

Tantalus Symposium -- 10/30/00
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I want to follow up on Professor Cartledge's remarks about Greek tragedy as a staging of social, or broadly-defined political relations by focusing on those plays as stagings of gender, of the relations between men and women. I am well aware that, in doing so, I will inevitably be simplifying a complicated topic, about which much has been written recently, some of it by other participants in this symposium.

All students of ancient women, whether in drama or in other aspects of classical culture, have had to contend with, and come to terms with, the problem of silence: the silence -- or, in the visual realm, the invisibility -- that envelops the actual, living, real women of ancient Greece. We have very little evidence about the experience of actual Greek women, largely because that society did not feel any impulse to record the experiences of ordinary people in general and particularly not of women. While the Greeks were on the whole very much concerned with the perpetuation of memory, the experiences they considered memorable were exceptional and heroic activities, activities, then, that were carried largely out by men. But beyond even this general indifference to recording the kind of information that we now long for and would prize, the Greeks placed a positive value on the silence of women and on silence about women.

We find an especially famous and prominent expression of this view in the words that the historian Thucydides puts in the mouth of the Athenian statesman Pericles in his funeral oration, a speech in which he honors the Athenian men who have died fighting in the Peloponnesian War. This is the same speech, quoted by Professor Cartledge, in which Pericles calls Athens an education for all Greece. At the very end of the speech, Pericles addresses himself to the widows of these men and says,

On the other hand, if I must say anything on the subject of female excellence to those of you who will now be in widowhood, it will all be comprised in this brief exhortation. Great will be your glory in not falling short of your natural character; and greatest will be hers who is least talked of among the men whether for good or for bad.

Striking here are Pericles' reluctance even to talk about the importance of not talking about women (and this in a context in which he insists that the sacrifices of these male warriors will be compensated for through spoken praise) and the fact that positive speech about women is seen as something to be avoided just as much as negative speech.

I would not presume to place any single interpretation on this desire to shroud women with silence. It is important to remember that silence about something can denote reverence and awe as well as indifference and disrespect, and that what people are secretive about is often what they treasure most. But it is clear that this was a society that was marked, in its ideology, if not to the same extent in its social practices, by a sharp sense of polarity between men who appear in public to speak and be spoken about and women who --ideally --are kept out of view and who are neither heard from nor spoken about. This was a society that measured its health in the silence and invisibility of its women. In the Greek vision of social life, when women are silent and out of view, all is well. That is partly because, when men are doing their job properly, women are protected and taken care of, so they don't need to speak or act. And it is partly because some of the realms of experience that women are associated with and to which they give expression, especially various forms of irrationality and sexuality, are under control. When women come into view and make themselves heard, that is a sign of disorder, a sign that something is wrong.

In tragedy, the art form through which, to paraphrase Peter Hall as Professor Cartledge has already done, the Athenians paid their artists to criticize their society or, adapting the language of

Michael Kustow, to put it at risk, breaking the silence around women and putting them on display is a major organizing principle, a central means by which the genre fulfills its mission. Although tragedy was composed entirely by men and acted entirely by men, who played all the parts, male and female, its female characters are at least as active and vocal as its male characters. The plots of tragedies often center on moments when women step forward and take decisive action, and this dynamic was built into the staging of these plays as well.

There was in the ancient theater a circular dancing areas, the "orchestra," where the chorus danced and sang, somewhat like the circular, sand-filled space in which all of the action of Tantalus takes place, but behind it there was also a raised platform, on which most of the action was presented. Behind this raised platform was a building, often presented as a house, containing a doorway, through which characters would enter and exit. In this fairly static form of drama, exits and entrances are major events, and the action of a play often centers on movements across the threshold between the private, inner, unseen world of the house, which is inhabited by women and visited by men, and the open, public world of the city and of political life. This public world is supposedly the exclusive realm of men, but in tragedy women move into it, bringing the usually overlooked concerns of this inner realm and, in many cases, its buried secrets with them.

In a number of surviving plays, the crossing of this threshold is a highly charged event. In Euripides' Hippolytus, for example, the queen Phaedra first appears as she is carried out of the house on a litter by her servants. She longs for open spaces because she is seeking relief from her unrequited and impermissible love for her stepson Hippolytus. When she gets into the open space of the stage, she finally cannot help herself from giving voice to this desire, so that what had been a secret kept within her mind and kept within the house -- and there is often a parallelism there -- comes out into the open, with disastrous consequences for herself, her husband Theseus, and her stepson Hippolytus.

In Aeschylus' Agamemnon, the play that depicts the death of Agamemnon, which we only hear about in Tantalus, Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra comes out of the house to greet her husband when he returns from the Trojan War and we then see her lure him back in to be killed, partly for his own actions in the War against Troy, partly for the misdeeds of his ancestors. Here the male character is forced into the realm of the house where all the things he would like to forget about, to keep hidden at the moment of his triumph, come back to haunt him. After the murder, the doors are thrown open and the bodies are wheeled out on a mobile platform, the "ekkyklema," so that the audience is given a vision of this hidden realm, which is the location of Clytemnestra's action.

In this way, the appearance of women on the stage means the disclosing of uncomfortable truths that the society and particularly the men of the society might prefer to keep hidden. For example, the fact that a respectable, high-born wife like Phaedra might feel sexually attracted to the wrong man, that women's sexual desires might not always coincide with the social arrangements in which they find themselves. Or the fact that a victorious military leader like Agamemnon might have achieved his victory at the cost of his family, and especially a female member of his family, that his political power is based, not on divine right, but on his father's victory in a bitter fraternal conflict. The silence that is associated with women and broken in tragedy is partly silence about some of the more awkward and troubling aspects of major social institutions like marriage, or like military leadership.

In depicting disasters, tragedy brings to light and reveals conflicts and flaws in the social order that are normally papered over and ignored. This social critique is often carried out through plots in which women enter the public sphere and take action in response to some kind of crisis or breakdown which is brought about by men as they pursue their particular activities and interests in ways that violate the religious and familial values associated with women. Thus Antigone in Sophocles' Antigone responds to her uncle's attempt to prohibit the proper burial of her brother

Polyneices because he is an enemy of the city. Medea in Euripides' Medea kills her children to get back at her husband for abandoning their marriage to take a new, politically more advantageous wife. Clytemnestra in the Agamemnon kills Agamemnon because of all he has done in carrying out the Trojan War.

That the women of tragedy tend to act in response to such transgressions means that they can appear as quite noble correctors of male wrong-doing, speaking up with eloquence about their own victimization and about the folly and injustice of male pursuits. And they often act generously to undo the effects of male misdeeds, even to the point of literal self-sacrifice. Female self-sacrifice is, in fact, a common theme in tragedy, one which is richly reflected in Tantalus. But it is also the case that, because women's actions in tragedy tend to be reactions, women become especially associated with revenge, a form of violence with which tragedy is especially concerned and which is more terrifying, more extreme, and more dehumanizing than whatever offense sets it in motion. It is also a type of action that often involves treachery and deceit, qualities especially associated with women. A prime example of a vengeful tragic character is Hecuba in Euripides' Hecuba, who is quite closely echoed in the Hecuba of Tantalus.

As agents of revenge, and in other ways as well, women are coded as those who are most susceptible to pressures and impulses that ought ideally to be resisted, impulses that compromise human integrity and the health of society, where -- to go back to my original point -- all is well when women are inactive and thus silent and invisible. So I think you can see that, by witnessing plays and acting in plays in which women emerge into view and break their silence, the men of ancient Athens were forced to confront those dangerous passions and terrible actions that they were normally trying to keep unexpressed, that they saw as being -- in John Barton's memorable formulation -- "unwordable."

Coming to Tantalus I was, then, curious to see what would happen to the gender dynamics I have been sketching for you when ancient myths were restaged in a time and in a dramatic tradition in which there is not the same sense of sharp difference between what it means for a man and for a woman to appear and speak in a public context.

Where I think one sees the most striking and most strikingly modern reformulation of gender role in Tantalus is in the portrayal of Clytemnestra and her interactions with Agamemnon (and those two were for me perhaps the most compelling characters in the entire cycle). In ancient versions of the myth, the expedition to Troy and the sacrifice of Iphigenia are actions that Agamemnon decides on alone in pursuit of essentially male values and to which Clytemnestra then reacts in the name of family bonds, especially her bond to her daughter. In Tantalus, we see a much more complicated decision that emerges from a discussion between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, in which she both favors the expedition and insists that it not be destructive, and involves a mixture of motives that cannot easily be slotted into a division between family and politics or between private and public. This subtle characterization of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon set up for me a certain tension with the mythic context, so that I found it hard to connect the conflicted, struggling characters that we see in that discussion to the reports that we get, first of Agamemnon's rape of Clytemnestra and then, much later, of her murder of him on his return from Troy.

On the whole, the mythic material out of which Tantalus is made ends up reinforcing the ancient dynamic of female victimization and vengeful retaliation. By pulling together so many variants, and layering them on top of each other in a way that Homeric epic and classical drama, which were more concentrated and selective, do not, Barton accumulates a relentless sequence of rapes, especially at the beginning of the cycle. So it comes to seem as if all action proceeds from the violation of women -- and indeed all new life, since most of the characters in the cycle are conceived through rape -- and this becomes a way of suggesting that all human life is tainted and flawed from the outset. It is also notable that the treatment of Achilles' son Neoptolemus draws on ancient conceptions of becoming female as, for a man, a form of demoralization. When

Neoptlemus is corrupted and becomes willing to do whatever it takes to avenge his father and destroy Troy, we see him adopting the role of a woman, pretending to be Pyrrha, and through that very pretense becoming womanish.

Finally, I think that the tension in Tantalus between modern attempts to rethink gender and ancient patterns is clearest in the treatment of the chorus, especially as realized in the Denver production. It is very interesting to see the whole sequence of events being presented as an education for a group of women, who serve, in effect, as its primary audience. This is very different from the situation of Greek drama where, even if women were part of the audience (which is by no means clear), the plays seem to be addressed primarily to their male spectators. And yet it is notable that, when that internal female audience puts on masks and enters the action, it does so as women, preserving an identification between actor and role not found in Greek tragedy; there a chorus made up of elite young men would often play women or slaves. And the young women become female characters in the drama just at the point at which those characters become victims, as the newly captive Trojan women. This turns out to be the prelude to their ultimate action, which ends the sequence: their vengeful, destructive assault on Delphi. Interestingly, this reenactment of old patterns is aided by the new conventions of the modern theater, which now includes in its idiom nudity and overt violence, both absent from the more formal and decorous performances of ancient tragedy. In the arresting and controversial scene in which the chorus women are stripped and branded, these new conventions are used, just when the internal audience enters the action, to accentuate and rivet our attention on the ancient theme of the violation of women as the source of tragic events.