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Film Theory and the Gendered Voice in Seneca

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> Oedipus: Who forbids me to enjoy the darkness? Who gives me back my eyes? Listen, it's the sound of my mother's voice—my mother.
>
> Quis frui tenebris vetat?
> quis reddit oculos? Matris, en matris sonus!
>
> (Seneca *Oedipus* 1012–13)[1]

> Au commencement, dans la nuit utérine, était la voix, celle de la Mère. La mère est pour l'enfant, aprés la naissance, plus un continuum olfactif et vocal qu'une image. On peut l'imaginer, la Mère, tissant autour de lui, avec sa voix qui provient de tous les points de l'éspace, alors que sa forme entre et sort du champ visuel, un réseau de liens auquel nous sommes tentés de donner le nom de *toile ombilicale*. Expression horrifiante puisqu'elle évoque l'araignée, et de fait, ce lien vocal originel restera ambivalent.
>
> (Chion 1982: 57)

Until 1973, films were studied in terms presumed to be universal, without reference to gender. With the delivery of her paper "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" in 1973, Laura Mulvey exploded the narrow assumptions of the field concerning the universality of its aesthetics, and feminist film theory was born (Mulvey 1989: 14–26).[2] Mulvey's early work on film owed as much to the women's movement of the 1970s—when the female body emerged as the starting point for all debates and issues from abortion rights to pornography—as it did to Freudian theory (Mulvey 1989: vii–xv). Mulvey argued that classic cinema reinforced the culture of male dominance by its strategy of displacement: Hollywood movies characteristically assuaged male fears of deficiency by representing the female body as the site of impotence and lack, and as the appropriate object for the controlling male gaze. Since Mulvey, a number of feminist film critics and filmmakers, all of them committed to the proposition that art and politics are interlocking forms of representation, have continued to seek not only to reconstruct but to transform woman at the level of images, discourses, and subjectivities—at the level, that is, of what Teresa de Lauretis has called "technologies of gender" (de Lauretis 1987). For example, E. Ann Kaplan and Mary Ann Doane theorize more than Mulvey had about the complex, interactive nature of the gaze, as involving, at the very least, actors, audience, and the filmic apparatus itself.

They saw possession of the gaze as oscillating in Hollywood films of the 1940s between male and female subjectivities (Kaplan 1983; Doane 1987). From the early eighties on, both Doane and Kaja Silverman turned away from their prior emphasis on the gendered body as primarily a visual construct in classic cinema to consider aural representations of woman in film (Doane 1980, 1987; Silverman 1988).

The uses of sound in film and fantasies concerning the origins of aural pleasure *in utero* and early infancy have been the focus of a number of recent studies in film theory. The infant experiences the mother, as Michel Chion has noted, more as "a vocal and olfactory continuum than a visual image" (Chion 1982: 57). Other studies have characterized fantasies of the womb as not only utopic but euphonic: as a sonorous envelope, as music in its most pure and primal form, and as a place where the sound of the mother's voice is linked to unending plenitude (Silverman 1988; Doane 1980; Rosolato 1974; Kristeva 1982). Describing the mother's voice as "the first model of auditory pleasure," Doane relates the aural pleasure we experience at the cinema to fantasies of return to the sheltering enclosure of the mother's body:

> The imaginary fusion of the child with the mother is supported by the recognition of common traits characterizing the different voices, and more particularly, of their potential for harmony. . . . At the cinema, the sonorous envelope provided by the theatrical space together with techniques employed in the construction of the soundtrack work to sustain the narcissistic pleasure derived from the image of a certain unity, cohesion, and hence, an identity grounded on the spectator's fantasmatic relation to his/her own body (Doane 1980: 44–45).

Lacan, as Silverman notes (Lacan 1981: 62–63; Silverman 1988: 85), attributes special significance in psychoanalysis to the mother's voice, grouping it with those objects he calls *objets a*—objects such as the mother's breast, the infant's feces, the mother's gaze, all of which the infant once saw as part of himself but which were lost in what amounted to a castration, or shearing away, of that body part. Silverman cites two films, Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941) and Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Diva* (1981), as particularly obvious manifestations of the voice/womb fantasy (Silverman 1988: 86–87). In *Citizen Kane*, a powerful but alienated millionaire finances the construction of an opera house to contain a voice whose resonant, reverberating plenitude promises to create for him the lost bliss of the womb.[3] Similarly, in *Diva*, the young protagonist, who is obsessed with the voice of a glamorous opera star old enough to be his mother, is shown in one scene wrapping himself in the womblike folds of the satin gown he has stolen from the diva's dressing room and closing his eyes in ecstasy as he basks in the sounds of her voice coming from his hi-fi. Such movies, Silverman argues, exemplify powerful fantasies of the adult subject's re-entry into the plenitude of

the womb, fantasies of recovery of a lost paradise, which Kristeva has called the *chora*, an image from Plato's *Timaeus*, signifying "an unnameable, improbable, hybrid [receptacle], anterior to naming, to the One, to the father, and consequently, maternally connoted" (Kristeva 1982: 133; Silverman 1988: 101–40; and see also Rose 1989). More experimental films such as Francis Ford Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) play openly with displaying not only the desire for, but also the anxiety engendered by, fantasies of a return to the sonorous containment of the womb (Silverman 1988: 87–98).

Chion presents a view of the female voice, both in adult fantasies and in the cinema, that emphasizes its more unsettling resonances. In his essay, "Le lien vocal" ("The Vocal Bond"), he offers an alternate fantasy of the mother's voice as a spiderlike apparition, swinging back and forth above and around the infant, spinning its *toile ombilicale* ("umbilical web") of sound.[4] Calling attention to fantasies of the female voice as subversive, anxiety-inducing, and generally unpleasurable in a long citation from Denis Vasse's study of psychotic children and adults, Chion suggests an interesting analogy between the umbilicus and the mother's voice: both are conduits between infant and mother; both are boundary markers signifying rupture:

> The umbilical zone, like a cicatrice in its opaque materiality . . . inscribes, at the very center of the infant, the desire . . . that it live according to the law of its species; and this desire is necessarily expressed, whether consciously or not, in the act of umbilical closure. This act of closure, accomplished at birth, is the correlative of the significance attached to the opening of the mouth and the emission of the first cry. Thus, the voice is inscribed in the umbilical rupture. At this closure, which marks, at the center of the body, the definitive rupture with another body . . . the newborn of man finds himself assigned to reside in that body there. . . . Henceforth, contact between the bodies of mother and child will be mediated through the voice. The umbilicus and the voice form, then, this pair in which the umbilicus is closure, and the voice is subversion of the closure.[5]

Striking in the Vasse-Chion paradigm is the reversal of the positions of mother and child: the enveloping, structuring, and omnipotent prenatal maternal voice is supplanted at birth by the voice of the infant, here gendered male (*le petit d'homme*), whose first cry asserts its separation from, and prefigures its mastery over, woman.

Silverman argues that, for the very reason that the maternal voice is generally invested with omnipotence in adult fantasy, classic cinema—the apparatus par excellence of the dominant culture—necessarily operates so as to reverse this fantasy.[6] Not only are visual representations of the female (woman, mother, wife, daughter) so constructed in classic cinema as to displace male fears of

insufficiency or lack; the voice of the cultural Other (the female), in Silverman's formulation, becomes the "dumping ground" for all that is not assimilable to the culturally dominant position (that of the male). In classic film, that is, the voice of woman is represented as the repository for nonrational speech, emotional or hysterical utterances, uncontrollable weeping, raw imagistic talk, babble, and most important, the cry of ecstasy or terror. Silverman demonstrates how this displacement of lack works in her analysis of Anatole Litvak's *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948), a film where a powerful female protagonist, Leona—whose very name suggests an ominous coupling of dominance with femininity—is set up for a fall.[7]

The film dramatizes a single day in the life of Leona (Barbara Stanwyck)—a day that ends with her murder. At the start of the film Leona is shown as isolated and bedridden due to an unexplained nervous disorder. In a series of flashbacks, we see Leona as she was before her marriage; she had been a forceful and overbearing woman who pressured her husband (Burt Lancaster) into marriage, into her father's home, and into her father's business as its head. In short, Leona has arrogated the functions of directorship and mastery to herself—a usurpation of the paternal position for which she will pay dearly (Silverman 1988: 78).

In the present tense of the film's story line, Leona has been reduced to helplessness: her only connection with the world is a telephone during the hours when her husband is away at work. In the beginning of the film, we see her overhearing a telephone conversation about the planning of a murder—her own—though she doesn't recognize it as such. She tries repeatedly to reach the operator in an effort to stop the murder. But because her voice reveals her hysteria, no one takes seriously her urgent pleas for help. Thus gradually, in the course of the film, we see Leona reduced from the dominant figure in the plot to infantile dependency. She neither has the mobility of an adult nor is she able to use her voice or manipulate language in such a way as to enable her to survive. In the final scene, her husband warns her from his office phone to cry out for help; but she, now too paralyzed and frantic to act, is strangled by the killer her husband has hired, who wraps the telephone cord around her neck, at last eliciting from her the piercing scream of an infant. This cry, according to Chion, is the crisis point, or vortex, toward which every action in classic cinema is irresistibly drawn. Film, Chion writes, is like a great animated machine whose purpose is the "accoucher d'un cri"—the birthing of a cry, a provocative metaphor that suggests a resemblance between film and the female body in labor (Chion 1982: 68).[8]

Seneca and the Roman Theater

In this essay, I will argue that representations of the female voice, chiefly as the site of lability, anxiety, and lack (moral and physical), though occasionally also as the source of plenitude and security, were already full-blown in the ancient theater in general, and most specifically in the tragedies of Lucius Annaeus Seneca

(c. 4 B.C.E. to 65 C.E.). Seneca's tragedies were seminal to the development of the drama in England and on the Continent, since they had far more direct impact on Renaissance theater and subsequent European drama than did Greek tragedy.[9] We tend not to realize this, since in our own era, Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, and Euripides's *Medea* are standard fare in high school and undergraduate literature courses, while Seneca's tragedies, seldom studied outside graduate seminars, have languished.

Despite the importance of Seneca to the rise of tragedy in Europe, he comes from a tradition largely lost to us. A substantial body of comedies from the early republican playwrights Plautus and Terence survives, but nothing remains from the great third and second century B.C.E. tragedians—Livius Andronicus, Naevius, Ennius, Accius, and Pacuvius—except scattered fragments. We know little about the evolution of the theater in Italy, except that after the second century B.C.E., comedy and tragedy ceased to flourish; and both genres gave way to more improvisational, dance-oriented performance forms such as farce, mime, and above all pantomime, where a solo dancer performed all the parts in a dramatic narrative. Only two tragedies were produced in Rome during the early imperial period as far as we know: Varius's *Thyestes* and Ovid's *Medea*, neither of which is extant. Of the hundreds of Latin tragedies known to us by title only, Seneca's tragedies alone survive. Ten plays have been attributed to him, including the eight complete tragedies *Hercules Furens, Troades, Medea, Phaedra, Oedipus, Agamemnon, Thyestes, Hercules Oetaeus*; the incomplete *Phoenissae*; and the almost certainly inauthentic *Octavia*.[10]

Seneca's tragedies in some ways mirror the sinister palace intrigues that marked Nero's regency (54–68 C.E.).[11] According to Tacitus, Seneca was a key player in these intrigues. Nero's mother Agrippina, the wife of the late emperor Claudius, recalled Seneca to the imperial court from Corsica, where he had been exiled on a charge of adultery by Claudius (Tacitus *Annals* 12.8). At court, Seneca was to serve as Nero's guardian and teacher, a role that caused the playwright, like the *nutrix* (nurse) character in his own tragedies, to zigzag uncertainly between playing his ward's moral instructor and his accomplice in crime. Seneca's intimacy with the young emperor resulted in increasing tension between him and his former patron Agrippina—a tension that has certain resonances in his portrayals of the queen mother figures in his tragedies (*Annals* 13.14). The many resemblances between Seneca's tragic plots and Tacitus's account of Nero's reign, moreover, cannot be simply coincidental. Agrippina's murder of her husband Claudius has obvious parallels in Seneca's *Agamemnon* and *Hercules Oetaeus*. Nero's executions of his stepbrother, his stepsister (also his wife), and his mother—according to Tacitus, Seneca was involved in the matricide—have their echoes in the *Agamemnon* and the *Thyestes* (*Annals* 14.7). The incestuous relationship between Agrippina and her son Nero, as Tacitus tells it (*Annals* 14.2), bears similarities to the relationships between the queen mothers and their sons (or sons by marriage) in Seneca's *Oedipus* and *Phaedra*; in each case, the sons were

responsible, in one way or another, for their mothers' deaths. Some of the details of Agrippina's death in fact so closely resemble Jocasta's suicide in the *Oedipus*, that we can only wonder whether Tacitus used Seneca's *Oedipus* to embellish his history or whether the report of how Agrippina died had caused Seneca to rewrite the end of his *Oedipus*. (See below on *Annals* 14.6 and *Oedipus* 1033–39.)

The tragedies of Seneca may have been produced at the imperial court, perhaps in a small private theater in the palace. Testifying to the emperor's passion for the theater, Suetonius says that Nero himself sang the roles of Orestes, Oedipus, and other tragedies in public (*Nero* 21). Nonetheless, the question of whether Seneca wrote his tragedies for performance in the theater or merely for recitation is still the subject of controversy.[12] The voice, in any case, played a key role in Senecan tragedy; since the actors wore masks in the performance of tragedy, every emotion, shift in feeling, or reaction had to be vocally registered.[13] From Quintilian we know too that certain conventional ideas about the quality and projection of the male versus the female voice existed in the Roman theater (*Institutio Oratoria* 11.3.19, 32). Moreover, since male actors played both the male and female roles, the "effeminate" or "soft" voices of certain male actors were the frequent objects of derision among Roman writers (Richlin 1992a: 92–95).

The Roman theater differed most from its Greek forerunners in its attitude toward the representation of sex and violence on stage. In Greek tragedy, acts most crucial to the plot such as murder, suicide, rape, and other forms of violence were not enacted on stage but were described to the audience after the fact by a messenger or some other witness. During the imperial period, the Romans' demand for ever increasing levels of sex and carnage on stage so escalated that actual executions and sexual acts were presented on stage as entertainment.[14] In keeping with the tastes of his era, Seneca's tragedies contain a number of explicitly bloody scenes: Theseus's recovery and reassembling of the mutilated remains of his son's body in the *Phaedra* (1262–72); Jocasta's perforation of her own uterus with a sword in the *Oedipus* (1038–39); and Medea's slashing of her arm with a knife in the *Medea* (807–11).

The Female Hysteric in Seneca

As in classic cinema, the female voice in Senecan drama is regularly the site of hysteria and paranoia—states not assimilable to the paternal position. Representations of the female body, and more particularly women's reproductive organs, as generative of emotional illness, can be seen both in Greek poetry from the Archaic period on, and in ancient medical texts, from the fifth century B.C.E. physician Hippocrates to the second century C.E. encyclopedists of medicine (Cyrino 1992; Foucault 1988: 114–15). Seneca's contemporary Celsus wrote that catatonia could be induced by diseases of the uterus (Greek *hystera*):

> From the womb of a woman, also, there arises a violent malady; and next to the stomach this organ is affected the most by the body, and has the most influence upon it. At times it makes the woman so insensible that it prostrates her as if by epilepsy. The case, however, differs from epilepsy, in that the eyes are not turned nor is there foaming at the mouth or spasm of sinews; there is merely stupor (*De medicina* 6.27; trans. Lefkowitz and Fant 1982: 230–31).

The second century physician Soranus saw uterine dysfunction as causing the fainting spells he observed in normal, non-epileptic women:

> Hysterical suffocation . . . [is] caused by some condition of the uterus. . . . When an attack occurs, sufferers from the disease collapse, show aphonia, laboured breathing, a seizure of the senses, clenching of the teeth, stridor . . . bulging of the network of vessels of the face. The whole body is cool, covered with perspiration, the pulse stops or is very small. In the majority of cases [these women] recover quickly from the collapse and usually recall what has happened . . . [but] sometimes they are even deranged . . . (*Gynaecology* 3.26; trans. Lefkowitz and Fant 1982: 228).

Clytemnestra in Seneca's *Agamemnon*, Phaedra in his *Phaedra*, and Medea in his drama of the same name, who respond in different ways to their husbands' sexual dismissal or abandonment of them, are all made nonetheless to display a similar physical and emotional pathology: trembling of the voice, sudden changes in pitch and volume, a tendency to rant, sigh, pant, groan, or sob audibly. Genitally bereft, these women's other orifices—mouths, eyes, noses, skin—bear the marks of their stress: their mouths refuse food and drink, their eyes water and tear, their skin becomes mottled or pale.[15]

In Greek tragedy, men weep, groan, and mourn openly. In Seneca, the ritual practices for mourning in the ancient world—loud weeping, breast beating, and hair tearing—are the peculiar property of women, and more specifically of female choruses, employed in only three of Seneca's plays (*Troades, Agamemnon*, and *Hercules Oetaeus*). Each of these plays has a chorus of captive women; but both the *Agamemnon* and the *Hercules Oetaeus* have, in addition, a second chorus who represent the local inhabitants, and these choruses sing in opposition to the captive women, thus denying the possibility of a unified female choral voice.[16] Unlike Euripides's choruses, which are predominantly female, Seneca's male choruses neither sing dirges nor do they sympathize with the female protagonists in their plays. Jason and Theseus, who can weep over the corpses of their sons, are the exceptional cases. In Seneca, woman alone remains the figure for raw nature, for feeling and emotionality unrepressed by the constraints of philosophy.

The Sounds of the Womb

The voice of the mother is almost always negative in its impact in Seneca. Agave's shrieking dismemberment of her son Pentheus is a recurring reminiscence in the *Oedipus* (441, 484–85, 616–18, 1005–7) and the *Phoenissae* (15, 363). But the most frightening of Seneca's evocations of what Chion has called *la toile ombilicale* are found in the *Medea*, where images of the womb and childbirth are consistently grouped with those of darkness, death, and Hades. In Seneca's tragedy, from her first appearance until the final scene on the battlements of the palace, Medea binds and envelops the space of the theater with the almost unrelieved continuum of her voice, her glance, and her movement back and forth and around the performance space. In the opening scene she invokes a full company of deities associated with the underworld: Hecate, goddess of witchcraft; Dictynna, deity of nets and traps; the Erinyes, the sometime goddesses of childbirth and fertility, whose snake-infested heads suggest supernumerary phalloi; and Lucina, the goddess of women in childbirth, known as "the one who brings to light," who here is linked with the spirits of darkness. In two long arias, we are shown Medea's occult practices (*Medea* 670–848): in the first of these, it is the nurse who describes Medea's preparations and incantations; in the second scene (like the shot/reverse shot device in film) we see Medea herself going through her paces as she invokes the spirits of ghouls from Hades and mixes the poisons she will use against Creon and Creusa, all the while beating time to her verses, her feet bared for the dance. Bathing the audience in the sounds of her hallucinations (as later she will inundate them with the screams of her children), Medea fantasizes that she sees the mutilated body of her brother Absyrtus who now demands the deaths of her sons. Removing poisonous herbs, serpents' venom, the gall of the Medusa, and the hearts and other vital organs of owls from the recesses of various enclosures, vials, and boxes, and finally applying a knife to her own arm to draw blood, in this aria she suggests a horrific sort of birthing.

> To you, [Dictynna], we consecrate this holy rite on blood-stained grass; for you, a torch seized from the midst of a funeral pyre eclipses the nighttime stars; for you, with swaying head and curving neck, I have made speeches; for you I have bound my streaming hair with a garland, as though I were a mourner; for you I wave a sad bough from the Stygian waters; for you I, a bacchante, with bared breasts shall strike my arms with a holy knife. May my blood wet the altar; may you become used, o my hand, to drawing the sword and to being able to bear the shedding of our own blood. Struck, I consecrate this holy draught to you. (*Medea* 797–811)

In Seneca, the womb itself is fastened on as the source of evil in the world—"greater crimes befit me, now that my womb has born fruit," says Medea (*Medea*

50). The characters both of Hecuba in Seneca's *Troades* and Jocasta in the *Oedipus* use words, cries, and gesticulations physically to frame and rivet the gaze of the audience on their wombs—the emblem of their femaleness and status as mothers—as evil. Hecuba informs the audience in the prologue to the *Troades* that her womb produced the torch that ignited the Trojan War (33–40). When Jocasta learns that Oedipus is her son, in a gripping scene—partly because it so closely resembles Tacitus's account of Agrippina's last words—she thrusts a sword into her womb:[17]

> Jocasta: . . . Shall I stab myself in the breast with this weapon, or shall I gouge my bare throat with it, burying it there? Do you not know enough to choose the wound? Here, right hand of mine, seek out this broad womb that bore sons and husband both (*Oedipus* 1036–39).
>
> (Ioc.: . . . utrumne pectori infigam meo
> telum an patenti conditum iugulo inprimam?
> eligere nescis vulnus? hunc, dextra, hunc pete
> uterum capacem, qui virum et natos tulit.)
>
> Tacitus: Now when the centurion drew his sword for the kill, [Agrippina] thrust out her belly and cried, "Strike me here—in the womb" (*Annals* 14.6).
>
> (Iam in mortem centurioni ferrum destringenti protendens uterum "Ventrem feri" exclamavit.)

The superimposition of womb/tomb imagery is also suggested when Andromache in the *Troades* first hides her child from the Greeks in his father's tomb, and later extracts him, drawing him forth from his uterine tomb so that he may be publicly executed (*Troades* 509–707). Likewise it is from the empty, abandoned wombs of Phaedra, Medea, and Clytemnestra, as Seneca makes clear, that destruction is engendered: woman, womb, and tomb in Seneca are correlatives.

In the prologue to the *Oedipus*, the king's description of Thebes and of its arable fields (always metonymic for the female body) evokes Vergil's sterile lower world.[18] Within the city, as in Chion's uterine night (*la nuit utérine*), the ambience is claustrophobic and without light. A menacing quiet seems to hang over the city: the air is windless, and only the crackling of funeral fires ruptures the silence. No mourning cries are heard and even "tears are dead" (*Oedipus* 1–70).

> The Dirce is dry, the Ismenus barely flows and hardly stains the arid shoals with its feeble wave. Phoebus' sister slips dimly through the sky, and the sad world pales under the cloudy day. No star gleams in the silent nights, but a heavy smog lies on the earth. A deathly light shrouds the citadels and homes of the gods. Ripe Ceres denies her grain, and tawny with her proud ears of corn, she trembles and her sterile crop decays on its withered stalk (*Oedipus* 42–51).

Womb as Primordial Knowledge/Power

But the womb is also a figure for knowledge and revelation. As in Irigaray's reprivileging of the cave/womb in Plato's famous allegory as *itself* the unrepresentable source of all representations and thus the epistemological first principle, so in Seneca's *Oedipus*, the place where Creon must go in order to embark on solving the mystery of his identity turns out to be a place whose landscape is conventionally suggestive of the female genitalia and womb.[19] The seer Creon visits inhabits a grove which, like Calypso's in the *Odyssey*, is overgrown with laurel, lindens, Paphian myrtle, and alders. Beneath the tangled overgrowth is a dark spring surrounded by soft, wet ground (*Oedipus* 530–48):

> At a distance from the city there is a grove shady with ilex trees. . . . A cypress raising its crest high above the lofty forest binds together the wooded glen with its green trunk. An old oak tree, decaying where it stands, extends its twisted boughs. Voracious old age has afflicted the flank of one tree; another, now split and torn from its roots and falling, hangs there—supported by a bough from still another tree.
>
> . . . Under that tree over there is a pitiful wet place that knows neither trees nor sun: it is stagnant and still, and a murky swamp encircles a slow-bubbling spring (*Oedipus* 530–37, 545–47).

In its associations with knowledge of a preverbal, precultural sort, then, the content of the choric voice is mantic rather than rational. This is clearly the case in three other personae of women in Seneca: Cassandra in the *Agamemnon*, Manto in the *Oedipus*, and Hecuba in the *Troades*, all three of whom are drawn to some extent from Aeschylus's Cassandra. Each of these women is capable of seeing or dreaming truths to which male characters are denied direct access. But in each instance, it devolves upon a male intercessor or analyst to act as interpreter. As in the classic Hollywood films of the 1940s that focus on the psychoanalysis of a female patient by a male doctor (*The Spiral Staircase, The Snake Pit,* and *The Lady in the Dark*), the female analysand senses, intuits, fantasizes things she cannot articulate; her analyst must reveal to her what, on a subconscious level, she already knows (Silverman 1988: 59–60). Without the authorization of a male priest, no one takes Hecuba's predictions of the future seriously (*Troades* 35). Manto, the seer Tiresias's daughter in Seneca's *Oedipus* (the seer has no daughter in Sophocles), sees what her blind father cannot see, describes what she cannot make sense of or interpret. Her talk is childlike, a babble of puzzling images that

her father must translate and order into meanings. She "reads" the entrails of the animals sacrificed to the gods; but she will need her father to enunciate the significance of her rambling, melodic lists of what she sees or has seen. Andromache in Seneca's *Troades* is capable of divining that the Greeks have marked her son for execution, after a dream in which the ghost of her dead husband appears to warn her of the danger facing their son. But in the end she is verbally outmaneuvered by Ulysses, who tricks her into betraying her child.

In Seneca's *Agamemnon*, Cassandra is shown having a series of visions. The chorus provides a full account of the symptoms of her hysteria: as in Soranus's clinical description of hysterical suffocation quoted above, Cassandra's body is shaken by convulsions, her eyes protrude, her pupils are dilated, she grinds her teeth, and her voice becomes high and tremulous:

> The priestess of Apollo is suddenly silent, her cheeks grow pale, and a quaking takes possession of her whole body; her sacred fillets stand on end, her soft tresses bristle, her panting breast heaves and emits a sigh from within; her eyes flicker uncertainly: first they roll back in their sockets, and then they stare frozenly ahead. Now she walks proudly and lifts her head higher in the air than she usually does. Now she prepares to unlock her struggling jaws; and then, like a bacchante impatient with the god, she guards her words—though her mouth remains open (*Agamemnon* 710–19).

In the first of her hallucinatory, prophetic monologues, speaking in apparent riddles, she seems to have a vision of Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon, followed by one in which she sees herself and Agamemnon as dead souls, floating down the Phlegethon (*Agamemnon* 734–50ff.). Though a chorus of Trojan women witnesses her wandering, chaotic speeches detailing her visions of the future, they do not listen to her words, discounting them as the ravings of a madwoman. In the second of her hallucinatory speeches (*Agamemnon* 876–909), she is alone on the stage. As though looking through a window in the palace, Cassandra "sees" the wife helping the king as he slips into the heavy cloak that she has woven—like Chion's *mère tissant*—for her husband's entrapment; she sees him struggling within the weblike folds of the garment to escape the blows of his wife and her lover, and finally she envisions the king's mutilated body, the lips of its severed head still moving to form a cry (*Agamemnon* 901–3).

But a utopic, choric fantasy of the mother's voice can also be found in Senecan tragedy. In the extant fragment of the *Phoenissae*, for example, a maternal Antigone, who leads her now sightless father Oedipus by her voice if not her hands, seems indeed to wash and envelop him in the sounds of her speech as she offers a guided tour of the rugged path they have taken, now pointing to the locus of this steep cliff here, now to that boulder or chasm over there (*Phoenissae* 61–72). Similarly, Sophocles's harsh Electra is very changed in Seneca's hands. In

Seneca's *Agamemnon*, she comforts her brother Orestes, here a small child, promising to hide him under the womblike folds of her gown (*vultus veste furabor tuos, Agamemnon* 914) where, no longer able to see, he can nonetheless *hear* the maternal voice. Andromache in Seneca's *Troades*, on the other hand, is advised by her servant to remove her son out of earshot of her voice, lest he *hear* a tremor in her words and lose heart (*Troades* 513–14). In the prologue to the *Troades*, Hecuba gathers her daughters and serving women (who comprise the chorus) together, seeming to enfold them in the caressing, consoling sounds of her voice, and as she philosophizes on the dangers of power and worldly riches, she leads her women in a song of lamentation. In this scene, she plays the role of a mother babbling sense and nonsense to her children, calling on them to imitate her sounds and to follow her lead (*Troades* 83–164). First she tells them to undress so that they can beat their breasts in grief. Then she calls on them to repeat after her. She orders them to begin with a mourning song for Hector, and they repeat her words. She commands them next to grieve for Priam. When they have done so, she asks them to change their chant to "Happy is Priam," and they promptly obey. And thus the litany continues with the young women mimicking their mother in her long catalogue of death and sorrow. The sound of Hecuba's voice—and she is on stage for at least the entire first quarter and last third of the play—seems to wrap around the poem, containing its movement and moods. From her womb may have come Troy's ruin—indeed, that is her claim—but she is also a figure of courage. After the Greeks have taken Troy, only the sight of the queen still causes the men to tremble: "I only am a terror to the Greeks," she says (*Troades* 62).

Silencing Woman

As in Greek tragedy, when women commit suicide or submit willingly to death in Seneca, they are notably silent (Loraux 1987: 20–23). In Seneca's *Oedipus*, Jocasta specifies before her suicide that she will excise the source of evil in Thebes by literally taking a knife to her womb (*Oedipus* 1038–39). These are the last words she speaks, thus figuring Chion and Vasse's associations of womb, wound, and voice. Similarly, Polyxena at the scene of her execution marches wordlessly to her death, her breasts perhaps still bared in obedience to Hecuba's instructions (*Troades* 87–94). But there are Greek models for the scene. In the messenger's account in Euripides's *Hekabe* the ritual murder of Polyxena is performed as a kind of entertainment in front of thousands of Greek soldiers; the princess insists on stripping herself to the waist before she receives the executioner's deathblow, while the whole Greek army watches:

> Then he seized his gilt sword by its handle and drew it from its sheath (543–44) . . . and when she heard her master's words, she took hold of her robe and tore it from her shoulder top down to the middle of her

> ribs where her navel was, and she revealed her breasts and chest, which were as beautiful as those of a statue; then, kneeling down on the earth, she spoke the most courageous words of all . . . (*Hekabe* 557–62).

Like the (narrated) public throat cuttings of Iphigenia and Polyxena in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* and Euripides's *Hekabe*—and as in the modern snuff film, for that matter—the point of Polyxena's public execution in the *Troades* is sexual arousal. As in Silverman's and Chion's examples from classic cinema, Seneca's Greek soldiers have come to see the murder of a young girl and to hear her screams. But in the *Troades*, the soldiers are denied these pleasures: Polyxena remains silent; and, keeping her body rigid, she propels her torso forward and downward, striking the mound of Achilles as though to wound and penetrate it, the messenger reports. Like some omnivorous female "organ-hole"—to borrow Ernest Jones's image (Jones 1935: 263–73; Silverman 1988: 66–67)—the mound instantly sucks down into itself the blood from the wound of the woman so that no spillage remains on the ground:

> Nor did she lose heart though she was dying: she fell face forward on the tomb with an angry smack, as though she wanted to make the earth lie heavy on Achilles's shade . . .; and the blood gushing from her wound did not remain where she lay, nor did it flow down from the summit of the funeral mound; but instantaneously the savage tomb drained the mound dry of all the blood that was there (*Troades* 1157–59, 1161–64).

Voice-over and the Male Chorus

The "voice-over" or "voice-off" in film belongs to a character who is not visible within the frame. Mary Ann Doane draws a distinction between the "voice-over" and the "voice-off," defining the voice-over as that belonging to a disembodied, omniscient enunciator who comments on but is not a character inside the fictional space of the film, inside the diegesis (Doane 1980: 37–42). The voice-off, however, is a voice belonging to a specific character *within* the diegesis, who momentarily speaks from beyond the frameline. Whereas the voice-over always occupies a position that is disembodied, exterior, and hence in excess of or superior to the diegesis, the voice-off only temporarily occupies this position. In classic cinema, the voice-over—which assumes an attitude of disinterest though its role is in fact to mold and influence the way that the diegesis is "read"—whether in fiction films or documentaries, is male. Pascal Bonitzer, who in the passage I am about to quote uses "voice-off" to cover both voice-over and voice-off positions, remarks on the politics of such a positioning of the voice:

> The voice-off represents a power, that of disposing of the image and of what it reflects, from a space absolutely *other* with respect to that inscribed in the image track. *Absolutely other and absolutely indeterminate*. Because it rises from the field of the Other, the voice-off is assumed to know: this is the essence of its power. . . . The power of the voice is a stolen power, a usurpation (Bonitzer's emphasis, Doane 1980: 42).

The male choruses in Senecan tragedy play a role similar to the voice-over both in classic cinema and documentaries.[20] Like the voice-over in film, the chorus serves the function of binding together the disparate parts of the drama to create a homogeneous texture, an illusion of unity and smoothness; moreover, like the voice-over, the chorus sometimes provides a running commentary on the action, the purpose of which is to guide the audience to form the "correct" opinion about what it has seen. The chorus, like the voice-over, is also, for all practical purposes, disembodied, exceeds the plot, and is unaffected by its outcome. The voice of the chorus in Seneca is privileged, authoritative, and frequently omniscient: "the one," in Lacanian terms, "presumed to know" (as Bonitzer reminds us).

Unlike the choruses in Euripides, who were frequently represented as all-female groups (though these "women" were played by male actors, as were all women's roles in ancient Greek tragedy), Seneca's choruses (for example, in his *Thyestes, Hercules Furens, Phaedra, Oedipus,* and *Medea*) tend to be all-male groups, who remain exterior to and untouched by the permutations of the plot, and who are apt to keep up a running philosophizing critique of the action. Whereas Euripides's and Aeschylus's choruses of women get involved in the action and often play a decisive role *within* the plots of the dramas, Seneca's choruses are without personal, particular, or bodied features. Like the disembodied voice in the voice-over of a classic Hollywood film, the Senecan chorus often takes a very distant stance to the action, commenting disinterestedly in the *Medea* in two long interior odes on the perils of the sea (nature, and human nature by implication: *Medea* 301–79; 579–669). On the other hand, the choral odes that frame the *Medea* urge the audience to be disgusted by Medea's Asian mannerisms and to approve of her dismissal by Jason (*Medea* 65–115; 849–78). Similarly, the choruses of male Athenians in Seneca's *Phaedra* act to contain yet transcend the action of the drama, impersonally moralizing at each crisis point in the diegesis, from Phaedra's first disclosure of her desires and her shame, to the death of Hippolytus. Their message at each juncture is one of resignation. When Phaedra tells the nurse she has begun to think of suicide, the chorus sings only of the cruelty of love and the history of its domination in the world (*Phaedra* 274–357). After Hippolytus has threatened Phaedra at sword's point, the chorus warns against the dangers of physical beauty, of nature's ravages, and foresees Phaedra's accusations against her stepson (*Phaedra* 736–834). When Theseus

has doomed his son with a curse, the chorus simply bemoans the indifference of nature and Jove to human suffering, and complains that there is no moral order or meaning in the universe (*Phaedra* 959–88). Once the messenger has reported the grisly details of Hippolytus's death, the chorus again, in reply to no one in particular, sings that fortune and death rule the world, noting at the end of their song—as though from a great moral and physical distance—that Phaedra can be seen (presumably on the stage) waving a sword around (*Phaedra* 1123–55). The Theban elders' choral odes in Seneca's *Oedipus*—and there are five of them in the play—never vary much. They provide a consistent tattoo: Thebes has a history of tragedy; fate is responsible; and all mortals must yield to fate. The second and third choruses respond to Oedipus's desire to find a culprit to blame for the trouble in Thebes. These two choruses taken together (beginning at *Oedipus* 403 and 709, respectively) sketch the history of Thebes and explain why the city and its rulers are a marked family. Choruses one, four, and five tidily wrap around the action (these begin at *Oedipus* 110, 822, and 980, respectively), sanctioning the fall of Thebes and the inevitability of Oedipus's end. The fourth chorus warns irrelevantly that steering a middle course is best; and the final chorus counsels impersonally that all men must accept and not attempt to flee that which in any case is inexorable, one's fate.

Film Theory, Classics, and the *Longue Durée*

The demonstrable applicability of the pioneering work of Mulvey, Doane, Silverman, and other feminist film theorists to the ancient Roman theater documents yet again the cultural implications of "the very *longue durée* of institutionalized oppression of women" (Richlin 1992a: xvii). Feminist film criticism suggests new roads for the study of visual and aural representations of gender across the distances of time and culture, avenues viable whether we are looking backward at Euripidean, Senecan, or Renaissance drama, or forward to recent films. The displacement of fear about lack onto the figure of woman can be seen in this year's most successful Hollywood movies. In *The Prince of Tides*, a successful New York psychiatrist (Barbra Streisand) is at last taught how to be a "good mother" and a "real woman" by one of her clients (Nick Nolte), a high school football coach who, after a few sessions with her, becomes her lover. In *JFK*, Liz (Sissy Spacek), the wife of New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison (Kevin Costner) takes her place beside the telephone and the TV, far from the affairs of men. As we have seen, Silverman's model of the female voice in films such as *Sorry, Wrong Number*, as the "dumping ground" for traits not assimilable to the paternal position, works equally well with Senecan tragedy, where irrationality, runaway emotions, or lack of bodily or mental control are attributes only ascribed to women. Silverman's focus on the female voice in film is an approach especially illuminating since, in Senecan drama, the voice and its textures are so important in the constructing of both persona and sexuality. Manto's rambling talk in the *Oedipus* must be translated into reasoned discourse by her father

Tiresias, the way the dreams of female patients in classic Hollywood films must be explained to them by their male psychiatrists. Seneca's Cassandra and Phaedra, like the Barbara Stanwyck character in *Sorry, Wrong Number*, are reduced from powerful protagonists to infant dependency in their tragedies. Psychoanalytic theories of womb fantasies, either as a sonorous envelope (Rosolato, Doane) or as an arachnoid trap (Chion), prove helpful, whether we are analyzing the Chionian *toile* Seneca's Medea seems to spin with her cries and whispers, the swoon of the young opera fan in Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Diva*, or the refuge that Orestes finds under Electra's skirts in Seneca's *Agamemnon*. Doane's and Bonitzer's formulations about the apportioning of aural space in film according to gender, and their observations about the designation of the voice-over in the classic cinema as the province of the male, have made it clear how the male chorus functions in Seneca and why male choruses are the rule in Senecan tragedy. Like the male voice-over in film, Seneca's choruses of men are not only the bearers of reason and moral clarity; they are positioned, as we have seen, within the diegesis so that they wrap around and enclose the rantings of a Medea or a Phaedra, offering prefaces before, and sententious counseling after, these women's speeches.

As a postscript, I want to offer some tentative conclusions regarding the construction of sexual difference in Aeschylean and Euripidean versus Senecan tragedy, focusing in particular on the representation of the gendered voice in the text. The argument I have presented here suggests that there is in Seneca a more monolithic submergence of woman and a more pervasive gynephobia than exists in Seneca's Greek models.[21] In his tragedies—as in classic Hollywood cinema—the female voice must ultimately be circumscribed and repressed. Gone in Seneca's tragedies are the songs of those women's choruses who in Euripides see themselves as united by their shared oppression, who perceive themselves as allied, even with a Medea or a Phaedra. The more fluid gender boundaries so characteristic of the Greek theater in fifth-century B.C.E. Athens (Zeitlin 1981, 1985) are not to be found on the Senecan stage. In Seneca, gender isoglosses are no longer to be transgressed; the fiction that men and women have different and polar "natures" has become canonical. The superiority (intellectual, physical) of Aeschylus's "masculine" queen Clytemnestra or Euripides's Taurian Iphigenia to the "feminized" men who play opposite these women has no parallel in Seneca, where representations of the maternal voice are confined—albeit with some exceptions—to that of the hysteric, the sexually voracious, the madwoman, and the intellectually and morally incompetent.

Notes

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1. Unless otherwise noted, all the translations in this essay are mine and all the Latin texts are from Miller 1979.

2. For the overview that follows and on many other points related to film theory in this paper, I am indebted to Ira Jaffe.
3. Cf. Chion 1982: 77–79, on the voice in *Citizen Kane*.
4. Chion 1982; the relevant passage is quoted in the original under my chapter heading.
5. Chion 1982, 57: "La zone ombilicale, comme cicatrice, 'dans sa materialité opaque . . . inscrit au centre mème de l'enfant la marque du désir . . . qu'il vive selon la loi de son espèce' et ce désir se trouve, consciemment ou non, 'nécessairement impliqué dans l'acte de la fermeture ombilicale'. Cet acte de fermer accompli à la naissance, est 'strictement correlatif à l'attention portée à l'ouverture de la bouche et à l'émission du premier cri'. Ainsi, 'la voix s'inscrit dans la rupture ombilicale'. Par cette fermeture 'témoignant au centre du corps de la rupture définitive avec un autre corps . . . le petit d'homme se trouve assigné à résidence dans ce corps-là. . . . Désormais, le corps à corps avec la mère se trouve médiatisé par la voix'. L'ombilic et la voix forment donc ce couple où 'l'ombilic est clôture, la voix est subversion de la clôture.' " In my translation above of a passage that Chion partly paraphrased and partly quoted verbatim from Denis Vasse's *L'Ombilic et la Voix*, Chion's quotation marks and italics are deleted to make the passage more readable; the ellipses, however, from Vasse's text are all Chion's.
6. On the cultural myth of the mother as omnipotent, see Dinnerstein 1976: esp. 28–37, 160–97. See especially Silverman's two brilliant introductory essays on the female voice in Hollywood cinema, "Body Talk," and "The Fantasy of the Maternal Voice," Silverman 1988: 42–100.
7. For the analysis of *Sorry, Wrong Number* that follows, I am indebted to Silverman 1988: 78–79.
8. Cf. Roland Barthes on the point of the female cry in Sade, as quoted in Kappeler 1986: 90–91.
9. For a general introduction to the Roman theater, Beare 1968 and Bieber 1961 are still valuable; on Seneca's Roman predecessors, see Fantham 1982: 3–9.
10. On the inauthenticity of the *Hercules Oetaeus* and the *Octavia*, see Friedrich 1954 and Axelson 1967; on the manuscript tradition, see Tarrant 1976; on the tragedies in general, see Boyle 1983.
11. On Seneca's well-documented life, see Tacitus, *Annals* 12–14; see also Suetonius, *Nero*; Griffin 1974, 1976.
12. For bibliographies on the performance versus recitation debate see Sutton 1986: esp. 1–6, and Ahl 1986: esp. 18–30, who argue for stage performance; contrast Fantham 1982: esp. 34–49, and Segal 1986: 207ff., who argue for recitation or reading. On recitations (public and private) as a means of publication, see the testimony of the younger Pliny, writing in the generation after Seneca (*Epistles* 1.13; 1.15; 4.19).
13. But this is not to dismiss the popularity and expressiveness of pantomime in Neronian Rome; on this see Richlin 1992c: 173–76.
14. Suetonius describes the burning down of an entire house in a play of Afranius (*Nero* 11); and the anal rape of Pasiphaë in a pantomime (*Nero* 12). See also Beare 1968: 238, 275; on startling visual effects, see Ovid, *Ars Am.* 1.102ff.

15. These women's symptoms are described in: *Agamemnon* 234–38; *Phaedra* 360–83; *Medea* 382–91.
16. Seneca does not specify the gender of these opposing choruses of townspeople; in his *Hercules Oetaeus*, the second chorus seems to be a band of Aetolian men sympathetic to Hercules; in Seneca's *Agamemnon*, the alternate chorus begins by singing: "*canite, o pubes inclita*" ("sing, o famous youths"), so they appear to be a band of young men.
17. Since Seneca outlived Agrippina by six years, we can conjecture that either Tacitus got the idea for the womb stabbing (which does not occur in Suetonius's account of Agrippina's execution: *Nero* 34) from Seneca's *Oedipus*; or that Seneca simply chose to use certain details from the report he had heard about Agrippina's execution in his own play about matricide. Either way, the dating of Seneca's play makes no difference; he could easily have made revisions or additions to his text until the day he died.
18. On the trope of the female body or womb as furrow see duBois 1988: 65–85; on place/space (the *chora*) as always connoting the female, see Jardine 1985: 88–89; Kristeva 1980: 238.
19. For the explication of the womb as ur-source in Plato's *Republic* 514a–517b see Irigaray 1985: 243–364. For associations of female body, grove, garden, and glen see duBois 1988: 39–58.
20. For the sake of simplification, I hereafter use the term "voice-over" to cover both voice-over and voice-off.
21. But contrast Rabinowitz 1992: 46–51, who demonstrates a comparable (though different species of) misogyny and gynephobia in Euripides.

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