

## Public and Private Thought: The Enthymeme of Death in Albee's *Three Tall Women*

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The issue of the public and the private is especially poignant in our culture because, even as we contemporaries are defined by our privacies, we are driven by our politics to find means of presenting those privacies in public. Twentieth-century culture displays a history of seeking boundary crossings between the signifier and the signified, between the sign shared by the public and the event in its privacy. Jacques Lacan argues in "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious" that metaphor is the agent that crosses the bar which divides the signified from the signifier (515).

The intense sentimentalism of Lacan's observation appeals to those of us in the arts, for we see it as a triumph of poetry over science. But the burden of this paper is to differ with Lacan and to argue that both science and poetry speak in the same manner in our culture and that manner is by way of public, not private, thought. In this regard, I am most interested in the function of theatre as an ideal medium for *public thought*.

I do not mean by public thought a formal system of logic, but rather a mental process shared by a given civic order. This mental process was called the *enthymeme* by Aristotle some 2,500 years ago. I want to explore the enthymeme as it operated in ancient Greek culture, and as it operates today, especially in the theatre and especially in contemporary treatments of death and dying such as Edward Albee's *Three Tall Women*.

In the *Poetics*, Aristotle lists *dianoia* as one of the six elements of structure. The term may perhaps be translated as "thought," but Aristotle gives no definition. Instead he refers us to his work on rhetoric, to which he says the issue of thought properly belongs (*Poetics*, XIX, 2). In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle makes clear immediately that rhetoric is a type of thinking the counterpart of dialectic (Book I, 1) but it is not concerned with what seems logical to an individual but what seems logical to a given class (Book I, 2). That is, rhetoric is concerned with public thinking, *phronesis*, or the practical thought processes common to a given civic order. As such, rhetoric is characterized by the

*enthymeme*, a thought process used by the group, as opposed to formal logic or the syllogism (Staub, "Rhetoric and Poetic" 5).

Because Aristotle gives no further definition, the traditional assumption has been that the *enthymeme* is some sort of faulty syllogism, but of late new rhetoricians have taken issue with such an assumption. As Eugene Garver declares in his recent and illuminating study of *Rhetoric*, we cannot define the *enthymeme* as a syllogism with defective or probable premises or with a missing premise (Garver 150). The *enthymeme* is not poor or secondary logic but, as Garver observes, the process of thought employed by a civic intelligence.

Since the whole thrust of classical Greek culture was the perfection of civic life, it is not surprising that Aristotle felt no compulsion to defend the value of the *enthymeme* or to engage in lengthy definition. Of its nature he says only that it must not employ long chains of reasoning or it will lose clarity nor should it include every link else it fall into prolixity (*Rhetoric*, Book II, 22).

But there is considerably more to the *enthymeme* than brevity. To understand its complexity, we must see the *enthymeme* as suasion in action, and to do that we must go to the only complete surviving examples of public life in ancient Greece: the *dramenon* of the city-wide festivals, frequently cited by Aristotle himself. Unquestionably, in Greek theatre the method was to present public figures (Kings, Queens, Potentates, Gods) thinking and acting publicly to encourage a public thought process in the spectators. Greek plays are clearly events of the civic assembly, organized around a chorus which represents the civic order of the play, and presented at public festivals before spectators who are only too aware of each other's presence in a sunlit and open seeing place. Indeed, the very seeing-place itself is crucial to all Greek thinking, for as Charles Segal and others point out: "The Greeks are a race of spectators." To see a thing is to understand that thing. "The Greek word *theoria* implies the same identification of knowledge with vision as that expressed in the common verb to know, *oida*, taken from the root *vid*—to see (*The Greeks* 193).

Moreover, the dramas were the first public events in which myth was used enthymemically, as a rational device for a public assemblage. Of course, the epic preceded the drama and the *rhapsode* was also presenting myth in a public assemblage. But the art of the *rhapsode* is one based on example, a string of examples, not upon an *enthymeme*. Indeed, Aristotle clearly differentiates in the *Rhetoric* between the *enthymeme* and the example (Book II, 19-20). The essential difference lies in the dynamics of the thought process. The *enthymeme*, particularly in drama, entails twisting ideas together in a non-linear action; reasoning from example, as in the epic, requires a linear procedure and thus a longer chain of reasoning, the very thing Aristotle cautions against in rhetorical argument. Indeed, the Greeks recognized the difference between linear

thought—*logos*—and the more supple and more active and twisted practical thought—*metis* (Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*), a difference which today might be drawn between binary choices and a more fluid quantum suasion.

The maker of a *dramenon* was a transition agent. On the one hand, he was a *logo-graphien*: a writer of stories engaged in the structuring of narratives, but unlike the epic maker, his narratives were for the sighted and therefore immediately-knowing group. Dramas are for spectators not audiences, and as a consequence they are enthymemic and mythic. As with any myth, they are to be grasped as a thing-in-action which serves as a singular proof of its own validity because it is *seen* to be. Indeed, as Aristotle points out, it is the *mythos* that is the soul of the *dramenon* just as the *enthymeme* is the soul of rhetoric. It is my contention that the two are the same and that the *mythos* of drama may be called the dramatic *enthymeme*.

What is the nature of the dramatic *mythos* that makes it identical with the rhetorical *enthymeme*? Like the rhetorical *enthymeme*, dramatic *mythos* begins close to the point of suasion so that its action will not be obscure and, like the rhetorical *enthymeme*, it does not fill in all the links so that it may be brief. But most important of all, the dramatic *enthymeme* is always a *trope*, in the true Greek sense of the word as a full turn about.<sup>3</sup> That is, the dramatic *enthymeme* always presents two or more actions turned-in upon themselves. This turning-in is the *stasis* (Aristotle also uses the term *peripetia* or turn around). The most common meaning for the term *stasis* is civil war, and like war the dramatic *stasis* is not a fixed point, as it will become in Roman thought, but a collection of agonistic energies (*dynamos*), a dynamic event which holds in tension the actions of the *prostasis* and that of the *exstasis* (ecstasy) so that the entire movement may be seen altogether, just as we currently perceive the universe in quantum terms. That is why it is appropriate to call the dramatic *enthymeme* a *trope*—a turning-upon or twisting about. All *mythoi* in drama are so constructed.

Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter is finally twisted together with his own sacrifice by Clytemnestra. Indeed, the very *peripetia* which entwines the two killings is a public and entirely visual event—Agamemnon's removing of some sort of foot gear and his treading barefoot on some sort of sacred carpet. It was a very public spectacle of great potency to be grasped by the civic intelligence of the assembled Greek spectators. We sense that some powerful energy is at work, but it is no longer convincing to us. It is not our *enthymeme*, but theirs.

“In the twining or braiding together of the existing assumptions of a given cultural group the suasion of the *enthymeme* occurs” (Staub 8). On the simplest metaphorical or metonymic level we can see the *enthymeme* at work in

such a phrase as “Richard the Lionhearted,” an *enthymeme* in which we literally argue that a particular English king was brave because we, as a group, have twisted together his name, the part of his body considered to be the source of such emotions, and the image of a lion. This is a brief but extremely complex *trope* which calls for considerable mental agility.

But a culture which knew not lions would draw no conclusion from the joining of Richard’s heart with a lion. That group could not nor should not be considered unintelligent because they were not affected by a particular *trope*. On the other hand, we should be cautious in assuming that *tropes* are faulty or simplistic thought. They may well be classified as the highest order of thought, even though they depend upon a civic and not a singular intelligence.

Indeed, it is precisely because troping, the fundamental *enthymeme*, is so complex and agile, exactly because it involves the apprehension and joining of energy and motion in its very structure, that it must grow out of a *public* and *civic* intelligence. Consider the complicated web of entwined events which make up the stunning and disturbing *enthymeme* known as *Oedipus Tyrannus*. First, there is the act of abandoning the infant to prevent his murdering his father, enfolded with the action of the grown son fleeing his home to escape his murdering his father, twisted with the action of his inadvertently killing his father, entwined with his unwittingly marrying his mother and having children by her, children who are his own brothers and sisters. This whole *trope* is enmeshed within itself even as the narrative of the *dramenon* begins so that it is an active helix turning endlessly upon itself, imploding throughout the short play. Indeed, the most significant event of the *dramenon* proper is the *stasis* or civil war between Oedipus and Jocasta in which she realizes that public shame is inevitable and commits suicide. Following his vision of his dead mother, Oedipus explodes the *stasis* into a public ecstasy of sorrow. The final suasive twist by which the whole *trope* is displayed is Oedipus’ embracing of his own siblings as his children. The poet’s intent is that the spectators are persuaded to pity and terror, because they see the final explosion of the complicated *trope* which they knew from their cultural assumptions could not forever implode. This logic of implosion-explosion, of tension and release, is the logic of the *trope*. Moreover, tropic logic consists in equal parts of past—and therefore—proven events entwined with present actions forming a single complex presented in a see-able whole movement.

The great achievement of the Greek dramatic poets, what raises them above the epic poet in the estimation of Aristotle, is the fashioning of the dramatic *trope*—the twisting together of images in an implosion-explosion turn-about—which is the very essence of public thought. That creation depends in great part on the facility of sight and therefore is especially the province of theatre—the art of the seeing place.

The Greek achievement was to last for centuries, even to our present time. Among the more telling of modern variations on the dramatic *trope* are found in the sciences: the Special Theory of Relativity and Quantum Mechanics. As John Casti in his delightful little study, *Paradigms Lost*, points out, Einstein introduced the idea that there is no such thing as an objective, observer-independent event (418), that is, one to be understood as linear. In short, the Special Theory of Relativity argued that understanding the universe was an enthymemic act, and moreover, since time and space were braided together in a single *trope*, that the *enthymeme* was a dramatic one.

Quantum Mechanics goes one step further in offering all of reality as an interchangeable braid: an *enthymeme* in which we may untangle the braid—to see it as wave or particle—as we wish, depending upon our way of seeing. Indeed, in John Cramer’s special concept of Transactional Interpretation, the very act of observing is a complex dramatic trope in which the light of the past as it comes to us from a very distant star reaching into the present is “met half-way” as it were, by the agonistic light emanating from our eyes reaching back into the past (Casti 465). Thus we not only see the past, but at a certain point-of-turn-around, we see into the past just as the past sees into us. In an extraordinary way, Cramer’s transactional interpretation restates the ancient Greek view of vision in which the rays sent forth by an object combine with the rays sent forth from the observer’s eyes so that an image is constructed between the two. Talk about a quantum universe!

I bring this long argument now to an especially contemporary moment in the theatre: Edward Albee’s 1994 Pulitzer Prize winning play, *Three Tall Women*. Here is a work centered on the event of one woman’s death. In its structure, it is at once very ancient and completely contemporary, so contemporary, in fact that it might well be called one of the great summation moments of 20th century theatre. *Three Tall Women* could not have been written before the theatre had been won for the *enthymeme* known as Realism, nor before the breakthrough of the Expressionists into the inner vision of the consciousness, what Carol Mavor calls “the *gaze* of the invisible, a sensate gaze from inside the body” (82). Nor could *Three Tall Women* have been written before Einstein’s concepts of relativity, nor before Quantum Mechanics, nor before the fluidity of cinema, nor even before the outrageous manipulation of time in the theatre by such postmoderns as Caryl Churchill.

This is not to argue that *Three Tall Women* is not a completely original work. It is indeed, but it is a work of the theatre of its times and a work of a seeing and public art. *Three Tall Women* is also an ancient work, for it clearly invokes one of humanity’s oldest myths, that of the triple goddess in her trinity of girl, nymph and hag. In its ancient guise, *Three Tall Women* makes it clear

that it intends to be an *enthymeme* not a syllogism, for its subject matter can only be understood enthymemically.

Stated simply, Albee's problem in *Three Tall Women* is how, in a completely public art such as theatre, can the single most intimate and private act of an individual's life be presented for public consideration? His solution is embedded in the late 20th century. He chooses, without apology or explanation, the contemporary *enthymemes* of science. In the first act of Albee's drama, we meet three women: one ancient, rich and garrulous; a second, her middle-aged nurse-companion; a third, a comely young lawyer come to advise on financial matters. The three women, gathered in the old woman's boudoir, are presented "realistically," as in a Chekhov play, a Newtonian universe, a recognized syllogism. The burden of the first act is the old woman's reminiscences and confessions, interspersed with her bouts with various incontinencies, and the growing antagonisms of the younger women in dealing with her frailties. The act ends with the old woman suffering a seizure, the logical conclusion of the syllogism.

In Act Two we return to the boudoir to find the old woman in bed, face covered with an oxygen mask, tubes running from her body to life support machines: the standard external medical image of dying in our times. The two younger women enter and begin a conversation which seems somehow less real than in Act One. Their dress is more formal, their movements more dance-like. Presently, the old woman, beautifully gowned, joins them, and we realize that we are not dealing with three women but one, that the stricken woman in bed and the three women are actually the many in the one twisted together in a single event: death. We realize this because we see it as a whole in action before us.

The three women begin a *pas de trois* of words and movement that is literally a dance of death in which *all time* is held together by the woman's several agonistic forces. The past now projects itself into the present; the present reaches back to meet the past. The old woman speaks of an ugly death; the young woman cries out, "Stop it!" "Grow up," says the old woman, as if to a naughty child. "She will," smiles the middle aged woman indulgently. "She does," she adds knowingly (Albee 34). With this interchange the audience is moved subtly from the Newtonian universe to the Einsteinian. What follows are a series of Cramer transactional interpretations. The young woman tells the other two to "Stay out of my life," and even pleads with the audience, "Don't listen to them. They don't *know* me" (35). This remark elicits sarcastic responses from the other two. The young woman, simply identified as C in the play, goes on to describe a sexual encounter and summarizes by saying, ". . . I'm a good girl. The boy who took me was a good boy." The middle-aged woman known as B replies, "Oh, yes. He was." A, the old woman, says, "Yes? He was?"

- B. You remember  
 A. (*Laughs*) Well, it was a while ago.  
 B. But you do remember?  
 A. Oh, yes, I remember him. He was . . .  
 B. . . . Sweet and handsome; no, not handsome:  
 beautiful. He was beautiful.  
 A. (*To B*) He was; yes.  
 B. (*To A and herself*) Yes. (36)

Here is a Quantum Universe in which the audience may still measure as they wish: wave or particle. The above conversation can be understood as two actual older women filling in the pastel memories of a young friend. But the conversation also sets the measuring devices of the remainder of the play in which each of the women reach back and forth across time to transactually interpret the same memories. Take the following exchange as recalls of a night of love:

- C. I'm not that kind of girl . . . Yes you are, he said; *you're* that kind of girl.  
 B. And I was, and my God, it was wonderful.  
 A. It hurt! (*Afterthought to B*) Didn't it?  
 B. (*Admonishing*) Oh, . . . well, a little.  
 C. You're that kind of girl and I guess I was. (37)

We are, by now, pitched headlong by Albee into the most suasive *enthymeme* of our science oriented culture. The audience is persuaded to enter the private moment of death and to think about that most private moment publicly in the prevailing fashion of the civic order of the late 20th century. Nor is it my experience that there is the least hesitation on the part of the audience. When I saw the play in New York, the attendees were seized with delight at the prospect of being able to think together with the dying character about the moment of death. This phenomenon was brought on, I am convinced by Albee's ability to turn the audience into spectators, so that they could *see* his very point before them.

During Act One, there was in the theatre the formal reserve that audiences of Realistic plays have towards the characters. They listened to the familiar *enthymemes* of late 19th-century Realism. But when Albee turns the full dramatic *trope* by using the old woman's seizure to convert the agony of the three women into the civil war (*stasis*) of a single woman, the spectators are energized and ready to see and think creatively. Now a private death is made public,

becomes *their* thinking about death. And when the old woman sheds herself of life, the spectators, in catharsis, share in that shedding.

Albee's achievement is to bring to us a contemporary *enthymeme* fashioned about what Lewis Carroll calls the after-time (*Alice in Wonderland* 164), that time of "remembering remembering" (Albee 53) after childhood or after life is lived to its fullest. And like Carroll, Albee does it as simply and as profoundly as A-B-C. Indeed throughout Act Two, these three aspects of the Albee female share the past among them as if they were serving a gourmet meal with all the complex seasonings of life. We see them perform a medieval dance of death, but also hear them in an ancient Greek *symposium*. They share lost loves and found loves, lost parents and even a lost son. And we all think their thoughts as participants in the dying process. Near the end of the dance, the following exchange seems to pull the argument tightly together.

- B. Does that tell you a little something about change? Does that tell you what you want to know?
- C. (*Pause; softly*) Yes. Thank you. (*Silence*)
- A. (*Curious*) You want some more?
- C. No, thank you.
- B. I shouldn't think so.
- A. Yes, you do. You want some more.
- C. (*Trying to be polite*) I said, no, thank you.
- A. That doesn't cut any ice around here. (*Points to B*) How you got to her is one thing; how you got to me is another. How do you put it . . . that thing there. (*Points to "A"*) (47)

Phillipe Aries paraphrases St. Ignatius in pointing out that one conclusion is that death is no more than the means of living well (301). Albee's dying woman rephrases Ignatius for our times when she finally realizes that death is the release of all the inner vision, all the antagonism of being an individual. Death is when we contemporary, highly subjective creatures come "to the point where you can think about yourself in the third person without being crazy" (54). With this realization, we turn-about once more, end the civil war of dying, and return to the logic of the first act. As A says: "That's the happiest moment. When it's all done. When we stop. When we can stop." (55). The three women join



hands. The *agon* is ended. We see the solitary dead woman in her bed, but we also see the triple woman as a cohesive whole, a logical unit. The enthymeme is over. Persuasion is apparent. Catharsis is won.

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## Notes

1. I discuss the issue of public thought in great detail in "Rhetoric and Poetic: The *Enthymeme* and the Invention of Troping in Ancient Greek Drama," *Theatre Symposium* (Tuscalusca, Alabama: U of Alabama P, 1997).

2. Led by the work of Kenneth Burke (*A Rhetoric of Motives*, 1958), the new rhetoric movement has done much to reclaim the importance of rhetoric as something deeper than mere decorative language. Some recent basic works of the new rhetoricians include E.L. Bowie's *The Importance of Sophists* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1982); B. Vicker's *Defense of Rhetoric* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988); J. Fernandez's *Persuasions and Performances* (Bloomington, Illinois: U of Illinois P, 1986); and *The Social Uses of Metaphor: Essays in the Anthropology of Rhetoric*, ed. J.C. Crocker and J.D. Sapir (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: 1977).

3. We tend to take the Roman and Renaissance rhetoricians' definition of *trope* as any figure of speech. The Greek word *trope* meant a sudden and highly contested turn-about, as when one side in battle suddenly turns and flees. The weapons and other items of value discarded by the defeated and fleeing army thus become trophies. Drama as a *stasis* (civil war), an *agon* (struggle) would, by its very nature, be structured tropically. And the chorus, the most public element of the *dramemnon*, would dance the double *trope* of *strophe* (a step against one's motion) and *antistrophe* (another turn-about step against the *strophe*).

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## *At Hathui's Tomb and The Lions' Den:* Resurrection Dramas in the Medieval Church

Dunbar H. Ogden and Robert L. Erenstein

Performances of dramas in the medieval church confirmed to their congregants—monastics and townspeople—that death is not an end to life. To this purpose they employed in their music-dramas certain features of the church already imbued with sanctity through sacred usage: altars, a tomb, the burial crypt, even an especially constructed replica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

Here are studies of two such stagings in medieval churches, parallel in their death-and-resurrection stories, in their use of ecclesiastical architecture, and in their messages to their audiences: one performed in the German convent of Gernrode c.1500, the other in Maastricht in 1996.

### *At Hathui's Tomb*

Dunbar H. Ogden

From the tenth through the sixteenth centuries the *Visitatio Sepulchri* was staged all over Europe, presented steadily for six hundred years. This *Visit to the Sepulchre* first began to be performed as an attachment to the Easter liturgy of the medieval church. It was a resurrection play, a brief dramatization of the three Marys' journey to Jesus' Tomb, their exchange there with an Angel (or Angels), their seeing the Tomb empty, and announcing their discovery to the gathered community by singing *Surrexit dominus* ("The Lord has risen"). In this dramatic presentation of immortality the little play embodied the spirit of springtime, the resurrection season of the year. Today about 1,000 manuscripts

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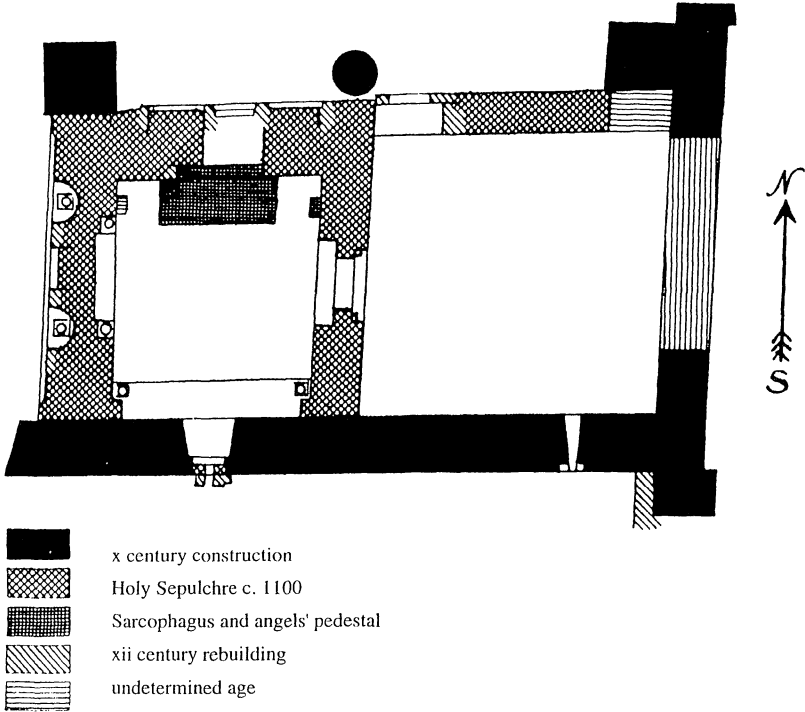


Figure 2· Church of Gernrode.  
Plan of the Holy Sepulchre, showing entrance into antechamber,  
entrance into grave chamber, and "window" opening in north  
wall behind the sarcophagus.