The Voices of Women in Greek Drama

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"If it is necessary to say anything about a woman's excellence, I can sum it up in these words: *great is her renown whose name is least on the lips of men, either for good or evil*."

This is Pericles, at the high-point of Athenian civilisation and power in the middle of the fifth century BC. In fact, one of the few women whose names have come down to us is Aspasia, Pericles' mistress of more than twenty years. Much attacked by the comic dramatists for her influence on the great man, but also no doubt because she was not an Athenian citizen, Aspasia gives her name to the dialogue by Aeschines, in which Socrates, like Plato, maintains the capacity of women for both politics and war. Something Aristophanes demonstrates to great comic effect in his *Lysistrata*, and which later Greek and Roman history amply confirms.

I've called this lecture *The Voices of Women in Greek Drama* but what we really have is women's voices transmitted to us by four extraordinary men; who, from their observation of women in their own households and in company – wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, daughters-in-law, servants, aunts – in the way of all writers, by eavesdropping, or sympathetically listening to these women's arguments or complaints, most of all by entering imaginatively into their experience, found a voice for women like Helen, Clytemnestra, Medea, Phaedra, who had traditionally been seen as the source of a peculiarly female capacity for treachery, but are allowed now to make a case for themselves. One that complicates conventional forms of responsibility to a point where we are so involved that we can no longer make simple judgements.

THE RAMSAY CENTRE
FOR WESTERN CIVILISATION

A voice as well for Hecuba, Andromache, Iphigenia, who had been seen as mere victims, with no agency in their own lives, and now, in plays that even bear their name, become central to what happens to them.

Or a place is found in this new dramatic world for women who are otherwise invisible: like Phaedra's nurse in *Hippolytus*, with her no-nonsense view of the ways of gods and men, or Orestes' old wet-nurse in the *Oresteia,* who offers us an unexpected and comic glimpse into how this heroic world looks from below:

> Darling Orestes! I wore out my life for him.
>
> There were many times when he screamed at night and woke me
> from my rest. For the baby in swaddling clothes cannot tell us
> if he is hungry or thirsty, or if he needs to make
> water. Children's insides are a law to themselves.
> I needed second sight for this, and many a time
> I think I missed and had to wash his clothes…
> And now, unhappy, I am told he is dead…

All of this also performed by men – not even, as in Shakespeare's time by boys, but highly trained singers, dancers, actors – two at first, later three, and a chorus of the protagonists'

fellow-citizens – male or female – who observe and comment on their predicament or behaviour and offer the audience glimpses into the past or disquieting hints of the future.

This is not theatre as we know it – an entertainment for regular devotees – but participation in a three-day religious festival devoted to the god Dionysus, on each day of which three tragedies and a satyr's play – a burlesque version of the earlier three – were presented to a mixed audience of some fourteen thousand, the poorest of whose entry-fees were publicly subsidised, for a prize judged by an elected jury of ten. All this, at the height of Athenian power and achievement in the arts, but also of deep political division, when Athens was involved in a prolonged war with Sparta involving siege, plague, famine, and when its high morality was severely tested. The war-crimes it was led to commit – at Scione, Hysie, Melos, all males of military age executed, reverberate deeply in the body of plays devoted to the Trojan women, and in Attic drama, as a whole, whose purpose was to argue (argument, eloquent debate and persuasion, was essential to it) the deepest questions of men's destiny in a world driven by forces, each one embodied in a god, of Nature, and of a perverse and contradictory *human* nature.

This is the subject of the only example that has survived of a three-play cycle, the *Oresteia*; but this matter of survival itself needs explaining.

Of some four hundred Attic tragedies, only thirty-two have come down to us: seven each of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides from a late Byzantine anthology and eleven more of Euripides. The loss of the rest is due to a change in reading habits and its co-incidence with a change in technology, from papyrus to codex. By the end of the second century AD the reading public was largely Christian and there was no place in Christian living for what St Jerome called pagan texts. What was no longer read was, quite simply, not copied. The larger part of Greek writings disappeared and what remained was lost to the West for the next eight hundred years.

THE RAMSAY CENTRE
FOR WESTERN CIVILISATION

But to begin now with the *Orestaia* of Aeschulus, a late play among his works, first performed in 458 BC.

In the original version of the story all the agents are male. Two brothers, Atreus and Thyestes, are rivals for their father's throne. Thyestes seduces Atreus' wife and is exiled. Thyestes in revenge murders Atreus' son. Atreus in turn murders the two sons of Thyestes and at a feast of false reconciliation serves them up to him as a meal. Thyestes uses his own daughter to father a third son who will one day avenge him. The surviving sons of Atreus are Agamemnon and Menelaus. Thystes' son is Aegisthus. While Agamemnon is away at the Trojan war Aegisthus seizes his throne, seduces his wife Clytemnestra, and when Agamemnon returns, kills him.

Aeschylus takes this primitive tale of cannibalism and cyclic revenge and "modernises" it by making it both civil and domestic. The central figure is now Clytemnestra; that is, the agent of action is now a strong-willed woman, a wife and mother. She kills Agamemnon, false hero that he is, for his moral cowardice in agreeing to the sacrifice of their daughter, Iphegenia, so that the Greek ships can have fair wind to Troy. Aegisthus is merely Clytemnestra's tool.

It is difficult for us to imagine how startling this must have been to its original audience. It is Clytemnestra, the Watchman tells us at the opening of the play, who "with a lady's male strength of heart and high confidence" has organised the line of beacons that in just hours carries the news to Argos that Troy has fallen. The Elders who make up the Chorus are incredulous. "Is there some evidence?" they ask when Clytemnestra announces the news. "There is," she tells them. Then adds, from an area of doubt where the play speaks its greatest truths, "unless a god has lied to me." "Is it a dream vision you credit?" the Elders demand. "I accept nothing" she tells them, "from a brain that is dull with sleep." "A charm then". "Am I a young girl," she snaps, "that you find my thoughts so silly", and she goes on to evoke the progress of the message across Greece, with the hope that the victors, "ïf they revere the gods who hold the city, will not violate what they should not." "Oh, let there be no fresh wrong done", she prays; and adds mockingly, "Such are the thoughts you hear from a woman merely." Here is authority, including moral authority, in a woman speaking powerfully in a man's world.

"My lady," the Elders admit, "no grave man could speak with better grace," but they remain divided. "Sorrow, sorrow, sorrow" is their refrain, "but good wins out in the end," and long before Clytemnestra mentions Iphegenia, "for the terror returns like a sickness to lurk in the house, the secret remembers the child that shall be revenged", and they go on to describe in detail Iphegenia's pitiful sacrifice. Any notion of the Trojan war as heroic is undermined by its terrible cost: "in the place of young men, urns and ashes are carried home. Their families mutter in secrecy, a slow anger creeps below their grief, at Atreus' sons and their quarrels". Faced with the hero of Troy himself, they tell Agamemnon directly: "When you marshalled this armament for Helen's sake, I will not hide it, in ugly style you were written in our hearts." Such is the Argos to which Agamemnon blindly comes home.

THE RAMSAY CENTRE FOR WESTERN CIVILISATION

Clytemnestra welcomes him with extravagant, and as she later admits, false enthusiasm. "Much have I said before to serve necessity", she tells the Elders after the murder, "but I take no shame now to unsay it all."

Agamemnon recognises the extravagance: "You strained it to great length," he tells her with false humility, but misses the falseness. When she has the red carpet spread for him he declines to step on it, and when she protests, "My will is mine", he tells her, "I shall not make it soft for you"; and when she insists, "Surely this lust for conflict is not womanlike; does such a victory on this mean so much to you?" It does and he yields, treads on the carpet and goes in to his doom.

Clytemnestra follows but comes back to deal with Agamemnon's prize of war, Cassandra, who has seen already, and tells the Elders, all that is to happen: "There is no god of healing in this story", she warns, "for there shall come one to avenge us also: born to slay his mother and wreak death for his father's blood." Clytemnestra, who knows this only too well, stays strong to the end.

"You try me out as if I was a woman and vain," she tells the Elders when the double murder is revealed. "You can praise or blame me as you wish, it is all one to me. That man is

Agamemnon, my husband: he is dead, the work of my right hand that struck in strength and righteousness. And that is that."

It isn't of course. "My thoughts are swept away," the Elders wail, "and I go bewildered."

"He slaughtered like a victim," Clytemnestra tells them, "his own child, my pain grown into love… You know what I have done, and lo, you are a stern judge. The flower of this man's love, Iphegenia of the tears, he dealt with even as he has been slaughtered. There will be no tears in this house for him."

All the Elders can come up with is "Here is anger for anger. Between them, who can judge lightly?" then as Aegisthus arrives to claim as his plan an act he has had no hand in, scorn for his cowardice, and on his side a threat against him that Clytemnestra dismisses. "No more violence. There is pain enough already. Let us not be bloody now. Thus, a woman speaks among you. Shall men deign to listen?"

The two plays that complete the *Orestaia*, *The Libation Bearers* and the *Eumenides*, share their material with two independent plays, both called *Electra*; one by Sophocles, the other Euripides.

In each one, Electra, angrily aggrieved and marginalised – in her father's palace in Aeschylus and Sophocles, in the Euripides by marriage to a peasant, who at least respects her virginity – is obsessed with vengeance and the return of her brother Orestes whom she has smuggled to safety as a child. Another shared feature of these plays is Orestes' reluctance, when he does return, to get on with the deed. Partly out of horror of the crime, partly from natural irresolution, partly because he doubts the god who has command of him.

THE RAMSAY CENTRE
FOR WESTERN CIVILISATION

In Aeschylus, after a 'recognition scene' involving a lock of hair, a footprint, and the cloak Electra wove for her brother's going, Electra disappears from the action and the climactic confrontation is between Orestes and his mother.

"Take pity, child," she begs, "before this breast where many a time, a drowsing baby, you would feed." Utterly disarmed, Orestes turns to his friend Pylades, who reminds him of his oath to the god.

"You bore me and turned me away to a hard life" he accuses. Clytemnestra reminds him of his father's vanities. "He suffered, while you were sitting here at home," he counters weakly. "It hurts women," she tells him, "to be kept from their men. Your mother's curse will bring you down." "How shall I escape my father's curse," he asks, "if I fail here." He strikes. "I have won," he cries, to the satisfaction of the Chorus, but is immediately claimed from within by the Furies. "They are clear, and here, and real," he cries, "you cannot see them. But I see them!" He returns, darkly possessed, to Apollo's shrine at Delphi, and is transported to Athens by Athene, to be judged on the Areopagus, and when the vote is divided, in the Athenian way, acquitted. The Furies are "civilised" by being institutionalised; they remain fearfully revered but no longer have the power of punishment.

The energy-centre of Sophocles' version of this is his self-centred heroine's confrontation with the women of her world: Clytemnestra, the Chorus, and a sister, Chrysothemis, who

suffers the same indignities as Electra but stays quiet – though she too can be sharp-tongued.

"You are no help to me," Electra complains. "I could be," Chrysothemis responds, "if you knew how to listen. And must I walk in your light?" "Till your own is clear enough," Chrysothemis retorts, "to guide both of us," "How clever," Electra spits, "And yet so blind." "Your malady exactly," Chrysothemis spits back.

What fun two male actors must have had with this high-toned bitchery. In the end the killings here are achieved almost too efficiently. Due mostly to Sophocles' talent for plotting rather than the killers'.

Euripides has a very different take on this. In a way that a twenty-first century critic might call "late", he plays mercilessly with the givens.

Orestes arrives disguised as a foreigner from Phocis, the bearer of the news of his own death and the urn with Orestes' ashes. He and Electra do everything they can to delay recognition; he because once it happens he will have to act, she to retain the luxury of her longing. She mocks the naivety of the three clues – the lock of hair, the footprint, the woven cloak; when Orestes is identified at last, by his old tutor, it is from a childhood scar that this devoted sister has entirely failed to notice. Orestes carries his news to "the lady of the house". Electra sends her an invitation to her hut, to bless the ten-day old son she claims to have borne.

THE RAMSAY CENTRE FOR WESTERN CIVILISATION

When Clytemnestra arrives, it is with an entourage of slaves, a vanity that makes a poor impression on the Chorus, but when Orestes traps her in the hut they take her side. "She calls for pity, and I pity her. Poor desperate queen, your suffering was bitter but your revenge on your husband was unholy." They also condemn Electra. "Dear Electra, you did a dreadful wrong to your brother, forcing him against his will." It is Clytemnestra's brother, the demi-god Castor, who arrives at the end to establish justice and condemn the brother and sister to separate exile.

What emerges as a pattern is that absent as women may be from public life -- from voting on the Areopagus on policy or law – in the daily world of the household, and in bed where men and women meet on negotiable and more equal terms, their voice, but also their agency, is strong, and it is this that the drama seizes on. One wonders what hint our dramatists might have found, or, what model, in the Homeric gods, with their very human intrigues and squabbles: in Hera's fierce defence of marriage against that embodiment of male licence, Zeus; in Zeus' quarrelsome daughters, that powerful force of nature – of sexual nature – Aphrodite, and her rival, Artemis; in Athene as the voice of divine reason, and civil justice and order. It is the men in these plays who are seen as weak and defensive: it is Agamemnon at Aulis and Orestes later, who find themselves unable to break free of their role as men; forced by convention to act against their own judgement at the whim of a god. Surprising how dismissive these playwrights are of their traditional heroes. "Oh, Greeks," Hecuba tells the Greek herald in *The Trojan Women*, "Your Greek cleverness is simply barbarity…You are mere politicians." They act, she means, out of mere expediency: to preserve their grasp on power – Like Creon in *Antigone*, though he pretends to be the

protector of order: or to take precautions against the future, like Odesseus when he instigates the murder of Astanax, the infant son of Hector and Andromache, or like Agamemnon to curry favour with his troops, when he acquiesces to the sacrifice of Hecuba's daughter, Polyxéna, as a death-tribute on the grave of Achilles. The victim always, as we are reminded, is someone's child. It is the women here – Clytemnestra, Antigone, Electra, Lysistrata – who speak up, against men, or their fellow-citizens or like Electra and Antigone, against a more compliant sister, for human justice or the sacred rights of burial, or in Lysistrata's case, an end to war, and are ready to act, outside their traditional role as women to restore or change things.

The *Lysistrata* is a late comedy that deals directly, as tragedy cannot, with the contemporary world: the endless war between Athene and Sparta.

Lysistrata, an Athenian woman, convinces her Spartan counterparts to join her in a bold plan: they will deny sex to their husbands till they agree to make peace. But to appreciate the comic force of this we must remind ourselves of the Greek view of sex.

Aphrodite, in the prologue to Euripides' *Hippolytus*, presents it as an elemental force that is both benign and productive; of procreation, of pleasure, of human wholeness. Neither sinful nor shameful, it is dangerous only if uncontrolled or misused: as Phaedra misuses it in her lust for her stepson, and as Hippolytus does when he insults the goddess by dedicating himself to chastity. The women in these plays are as open in their need for sex as the men. Lysistrata's friends at first reject her plan; the cost is too high. To deny pleasure to their husband is to forgo their own. Clytemnestra complains of the empty bed women go to when their men go to war, and of having to share her bed with a prize of war like Cassandra; Medea of having to yield hers to a second wife.

THE RAMSAY CENTRE FOR WESTERN CIVILISATION

We need as well to take account of the Greek attitude to the body; to nudity, for instance. Local heroes and the gods were represented naked. Athletes performed naked in the palestra and at public games. Essential to the comedy of *Lysistrata* is the fact that the male member in erection was an unremarkable sight for Greeks, not only on the terms that in Greek cities marked the boundary of wards, but on urns and in the leather phalluses that identified the male characters in comedy. In Act 2 of the *Lysistrata* all the males are afflicted with what are no longer the signs of triumphant masculinity but of a humiliating dependence that women are now exploiting in their war for peace.

The last word as we have it comes with *The Bacchae*, at the very end of the fifth century, when Euripides, turning his back on Athens, has gone into voluntary exile in Macedon.

A strange work. Tragic only in the savage end of its protagonist, Pentheus, its dialogue is comic in tone, its Chorus of Theban women, lyric and celebratory. The central character is the god Dionysus. Under his influence, which chooses the instinctive, the animal, the supernatural, the joyfully excessive and ecstatic over rationality and balance, the women of Thebes, including King Pentheus' mother, have taken to the mountains in secret and sometimes orgiastic wildness. They are supported by the old King, Cadmus, and by Tiresias.

The young King, Pentheus, who opposes these Maenads and their god, is beguiled by Dionysus into spying on them disguised as a woman, but is caught, mistaken for an animal, and torn to pieces by his own mother.

Once again it is women who are the agents here, though it is a god who moved them; the men are either old and amiably foolish, or like Pentheus merely foolish. What the god offers, when properly used, is life-enhancing and joyous but can also be destructive. Either way, it is not to be rejected.

This is a new and very different world from the one we find in earlier plays. We are on the brink of a new phase of Greek culture. The great days of Athene, and its brief hegemony, in the fifty-two years between the *Orestaia* and the *Bacchae* are done.

THE RAMSAY CENTRE
FOR WESTERN CIVILISATION