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Tragedy and Feminism

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> The tide of rumor will turn and bring our lives renown: glory will come to the female race. No longer will a discordant reputation oppress women; the Muses will leave off their ancient songs of our faithlessness. Not to us did Phoebus, lord of songs, grant the inspired strain of the lyre, or else we would have sung a hymn in answer to the race of men. The long ages have much to tell of women's fate and men's.
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> Euripides *Medea* 418–30

Within the Western humanist tradition that traces its origins to classical antiquity, tragedy holds pride of place. It is the humanist genre par excellence, treating the questions that seem most profoundly to define mankind. Within this tradition, Oedipus is a tragic "everyman," illustrating man's tragic blindness and the cosmic limitations upon his knowledge and free will. The moral of Oedipus' story applies to all men: "count no man happy until he is dead." For many scholars and lay readers alike, its universal humanist message makes tragedy the most classic of the classics, and its dark conclusions about the mortal condition virtually define the genre from its ancient origins to its contemporary incarnations.

Feminist scholars of tragedy, both classical and post-classical, have questioned the universality of tragedy's humanism, asking what bearings its insights into the nature of "man" have upon "woman." They have resisted the adequation of humanity and masculinity upon which this humanism rests. This is an ancient catachresis: Greek tragedy often expresses its universal message in explicitly gendered terms, as when the chorus of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* responds to Oedipus' fatal discovery by lamenting the generations of mortals (*brotoi*) and the shadowy existence of man (*anêr*, 1186–96). Aristotle likewise describes the ideal tragic plot in terms that make it clear that the tragic everyman is, literally, a man (e.g., *Poetics* 13). The Greeks' own equation of the masculine and the human is perpetuated in modern scholarship by the slippage in English between "man" in a universal and a specific sense: even where Athenian tragedy did distinguish between man (*anêr*) and human (*anthrôpos*), modern

translations tend to blur that distinction, for instance rendering *Antigone*'s famous ode to human ingenuity (*anthrôpou*, *Antigone* 332) as "The Ode to Man." Feminist scholars seek to pry apart man and human, *anêr* and *anthrôpos*, and to show that the two are not, in fact, coterminous. They highlight the exclusions that have historically secured claims of universality, the politics behind seemingly neutral truths, and the power relations that have sustained Western humanism from the Greeks on.

It is little surprise, then, that feminists have maintained a love-hate relationship with tragedy. Tragic theater ancient and modern abounds in memorable female characters. In the case of ancient tragedy, female characters play substantial parts in virtually all of the 32 surviving plays, and only one extant tragedy (Sophocles' *Philoctetes*) contains no female character at all. This prominence is all the more remarkable for being out of all proportion to women's status in contemporary Athenian society. Women were almost completely excluded from public life in ancient Athens; considered lifelong minors, they were unable to vote, own substantial property, or represent themselves in court. While men competed for glory in the public arena, respectable women were largely restricted to the household, where their greatest glory was chastity and silence. On the tragic stage, by contrast, we find an array of strong and active women, women who deliver persuasive public addresses, enter into debates with men, sacrifice themselves for their families or their countries, even exercise political rule (cf. chapter 14, this volume). For many feminist readers, tragedy's dominant women have offered a counterweight of optimism against the pervasive misogyny of Athenian culture, suggesting that either women were not, in fact, as thoroughly marginalized as they appear from other sources or, if they were, at least the culture was capable of thinking critically about its own oppressions and exclusions.

While the prominence and ubiquity of female characters makes tragedy a natural object of feminist interest, its representation of women is far from unequivocal. To turn again to the ancient example, we often find attractive female characters sharing the stage with virulent expressions of misogyny. Euripides, for instance, offers us both Medea's self-conscious critique of the iniquities facing women in a male-centered world ("I would rather stand in the battle-line three times than give birth once," *Medea* 250–1) and Jason's misogynist opinion that "it would be better if men found another way to bear children and there were no race of women" (573–5). With its horrific description of Medea's vengeance and matricide, the play hardly offers the revisionary history the women of the chorus anticipate in the epigraph to this chapter, yet many readers find its depiction of Medea's plight insightful and sympathetic. Already in antiquity, these contradictory representations generated debate over Euripides' attitude toward women. In Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae*, the women of Athens attack Euripides for exposing their adulterous stratagems to their husbands (383–458); in *Frogs*, by contrast, Euripides claims that he wrote "democratically" by giving women a voice in his plays (948–52). It is impossible, then, to view Euripides – or tragedy in general – as either "misogynist," blithely reproducing the gender stereotypes and inequalities of a sexist society, or "feminist," radically challenging

those same stereotypes and inequalities. If tragedy as a genre has often seemed to sing a hymn of the female race (as the chorus of *Medea* puts it), that hymn has remained difficult to interpret and its ambivalent message has been the object of much productive debate among feminist scholars.

This chapter surveys that debate, focusing on the tragedies produced in Athens in the fifth century BCE and the scholarship on those plays. One persistent theme throughout this scholarship has been the attempt to understand the connection between tragedy's representation of the feminine and the institutional, experiential, or ideological status of women beyond the tragic stage. This question has real stakes for feminist classicists, trying to reconcile their love of ancient literature with their commitment to fight the social inequalities it so often enshrines. But it is also vitally relevant for feminist work on post-classical drama. In Shakespearean tragedy too, for example, a contradictory representation of women reflects their ambiguous position in a largely androcentric culture (see, e.g., Callaghan 2000). Virtually all historical texts encode elements of their cultural milieu that a modern reader might wish to oppose – sexism, racism, imperialism, class bias, etc. – while not tossing away the literary baby with the cultural bathwater (as happened, for instance, with the banning of *Huckleberry Finn* from school curricula). Thus the debate among feminist classicists on tragedy's relation to Athens' oppressive gender norms resonates across disciplinary boundaries, and its conclusions are potentially valuable for any scholar seeking a way of reading the text that recognizes its more oppressive aspects without condoning them, or that locates resistance within the text without retrojecting an anachronistic political sensibility.

Before delving into that debate, however, it may be helpful first to define what constitutes a feminist interpretation. This is, of course, a fraught question. At a moment when many Women's Studies departments are changing their name to Gender and/or Sexuality Studies and the very category of "woman" has come under question from postmodern theory, the object of feminist interpretation is no longer simply the lives and writings of women. In the case of Greek tragedy, "woman" is mediated by a text written and produced exclusively by men – with all-male actors and probably an all-male audience – and thus the study of women has always been a study of gender, the cultural construct of femininity in its differential relation to masculinity. In Greece, that construct was also tied up with notions of the body and sexuality, and so feminism has from the start necessarily and productively intersected with sexuality studies.

Methodologically feminist scholars have employed a variety of approaches to tragedy, including anthropology, film theory, deconstruction, and psychoanalysis, but have tended to share certain basic assumptions and concerns. Feminists assume that gender – generally an asymmetrical arrangement of gender – fundamentally structures society and discourse; their aim is to excavate that structure. Their guiding questions when they approach a text concern its latent power relations: Who is speaking? To whose advantage or disadvantage? What sort of gender (and other) hierarchies does the text inscribe or prescribe? What interests lie beneath statements

that claim to be interest free, and what exclusions lie behind statements that claim to be all-inclusive? Feminism tends to operate through a hermeneutics of suspicion, skeptical of claims to neutrality on the part of the text or its reader. This has also made feminist scholarship self-reflective about its own practice: Who is reading? What desires animate that reading? What power dynamics are reproduced by it? Thus, for example, Karen Bassi (1998) identifies the nostalgia at work in our contemporary readings of Athenian tragedy, a desire to preserve the idealized masculine subject of antiquity and be at one with him.

While feminists argue that all readers bring their own desires and concerns to the text, they are particularly open about their own. And this is perhaps what most distinguishes feminism from other methodologies: its commitment to reading as a vehicle for social change. Feminists are often accused of having a "political agenda," and in a sense it is true. Implicitly or explicitly, feminists bring to the texts they study a desire to transform the way gender is understood and lived, to resist sexism, rethink confining notions of femininity and masculinity, and challenge the inevitability or necessity of gender arrangements they find oppressive in their own lives. This scholarly activism, the belief that critical reading can have real-world results, means that for feminist historians the study of the past is immediately relevant to the project of understanding the present. Some explain that relevance in terms of a continuous history of misogyny (e.g., Peradotto and Sullivan 1984: 1–4); others find the value of the past in its difference from modernity and the opportunity that affords for rethinking our own assumptions about gender (e.g., duBois 1988). But all believe that the study of the past is and should be useful to the present, that we turn to the past hoping to find something, and that this desire is not only inevitable in scholarship, but in fact beneficial. Thus feminist classicists argue simultaneously against those feminists who reject ancient Greece as the progenitor of a misogynist legacy best ignored, and those classicists who argue that to expose the violent substrate of classical literature denudes it of the grandeur and beauty that constitute its timeless relevance. The feminist scholar of ancient tragedy – like feminists working on any historical literature – tries to mediate between these two positions, finding the relevance and timeless appeal of the plays precisely in the complex way they challenge, as well as reflect and affirm, the androcentric tradition they are too often assumed to simply embody. Feminist scholars of non-contemporary tragedy, then, be it Sophocles or Shakespeare, bring to their work a desire not only to show the relevance of the literature of the past to the politics of the present, but also to redefine the very criteria of relevance, to posit a different sort of universalism and resituate tragedy within a more inclusive tradition of humanism.

The first major feminist discussion of Athenian tragedy came in Sarah Pomeroy's groundbreaking book *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (1975), which aimed to bring to light the life of average women in classical antiquity, and thus redress the balance of a historical tradition that had mostly ignored them. Pomeroy approached tragedy as a potential source for the lives of contemporary women and judged it by its verisimilitude: Aeschylus' and Sophocles' heroines reveal little about women in

contemporary Athens, while Euripides' are truer to life (1975: 92–112). This empiricist approach may seem rather naive now, when many feminists would critique the very notion of "the lives of real women" as a unitary, knowable (much less empirically describable) object, and would find fault with the presumption that texts mirror an autonomous reality that exists outside of them. Yet the assumptions and questions that ground Pomeroy's work have persisted throughout feminist scholarship. Tragedy is rarely still mined for nuggets of reality, but it is broadly assumed to bear *some* relation – whether active or passive, direct or inverted – to the world outside it. And although many feminists would now be wary of reifying "the life of real women" as if it were an ontological given, not a discursive construct, nonetheless "real women" – women outside the theater of Dionysus – have remained an implicit reference point for most subsequent feminist work on tragedy.

Pomeroy pointed the way for future scholars when she suggested that the women who were excluded from male life "returned to haunt men's imaginations, dreams, and nightmares" (1975: 229). The second generation of feminists shifted the emphasis from "women" and their lived experience to "woman" as a cultural concept. A notable representative of this trend was Helene Foley's important article, "The Conception of Women in Athenian Drama" (1981). Foley begins by contrasting the images of women in drama to the view of their legal and institutional position gleaned from nonfiction prose. But rather than put the former at the service of the latter – drama as a reflection of the reality embodied in prose – she posits a symbiotic relation between the two:

> [W]e must begin by accepting all of the complex distortions of life which belong to the genre [of tragedy]. Then we must go on to categorize the precise nature and range of these distortions in the context of the symbolic systems presented in Athenian literature, systems in which sex roles obviously play a central part. In short, we must investigate how the concept of woman operates in the symbolic systems of drama as a whole. At the same time we should not despair of uncovering comprehensible – if oblique – relations between life and literature . . . [T]he Athenian audience must have brought to their experience of the remarkable women of drama a way of understanding these characters which grew out of their psychological, religious, political, and social lives and problems. (1981: 35–6)

Ttagedy and life are semiautonomous but mutually informing symbolic systems; tragedy incorporates and speaks to the lived experience of its (male) audience without simply mirroring it. In the discussion of structural anthropology that follows, Foley tefines this symbiosis by suggesting that the same polarities (nature vs. culture, public vs. private) informed conceptions of gender in both the tragic text and the democratic city, with woman functioning as a shifting sign within these fundamental cultural oppositions.

Foley closes her article with the famous remark of Lévi-Strauss that women are not only signs but also generators of signs. One criticism leveled by feminists against this type of work is that in emphasizing the former it overlooks the latter. It reduces

woman to an object within a male text, a sign manipulated by men for male aesthetic pleasure or moral edification, and thus loses sight of women as subjects who themselves manipulate tragedy's symbolic systems, including its gender system. Tragedy does, indeed, stage women as "generators of signs," as subjects of language, desire, and action. At the same time, these characters are constrained by the symbolic systems within which they are constructed: as characters within male-authored texts, they are signs even when they are subjects. This paradox generates much tension, as heroines try to assert themselves as subjects in a poetic and social universe that treats them as symbols of male heroism, virility, or honor. Thus, for example, when Clytemnestra deploys the traditional tropes of femininity and domesticity to lure her husband to his death in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (offering him a warm bath then killing him in it), her action shows her as a skillful manipulator of signs, and simultaneously fixes her as herself a sign of monstrous inversion within the play's hierarchies of gender and power. This tension between woman as sign and woman as (the sign of) a producer of signs may help explain the jarring juxtapositions of misogynist and "feminist" statements within a single play. Medea may be the product of a discourse that dreams of a world without women (in a passage I cited earlier), but as soon as she is imagined as a speaker and (in accordance with tragedy's practice of *ethopoieia*) is given lines appropriate to her character, she can deliver speeches that go against (while still being contained within) that discourse.

Treating tragedy's female characters not as reflections (accurate or inaccurate) of "real women" but as symbols operating complexly within textual and cultural symbolic systems opened two interrelated avenues of inquiry, one literary and one socio-historical. The first – the function of the female within the thematic, metaphoric, visual, and spatial codes of a literary text – is pursued with particular sophistication by Froma Zeitlin. If Pomeroy asks what tragedy can teach us about Athenian women, Zeitlin asks what attention to women can teach us about tragedy. In her early article, "The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in the *Oresteia*" (1978, reprinted in her 1996 collection, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*), she examines how tragedy constructs the female and uses her to construct its own imagined world. She shows how Aeschylus' trilogy posits female power as dangerous, a rule of women that threatens to overthrow the rule of men, and by turning Clytemnestra into a monster justifies her murder and the eventual exclusion of women from the civic sphere. The trilogy achieves this progress from "rule of women" to "rule of men" in part by linking the opposition between male and female to other cultural polarities: culture over nature, god over mortal, life over death. The structural oppositions so prevalent in tragic thought are neither natural nor neutral, as Zeitlin shows, but instead are generated and consolidated through violent textual manipulation. The homologies she draws between different hierarchies explain both the depth of misogyny in Athens and the stakes involved: once the binarism of male and female is yoked to that of order and chaos, for example, control of women becomes "the social and cultural prerequisite for the construction of civilization" (1996: 88).

Given the importance of the feminine to tragedy's project of "world-building," Zeitlin emphasizes inclusion and negotiation over oppression and exclusion (1996: 8). Through transaction with the idea of the feminine, tragedy addresses its most fundamental concerns: the nature of the male self and society, the mysteries of desire and reproduction, man's relation to the cosmos and the gods. Women are so prominent in tragedy, then, not for their own sake (not because the tragedian or the tragedy is either "misogynist" or "feminist"), but because their presence as "other" illuminates the male world and self:

> From the outset, it is essential to understand that in the Greek theater, as in Shakespearean theater, the self that is really at stake is to be identified with the male, while the woman is assigned the role of the radical other... Even when female characters struggle with the conflicts generated by the particularities of their subordinate social position, their demands for identity and self-esteem are still designed primarily for exploring the male project of selfhood in the larger world. These demands impinge upon men's claims to knowledge, power, freedom, and self-sufficiency – not, as some have thought, for woman's gaining some greater entitlement or privilege for herself and not even for revising notions of what femininity might be or mean ... [F]uncrionally women are never an end in themselves, and nothing changes for them once they have lived out their drama on stage. Rather, they play the roles of catalysts, agents, instruments, blockers, spoilers, destroyers, and sometimes helpers or saviors for the male characters. (1996: 346–7)

Women are instrumental in tragedy, but in no way incidental: they are not mere intruders within male social or psychic space, but instead are woven into the metaphoric and thematic weave of the play, integral to its language, its philosophical concerns, even its generic form and dramatic enactment. In "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama" ([1985] 1996: 341–74), Zeitlin argues that tragedy as a genre shares an intrinsic affinity with the feminine. She identifies four defining elements of the tragic experience – the representation of the body, the arrangement of space, the strategies of plot, and dramatic mimesis – all of which, she argues, were coded as feminine in Athenian thought. So, for example, when male characters appear on stage weakened and in physical pain, like Heracles in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, poisoned (accidentally) by his wife, they experience a corporeality associated primarily with women. By "playing the other" – both literally, as male actors playing female characters, and imaginatively, as a male audience entering into feminine experience – Athenian men achieved a broadened understanding of what it meant to be a man.

Zeitlin's analysis, then, looks inward and finds the answer to questions about tragic women not in the external world but on the tragic stage, in the theatrical resources, generic structure, and thematic preoccupations of tragedy (1996: 347). She does at times gesture beyond the stage. The *Oresteia*, she says at the end of "The Dynamics of Misogyny," not only reflects Athenian thought about women, but also contributes to it: through "a continuing reciprocity between external and internal, between

individual psyche and collective ideology," it "organizes and manipulates reality" (1996: 119). That tragedy may shape – not merely reflect – the extra-theatrical world is an important insight. But that world is glimpsed only occasionally in Zeitlin's work and appears almost as an epiphenomenal effect of the text. And that world, too, is textual, as much a matter of mythical patterns and literary paradigms as social institutions and legal rights: the extra-textual woman she refers to most is not "the real Athenian" but Hesiod's Pandora, the first lady of Greek myth. This opens Zeitlin's work (and other work in this literary vein, like Loraux [1985] 1987 or Goff 1990) to accusations of apoliticism, a failure to contextualize tragedy within the specific ideological struggles of fifth-century Athens. These works exemplify feminist philology at its most insightful; by focusing on the textual role of the feminine they illuminate the metaphorical density and structural nuance of tragedy, but also risk fetishizing both tragedy and its women by deracinating them from the society that produced them and from the political and ideological conflicts that shaped their textual ambiguities.

But as Peter Rose notes, there is a potentially political reading implicit within this literary approach (Rose 1993: 221–3). Because tragedy was a site of active ideological struggle, he argues, it contains contradictory impulses toward affirming the status quo (a negative hermeneutic) and challenging it (a positive hermeneutic). Reworking this double hermeneutic slightly, we can see how the literary and theatrical richness that readings like Zeitlin's uncover itself dismantles any simple ideological claims that tragedy may ultimately make. Zeitlin comments that in many tragedies "the project is to lay the female to rest, at least temporarily, and to define the parameters of male hegemony. But in the course of its enactment, the dynamic impulse belongs to the female" (1996: 171). Thus the *Oresteia* moves from a chaotic rule of women through matricide and demonization of the woman to the ultimate establishment of the rule of law in a world of male citizens. Yet we reach this final scene of world-building by way of both a plot driven by women and imagery and language saturated with gender. So when the virgin Eumenides are set at the end to preside over holy sacrifices for the city (*sphagiôn . . . semnôn*, *Eumenides* 1007), the celebratory language cannot help but evoke what it most wishes to obscure: not only Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon (*sphagên*, *Agamemnon* 1389), but also the sacrifice of the virgin Iphigenia (*parthenosphagoisin*, *Agamemnon* 207), whose pathetic murder symptomatized the violence of the old order even as her enforced silence presaged the violent exclusion of the female from the new order. The dramatic structure and metaphoric texture of the trilogy thus work simultaneously toward and against its final resolution. By highlighting the ways in which the theatrical and textual means (which often operate through the female) destabilize the ideological end (which generally reaffirms male hegemony on the stage and beyond it), we can politicize textual analysis, situating it critically within its historical context while sacrificing none of its literary sophistication.

This project of situating tragedy historically once again takes center stage with the "return to history" that characterizes most recent feminist work on tragedy in general (and indeed, much recent work across the humanities). This approach has sought to

elucidate tragedy's representation of women not in terms of the texts' metaphorical systems but in relation to contemporary social institutions or broader ideological structures (see Goff 1995, Winkler and Zeitlin 1990 for this trend in classical tragedy scholarship; many of the essays in Callaghan 2000 exemplify the same trend in Shakespeare scholarship). Often anthropological or sociological in orientation and intersecting productively with cultural and postcolonial studies, it has sought to theorize the relation between tragedy and its sociocultural environment, asking how tragedy not only reflects but also supports, shapes, and sometimes subverts cultural norms. If Pomeroy asks what tragedy can tell us about women, and Zeitlin asks what women can tell us about tragedy, these studies ask what tragic women can tell us about the society that gave them dramatic existence.

Within classics, much of this work has focused on marriage, kinship and social exchange (Loraux [1984] 1993, Rabinowitz 1993, Wohl 1998, Ormand 1999, Foley 2001). Because so many Greek tragedies treat myths of domestic disharmony and highlight tensions between the public sphere and the private, marriage is a ubiquitous concern. Marriage is staged in tragedy as the keystone of human society – defining male and female identities, creating kinship bonds within and between cities, securing social continuity through the production of legitimate heirs – but also as a site of potential social crisis. This crisis is often precipitated by the woman, whose sexual jealousy or infidelity, loyalty to her natal household and status as outsider in her husband's household, insufficient or excessive devotion to her children, refusal to subordinate her own desires to her husband's (or unhappiness in doing so) all enact various structural tensions within the Athenian marriage system. And because marriage functioned as "a metaphor for civic life" (Foley 2001: 103), marital crisis is often the occasion for exploring further social questions, including the definition of citizen status, the struggle between egalitarianism and elitism, and the obligations of reciprocity and economic exchange. This metaphorical mode of reading has been extremely productive for feminist scholars, as it places gender at the very heart of the city's most vital concerns and shows how "the feminine . . . haunts the Athenian civic imagination," shaping even realms from which women were excluded in practice (Loraux [1984] 1993: 11). In the process, however, sometimes the female herself is lost, becoming a pure and vacant vehicle for other, more important, male social relations or civic issues. Modern scholarship thus risks reproducing the dynamic of the ancient texts, instrumentalizing the woman as a symbolic means to the larger goal of (re)constructing the male world.

One way scholars have tried to avoid this pitfall is by focusing on female agency and analyzing the ways in which the dramatization of a woman's subjective experience can complicate her structural position within the institutions and relations of tragedy's masculine world. Thus in Ormand's view, the woman's experience of marriage as unfulfilling and alienating is one source of instability in tragic marriage (1999: 25–35), while for Foley, the contradictory cultural demands upon women insistently raise the problem of an autonomous female ethical agent (2001: 109–23). Likewise, in *Intimate Commerce: Exchange, Gender, and Subjectivity in Greek Tragedy* (1998) I examined

the subjectivities, male and female, generated by the tragic exchange of women between men (in marriage, gift-exchange, war, or sacrifice). These exchanges require a female object in order to consolidate male identities and relations, but tragic heroines often refuse that role. Even when they fail to position themselves successfully as active partners in exchanges with men (as they invariably do), their very attempt shows tragic subjectivity under construction and illuminates both the nature and limitations of the self, female or male. Whereas I see tragedy's frequent dramatization of the female psyche as part of its attempt to develop a language and theory of the self, Nancy Rabinowitz (1993) argues that the plays grant their heroines an illusory subjectivity the better to control them, representing them as either uncannily powerful or sacrificial victims in order to justify their containment. For both of us, tragedy ultimately forecloses the possibility of a viable female subject; but while Rabinowitz emphasizes the inevitability of that foreclosure, I find it remarkable that tragedy keeps open the space of the female psyche for as long as it does. After we have heard Medea lament the plight of women, seen her agonize over the decision to kill her children, and gained such intimate insight into her desires and motivations, can we easily condemn her as a monster at the end?

Rabinowitz and I both argue for the importance of the psychological in understanding the role of women in tragedy. But while this approach has proved extremely fruitful in feminist readings of post-classical tragedy, the psychological – and particularly psychoanalysis – is by and large an underutilized resource in feminist work within classics. Whether this is due to a wariness of psychoanalysis' supposed phallocentrism or its ostensible ahistoricism, it is a regrettable absence. As critics of Renaissance drama have shown (e.g., Kahn 1981, Belsey 1985), the nature of the self is a central problem in tragedy: complexly enmeshed in relations to the family and state, shaped not only by gender but by class and other ideologies, limited in freedom but not responsibility, the individual is often staged as a psychologization of the social. This is especially true for female characters, who are less secure as social agents and therefore offer a test case in tragedy's epistemology of the self. If gender is a point of convergence between the psyche and the social, as the individual internalizes the norms of society, then psychoanalysis offers indispensable tools for feminist critique, diagnosing the ways in which characters inhabit gender norms or (more often and more interestingly) fail to inhabit them fully. Moreover, these same dynamics operate at the level of the text as a whole. If, as Judith Butler suggests (1997: 86), those social injunctions which we cannot fully incorporate become the loam of the unconscious, then we might understand the plays' profound ambivalence toward the female – the simultaneous aggression and dependence, desire and fear, that permeate the language and shape the structure of these texts – as the unconscious trace of their uneven internalization of the gender imperatives of their society. Approached in this way, a psychoanalysis of the text is neither necessarily phallocentric nor necessarily ahistorical, and could be a valuable instrument for feminist classicists (as it has been for scholars of post-classical tragedy) as they try to theorize the gendered construction of the self on stage and off.

In this way psychoanalysis might add to the project that more than anything else characterizes recent work on Greek tragedy, the intensive investigation of tragedy's relation to Athenian ideology. This investigation has been central to feminists' concerns since the 1970s, as I have suggested, although it has taken different forms and emphases over time. In its current instantiation, it assumes that tragedy bears an active relation to Athenian social and sexual norms, not only reflecting but contributing to them; the guiding question then becomes the nature of that contribution. Does tragedy reaffirm Athens' oppressive gender hierarchy or does it resist, even subvert it? If it does both simultaneously (as many conclude), how can we theorize the relation between the two? On the one hand, tragedy was a civic institution, part of a civic festival sponsored by and held in honor of the city (a fact discussed most famously by Goldhill in Winkler and Zeitlin 1990). Bearing that in mind, several scholars have viewed tragedy as an "ideological state apparatus," and have argued that tragedy as a civic practice functioned to naturalize and reproduce existing social relations, consolidate existing ideologies (including gender ideologies), and hail both its characters and its audience into specific (gendered) subject-positions (Rabinowitz 1993, Wohl 1998, Ormand 1999; cf. Rose 1993). On the other hand, since Vernant's famous 1969 essay "Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy" ([1972] 1988: 29–48) it has been common to view tragedy as a staging of questions rather than answers. Exposing the rifts and fissures within Athens' dominant ideology, tragedy (by this view) poses a challenge to Athenian gender relations, questioning their necessity and naturalness, revealing their structural or systemic incoherences. The former approach situates tragedy firmly within its historical context, tying it directly to other ideological and discursive formations, but it runs the risk of turning the plays into monovocal ideological documents – propaganda for the patriarchy. The latter captures well the dense texture of tragedy, in which virtually every word bristles with double meaning, but risks naive apoliticism or even aporia – ambiguity for its own sake.

For feminism the debate between these two views of tragedy is not merely academic. Instead, it is a question of how to read both as a classicist and as a feminist (Rabinowitz and Richlin 1993), affirming the value of Athenian literature while acknowledging the oppressions and exclusions of Athenian society. In this sense, it is a question of saving tragedy from the worst aspects of Athens – and Athens from the worst aspects of itself – and in this way redeeming both for feminist study. Thus the theoretical debate over tragedy's relation to Athenian gender ideology is replicated on the hermeneutic level in a division between "optimists" and "pessimists." Rabinowitz argues the pessimist's position: viewing tragedy as a "technology of gender" that hails its audience (male and, she believes, female) as gendered subjects in accordance with the unequal gender norms of Athenian society, she proposes that the plays' primary function was to reinforce male control over women and in this way "to keep the system going" (1993: 21). This conception of tragedy raises obvious problems for the feminist critic, as Rabinowitz acknowledges: in her quest for a "third position," she looks to those moments when the plays fail in their relentless ideological intent and

takes hope in the idea of a "resisting [female] reader" who saw through tragedy's violent containment of women to "the female power that may well have inspired this male reaction" (1993: 23).

Even if we accept the premise that women were in the audience and viewed the plays resistantly, this is a shaky ground for optimism, as it situates any progressive impulse outside the texts themselves. Others have accordingly sought signs of subversion or resistance within the plays and have based a cautious optimism on the notion that tragedy questions the status quo (as well as representing it) and that "by giving a public voice to those who were normally silent in the political arena . . . it can open fresh perspectives on and restore some balance to a civic life and dialogue otherwise dominated by citizen males" (Foley 2001: 18). But this optimism is tempered by the acknowledgment that tragedy's questions often serve ultimately to reinforce the system they seem to challenge:

> tragedy can invert and destabilize norms in a fashion that questions the cultural status quo . . . Yet such temporary inversions and queries can also serve in the end to reinforce cultural ideologies, and we should not be fooled into thinking that the prominent, articulate, active, or resistant women of tragedy represent a genuine impulse for social change. (Foley 2001: 333)

Asking about the real-world effects of tragedy's "tensions and ambiguities" drives even the optimistic feminist to pessimism.

How, then, can we reconcile these two positions and theorize the relation between tragedy's function as an ideological apparatus reproducing and reinforcing Athens' oppressive gender norms, and tragedy as a site of institutionalized questioning of or even resistance to those norms? Tragedy was a site of ideological contest, a struggle over the terms in which the world will be conceptualized and organized. This struggle is always ongoing and its conclusions always provisional; it is not the victory of one position over the other that constitutes ideology, but the struggle itself. This means that ideology always contains both hegemonic and subordinate positions, and the relation between them is not fixed or inevitable, but contingent and variable. As an ideological apparatus, tragedy reflects and reproduces ideology *as conflict*: tragedy's "tensions and ambiguities" are thus in fact an essential aspect of its ideological role, and tragedy mirrors reality precisely in its contradictions (Rose 1993; Wohl 1998: xviii–xxiv). And if tragedy's ideology is not monolithic, neither is its ambiguity neutral: tragedy's allusive language and indeterminate images condense different and competing ideological positions, positions that could potentially be actualized in the real world.

The woman, I believe, is the locus, as well as object, of tragedy's most intense ideological negotiations. She is simultaneously the cornerstone in tragedy's project of world-building and a point of instability within the world that results. Sophocles' *Trachiniae* provides a good example. The play closes with a scene of patrilineal succession, as the dying Heracles, poisoned unintentionally by his wife Deianira,

hands to his son Hyllus a bequest of legitimacy, royalty, and heroic identity – as well as his concubine Iole, who drove Deianira to murder and then suicide. Such scenes of male bonding close several tragedies and seem to strongly reaffirm an androcentric ideology in which relations between men constitute the social order and the patriline guarantees its perpetuation in future generations. This productive, patriarchal world order – sanctified on the highest level by Zeus himself (*Trachiniae* 1278) – is secured at the expense of the woman, who is either driven to death (Deianira) or reduced to a silent, passive object of male exchange (Iole). But this new social order falters precisely where it should be most secure, the exchange of the woman: Hyllus is reluctant to accept Iole as his bride. This reluctance is not merely the scruple of a son against marrying his father's concubine and the woman he blames for both his parents' deaths. It is the textual trace, in the midst of this inaugural moment, of the tragedy of Deianira, which occupied the first two-thirds of the play. Through Deianira's eyes we see the cost for women of the social transactions that are so productive for men. We are told how she watched the terrifying marriage-contest between Heracles and the river-god Achelous, waiting to see which would be her husband; how she was ripped from her mother ("like a calf abandoned," *Trachiniae* 530) and carried far from her family to become the wife of a hero who seldom comes home and, when he does, brings with him Iole, a captive from his latest expedition and his "hidden bedmate" (*Trachiniae* 360). Deianira speaks of her jealousy of, but also sympathy for, the silent girl, whose experience she compares to her own. Her unhappiness, presented in painful detail, constitutes a critique of a heroic – and tragic – order that trades in women and predicates male subjectivity and social relations on the reduction of women to objects.

Deianira attempts actively to save her marriage by sending Heracles a "gift in exchange for the gift" of Iole (*Trachiniae* 494), but her gift, a robe smeared with what she thinks is a love-potion but is actually poison, is fatal, and when she discovers this Deianira kills herself. Her death and subsequent vilification pave the way for the play's final scene of patrilineal bonding and masculine world-building, but do not erase the pathos of her story, which lives on after her, embodied in the silent Iole. The final scene, then, reproduces a heroic male order along with its oppression of women; but at the same time it also reproduces Deianira's unhappy perspective on that world, which lingers on in Hyllus' reluctance to accept Heracles' gift of Iole, and in a pall of unease and coercion that clouds this ostensibly celebratory moment. In this way the play subtly incorporates alternatives it manifestly rejects, installing them as a point of silent but persistent critique within the world it creates.

It is in the woman as an institutionalized point of resistance to the oppressive systems she is used to consolidate that I find some basis for optimism. Tragedy does actively reproduce the unequal gender relations of Athenian society; it does reinforce the ideological status quo. But if we view ideology as contested and provisional instead of fixed and invariable, then there is some hope for change, a hope that tragedy encrypts within its contradictory representations of the female. Though we should not ignore the forces within society that make some ideological positions more viable in practice than others, we also need not, I think, dismiss the radical potential of

tragedy's critique, its implication that liberatory alternatives subsist within the very structures of the hegemonic. Thus for me the solution to the *hermeneutic* problem – how to read tragedy as a feminist – is reached only by working toward a solution to the *theoretical* problem of tragedy's relation to Athenian gender ideology. In tragedy's interweaving of reaffirmation and resistance lies the answer both to feminists who revile Athens as the origin of misogyny – it is, but it is also the origin of a critique of misogyny – and to those humanist philologists who decry feminism for sullying the beauty of the classics – for if the beauty of timeless and apolitical truths is lost, another sort of beauty is found precisely in tragedy's complex ideological negotiations.

Feminism brings to the study of tragedy in general less a new object of inquiry (for scholars had always noticed the genre's foregrounding of the female, even if they had not fully appreciated its extent and depth) than a new awareness of the ways in which gender (and other power) relations structure drama in its language, theatrical performance, and ideological effect. I hope that my survey of the scholarship on classical tragedy has illustrated this point, but to underline it we need think only of how feminism has changed the way scholars view Greek tragedy's pervasive structural oppositions. Although the genre's ubiquitous play of dark and light, nature and culture, house and city – to say nothing of female and male – is hard not to notice, feminist critics revealed the hidden connections among these various oppositions and the ways in which, within an ostensibly balanced dialectic, one side was implicitly valorized and the other subordinated; they made visible a politics of structure. Furthermore, by focusing on the minor term in the dyad – the woman and all she is aligned with – they uncovered buried alternatives within hegemonic hierarchies. An excellent example of this is Helene Foley's reading of *Antigone*. Many readers have echoed Hegel's interpretation of the play as a transcending of the family (and the feminine) by the masculine state; they assume that in the gendered oppositions that structure this play Creon's position – representing masculinity, authority, civic order – must be the stronger. But Foley restores equal weight to the "slave" position in this dialectic, arguing that Antigone offers an alternate mode of ethical reasoning to Creon. Instead of a zero-sum game of opposites, the polarities in this play exist in a complementary relation; their synthesis is achieved not through the victory of one over the other (in the Hegelian tradition) but through the expanded morality that their juxtaposition affords: "the gendering of ethical positions," Foley concludes, "permits the public exploration of moral complexities that would not otherwise have been possible" (2001: 172). If structural polarities are themselves objects of ideological contest (not essential and universal modes of human thought), then not only are their hierarchies always in theory reversible, but their synthesis is greater than the sum of its parts.

Finally, feminism has challenged the political neutrality not only of tragedy's structuring metaphors but also of the ways in which it has been read. It has argued for the need to critique our own investment in the texts we study and to expose the desires behind our continuous return to tragedy. If feminism debunks the timeless truths and claims to universality of the Western humanist tradition fathered by tragic

Oedipus, it suggests that there might be a different humanist tradition – perhaps one mothered by Antigone who, with her oppositional ethics, exposes the limits and limitations of the masculine universal and reminds us that critique, too, is a legacy we inherit from Greek tragedy.

Acknowledgments

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