Form and Content. Conscious or Unconscious?

Nancy M. Laan

Dept. of Classics, Oude Turfmarkt 129, 1012 GC Amsterdam, The Netherlands

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AFFILIATION: University of Amsterdam / The Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research

E-MAIL: Nancy.M.Laan@let.uva.nl
FAX NUMBER: +31 20 5252544
PHONE NUMBER: +31 20 5252571 (office)
                 +31 20 6221743 (home)

Introduction

In this paper, I would like to discuss the relation between content and rhythmical form in Euripides' Orestes. My study of work-internal differences in Euripides' rhythmical style is compared to the earlier study by Philippides (1981), and a large part of the discussion will concern the similarities and differences between her results and mine. An explanation for these differences will be sought in the different nature of the phenomena studied and in the different methods used to obtain the results. Furthermore, I shall demonstrate that the relation between form and content raises a question that is important for another branch of Euripidean stylometry, viz. the study of the chronology of his works, as well as for chronology (and attribution) studies at large.

Background

The rhythmical style of Euripides (485-406 BC) has been the object of study for almost two centuries now. Particularly the development in his use of the iambic trimeter has been studied extensively. The iambic trimeter, in its basic form a 12-syllable line, is the main verse type of the spoken parts of Greek drama. It turned out that Euripides' use of resolution (the representation of one verse element by two short syllables) increases gradually from his early to his late tragedies and can, therefore, be used for the (approximate) dating of his undated tragedies. Recently, Euripides' use of resolution has also been studied work-internally. Philippides (1981) studied six of Euripides' tragedies in this respect, three early and three late ones, and her conclusions are quite interesting: a significantly higher incidence of resolution "appears to coincide with scenes of dramatic intensity", and a significantly lower incidence "often coincides with non-excited passages, narrative, rationalizing discourse and scenes of camouflaged plotting or lying" (both p. 107). It seems that the repeated occurrence of the two short syllables of resolution reflects in some way the excited mood of a passage. The rhythmical form, then, is found to support the content.

My own study of Euripides' work-internal style focuses on elision. Elision occurs when a short final vowel is followed by a word that begins with a vowel. The elision of a vowel entails the loss of a syllable for the rhythm: the syllable containing the elided vowel merges with the following word-initial one. In a way, elision and resolution have the same effect: they both offer a way to add an extra syllable to the line. Therefore, it seems possible that a concentration of elision has the same function as a concentration of resolution, viz. to indicate a situation of excitement. The findings of Olcott (1974) for Sophocles seem to support this hypothesis. She notes that the type of elision that occurs on a caesura coinciding with "a break in sense" is found "in unusual circumstances, that is, emotional or emphatic" (p. 61). It will, therefore, be my aim to discover whether differences in elision use within Euripides' works can be linked with differences in content; and if that seems to be the case, to see whether the results are comparable with those of Philippides. For this, I am mainly looking at two of Euripides' plays: the Medea (431 BC), one of Euripides' early plays, and the Orestes (408 BC), one of the late plays. Here, I shall discuss only results of the analysis of the Orestes (also part of Philippides' corpus).

Method

The elisions (and resolutions) are counted with the help of a database system, designed for my project by Jan R. de Jong (Computer Centre of the Faculty of Arts, University of Amsterdam). The input of the database consists of the electronic text of Euripides (from the CD-ROM of the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae) and a rhythmical analysis, based on that electronic text and provided by a parser developed for the purpose (see De Jong and Laan, 1996). The rhythmical analysis is necessary to find the resolutions, and also for the study of the use of certain types of elision (for instance, elisions occurring at certain verse positions, e.g. the caesura). To get some measure of objectivity about the significance of the elision (or resolution) counts, one needs statistical methods. As my data are sequential, i.e. occurring in a series of trimeters, it seems logical to adopt a model for time series data. On the advice of prof.dr. Jan G. de Gooijer (Dept. of Economic Statistics, Univ. of Amsterdam), I use Change-point analysis, a method that looks for the point of change in a series of data. A programme developed by him looks, in every series (i.e. in

every uninterrupted sequence of iambic trimeters, e.g. an epeisodion or 'act'), for a change in elision (or resolution) use, either a change in mean or a change in variance. The Orestes has six trimeter series that are long enough for such an analysis.

Results and Comparison

The results are promising. A significant change-point (already reported in Laan 1995, p. 275) was, for instance, found at Orestes line 1030, with a high mean of elision before the change-point and a lower mean afterwards. This change in elision use clearly coincides with a change in mood, from utter despair to a calmer frame of mind. A concentration of elision, then, seems to have a function comparable to a concentration of resolution.

When my results are compared with those of Philippides, it turns out that, so far,

(1) in the case of a significant change that involves a high amount of elision, the high part never coincides with a passage significantly high in resolution, but

(2) in the case of a significant change that involves a low amount of elision, the low part sometimes coincides with a passage significantly low in resolution.

The non-coincidence of highs of elision and resolution may be explained in several ways:

(1) both elision and resolution add an extra syllable to the line. A concentration of both might give too much information compressed in too few lines. In this case, elision and resolution are just two ways to get the same effect, which cannot be used together.

(2) resolution and elision might differ in their dramatic function. Elision might, for

instance, be used to indicate a different kind of emotion than resolution.

(3) a combination of both.

The difference between Philippides' statistical method and mine may also have some effect on the difference between our results. If, for instance, a whole trimeter series is consistently high in resolution (or elision), my method (see Method) would not detect any significant change, since there is none in that particular part of the play; in such a case, however, Philippides' method might find that (almost) the whole passage is significant, since it computes the significance in relation to the amount of resolution in all trimeters of the play (Philippides, 1981, pp. 49-55), and not just in relation to the amount of resolution in that particular sequence, as my method does. I.e., my method works on the level of a trimeter series, hers on the level of the whole play. Moreover, I am looking for a point of change in resolution (or elision) use, while Philippides is investigating whether a fixed set of lines shows a high (or low) amount of resolution. This raises questions about

the relationship between the results of the two methods.

Consciousness

Despite the differences just described and although the findings for elision still need corroboration, it seems justified to conclude that Euripides' use of elision, like his use of resolution, seems to be linked in some way with the content. This relation between content and form appears to indicate that Euripides made a conscious use of resolution and elision. However, the spectacular increase in resolution from his early to his late plays has generally been deemed an unconscious phenomenon (see e.g. Kitto 1939, p. 179), and the less spectacular increase in elision (see Laan 1995, pp. 274-275) would perhaps also be considered unconscious by some. And unconsciousness has actually frequently been taken as a necessary requirement for a phenomenon in order to be considered a valid criterion for dating (or attribution); see for dating e.g. Ceadel 1941, p. 67, and for attribution e.g. Holmes 1994, p. 88.

I think, however, that the increase of resolution is still valid as a dating criterion, despite the indication that Euripides made a conscious use of resolution within his works. For, as I pointed out before (Laan 1995, p. 273f.), Euripides' stylistic development is an exemplary case, because of the availability of securely dated works – with a range of dates from early to late – that clearly show a gradual development; i.e., his case is exemplary regardless of the unconsciousness of his resolution use. We should, then, ask the general question whether unconsciousness always is a necessary feature for phenomena that are used as dating (or attribution) criteria? May it not be possible that there are cases, such as that of Euripides, where conscious phenomena do not have to be excluded?

Conclusion

All in all, it seems clear that the study of work-internal differences in Euripides' rhythmical style provides us with a little more knowledge of his dramatic technique. Moreover, Euripides' apparently conscious use of resolution and elision within his works raises doubts about the unconsciousness of his resolution and elision use in general. And as resolution still seems a valid criterion for dating, this forces us to reconsider the requirement, often made in stylometric studies, of unconsciousness for phenomena used as dating or attribution criteria.

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