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# Private Speech, Public Pain: The Power of Women's Laments in Ancient Greek Poetry and Tragedy

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Private Speech,  
Public Pain  
the Power of Women's  
Laments in Ancient  
 GREEK   
Poetry and Tragedy

Women's discourse in Greek society has been traditionally controlled and restricted by strict sociocultural codes. Barred from participating in the exclusively male public political scene, women have developed another mode of expressing their concerns and opinions about the world around them-through performance of ritual laments. In these songs of mourning women are empowered through their pain to address publicly issues of social importance; the most successful performers skillfully weave sometimes abrasive, often persuasive, and always highly charged judicial and political language into their lament. Women use this medium of public mourning as a protected vehicle through which they pronounce moral judgments with political immunity, much like the professional male praise-poet, who uses his craft to direct strong but subtle criticism toward the individual whom he is praising.<sup>1</sup>

Owing to a lack of evidence, we know very little about the sound of ancient Greek music. Studying ancient Greek ritual laments as *songs* is tricky because we lack musical notation and possess no clear understanding of an ancient lament's melodic composition; we must rely on the context and form of the text and its meter, which, thankfully, we do know something about.<sup>2</sup> Meter in tragedy distinguishes the speech of an actor from the song and dance of the chorus, and we know from ancient scholars, poets, and playwrights that each meter, together with the rhythm and melody of musical accompaniment, evokes a different emotional expression in song and dance.



In ancient Greek culture, and indeed in many parts of Greece today, ritual laments are best described as performed speech-acts.<sup>3</sup> The words of the laments in song mixed with cries and shrieks must not be perceived simply as sounds, but as actions displayed before witnesses in an open strategy of what Nadia Seremetakis calls “truth-claiming.”<sup>4</sup> The laments are directed toward the doomed, dying, or dead individual, or structured as a dialogue between the dead and the living; by extension, the lament effects emotional responses in the listeners and forces them to react, thereby reinforcing values of truth, social justice, and natural law.



2

Professional male poets and playwrights of ancient Greece, recognizing the expressive power of women’s ritual laments, often exploit them in critical narrative moments. I focus here on the narrative context of women’s lamentation in archaic Greek epic and tragedy, considering (1) how women use the techniques of “witnessing” and “truth claiming” to defy or condemn male social attitudes and institutions, (2) how women use expressions of *pónos* (pain) to control their own discourse, and (3) how the use of woman’s ritual lament as a narrative maneuver in Greek poetry and tragedy effects changes in the male participants.

# Background Categories of Laments



Margaret Alexiou's 1974 book on Greek women's ritual lament paved the way for a host of other analyses of women's voices in Greek life and literature, both ancient and modern.<sup>5</sup> Her comparative approach shows that the most ancient ritualistic aspects of women's laments can still be found in modern Greek practice and that there is continuity on the levels of form, content, and style from antiquity through the Byzantine Period into modern times.

The two most common words for "ritual lament" in ancient use, *thrēnos* and *góos*, are a bit difficult to differentiate. Both are from an Indo-European root meaning "a shrill cry,"<sup>6</sup> and both contain intense emotions associated with mourning—grief, anger, blame, and so on—as well as words of praise for the deceased. From their earliest vocalizations as loud cries and screams, they developed into songs with music, and eventually, as the narrative structure took on a life of its own in the hands of writers, the musicality was lost. Alexiou argues that in Homer, where the word *thrēnos* appears only twice, it is meant to be a composed dirge performed by (1) the Muses for the dead Achilles (*Odyssey* 24.61), and (2) male professional mourners at Hektor's funeral (*Iliad* 24.721); the *góos*, a much more frequent term, refers to the im-provised, context-specific weeping performed by kinspeople and close friends of the deceased.<sup>7</sup> The *góos* in Homer seems to work both as the expression of general grief at the loss of a loved one and as a stylized ritual lament performed specifically by women.



Alexiou sees these *góoi* as inarticulate wails and shrieks uttered as an antiphonal response to the more thoroughly composed *thrênos*; we have no text of the supposedly polished *thrênnoi*, however, while the verses of the kinswomen's *góoi*—Thetis's (*Iliad* 18.52 ff.) and those of the three women closest to Hektor—his wife, mother, and sister-in-law at his bier (*Iliad* 24-723 ff.), are fully and eloquently narrated. Homer presents us with three sets of mourners at Hektor's bier: (1) professional singers (*oidoi*), who may be playing songs that are full of mourning (*stonóessan*) on their instruments, but are not actually singing,<sup>8</sup> (2) kinswomen Andromakhe, Hecuba, and Helen, who sing solos (*góoi*), and (3) a group of related and nonrelated women (*stenákhonto gunaikes*) who wail in refrain. We must agree with Alexiou that these *góoi*, at any rate, are *songs*, but as we will see, they are also a *voice*.<sup>9</sup>

In Athenian tragedy of the classical period *thrênos* and *góos* as terms were often conflated, and later Greek scholars used the term *thrênos* more than *góos* to denote a sung lament that contained praise. The *thrênos* was introduced by a new term specific to tragedy, the *kommós*, a word that is derived from the Greek verb *koptô*, "to beat the breast in lamentation,"<sup>10</sup> a common image exploited in tragedy as the most visually compelling exhibition of physical and psychological pain. Aristotle (*Poetics* 12.1452b) defines the *kommós* as an antiphonal song of lament between an actor and the female chorus, such as this one, from the final scene of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, in the aftermath of Troy's demise at the hands of the Greeks (1302-9):

HECUBA (soloist): *iô!* Earth that nourished my children!

WOMEN: *eh! eh!*

HECUBA: Oh, children, hear! Attend to your mother's voice!

WOMEN: You call to the dead in your lament!

HECUBA: Setting my old body on the ground, I beat the earth with my two hands.

WOMEN: We kneel on the earth in succession, weeping for our own wretched husbands below.

In exchanges like this, which occur with extraordinary frequency in Greek tragedy, women mourn the death of an entire city through the public expression of their own personal losses. Each action is echoed with a counteraction; the women complete each other's thoughts. Their lament is not simply a description of war's destruction, it is that destruction. The sound of their wailing voices, their bodies falling and beating the ground, are reenactments of war's battlefronts.




6



7

Voice of the  
Female Sex





In his *Life of Solon* (21.90.4) Plutarch (first century C.E.) tells us that the Athenian lawgiver Solon forbade women's performance of "composed dirges" (*thrênein pepoiêména*). Plato (*Rep.* 3.395 d-e) states that lamentation is "weak and feminine"; he is adamantly opposed to the irrational expression of grief. In his *Laws* (12.960a) he remarks that "ideal lawgivers" would prohibit public outcries at funeral processions. These decrees by men suggest highly that the women's laments contained language that was perceived as politically threatening, especially to the patriarchal democratic institutions of Athens.

Roger Just correctly interprets the lawgivers' objections to laments: "Women's lamentations cause disruptions and pose a threat to the good order—indeed to the very survival—of society by their introduction of the unrestrained, the emotional, the illogical."<sup>11</sup> He uses as an example a scene from Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* (181-95), when the besieged Theban general Eteokles tries to silence the laments sung by a chorus of young women by charging that their behavior is antithetical to what is sophrones, "right minded" (186); he aggressively turns their fear of enslavement inside out: "You yourselves are the ones who enslave me and the entire city" (254). Eteocles wishes that the women could "suffer in silence" (250, 252, 262), and expresses utter exasperation at their display of emotion (256-59):

ET. Oh Zeus! what a race of women you gave us!

CH. A wretched one, like men whose city has been sacked!

ET. You will speak ill-omens embracing the god's images?

CH. Fear has seized my tongue with a weak spirit!



If we look closely at this exchange, we must notice several points. First, Aeschylus' audience knows that, according to tradition, Thebes was indeed sacked, Eteocles was killed, and the Theban women were taken as slaves. Second, Eteocles, as a warrior-hero, must believe that mortal men, not gods, are in control of their fate. Yet the women's laments indicate otherwise; alternating prayers with moans and cries, holding their hands up to heaven in a ritual posture of supplication and mourning as they move in dance across the stage, their song openly expresses what the hero-warrior has been trained not to express—fear and apprehension—those sentiments that are natural in war but that weaken the morale of the fighting men (181-86):

I ask you, insufferable creatures,  
is this protection and safety for the city or  
courage for this beleaguered army here,  
for you, falling before the wooden images of the  
city's gods  
to shout and howl...?

Although men's discourse projects women's laments as illogical, the opposite, of course, is true; it is the truth that war is an evil waste that men cannot afford to hear or be generally willing to allow themselves to act upon.<sup>12</sup> As the warriors continue to equip for battle, women try to prepare themselves to face the inevitable funerals and the pain of their own lives, as they continue afterward. For ancient Greek society, war was a seasonally

recurring crisis, an evil very close at hand, not as it is for us North Americans living in the twentieth century—remote, abnormal, difficult to understand,<sup>13</sup> In ancient Greek society, women generally did not go into battle; left behind each year during war season, they must have felt themselves to be prisoners of war, helpless to change the repetitive cycle of devastation to family and property but resigned to it. Witness the bitter truth exclaimed in Hecuba's lament over the body of Hektor (*Iliad* 24-754-56):

But you, when Achilles had seized your *psukhê*  
[soul] with the fine-edged bronze,  
he hauled many times around his companion's  
tomb,  
Patroklos' whom you killed; but even so, did not  
restore his life.



12



13

Women's &  
Men's Pónos  


One way of investigating the reasons why the male-dominated political structure was so wary of women's performed laments is to explore the engendered discourse of *pónos* (pain) in Greece. In Hesiod (*Theogony* 226-32), whose poetry is blatantly misogynist,<sup>14</sup> *Pónos* was born from *Eris*, that divine force that instills manly competition, and is grouped together with battles (*Mákhās*) and fights (*Husmínas*). There is no room in Hesiod for women's pain, but ironically, *pónos* did not exist for men before women were invented (Hesiod *Works and Days* 92). Again, in Homer's *Iliad*, a poem of Achilles' wrath and its destruction, *pónos* is the physical exertion of battle (e.g., 6.77; 10.164; 16.568; 21.525) and the quintessential metaphor for war itself (6.525).

In the *Odyssey*, which is not about war but the coming home from war, *pónos* is used most frequently as the ritual of preparing communal meals (e.g., *pénonto daíta*, "they prepared their dinner": 2.322; 4.531; 4.624; 4.683; 14.251; 22.199; 24.412). Here we are a bit closer to the ideas of social cohesiveness that women's expressions of *pónos* intend. The theme of fasting while mourning is most strikingly illustrated in the myth of Demeter: when the goddess is in mourning over her lost daughter Kore, not only does she refuse food herself, but as she is in charge of the world's agriculture, everyone is deprived of sustenance. There is a modern saying among the Maniats that illustrates this power of *pónos* over the body: *kállio ekhò moirologó pará na pháô kai na pió*, "I would rather lament than eat or drink."<sup>15</sup> Another common saying of grieving people is *den katevaínei kátô to phai*; "food will not go down."



Although the act of mourning is seen to consume to the point of blocking out bodily needs, at crisis moments in Homer male heroes consider it “inhuman”<sup>16</sup> to put sorrow above the stomach’s needs. Odysseus says that eating helps one forget *pénthos* (220-21). Achilles agrees, and tells Priam that they must eat despite their states of mourning (24.601-20). To keep in mind the practical necessity of satisfying bodily needs (i.e., hunger) is to shut out overpowering *pónos*.

The strict laws in antiquity that limited and manipulated women’s public voice were primarily due to the widespread belief in Greek (and Roman) politics that women were not in control of their discourse because they were ruled by emotion.<sup>17</sup> Women were excluded from public politics, justifiably, according to men, because their mental and physical health depended on their reproductive health, and their sexuality was regarded as a pollution.<sup>18</sup> A social barometer of a woman’s honor (or shame), even today in Greece, is her sexual behavior.

In both ancient and modern Greek daily life, political banishment is compensated for, in a very important way, by women’s dominance over family and religious life; they are empowered with maintaining the spiritual health of their communities.<sup>19</sup> Their duties include all human rites of passage, mediation between one stage and the next, from entrance to exit. If a young person dies before marriage, women dress the corpse in wedding attire and marry the youth “to the black earth,” effectively thwarting Death’s attempt to deny this important transition.<sup>20</sup> In Greek poetry and tragedy, women

who mock their role of mediator come to a bad end. Clytemnestra murders her husband and then refuses to “close his eyes and mouth in death,” the proper rituals that prepare the body for burial. For this neglect she wins an everlasting song of loathing (*Odyssey* 11.424-26). Hecuba stabs out Polymestor’s eyes, a stark contrast to the gentle ritual of closing the lids in death; she is changed into a dog (Euripides *Hecuba* 1045 ff.).

In preparing a corpse for burial, women make close contact with a ritual artifact, a polluting entity:<sup>21</sup> *It is precisely through their connection with pollution that women define social order.* Patriarchal systems are stubborn to concede this fact, and a great tension is created between the sexes, each side trying to assert the validity of its own truth claims. It is important to note that participation in Athenian State Theater is a ritual of initiation reserved for male adults and, through the chorus, young up-and-coming male citizens in the democratic city; the impersonation of female characters (leading women, captive women, female Furies, etc.) by male actors and chorus boys gives them a unique opportunity to experience firsthand those female powers that are beyond men’s control.<sup>22</sup> In Greek tragedy, it has been quite clearly shown by Froma Zeitlin that the male characters’ dramatic plans succeed though their association with women. She observes that “women’s plots are generally more successful than men’s,” citing as an example Ofestes’ need for help from Electra and the female chorus in order to achieve his goal.<sup>23</sup>



So, men need exposure to the woman's experience if they are to fully understand and realize their own potential and their own operative emotions. Since real women are denied an independent public voice, they exert power through manipulative techniques: through family, especially male kin,<sup>24</sup> and through the power of ritual lamentation performed with riotous group support. Tragedians have made good use of women's primary role in funeral rituals, arranging turns of plot that fall on a false burial rite intended to facilitate, for example, an escape (as in Euripides *Helen* 1049 ff.) or a long-awaited reunion (such as Sophocles *Electra* 42 ff.) .

The expression of *pónos* can be viewed as a discursive tool in the male-female conflict of power and influence within the ancient Greek sociopolitical structure. Just as there is male honor in fighting wars, competing in athletics, and performing tasks requiring enormous physical strength in order to win personal glory, women find their honor in patiently enduring suffering, hardships, and loss. A bard's song of the hero-warrior's praise can turn into a lament when perceived by a woman: Penelope begs Phemios to stop singing a song about the glory of Odysseus, for it "causes her unforgettable sorrow" and makes her long for "his dear head" (*Odyssey* 1.343-44). The head, of course, is caressed by the wife in love, and in death—it is cradled in her hands during ritual lamentation (for example, *Iliad* 18.71). The Greek word *pónos* applies both to the male "pain" of physical exertion and the "pain" felt and performed by women in their songs of lamentation. For men, *pónos* embodies an agonizing personal struggle to achieve victory; for women, it involves the struggle to resolve personal and social conflicts back at home.

Far from being detached from pain (*pónos*), women's laments *must* be outward expressions of it. Euripides, in his *Trojan Women*, creates a scene in which both male and female *pónoi* are highlighted simultaneously in a lament, an intensely dramatic moment that must stand as one of the best examples of this playwright's genius. Hecuba, who is described by the chorus of captive women as the most full of *pónos* (722, *poluponotátên*) among mortals, laments the death of her grandson Astyanax, whom the Achaeans hurled from the walls during the sack of Troy. He was the child of her favorite son, Hektor, who is also dead. Now Astyanax lies limp inside Hektor's shield, in which he will be buried. Her long lament over his body, spoken with antiphonal response sung by the chorus, uses the image of the shield to punctuate both her *pónos* and Hektor's.

She begins by chiding the Achaeans for their irrational fear (*mê diekselthôn lógō*) that caused them to murder a child. In a tearful address to the child, she chides him for dying before her, for robbing her of the right to be buried by him—this reversal of nature caused by war; she then sheds harsh blame on the Achaeans for this crime of fear:<sup>25</sup>

What then would the poet write on your tomb?  
 "This child the Argives once murdered because  
 they were afraid?"  
 An inscription of shame for Greece!  
 (1188-91 )

Hecuba then addresses the image of war's destruction directly (1196-99), focusing on the impression of the



child's body lying motionless in the shield—a *pónos* for her and the boy's mother Andromakhe—and the sweat stains on the shield's rim, a visible symbol of Hektor's *pónos* in battle, his physical triumphs. Only the women's *pónos* is alive, however, for the dead feel nothing; this is womankind's strongest claim, that their *pónos* endures. They set themselves apart as the ones who bear the burden of pain—not even the divine have *pónos*,<sup>26</sup> yet the religious rituals for the dead and the living are conducted and controlled on a daily basis by women.



22

As caretakers for the dead, women find both *timè* (honor) (Aeschylus *Suppliants* 116) and cathartic joy (Euripides *Trojan Women* 608-9) in lamentation. We find Sophocles' Deianeira in the *Trachiniae* caught in a cycle of unending *pónos*: “one night brings *pónos* and the next night dispels it by receiving *pónos* in its place.”<sup>27</sup> Helen, in Euripides' play of the same title (329), is helped by the chorus of captive women because “it is right for a woman to share *pónos* (*sumponein*) with another woman.” Women claim to possess such *pónos* that they cannot easily satisfy their desire to express it in the form of sung lamentation (*góos*), as Euripides' chorus of Argive maidens pronounce in their song of lament for their dead sons (*Supp.* 79-84):

An insatiable delight for *góos* comes to me  
Suffering much *pónos*, as from a steep rock  
the running drop flows  
of eternal, never-ceasing *góos*.  
The *pónos* for dead children  
that's the woman's concern,  
born to suffer in *góos*, eh, eh...

While *pónos* is a spiritual and physical motivating force for women's laments, men cannot easily sustain the *pónos* of ritual mourning. Homeric poetry is full of examples. In *Odyssey* 4.103, Menelaos admits that a man “may quickly have one's fill of gloomy lamentation [*góos*]”; even Achilles tires of lamenting Patroklos, and tells Agamemnon, “even of mourning [*góos*] there can be enough” (*Iliad* 23.157). Odysseus tells Penelope that “it is not good to grieve [*penthêmenai*] always without end” (19.120). In a typical display of male bravado, Hektor (*Iliad* 6.450-65) admits to his wife, Andromakhe, that he would rather be praised as a dead hero than be alive to witness his wife's enslavement after he falls in battle. Like most heroes of Greek myth, Hektor earns his valor at the expense of his wife, who must live on only as a reference to the great hero to whom she was once wedded. This is precisely Cassandra's complaint in her cynical lament in *Trojan Women* (353 ff.), where she declares that she will not live on as a trophy of Agamemnon's victory at Troy, but will kill him and her own death will follow.



23

Tragedy, too, displays male insecurity and discomfort in the face of emotion. Both Euripides and Sophocles characterize Theseus, the protoking of Athens, as a powerful political figure who displays a strong discomfort in the face of women's public mourning. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Coloneus* (1751-53) Theseus implores Antigone and Ismene to “cease the dirge” over their father, but they continue nonetheless; in Euripides' *Suppliants*, Theseus is moved by the women's laments but not like his mother, whom he bids to stop weeping because she has no binding *reason* to lament their cause—she “has no kinship

ties to these people” (286-91). We have already seen the reaction of Eteocles to the women’s mourning in Aeschylus’ *Seven Against Thebes*.

I can find no instance in ancient Greek poetry or tragedy when comments such as these are made by a woman. Always the ritual of lamentation is stopped by men. The outlawing of women’s laments in fifth- and fourth-century Greece gave rise to men’s “funeral orations”—*élegoi*, *epitáphios lógos*, and *epikédeion*, which were contrived by male literary society. These orations were devoid of explosive emotion and made use of controlled, subdued language, but expanded on and emphasized the elements of praise found in laments; they functioned in the male social and political sphere in a way very different from the oldest manifestations of the ritual laments.<sup>28</sup>



# Women's Control of Discourse





In her book on the current social practices of the Maniat people in the southern Peloponnese, Nadia Seremetakis writes: “Truth claiming through the force of emotion and shared moral inference often occurs when the subject is in conflict with the social order. It is in this type of situation that the validation of truth claims turns to media outside the official jural forms. In Inner Mani, death rituals, in the past and present, have been a performative arena, demarcated by gender, where pain (*pónos*) figures prominently as an orchestrating and prescriptive communicative paradigm. In these rites, the vocalization and physical display of pains construct an affective enclave of women where alternative codifications of their relation to the social order achieve a formal status as biographical testimony and oral history.”<sup>29</sup>

We see this clearly in Greek tragedy, perhaps most strikingly in the plays of Euripides, whose highly charged, emotional music made him famous. In his *Trojan Women* (110-11) Hecuba, lying on the ground, ponders aloud her entitlement as a bereaved mother and recent widow to vocalize her pain: “Should I be silent, or not be silent? Should I lament [*thrênêsai*]?” Hecuba invites the women to join her mourning (143-45), to double her discourse. Silence is tabooed. For the women there is a strength in numbers, and a power through the acoustics of death embodied in lamentation that give validity to their discourse. In *Odyssey* 24.48 ff., the cry (*boê*) of the Muses’ *thrênos* for Achilles’ death makes soldiers tremble.



Besides sonics and physical gestures (dressing the body, holding the corpse's head) women's tears in weeping are exceptional in their sheer magnitude; they are one of the primary manifestations of emotional display. To "weep like a woman" means to "melt down" (*têkô*). This verb is synonymous with the modern *leiônô*, an expressive metaphor for the burning pain of crying and tears "which liquefies the self" in women's laments.<sup>30</sup> Helen "melts down" with tears (*Iliad* 3,1.76), as do Polyxena and her mother Hecuba (Euripides, *Hecuba* 433-34). In *Odyssey* 1.9, *têkô* appears no less than five times as a metaphor for the inner pain of Penelope's tears flowing for Odysseus (1.9.204, 205, 206, 207, 208), and he urges her to stop "melting" her heart with lamentation for him in 1.9.264. Odysseus himself comes to a point in his life when he "melts down" and sheds tears "like a woman" (*Odyssey* 8.522-23), upon hearing the bard sing of his atrocities at Troy. Here is a critical juncture for this character, for at this moment he is metaphorically transformed into a woman who is violently beaten with spear butts as she laments over the body of her dead husband. Odysseus is lost in a woman's *pónos* (529) until his male companions rally to remove him from this state of mind.

Consider also the scene in *Iliad* 1.8.22-51., when Achilles first hears of the death of his companion Patroklos: As he falls to the ground and begins a ritual of lamentation (defiling his body), he is immediately joined by the wailing captive women, and when he himself cries out, his mother Thetis hears him (37) and immediately responds. She leads all her female kin in lamentation not for Patroklos, but for her *own* son Achilles, who is

fated to die later (50-51.). When she bids the chorus of Nereids to "hear her" (*klute*) she is asking them to bear witness to her pain, through which her pronouncements are disseminated to the rest of society.<sup>31</sup> Thetis tells the women that she will go "to look on [her] dear son, and *listen to the pain [penthos]* that comes to him" (63-64). Though Patroklos and Achilles die, there are witnesses to their death, female representatives for the pain, who avert a taboo of silent death.<sup>32</sup>

Seremetakis discusses what she sees as "gender dichotomies of the lament session-in which women are vocal and emotionally demonstrative in public and the men are silent, inhibited, and spatially segregated." She hastens to point out that "the men are not ignored by the women mourners during the ceremony, nor are they oblivious to what is happening within the circle of mourners; they function like a silent chorus."<sup>33</sup> This describes the very scene in *Iliad* 24, when Hektor's body is laid out. Men are present and feel *penthos*, "sorrow," (709), but the actual lament is performed by alternating female soloists, as we have already seen. Men are not expected to, nor do they sing laments in the presence of others like the women.



# Performance Categories



Classicist Charles Segal and musicologist Susan Auerbach have both described Greek women's laments as "non-music."<sup>34</sup> They do not mean to suggest that laments are not *song*, but that they lack *musicality*. In his discussion of song in Greek tragedy, Segal refers to Hecuba's tears in Euripides' *Trojan Woman* as "negated music." In a medium in which a singing and dancing chorus plays the crucial role of mediation between the action of the story and the audience, Segal points out that women's laments in tragedy are described as "undanced (*akhoros*) and unlyred (*alyros*)" (343-45); at the same time, however, he states:

By absorbing the cries of grief into 'the lyricism of choral lament, the tragic poet is able to identify the emotional experience of suffering with the musical ' and rhythmic impulse that lies at the very origins of the work. This transformation of cries of woe into song constitutes at least part of the creative power of the poet-maker and of his divinity, the Muse.<sup>35</sup>

Greek laments are both elaborate and intricate, employing many different techniques; they are comparable to the modern Greek laments described by Holst-Warhaft and Seremetakis, who observe that in the Maniat tradition mourning women use solo-chorus interplay, solo improvisation and antiphony, stylized sobbing, pitch alteration, and other musical techniques in combination with physical gestures to create spatial and acoustic dynamics.<sup>36</sup> The importance of gesture in lamentation performance is certainly vivid in Hektor's laying out in *Iliad* 24, and can be seen on many depictions of ancient Greek women's ritual mourning in the plastic arts.



Figure 1 shows typical postures of mourning Greek women as they stand around a dead man's bier. The women raise their white arms over their heads, tear their hair, cover their heads with their hands. A woman stands at the corpse's head, caressing it. Notice the absence of men at the bier. In Figure 2, a woman tears her hair in grief over the body of a dead hero who lies naked near his heaped-up armor, which has been stripped from him. Figures 3 and 4 illustrate how Greek women's physical postures and ritual gestures of grief have continued into modern times. In Greece today, many bereaved women wear black for life, making them conspicuous signifiers of grief in everyday life.



34

Euripides, in his musical tragedy *Helen*, transforms the harshness of a formal *góos* (164ff.) into a soothing song. In this lyrical lament over her role in the carnage at Troy and the loss of lives in a preventable war, Helen wishes that the Sirens could accompany her mourning with the Libyan harp, with the syrinx, with lyres, and with tears of their own to match hers “suffering for suffering, care for care, antiphonal chorus to my lament.” Her call for witnesses appears less anxious than Hecuba's or Thetis's; she seems to be caught up in the lyrical beauty of her song and treats this lament almost as if it were not a lament at all.

When the chorus of captive Greek women enter with a song in response to Helen's lament, they delyricise the performance, heightening its sense of urgency and tension; they call her sounds a “confused noise” (*hómados*), and an “unlyred elegy” (*alyron elegon*), a sharp voice of pain such as a fleeing nymph would

make when seized in the woods by Pan (186 ff.). The reference to Pan here is significant because it reflects back to Helen's lament in the previous lines. According to myth, a nymph fleeing from the desires of Pan was transformed into a bed of reeds, which Pan then cut and fashioned into the pipes, the *syringas* that Helen wishes could accompany her sorrowful song; built into the music of the pipes is the cry of the assaulted nymph.

This image of the captured nymph who becomes the instrument of Pan's play epitomizes both Helen's own position as “captive” (the very meaning of her name, line 1674), and that of the chorus, who are spoils of war, forced out of their homes to bed men who killed their husbands, sons, and brothers. That is, they are performing *moirologia*—laments—that “speak their fate.”<sup>37</sup> The chorus's striking imagery inspires the self-conscious Helen to a greater outpouring of emotion in her next strophe addressed directly to the chorus, where she reveals to them the news of Troy's demise and the death of her kin, which Teucer had lately told her:

*iô, iô* [inarticulate cries]  
 Captives of foreign oars,  
 Greek maidens,  
 some Achaian seaman  
 came, he came, bringing for me tears upon tears...  
 Ilium overthrown  
 belongs now to burning fire,  
 on account of me, murderess  
 on account of my name, *polúponon*.



35

The significance of *polúponos* (much-suffering) has been discussed. Helen here is blaming herself for being a captive, which is the same as blaming herself for being a woman. This is not the first time Helen blames herself, her womanhood, her sexuality, for war's destruction.<sup>38</sup> Her sexuality is blamed for forcing mothers to mourn, and their mourning is equivalent to the mourning of all of Greece (*Helen* 362-70).

Helen's song is subtle, but it speaks out loudly against pervading attitudes toward war. As speech-acts the ritual lament must be interpreted simultaneously as a "voice" and a "song."<sup>39</sup> Notice how Aeschylus' Danaid maidens, who are fleeing a forced marriage to their Egyptian cousins, combine song and speech in their lament (*Suppliants* 11.2-15):

I pronounce [légō] sufferings such as these, crying  
out songs, tears flying, shrill, sad,  
*iê, iê,*  
I am famous for crying *iê!*

The maidens have no real rights to refuse the marriage, and they admit that "left alone, women are nothing; no Ares is in them" (748-49); the only personal, independent action they can take in response to and against male aggression is their song and dance of lament, charged speech-acts that compromise the majority of the drama's 1073 lines.

An even more dramatic illustration comes from the traditional connections that women have with birds whose cries are sonically suggestive of lamentation.<sup>40</sup> Bird sonics are perceived as a

cross between cries and song in Greek poetry and tragedy, and are used by tragedians in moments requiring critical mediation between the living and the dead. In Euripides' *Trojan Women* (1.45-52), Hecuba leads the chorus in lamentation for the destruction of the city:

And I, as mother of winged birds, lead forth the cry  
[*klangan*],  
the song [*molpán*]; not the same song as once long  
ago, when  
leaning upon Priam's scepter  
my feet led the chorus in the Phrygian beat  
fine-sounding, to the gods.

One myth in particular that is a frequent metaphor for a woman's greatest expression of grief through bird imagery is the shocking Thracian story of Procne (Ovid *Metam.* 6.572 ff.), who kills her son Itys to render her husband sterile (that is, by destroying his male heir) after he rapes her sister Philomela and cuts out her tongue. Both women are transformed into birds: Philomela becomes a swallow, whose voice (*phônê*) is incoherent; Procne is transformed into the mournful nightingale, whose voice is often compared to that of lamenting women.<sup>41</sup> Such a one is Penelope, who is discovered mourning in *Odyssey* 1.9-51.8-22:

As when the daughter of Pandareos [Procne], the  
greenwood nightingale  
in the newly arrived spring sings her beautiful song  
perched on the sheltered leaves of trees  
varying her cadence continually, she pours out her  
much trilling voice [*phônê*],  
mourning her dear son Itys.



In Aeschylus' *Suppliants* (58 ff.), the chorus of women sing that anyone who understands the flight and cries of birds (*oiônopólôn*) would know, upon hearing their song, that they lament, for they sound like nightingales (*aêdónês*). Similarly, the women's chorus in Euripides' *Helen* asks for a "nightingale's song of sorrow that is sweetest to join their *thrênos*" (1.1.07ff.), and Electra, in the play by Sophocles (1.47-49), responds to the chorus of women urging her to rest from mourning her dead father:

But as for me, suited to my mind is the distraught bird  
who groans "Itys," always she laments "Itys,"  
a messenger of Zeus.

Electra's goal is to secure divine help in avenging her father's death; in comparing her sorrow to Procne's, she delivers her pain not only in the marked sonics of birdsong, but even more powerfully, she pronounces it as a *messenger* (*angelos*) to Zeus.<sup>42</sup>



38

# Figures





Figure 1





Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

# Conclusion



When we consider the fate (*moira*) of mortal women featured in Greek poetry and tragedy, we find that most of them succumb to *pónos*, dying either from the weight of their pain (Antikleia, for example), by suicide (like Antigone, Phaedra, Jocasta, Deianira), or at the hand of a male murderer (such as Polyxena, Cassandra, Clytemnestra, Odysseus's serving maids). Are these women as dispensable as they appear? Certainly not. They have been given the public platform that is ritual lamentation, upon which they are empowered to speak and act on matters of personal and civic importance, exclaiming truths that make men nervous, angry, and if they are listening, changed. Tragedians who, for the most part, avoided making overt political statements in their plays could do so subtly through the *kommós*, the antiphonal exchange between chorus and actor.<sup>43</sup> The tragic male actor, impersonating a woman, trains himself to experience her pain, to express suffering *her way*—communally. Whoever plays the role of Andromakhe in her tragedy must feel her pain as she pleads with Menelaus (Euripides *Andromakhe* 390ff.):

I slept with my master through force,  
You would kill me, and not him?  
The guilt is his...I saw Hektor dragged...  
I saw Troy in flames...  
I, a slave, dragged by the hair, aboard Argive ships;  
Since I came here to Phthia, as bride  
to my husband's murderer...

If this performance is to be convincing, the male player must become Andromakhe and extend her essence to the audience. Pain (*pónos*) must



be understood by both player and audience as a legitimate motivating force for the politically marginal woman, which compels her to declare binding truths before witnesses. Mourning women, through their association with death and pollution, define purity and social order; they praise the righteous and highlight the wider concept of justice by indicating and judging the guilty in their laments. It is no wonder, therefore, that female characters in poetry and drama are generally given the best monologues and choral odes, and have a profound effect on the success or failure of a plot.



50

There is much more to say; we have barely scratched the surface here. With no musical examples save one problematic fragment with musical notation from the *Orestes*,<sup>44</sup> our next step must involve a comparative look at the metrics of women's choral laments in tragedy. There we might find a hint of their musicality, which *must* be there for the dramatic opposition of *unlyred* and *undanced* songs of lamentation to be fully understood.

## Notes



1. For the ancient Greek art of praise poetry see G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), chs. 12-14, and his *Pindar's Homer: The Lyric Possession of an Epic Past* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), ch. 6; B. Gentili, *Poetry and Its Public in Ancient Greece*, trans. A. T. Cole (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), ch. 7; R. Martin, "Hesiod, Odysseus, and the Instruction of Princes," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 114 (1984): 29-48. For comparable African praise poetic traditions, see J. Opland, *Xhosa Oral Poetry: Aspects of a South African Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); A. Mafeje, "The Role of the Bard in a Contemporary African Community," *Journal of African Languages* 6 (1967): 193-223.
2. See the discussion of form and structure of ritual laments in M. Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), ch. 7. For a linguist's comparison of meter and rhythm, song and speech in Greek epic, lyric, and tragedy, see G. Nagy (1990), esp. ch. 1.
3. Where the utterance *is* the deed. See J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962). Swearing an oath with the statement "I do" is one example of a speech-act. For the application of speechact theory to Homer, see R. Martin, *The Language of Heroes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 21-22.
4. C. N. Seremetakis, *The Last Word: Women, Death, and Divination in Inner Mani* (Chicago:



University of Chicago Press, 1991). Here she states that “‘to suffer for’ and ‘to come out as a representative for’ are narrative devices in laments that fuse jurial notions of reciprocity and truth claiming with the emotional nuances of pain” (102). See also G. Holst-Warhaft, *Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature* (New York: Routledge, 1992), who notes that laments provoke the authority of the state when mourners take sides in local political struggles (114 ff.). See her chapter 3 on the politics of revenge in Inner Mani.

5. Most recently, L. Danforth, *The Death Rituals of Rural Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); H. Monsacré, *Les Larmes d'Achille* (Paris, 1984); N. Loraux, *Les mères en deuil* (Paris: Seuil, 1990); N. Sultan, “Women in ‘Akritic’ Song: The Hero’s ‘Other’ Voice,” *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 9 (1991):15-70; Seremetakis (1991); Holst-Warhaft (1992); C. Segal, “Euripides’ *Alcestis*: Female Death and Male Tears,” *Classical Antiquity* 11 (1992):142-58, and *Euripides and the Poetics of Sorrow* (Durham: Duke University Press, forthcoming).
6. Alexiou (1974), p. 102.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 12 f; 102 ff.
8. This is the only use of *aoidoi* in this context in Homer, so it is difficult to explain. Charles Segal believes, along with Margaret Alexiou, that the *aoidoi* are actually singing laments and are in charge, but the sense here is too ambiguous. See Segal, “The Gorgon and the Nightingale: The Voice of Female Lament and Pindar’s Twelfth *Pythian Ode*” (unpublished draft, courtesy of tht.; author), p. 5, and Alexiou (1974), pp. 10 ff.

Traditionally, *aoidoi* are male singers who sing about the *kleos* (glory) of heroes, an eternal song of praise; they are not lamenters. The accompanying verb *stonóessan* (causing groans) does not necessarily imply that their *singing* caused groans; in modern Greek tradition, men perform an instrumental mimesis of vocal lamentation (on elarino, for example) and do not actually sing laments; since we know that Homer’s *aoidoi* played the lyre, perhaps this instrumental mimesis is what we should imagine. Alexiou acknowledges that the *thrénos* and *góos* were frequently performed to a musical accompaniment.

9. The “voice” inherent in women’s lamentation can be seen in the modern word for ritual lament, *moirologi*, which means “speaking one’s fate.” In Greek traditional belief, fate (*moira*) is something from which no one can escape (e.g., *Iliad* 6.486-89), and the Fates (*Moirai*) are personified as three old women weavers who control life’s passages through the stages of spinning, measuring, and cutting thread. In myth, characters such as Helen (*Iliad* 3.125-28), Penelope (*Odyssey* 19.510-17), and Philomela (Ovid *Metam.* 6.572 f.) weave words of pain and fate, as they weave cloth. That is, the intricate pattern woven into the cloth is a metonym for the discourse in the polyphonic song of ritual mourning.
10. P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la Langue Grecque*, vol. 2 (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1970), pp. 563-64.
11. See R. Just, *Women in Athenian Law and Life* (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 198-200.
12. This scenario is repeated in Vergil’s *Aeneid* (9.47 ff.), when a beheaded warrior’s mother



openly laments her pain, anger, and rage that she was robbed of her duty to perform proper rites of preparation for burial:

Is it thus, Euryalus, that I see you? You, who  
 were so recently the comfort of my old age,  
 you could leave me like this, alone, cruel one?  
 Nor, before you were sent on such a dangerous  
 mission,  
 did I say my last farewell to you!  
 Ay!...nor did I, your mother, escort you—your  
 corpse,  
 or closed your eyes in death, or bathed your  
 wounds...



56

Hearing this lament, the fighting spirit of the Trojans is crushed—they are disheartened for war and begin to lament themselves—so the woman is quickly and physically removed from the scene.

13. For modern women, especially, war is a complicated dilemma: we join the battle lines and fight alongside men, but there is still the raging debate over the perceived extraordinary dangers women prisoners of war experience (not to mention sexual harassment by comrades-in-arms). In the modern Greek culture of Mani, not only do women place themselves on the front lines in violent clan wars, but they use lamentation as a juridical institution (called the *kláma*) to proclaim and validate their side of the arguments. See Seremetakis (1991), pp. 39-45, 144-53. See also Holst-Warhaft (1992), pp. 155-58, for a brief overview of the feminist perspective on women's

attitudes toward war.

14. For Hesiod and the origins of Greek misogyny see E. Cantrella, *Pandora's Daughters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), pp. 34-35; Just (1989).
15. Holst-Warhaft (1992), p. 94.
16. Odysseus in *Odyssey* 7.216—*kúnteros*: “more like what a dog would do.”
17. Just (1989), ch. 6. Michael Herzfeld has observed similar male attitudes in modern Greece; women are considered “incomplete humans because of their stereotyped inability to speak rationally.” See his “Silence, Submission, and Subversion: Toward a Poetics of Womanhood,” in *Contested Identities: Gender and Kinship in Modern Greece*, ed. D. Ioizos and E. Papataxiarchis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 79.
18. See Just (1989), pp. 214-16; H. Foley, “The Conception of Women in Athenian Drama” in *Reflections of Women in Antiquity*, ed. E. Foley (New York: Gordon and Breach, 1981), pp. 127-68. She notes that the word *hysteria* comes from the ancient belief that women's wombs wandered inside the body and were especially vulnerable to penetration by external evil demons (p. 132).
19. Just (1989), ch. 5; C. Patterson, “Hai Attikai: The Other Athenians,” in *Rescuing Creusa: New Methodological Approaches to Women in Antiquity*, ed. M. Skinner (special edition of *Helios* 13 [1987]: 49-67). I believe that it is no etymological accident that the word for the human *psukhé*, “soul, psyche,” is a feminine noun. Disembodied after death, she (the soul) travels to the underworld, “fluttering from the limbs, mourning



57



- (*goóōsa*) her destiny” (*Iliad* 16.856-57).
20. E.g., Astyanax is buried as a groom in Euripides’ *Trojan Women* 1218-20; see also L. Danforth (1982), pp. 74 ff.; Alexiou (1974), pp. 120-22. This is still a traditional practice in Greece.
  21. See Seremetakis (1991), pp. 102-3, for corpses as pollution in Inner Mani. Also, Shiela Murnaghan mentions the corpse of Patroklos as a ritual artifact in the *Iliad* in “Body and Voice in Greek Tragedy,” *Yale Journal of Criticism* 1 (1988): 23-43.
  22. F. Zeitlin, pp. 64-76, in “Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama,” *Representations* 11 (1985): 63-94.
  23. Zeitlin (1985), p. 76.
  24. For women’s public influence in tragedy see discussions in Foley (1981), M. Lefkowitz, “Influential Women,” in *Images of Women In Antiquity*, ed. Cameron and Kuhrt (London: Croom Helm, 1983), pp. 49-64; Zeitlin (1985).
  25. Here I am simply augmenting Charles Segal’s excellent discussion of this scene in “Song, Ritual, and Commemoration in Early Greek Poetry and Tragedy,” *Oral Tradition* 4/3 (1989): 352-53.
  26. Cf. *Trojan Women* 606; Aeschylus, *Suppliants* 123-28.
  27. See P. Easterling, *Sophocles’ Trachiniae* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 77.
  28. Alexiou (1974), pp. 14-23; Holst-Warhaft (1992), ch. 4. See Nicole Loraux, *Les mères en deuil* (Paris: Seuil, 1990) pp. 40-45, where she discusses the antagonism between the outlawed laments of kinswomen and the male political



*epitaphios logos*. Just (1989), ch. 9, agrees with Alexiou that this law was most likely intended to keep funerals private so as to check potentially explosive aristocratic demonstrations under the “protection” of the medium. For modern Greek parallels, see Seremetakis (1991), pp. 169 ff.

29. Seremetakis (1991), p. 5.
30. See Seremetakis (1991), p. 498.
31. See also Euripides’s *Helen* (185): the chorus of women heard (*ekluon*) her pain, and immediately responded and joined that pain in song. See Seremetakis (1991), pp. 494-95 for “witnessing” in modern Mani laments.
32. Sophocles must have been aware of the fear of a “silent death” when he created the dramatic scene in the *Trachiniae* during which the dying Herakles discovers that there are no women nearby to facilitate his death. He is forced to become his own mourner.
33. Seremetakis (1991), p. 100.
34. See Segal (1989), 330-59; and S. Auerbach, “From Singing to Lamenting: Women’s Musical Role in a Greek Village,” in *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, ed. E. Koskoff (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), pp. 25-44. I disagree with the opinion of Auerbach that laments are “nonmusic” compared to men’s *andriassia*. She believes that while laments have musical form, they do not contain the ornamentation and variety that she finds in men’s table songs (p. 27). I have observed Greek Orthodox Easter services where, during the Deposition of the Cross, women burst into extraordinarily creative and highly ornamental songs of lamentation, ones that they have been thinking about and



preparing for emotionally in the days leading up to the occasion.

35. Segal (1989), pp. 344, 349.
36. Holst-Warhaft (1992), pp. 48-50; 69 ff.; Seremetakis (1991), esp. ch. 6.
37. See note 9 above.
38. See also *Iliad* 3.125-27; 6.343-49, etc.
39. See Segal (1989), pp. 339, 345, where he discusses the oral poet's special sensitivity to the vocality of laments.
40. Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), deals with bird sonics and emotion at length. For excellent discussions of bird imagery in laments, see Alexiou (1974), pp. 93-98, 180-86; Danforth (1982), pp. 62-65, 112-15. Lévi Strauss discusses the theme of birds as mediators in *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 54-61.
41. In Greek myth, women who are raped are known to give the name of a mourning bird to the child born from that assault, e.g., Halkyonê, *Iliad* 9.561-64.
42. Consider also Halkyonê, Meleager's wife, who uses the medium of lamentation to define justice for her city in *Iliad* 9.161 ff. For more on halcyons, swallows, nightingales, and cuckoos as birds of lament, see Alexiou (1974), p. 97. For an analysis of the greater significance of the story of Meleager and his wife in *Iliad* 9, see Nagy (1979), pp. 110-11.
43. Dare I suggest that the legislation that was enacted to restrict women's public lamentation in Athenian life may have had enough impact

on tragedy's effectiveness to contribute to its decline?

44. J. Solomon, "Orestes 344-45: Colometry and Music," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 18 (1977): 71-83.



