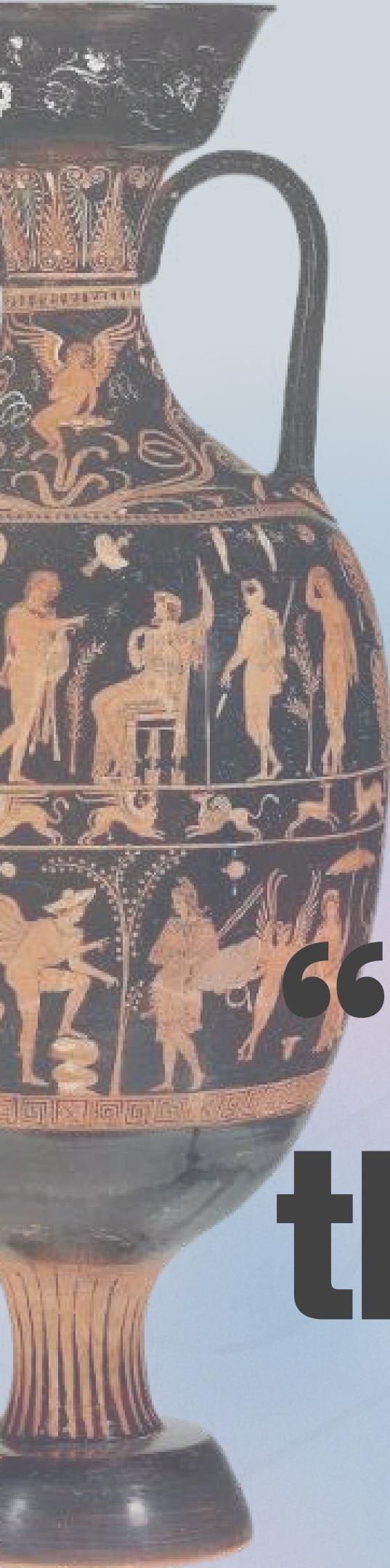

Women in Sophocles.

Daniela
Strummiello



“Playing the Other”

Zeitlin 1990a

How is it possible that a culture that prescribed the **silence and invisibility** of women produced a genre where women are portrayed as **supremely articulate**?

Gera (2003) believes that in the Greek mind “the possession of speech...is often thought to entail the capacity for rational thinking as well.”

Can we argue that Greek tragic women, just by speaking, are subjective beings?

“To investigate the nature of the female subject in tragedy, it becomes vital to study the language of female characters.”

METHODOLOGY

Sociolinguistic approach:

speech → social roles and conditions

METHODOLOGICAL PITFALLS

- what is the relationship between the speech of ancient Athenian women and female characters in Attic tragedy?
- anachronism and cultural inappropriateness
- is **silence** the linguistic preserve of tragic women?
- in sociolinguistic, broad generalizations tend to fail



Mossman's proposal

*“I believe that when looking at tragedy it is necessary to **take each play as a separate entity** and accept that a technique used in one play to create a female character might not work in the same way in another play, with a different set of circumstances and a different linguistic atmosphere.”*

*“All characterization operates by placing the descriptors it uses to create **a persona in a particular context** and playing off the character created by those descriptors against his or her setting.”*

Sophocles' range of female characters

what we have to take in consideration

- **TRANSMISSION OF THE TRAGEDIES**

We only have **7 full tragedies** by Sophocles.

This could explain why only Euripides is usually noted for his characterization of female characters.

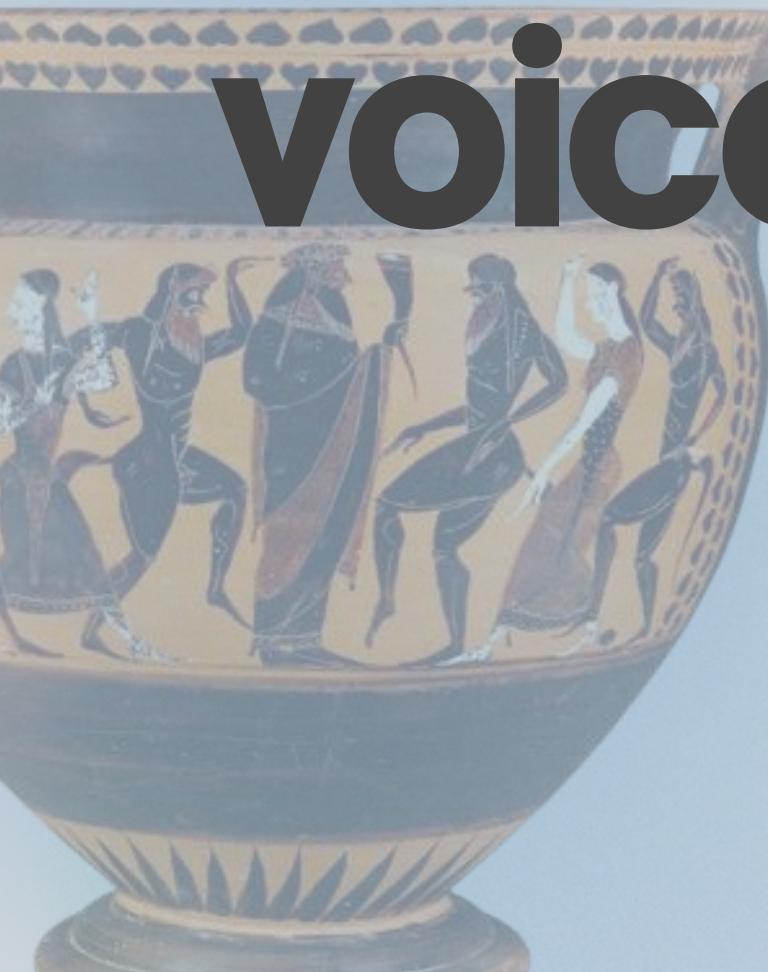
- **FRAGMENTS**

A good part of the tragedies whose title remains are **named after female characters.**

- **MISINTERPRETATION FROM THE CRITICS**

A lot of critics seem to misunderstand Sophoclean women because they look for the **similarities with male heroes, rather than what distinguishes them.**

How does Sophocles create his women's voices?



“They are not heard in isolation, but as **part of the fabric of each play** as a whole, and so interaction with male characters and with each other can be used to make them sound female and to individualize them, shaping the audience’s view of them as **moral agents.**”

MAIN STRATEGIES:

Intertextuality

Rhetoric

Tecmessa

Ajax

inclinity to narrative and story telling

her role is verbal interpretation, consolation and lamentation

she focuses on the sounds that Ajax makes: she wants to understand him and to communicate with him

her attempts at interpretation

characherize Ajax as inaccessible and characterize her as a **gentle mediator**

TECMESSA

Lord Ajax, there is no greater evil for men than the fate imposed by compulsion. I was born of a father who was free, greatest in wealth of all the Phrygians, and now I am a slave; that was the will of the gods, and in particular of your strength. Therefore, since I have come to share your bed, I wish you well; and I implore you by Zeus of the hearth and by your bed, in which you have been joined with me, do not think it right that I should suffer painful words from your enemies, abandoning me to one of them. For on the day when you perish and by your death abandon me, believe that on that day I shall be seized with violence by the Argives together with your son and shall have the treatment of a slave. And one of my masters shall let fall bitter words like these: "Look upon the concubine of Ajax, who was the army's mightiest man, and see what servitude she endures after being so envied!" So shall he speak, and I shall be the victim of my fate, and these words will be shameful for you and for your family. Come, show

Ajax, vv. 485 - 524

the speech is not only meaningful for what the characters say, but for the Homeric text against which they are written (intertextuality):

Iliad 6, vv. 390 - 502

Tecmessa

- refers to Ajax as “Lord Ajax”
- reminds Ajax of Fortune and that he made her a slave
- stresses her good will towards him, twice referring to their sexual relationship (vv. 491, 493)
- she imagines her situation after Ajax’s death
- she refers to her hypothetical future masters with the same word she used for Ajax, “δεσπότης”.
- she mentions the disgrace that would fall on Ajax and his family
- she appeals to him to pity her son
- she returns to the obligation Ajax should feel for her for the sexual pleasure she has given him

Andromache

- refers to Hector as “daimonie”
- reminds Hector how Achilles killed her family
- Hector imagines Andromache’s situation after his death
- she explains that since her family is dead, all her love is directed towards Hector
- she appeals to him to pity her son
- she gives Hector military advice

Tecmessa’s speech is persuasive and subtle. She puts forward compelling, appropriate arguments. It conveys a sense of her character as **loving, forgiving and loyal**.

Deianeira

Trachiniae

with Tecmessa, both can be described as
“good” women

behave well towards their men

are proper, obedient

“[...] contribute to the creation of a distinctive, and
distinctively female, character for her”.

- her life is defined by this contested marriage
- the imagery she uses is of nurturing. He's at the center of everything, and she's at the edge
- Deianeira means “man-slayer”; but she actually acts like a model wife



Intertextuality is used here too to compare her with another woman whose husband comes home from war with a concubine: Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

Deianeira

Trachiniae, vv. 293 - 334

- questions Iole kindly; is understanding when Iole refuses to speak
- Iole, unlike Cassandra, never speaks in this play. It's unnecessary: **Deianeira “attributes her own feelings to her to such an extent that she effectively speaks for her”**
- does not blame Iole for Hercules' actions

the contrast between the two women is strong and it's emphasized by the difference in their language

- hesitant, stumbling, sometimes rambling

Clytemnestra

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

- clashes with a silent Cassandra, displaying real anger for the first time in the play
- blames Cassandra for Agamemnon's actions

- great manipulator of words

Electra and Antigone

In both plays, two contrasting sisters help characterize each. It's interesting to compare the two pairs:

plot of Electra

suggests that Sophocles wanted his viewers to **compare the two pair of sisters**.

Electra doesn't have a sister in any other surviving play, even though Chrysotemis is not an invented character.

similar familiar situation

Both believe themselves or are believed to be the last of their families.

and

same situation, different reactions

Chrysotemis is in the same situation as Electra, but she responds differently. The same can be said about Antigone and Ismene. This characterizes them.

dual

To express the loneliness and abandonment that both pair of sisters face, a very rare dual is used.

Antigone, vv. 58

νῦν δ' αὖ μόνα δὴ νῷ λελειμμένα σκόπει

Electra, vv. 950

ἀπεστέρηκε καὶ μόνα λελειμμέθοι.

Electra and Chrysotemis

When Electra has been convinced that Orestes is dead, she asks Chrysotemis for help in killing Aegisthus (vv. 870 ff.). There is a brief unity in grief between the sisters, but, right after, Chrysotemis scolds Electra.

Electra, vv. 947 - 989

ELECTRA

Then hear what I have determined to accomplish! You know, I think, that we have no friends here, but that Hades has taken them from us and we are left alone. So long as I still heard that my brother was alive and well, I had hopes that he would one day come to avenge his father's murder. But now that he is no more, I look to you, not to be afraid to kill with me your sister the author of our father's murder, Aegisthus; I must conceal nothing from you any more! Why, how long will you wait, doing nothing? To what hope that still stands upright can you look? You can lament at being cheated of the possession of your father's wealth, and you can grieve at growing older to this point in

But Chrysotemis knows the limits of what is accepted for women, and points them out.

Antigone and Ismene

Electra doesn't act: she is saved by Orestes showing up. Antigone, on the other hand, does act. She is vindicated by events, but not by anyone's words.

“Antigone dies; but it is possible to see death as what she wanted all along.”

time without a wedding and without a marriage. And think no longer that you will ever get these things; Aegisthus is not so stupid a man as to allow your children or mine to come into being, bringing obvious trouble for himself. But if you fall in with my counsels, first you will earn credit for piety from our dead father below, and also from our brother; and further, for the future you will be called free, that which you are by nature, and you will obtain a worthy marriage; for what is excellent draws the eyes of all. Then as to fame on the lips of men, do you not see how much you will add to you and me if you obey me? Which of the citizens or strangers when he sees us will not greet us with praise? “Look on these sisters, friends, who preserved their father's house, who when their enemies were firmly based took no thought of their lives, but stood forth to avenge murder! All should love them, all should reverence them; all should honour them at feasts and among the assembled citizens for their courage!” Such things will be said of us by all men, so that in life and death our fame will never die. Come, my dear, comply, work with your father, labour with your brother, save me from my sorrows, and save yourself, recognising that a shameful life is shameful for those nobly born!

this brings us back to the question:
WHAT IS THE PROPER BEHAVIOUR FOR FEMALE CHARACTERS IN TRAGEDY?

Rhetoric in tragedy

“Female characters may use rhetorical tropes of great sophistication in a way which not only creates an elaborate argument but also contributes to creating a character.”

Clytemnestra’s speech at *Electra* vv. 516 - 551:

CLYTEMNESTRA

You are ranging about once more, it seems, at large; because Aegisthus is not here, he who always used to prevent you from shaming your family at least outside the house. But now that he is away, you show no respect for me; and you have declared often and to many people that I am insolent and rule unjustly, doing violence to you and what is yours. I do no violence, but I abuse you because you often abuse me. Your father, and nothing else, is always your pretext, because I killed him. I know it well; I cannot deny it. Yes, Justice was his killer, not I alone, and you would take her side, if you happened to have sense. Why, that father of yours, whom you are always lamenting, alone among the Greeks brought himself to sacrifice your sister to the gods,^a though he felt less pain when he begot her than I did when I bore her. So, explain this! For whose sake did he sacrifice her? Will you say for that of the Argives? But they had no right to kill her, who was mine. But if he killed her who was mine for his brother Menelaus, was he not to pay the penalty to me? Had not

Electra’s speech at *Electra* vv. 552 - 608:

ELECTRA

This time you shall not say that I was first to say something painful and then heard these things from you! But if you will allow me, I wish to speak on behalf of the dead man and of my sister also.

But though she proclaims she will speak for her sister, she doesn’t. She’s too preoccupied with defending her father.

This is how she concludes her speech:

I think you more a tyrant than a mother towards us, I who live a miserable life, living always with many torments that come from you and from your mate. And the other wears away an unhappy life, far away, he who barely escaped your violence, the unfortunate Orestes. Often you have accused me of bringing him up to punish you; and I would have done so, know it, had I had the power. So far as that goes, proclaim me to all, whether you like to call me bad or loud-mouthed or full of shamelessness; for if I am expert in such behaviour, I think I am no unworthy child of yours!

Eurydice

Antigone, vv. 1183 ff.

- when she hears of her son's death, her first reaction is to be struck dumb.

She will be silent again after she hears the full story on stage. She will then go back into the house.

- she says nothing.

We know she leaves because the chorus mentions it.

- Her silence confirms the perception created of her by her first words, of a virtuous wife, who can be relied on to not make a fuss.

This perception is broken when she kills herself the same way Haemon had just killed himself.

All the women in *Antigone* show a devotion to family that is lacking in all the male characters.

Jocasta

Oedipus Tyrannus, vv. 911 ff.

- when she realizes that she can't stop the Shepherd from revealing the truth to Oedipus, she silently goes into the house.

- she leaves, predicting that she won't say anything anymore. The chorus confirms her silence (vv. 1071 - 1075).

- she speaks of her silence. This is almost performative. She used to speak freely and firmly, but now she is reduced to silence by shame and death.

In conclusion,

Sophocles creates a variety of **individualized female characters**.

It seems that he put as much work into making them sound **female** and **different from one another** as Euripides.

Why? Did the poet want to show them capable of subjectivity too?

True, the poet is male.

“But just as the male actor must wear a female mask and perhaps modify his voice to sound female, so the poet can be seen to modify his voice and allow his characters to sound, if not like women, at least like tragic women, and to sound like individuals at that.”

What would tragedy be without these Individual Women?

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