334

EURIPIDES, *TROADES* 95-7: IS SACKING CITIES REALLY FOOLISH?

> μῶρος δὲ θνητῶν ὅστις ἐκπορθεῖ πόλεις,   95
> ναούς τε τύμβους θ', ἱερὰ τῶν κεκμηκότων,
> ἐρημίᾳ δοὺς αὐτὸς ὤλεθ' ὕστερον.

95 ἐκπέρσας Reiske: ἐκπορθῶν Hartung   96 δὲ Blomfield: τύμβους θ'· ἱερὰ interpungit
Σ   96–97 κεκμηκότων· ἐρημίᾳ δούς ⟨σφ'⟩ Page   97 ἐρημίᾳ δούς· αὐτός West

Rem tene, the elder Cato advised the aspiring orator, *verba sequentur*. The advice applies equally to the textual critic. Of those who have attempted to emend, repunctuate, or defend this passage, few seem to have been troubled by any doubts about the firmness of their grip on the *res*, the precise point Poseidon is making. The usual view of what Poseidon means is that those who sack cities are foolish because such an act *results* in their own subsequent destruction, presumably because they desecrate temples and thereby offend the gods.[1] Poseidon's words are cited as encapsulating the 'moral' or 'lesson' of the play, that the destruction of others and their cities brings the victor no advantage but only his own ruin, that the sacking of cities is always and everywhere an act of criminal folly.[2] Yet there are several features of the lines themselves that are hard to square with this reading, and the context, Poseidon's monologue and his dialogue with Athena, suggests a slightly different view of the lesson to be read from the coming destruction of the Greeks.

(1) There is a grammatical problem in the lines, succinctly stated by Diggle (p. 59): 'A literal translation, with the order of the Greek expressions retained, will show what is wrong. "It is a foolish man who sacks cities and shrines and tombs, holy places of the dead, having devastated he himself perishes later." To make sense of this one must take τε in 96 as connecting not ναούς with πόλεις but clause with clause...[T]his is a contrivance against which the natural inclination of the reader rebels...'. The conjectures listed in the apparatus above attempt in various ways to remedy this problem. Three in particular, the scholiast's, Page's, and West's, reflect the desire to make ὤλετο a main verb, as on the usual view it must be. West makes this point well: '[W]e must sympathize with [the scholiast's] desire that ὤλετο should be a main verb, not part of the ὅστις clause. As the text stands it seems to say, "he is a fool who sacks cities and after laying waste shrines and tombs perishes in his turn". This is unsatisfactory: it suggests that the approved path of wisdom consists in never sacking cities at all, *or else in taking care to survive*...' (emphasis mine). Thus even on the usual view, alteration seems to be necessary. That the usual view is wrong, however,

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[1] This is the clear tenor of most translations: 'Wie töricht sind die Menschen! Städte reissen/sie nieder, Gotteshäusern bringen sie/Verödung und der Ahnen heil'gen Gräbern/und gründen nur des eigenen Glückes Grab' (Wilamowitz); 'That mortal who sacks fallen cities is a fool,/who gives the temples and the tombs, the hallowed places/of the dead, to desolation. His own turn must come' (Lattimore); 'Insensé le mortel qui détruit les cités et livre à l'abandon les temples et les tombes, asiles saints des morts: sa perte s'ensuivra' (Parmentier). We might also cite the explicit comments of Parmentier (the Notice to his Budé edition, p. 10), Pohlenz, *Die griechische Tragödie*[2], 372, and E. G. O'Neill, Jr., 'The Prologue of the *Troades* of Euripides', *TAPA* 72 (1941), 318. I cite the following by author's name: James Diggle, *Studies on the Text of Euripides* (Oxford, 1981); and M. L. West, 'Tragica', *BICS* 27 (1980), 15.

[2] e.g. by K. H. Lee, *Euripides: Troades* (London, 1976), 79.

and that the translation rejected by West is essentially correct, is suggested by the following difficulties of sense.

(2) There is nothing in these lines about the destruction or desecration of temples. What is mentioned instead is their abandonment, their being handed over to desolation, a quite different idea. Elsewhere it is only actual sacrilege – looting, burning, or violation of the right of sanctuary – that calls down the wrath of a god.[3]

(3) Mentioned in the same breath with the temples, and with greater emphasis, are the ancestral tombs, likewise rendered desolate. It is hard to see what these contribute to the usual view of Poseidon's meaning. I can find no passage in ancient literature which would suggest that the gods are particularly angry with those who pillage tombs, much less with those who cause them to be untended by the living.[4] What 96–7a seem to be describing is something quite different from sacrilege, namely the killing or removal of the city's population and the consequent suspension of the worship and tendance that normally take place in temples and at the tombs of ancestors.

(4) It is elsewhere assumed in Greek literature and in the practice of Greek states throughout the classical period that cities may be sacked and rendered desolate without the commission of sacrilege. We must distinguish, of course, between conduct that wins general moral approval and conduct deemed to be consistent with piety. P. Ducrey[5] details cases of the massacre and enslavement of the population of a defeated city, notes that victors did not always act thus even when it lay in their power, and attempts to discern hints of a public sentiment that acted as a check on the winning side. But Ducrey is able to cite only one passage which implies a belief that the gods have any interest, apart from the case of suppliants at their altars, in the treatment of the captured, E. *Hcld.* 1010–11, a passage of doubtful interpretation.[6] That the requirements of piety may be satisfied even by a victor who takes extreme measures against a captured city is a point made explicitly by Polybius, who says (5. 10. 6–8) that when Alexander destroyed Thebes, he took care not to commit impiety.

(5) If we are still in any doubt, we may note the attitude of Poseidon himself earlier in the prologue (23–7), which is not one of anger but of resignation: when cities are taken, the gods depart since there is no one left to worship them, and this is regarded, apparently, as normal and not as an outrage. In 15–17 he describes the general

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[3] See, for example, A. *Pers.* 809–12, *Ag.* 338–42, and Hdt. 8. 109. O'Neill (above, n. 1), 303, tries to read overtones of sacrilege into ἐρημία in 26. The article abounds in unsupported fancies of this kind.

[4] Paul Perdrizet, 'Le témoignage d'Eschyle sur le sac d'Athènes', *RÉG* 34 (1921), 74–9, tries to interpret δαιμόνων ἱδρύματα at *Pers.* 811 as a reference to the tombs of the dead. But see A. M. Dale on *Alcestis* 1140.

[5] P. Ducrey, *Le traitement des prisonniers de guerre dans la Grèce antique* (Paris, 1968).

[6] This is a puzzling passage on any view: in 961–6 the servant implies that Eurystheus cannot be killed because of a peculiarly Athenian decree, while Eurystheus himself appeals to 'the laws of the Greeks'; in 1010 the material relevance of πρόθυμον ὄντα is not easy to see, nor indeed the relevance of 1009–11 to the whole argument. Quite possibly all Eurystheus means is that once he has been promised his life, it is not permissible for his captors to go back on their word.

The only other passage I know of (not cited by Ducrey) which might indicate divine hostility to the massacre of enemies is A. *Ag.* 461: τῶν πολυκτόνων γὰρ οὐκ ἄσκοποι θεοί. But the context does not suggest that either gods or men feel anger at the destruction of the Trojans. The citizens (456–7) are angry because of the loss of Greek life, while the gods appear to be jealous of overly great success (cf. 468–70 and 464). Probably it is not as killers but as too fortunate that such men attract the gods' notice. Certainly excessive good fortune is what the Chorus deprecate with the words μήτ' εἴην πτολιπόρθης (472), as the correlative deprecation of excessive bad fortune shows. It is noteworthy that neither Fraenkel nor Denniston–Page cites any parallel for the idea that the killing of enemies in the course of war or its aftermath, apart from those specially under a god's protection, incurs divine condemnation.

desolation of the city's groves, the temples awash with blood, and Priam's corpse lying next to the steps of Zeus Herkeios' altar. He makes it clear (25) that his own temple is among those that have been made desolate. But it is not these things that motivate him to punish the Greeks. Only Athena's request does that.[7]

(6) Athena, for her part, makes it clear that it is only the crime of Ajax and the Greek failure to punish it that anger her, not the sack of Troy. Indeed, it was precisely to the sack of the city (72) that she lent her aid. Neither Poseidon's nor Athena's wrath, in short, illustrates the folly of sacking cities.[8]

The usual view of these lines, then, cannot account for the absence in them of any reference to sacrilege or to its punishment, the mention of tombs alongside that of temples, and the conspicuous failure of the two divinities elsewhere in the prologue to exhibit any anger at the sack of Troy – a failure quite in keeping with ordinary beliefs about the gods. It would still be possible to defend the usual view by maintaining that Poseidon is speaking on behalf of the poet and expressing for him novel views which his own character and dramatic situation do not strictly entitle him to hold, though why the poet forebore to lend him and Athena the slightest hint of indignation at the sack of Troy is not easy to explain. But since there is a simple interpretation which allows Poseidon to speak in character, makes sense in terms of normal fifth-century religious and moral beliefs, permits us to account for what he mentions and what he omits, and allows us to explain the grammatical structure of the lines almost exactly as they are transmitted, the hypothesis of extra-dramatic editorializing need not be made.

What Poseidon means is not that the sacking of cities itself falls under divine condemnation and is therefore foolish. Rather, that man is a fool who, after conspicuous success, meets by his own subsequent action with conspicuous failure. A man who has caused a city's shrines and tombs to be untended by killing or enslaving its population is a successful man, but if he later suffers the same fate he has brought upon others, his later failure is thrown into sharper relief by his earlier success, and his folly and ignominy are increased. 'He saved others; himself he cannot save,' said Jesus' mockers, the first of these two facts being mentioned only to emphasize the second. So Poseidon's words might be paraphrased, 'He destroyed his enemies but perished later himself'.

This kind of contrast is one of the staples of rhetoric, though it has not received much discussion or a convenient name. Socrates in Plato's *Apology* is made to say (28 d–29 a) that it would have been a terrible thing if he had obeyed his human rulers at Potidaea, Amphipolis, and Delium and done his duty but failed to obey the command of the god to live a philosophic life. The first of these is not terrible in itself but only the inconsistency between the first and the second. The Nurse at *Medea* 190–7 says that men of old were foolish since they invented hymns for festivities and banquets but failed to discover how to use song to put an end to grief. The reason they are foolish

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[7] There is, of course, mention of Greek sacrilege in the prologue, notably Agamemnon's failure to respect Cassandra's virginity, granted to her by Apollo, but this will not be any concern of Poseidon's. The reference to Priam's corpse lying next to the steps of Zeus Herkeios' altar probably connotes a sacrilege by Neoptolemus: cf. Proclus' summary of the *Iliupersis* (Allen, 107) and *Ilias Parva*, fr. xvi (Allen, 134). Again, that is not Poseidon's affair. The point of φόνῳ καταρρεῖ (16) is not, I think, sacrilege but ritual impurity: cf. νοσεῖ τὰ τῶν θεῶν in 27. But there is no indication that Poseidon's temple has been outraged, even supposing that 16 refers to sacrilege.

[8] Surprisingly few critics have noted that Poseidon, on the usual view, is speaking out of character. D. J. Conacher, *Euripidean Drama* (Toronto, 1967), 135–6, rightly finds 95–7 an incongruity in the prologue.

is that they both succeeded at the first task and failed at the second. At *Hippolytus*
535–44, the Chorus say that it is foolish that men sacrifice to the other gods but fail
to worship Eros. Here again it is the second item, and the inconsistency between it
and the first, that is foolish. Most frequently this inconsistency is marked by μέν and
δέ, but the *Hippolytus* example shows that δέ alone will suffice.[9]

We now know what Poseidon means, and it is the simplest of changes to recover
what he said, reading δέ for τε in 96: 'Foolish is that mortal who sacks cities but who,
when he has emptied the temples and tombs, holy places of the departed, perishes later
himself'. It should be noted that this interpretation relieves us of the necessity of
making ὤλετο into a main verb, either by sleight of hand, as in Lattimore's translation
('His own turn must come') or by alteration of the wording or repunctuation, as in
the suggestions of Page and West. Both ἐκπορθεῖ and ὤλετο belong in the subordinate
clause, just as do the two verbs in *Med.* 190–7, *Hip.* 395–7, *Hec.* 311–12 and 592–98.
For the alternation of present and gnomic aorist in the same relative clause, see, for
example, Pind. *Pyth.* 2. 50–2.

The suggestion of δέ for τε in 96 was first made by Blomfield.[10] I suspect that he
understood the passage in the same way I do for he writes, 'Omnino legendum ναοὺς
δέ, subintellecto μέν post ἐκπορθεῖ', clearly making ἐκπορθεῖ and ὤλετο correlative
and suggesting that the first verb is somehow preliminary or secondary. My excuse
for repeating his suggestion is that his laconic style failed to convey his meaning.
Diggle, for instance, interprets Blomfield to mean something quite different: 'This
conjecture causes Poseidon to make not one point but two: to sack cities is folly, but
to devastate temples and tombs is suicide'.[11] (Diggle fails to note just *where* Blomfield
placed his understood μέν.) The corruption of δέ to τε is amply illustrated by Diggle's
examples. While it is just barely possible to get the required meaning out of the passage
while retaining the reading of the MSS, I urge the adoption of Blomfield's conjecture
as the most economical means of restoring a sense which it is probable Blomfield
already saw.

Other conjectures, even where they do not give the wrong sense, labour under
greater or smaller disabilities. Reiske's ἐκπέρσας is, *pace* Diggle, stylistically blameless
and gives the right sense, but the corruption is not easy to explain. Hartung's ἐκπορθῶν,
by contrast, is stylistically inept but paleographically easy. Diggle prints Page's
κεκμηκότων·/ἐρημίᾳ δούς ⟨σφ'⟩ κτλ. This has the advantage of rendering 95 more
intelligible in Greek terms by making Poseidon say that is is folly to sack cities *and*
temples and tombs, not merely to sack cities. But there is a disturbing lack of
parallelism between the three objects of ἐκπορθεῖ since temples and tombs are parts
of cities, the tombs are still unexplained, and the omission of σφε is less easy to account
for than the corruption of δέ to τε. West's colon after δούς is a grammatically possible
way of arriving at the usual meaning. It is, however, stylistically inferior since it makes
the first sentence drag out to a dying fall.

If Blomfield's conjecture is correct, we may restore to Poseidon the ordinary Greek
morality and conventional theology that Euripides' first audience would be bound to

[9] Other Euripidean examples are *Hip.* 395–7, *Hec.* 311–12, 592–8, 813–19, and, though
formally distinct, *Andr.* 324–8. In prose, see, for example, Xen. *Hell.* 1. 7. 28.
[10] See the variorum edition published by A. and J. M. Duncan, *Euripidis Opera Omnia*
(Glasgow, 1821), v, 611. (I owe this reference to Diggle.)
[11] Diggle, 59. Page, cited there, interprets the passage in the same way. W. Headlam, who
repeated Blomfield's conjecture in ignorance that it had already been made (*JPh* 23 [1895], 287),
is even more puzzlingly laconic than Blomfield. He too notes that sacrilege did not always
accompany the sack of a town, though how far this line of reasoning took him is impossible to
say.

DAVID KOVACS

presuppose here. Just what attitude or attitudes Euripides expected his audience to take toward the destruction of Troy and to the Greek responsibility for it (revulsion at Greek inhumanity, contempt for Greek folly, elegiac sadness for the loss of Trojan greatness, awe at the inscrutability of the gods, moral satisfaction for the punishment of transgressions on both sides, etc.) is a question that can be answered only by consideration of the play as a whole. There may be hints in the prologue that we are meant to feel anger at the Greeks for their destruction of Troy and to see that they deserve shipwreck on moral as well as on religious grounds. As far as the gods are concerned, however, what moves them to destroy the Greeks is not that they have killed or enslaved the people of Troy but that they have treated their divine allies with contempt. Poseidon's 'moral' has much less morality in it than has generally been supposed.*

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