

**PASS-PORT:
THE REPRESENTATIONS OF THE “PASSAGE” ON THE
THEATRICAL STAGE**

The discussion aims to examine the methodological approach and the representation on stage of my doctoral research entitled “Sea Journeys in Ancient Greek Tragedy” (Kings College London 2016, supervised by Edith Hall) as a result of a workshop and the rehearsals that followed. The performance *Pass-Port* was performed at the theatre Argo in Athens, in November 2022². Focusing on the element of wanderings as a main axis of my study, the theoretical and practical aim of the research was to integrate the problematic of immigration and refugees, as well as the dynamics it shapes in the societies of the future through the wanderings of mortals, heroes and gods in ancient Greek tragedy. Moreover, the discussion will be focused on the dramaturgical procedure and the directorial choices regarding the stage representations, not only of the sea as a place of multiple dynamics, symbolism and interpretations, but also of the coast as a liminal space and a border between two homelands, life and death, *nostos* and *nostalgia*.

Key-words: *Pass-Port, performance, passage, migration, liminality, Greek tragedy*

Travelling within the world of the ancient Greek tragedy is always an experience “full of adventure, full of discovery,” like a marvelous voyage to Constantine Cavafy’s Ithaca. For the seafaring Greeks, sailing was a synonym for gaining knowledge. The sea was not only the natural background setting of ancient Greeks’ everyday life, but its vastness, as it expanded beyond the limits of their known world, stimulated their curiosity to explore it.

However, in many cases, the adventure of wandering is the result of exodus and catastrophe. In *Hecuba* and *The Trojan Women*, for example, the dramatic setting oscillates between two particular spaces: the devastated Troy and the sea as the setting for the imminent departure. The sea functions as a passage to exile for the Trojan captive women and as a passage to return home for the Greek army (freedom and enslavement, catastrophe and rebirth)³. Liminality in between personal and collective, life and theatre, trauma and healing is constantly manifested. Particularly, in *The Trojan Women*, the seashore reflects, in the most appropriate way, the liminal situation of the women who face an imminent departure to exile. The dispersal of the women in islands and cities, washed by rivers and the sea, ironically evokes the image of the corpses of the Greek soldiers filling the shores of the Aegean that Poseidon and

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² Trailer of *Pass-Port – Sea journeys in Ancient Greek Tragedy*, Theatre direction by Leonidas Papadopoulos, In Between Art Theatre Company, 2022, [online]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rY90525-WyQ> (accessed December 17, 2023).

³ Collard (1991), Gregory (1997 and 1999), Harrison (2008), Hourmouziades (1965), Lee (1976), Mossman (1995), O’Neill (1941), Rehm (2002), Segal (1990), Zeitlin (1991).

Athena eagerly planned in the prologue of the play (*Trojan Women*, 77-97). In the first *stasimon* of Euripides's *Hecuba* (444-483), the chorus speculates about their future servitude in potential Greek destinations. Even though the inconsistency between the wishes of the captive women and their identity as married women, is obvious,⁴ simultaneously a challenge is posed suggesting that this liminal situation could be characterized as a symbolic rite of passage.

Arnold van Gennep in his seminal work *The Rites of Passage*, classifies the initiatory rituals in three different stages: rites of separation, transition rites, and rites of incorporation⁵. Taking into account the destruction of the Trojan women's previous life, their imminent voyage to Greece could easily be identified as a procedure of transition. Losing their identities, women pass to a new stage of life, and this transition is marked by a symbolic death and a subsequent rebirth. The journey into exile, in comparison with these rites, contains separation, transformation via a liminal stage and a kind of a new incorporation. Furthermore, another significant similarity here is that several rites of passage are usually accompanied by violent acts, particularly involving rituals of sacrifice or reproducing symbolic representations of the wildness of humanity's primitive instincts⁶. Captive women who face the catastrophe and savagery of the war are not only like the bereaved birds crying for their fates and losses,⁷ but also like animals in cages. The similarities with ritual ceremonies at Brauron, where young girls acted as bears for Artemis in the festivals of Arkteia, are profound⁸. The pre-marriage status of these maidens is symbolically reproduced by the Trojan women who face an impending new marriage. Either maidens, or married, they are going to be a part of a maturation process that leads them to a marriage, or a second marriage.

The conclusion reached provides this kind of transition as a symbolic rite of passage. The role of the sea is also crucial, as the background for the Greeks' destruction which is desired and is prefigured by Poseidon and Athena in the prologue as a form of punishment for the Greeks' impiety after their victory at Troy. The sea journey from Troy to Greece can be also illustrated as a passage of the Acheron, where the ships of the Greeks, transporting the spoils of victory, become the boats which will lead them to their demise. Another motif that links rites of passage with the Trojan women's journey is that in both cases girls or women were removed or exiled to a place isolated from their own households or communities and were "subjected to physical orders and trials"⁹. The significant difference between these two parallel situations is that the young girls re-integrated afterwards into the social community of

⁴ Ulrich Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Die Textgeschichte der griechischen Bukoliker*, Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1906, p. 206.

⁵ A. Van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, 1909, as cited in Mark William Padilla, *Rites of passage in ancient Greece: Literature, religion, society*, Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1999, p. 15.

⁶ Goff, as cited in Padilla, *op. cit.*, pp. 109-128.

⁷ Polyxena in *Hecuba* (178) and Hecuba in *Trojan Women* (146) mention birds to express vulnerability and motherhood.

⁸ On the Arkteia, see Paula Perlman, *The Arkteia: a festival celebrated in honor of Artemis in Attica*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989, pp. 111-133.

⁹ For this aspect of the rites of passage for young girls, see Katz as cited in Padilla, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-147.

their cities, while the captive women are confronted with mutual separation and enslavement.

Van Gennep suggests that travel itself “is a passage with dynamics of the type found in other passage rites such as those of initiation”; observing also that travel “must also be one of the commonest basic structures for narratives.”¹⁰ Travel is Trojan women “captive’s dilemma,”¹¹ the choice between death and a new perspective of life. In *Hecuba* and *The Trojan Women*, the period of waiting undergone by the women is a liminal situation; and the seashore a space of contradictory feelings and realizations: a stage where a symbolic dramatic *agon* takes place between the primitive and civilization. In this remote threshold space between two poles and respective choices, human beings must determine their own lives. If we can identify the seashore as a tragic space, it is because it acquires a temporary character within the frameworks of ancient Greek tragedy as a liminal space of *dilemma*, choice, and transition.

From my scrutiny on the surviving texts discussed, it might easily be inferred that sea’s multiple transformations, through the imaginary world of the theatre, are closely connected with Greek’s understanding of the transformation of life to catastrophe and death, and from death to immortality. Aeschylus’ *Persians* provides a striking example of the transformative powers of the sea. The aquatic landscapes become passages of destruction and death for the defeated Persian army. Xerxes’ crossing of Hellespont, a gulf devoted to the young maiden Helle after her fatal fall in its waters, evokes nature’s alteration, which is the beginning of total disaster for the Persians. The crossing of Hellespont, as well as the desired but unsuccessful crossing of the river Strymon, can be seen as a symbolic reflection of the final *pompe* of the Elders towards the Persian palace, which acquires the characteristics of a funeral procession. It is also implied that these Elders can be seen as the reverse image of the absent young troops, fostering images of the dead Persians’ lost potential future. Hence, the final march of the play can be interpreted as a metaphorical homecoming. As a result, places of triumphant battles function simultaneously as sacred tombs of death. The waters of Salamis in Aeschylus’ *Persians*, for example, become a synecdoche for the destruction of the Persians and the central point of the dramatic structure of the play. The narrow straits acquire a clearly defined imagery as a passage of death, a place of no escape and an absolute “other,” The sea’s power and boundlessness transforms into a “vast ocean of catastrophes” (*κακῶν δὴ πέλαγος ἔρρωγεν μέγα*, *Persians*, 433).

The sea as a morbid space of death hosts shipwrecks, secrets, and drowned sailors. The sea, though familiar to the Greeks, preserves the fear of the unknown in many aspects of their life. The soulless bodies the Persian soldiers and the maiden Helle in Aeschylus’ *Persians*, as well as the corpse of the young prince Polydorus in Euripides’ *Hecuba*, swaying in the sea, preserve a perpetual mobility that differs from the stillness of the tomb and as a result it can be suggested that the sea creates an image of endless travelling as a kind of symbolic immortality.

The sea is a no man’s land, and like the Underworld, a place of no return. It can be metamorphosed to become a deadly trap with no chance of escape. The

¹⁰ Gennep, as cited in Padilla, *op. cit.*, p. 228.

¹¹ Scodel (1998, 153) points out the choice of the women in *Trojan Women* to ‘remain within the past or to try to negotiate a future’.

darkness of Hades finds one of its most striking metaphors in the abyss of the sea. In Aeschylus' *Persians* the dead commanders are identified as fishes, children of silence. Nevertheless, it is suggested that the repeated recitations of the Persian generals, as well as the chorus' invocation to Darius, indirectly and symbolically, succeed in allowing the invisible and imaginary chorus of the "departed" souls to emerge from Hades.

Heroes and gods' wanderings in the sea have, in several cases, much in common with today's refugees who, in pursuit of a safer life through the sea routes, expose themselves to the unpredictable nature of the watery environment. A typical example is the Mediterranean Sea which in our temporary history, as far as in ancient world, becomes the wet grave of many of them. It is the same place that in Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates says that "the earth is very large and we who dwell between the pillars of Hercules and the river Phasis do so in only a small part of it around the sea, like frogs or ants round a pond"¹². So we could suggest that the journey of wandering is timeless. The sea becomes a medium of salvation but, unfortunately, in many times a passage to death. It hides within it, the journey of the refugee, the sadness of loss, but also the hope for a better future.

The performance *Pass-Port – Sea journeys in Ancient Greek Tragedy* was a stage voyage full of sound and light. It narrated the wandering of souls and bodies who search for their own identity in a world which is both familiar and paradoxical. During the workshop the dramatic works of ancient Greek literature were studied and researched meticulously. Simultaneously texts from the corpus of modern Greek literature, poetry, and visual arts, as well as historical documents and life narratives, are also incorporated in our dramaturgical research and analysis. More specifically the study material includes: Myths and Homeric Epics and Hymns. Texts of ancient Greek literature (History, Philosophy and Lyric Poetry), the surviving works of ancient Greek tragedy, the Doctoral research "Sea Voyages in Ancient Greek Tragedy", imagery of wanderings and crossings through the sea, representations of symbolic and real borders of all kinds in literature and other art forms, historical documents, verbatim stories and life narratives. Thus, the maritime itineraries of the ancient Greek tragedy intersect with other texts and intertexts of the modern Greek literature. From Alexandros Papadiamantis and Aristotle Valaoritis to Kostis Palamas – different literary shells that echo the sounds of the sea and its hidden treasures or traps.

In the heart of our study remains the ambivalent *cosmos* of the sea with its prominent role. As we mentioned before, many of Greek tragedies begin or end with arrival or departure by sea. In Euripides' *Trojan Women* the band of women are being herded onto the Greeks' ships in order to sail away to their life in slavery. Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women* are asylum-seekers who arrived on the shores of Lerna, near Argos. Euripides' *Andromache* and *Helen* are fugitives and prisoners of war. The dangerous waters of the Black Sea in Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, become the mean of Iphigenia, Orestes and Pylades' escape from Taurike Chersonesos. The mention of

¹² Plato. *Euthyphro*. *Apology*. *Crito*. *Phaedo*. Edited and translated by Christopher Emlyn-Jones, William Preddy. Loeb Classical Library 36, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017, pp. 344/375, [online]. DOI: 10.4159/DLCL.plato_philosopher-phaedo.2017 (accessed December 17, 2023).

Crimea brings in mind the nowadays displacing of thousands of citizens far away from their homeland.

The liminal dimension of the sea remained as one of the main axes and precursors of the directorial approaches, both in terms of the composition of the text and of its visual representation. Traveling to our own Ithaca, all the members of the performance, create a visual representation of a journey that captures, through the passage of the sea, a wandering route, not only through humans' historical evolution, but also through a search for the unpredictable light and darkness eddies of human nature.



Photo 1: "O breeze, breeze of the sea...where will you bear me, the sorrowful one?" (Euripides, *Hecuba*), in *Pass-Port*; production photo by Miranda Papadopoulou (2022).

Photo 2: "And she (Earth) bore also the fruitless deep with his raging swell, Pontus, without sweet union of love" (Hesiod, *Theogony*); production photo by Katerina Arvaniti (2022).



Photo 3: Refugees at sea during the storm, in *Pass-Port*; production photo by Katerina Arvaniti (2022).

Considering that the dramatic action is undeniably determined by its visible or invisible spatial characteristics, it can be suggested that the seascape, despite its

absence from the theatrical setting, has a prominent role in the visible sphere of the theatre. Nevertheless, in many cases in the theatrical art, the element of water can be depicted through the scenographic code. The “sea” in the performance of *Pass-Port*, beyond the vast imagination of the diegetic space, enters limited within the stage space¹³. As a result, the water integrates and interacts with the actors within the theatrical stage. Through the narration and the development of the plot, the water emerges and mirrors the bodies of the actor and from imaginary it becomes visible. The use of a structure filled with water inundates the stage space resulting in the bodies of the actors acquiring an experiential interaction. Actors’ movements and expressions play a distinctive role. Their clothes and their bodies, sink or reflected on the water surface, while the stage objects (ropes, children’s toys and small boats) float acquiring their own semiotic dimension (yokes, killing nets and life preservers) in the development of the plot. The three wooden platforms, each time, acquire their own identity: an island in the chaos of the immensity of the sea, a forgotten homeland, a desert island, a ship that will unite two different worlds, a life raft that will prolong human beings’ agony and hope to reach their destination.

Closing this brief account of the semantic theoretical and practical issues of the performance *Pass-Port – Sea Journeys in Ancient Greek Tragedy*, I cite a piece of dramaturgical composition that encapsulates the notions of exodus and catastrophe through the sea:

... Sea... place of passage... It brought me here, far from my land. I had never been on a boat. I only knew about the sea from the paintings and all the nautical stories I heard from men. For sailors who fought desperately the waves in order to be saved and when the storms raged the sea and they were left surrendered in the wild waters. I feel trapped in a sea of despair. I am abandoned to the multitude of my woes, because the storm of life has crushed me. Where can I ask for a shelter? In which country? Which way should I take? What demon or God, what man will come to save me? Everywhere is a desolation. Throw my wretched body into a ship. I do not want to see the light of the day. Let the water become the passage for my death and not the path for a refuge...

Sea... place of passage...

The performance *Pass-Port – Sea journeys in Ancient Greek Tragedy* encapsulates not only the never-ending voyage through the sea and its symbolic synecdoche to life, but also the notion and catastrophe in a world of constant turmoil. Every man is like a sailor travelling in space and time. His life is an adventure of departures and arrivals, victories and disasters, calm waters and storms. Man struggling with divinities (*δαιμονες*), Furies (*Ἐρινίες*), and the all-tamer time (*πανδαιμάτωρ χρόνος*), fights to escape his predicted fate. His wanderings in a sea of despair, metaphorically, illustrate the pursuit of a desired eternity within the limits of his mortal life. Hence, he fragile condition of many of the characters of ancient Greek tragedy could be present them, on both dramatic and scenic world, as liminal figures of the exodus, exposed endlessly at the mercy of elements. As a result, the dilemmatic,

¹³ Manos Damaskinos, “Dissolving the boundaries between dramatic and scenic space. The liquid element on the theatrical stage,” in the theatrical program of the performance *Passport*, Athens, 2023.

in many cases, human figures, through their exodus, follow their route to salvation or catastrophe.

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