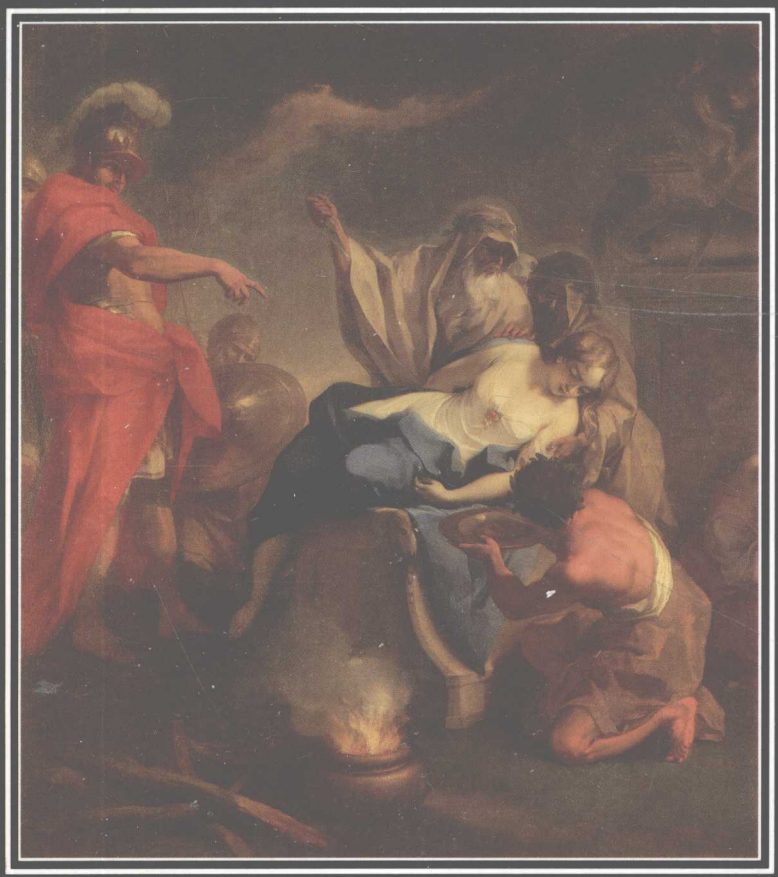
Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman



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Translated by Anthony Forster

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PREFACE

"DEATHS represented on the stage, great suffering, wounds": events of tragedy, a *spectacle*. As one considers the examples given by Aristotle to support his definition of tragic *pathos* as "action causing destruction or suffering,"[1] how can one possibly doubt that in the Athenian theater death was meant to be seen? *Thanatoi en tōi phanerōi:* death agonies in public, a murder in front of everybody . . . As I reread Aristotle's sentence, I am puzzled, and I realize that I should warn the reader that in these pages it is the listener to tragedy who will take precedence over the spectator, because everything comes to us through words. Everything happens in words, and this is particularly true of death. In trying to define the ways in which women die in Greek tragedy, I have found nothing that is seen by the audience, or at least nothing that is seen in the first instance: everything starts by being spoken, by being heard, by being imagined. For seeing is born from words and is closely bound up with them. This is why, in the course of my reading, I felt that I could make out under the surface of the words what it was that gave the Greek audience some particular moment of intense pleasure in listening.

So words are read to replace, if not to recover, words that were heard, words to which the Athenian public listened closely in the tragic performance. Those words could be heard in more than one way, in many different ways: in short, a text and nothing but a text. My choice may be to

rely "much more on imagination than on sight, more on the ear than on the eye,"[2] but what difference does it make? It happens that this was also the choice made, in fifth-century Athens, by tragedy itself. I am not going to bring forward proof of this; it would need much more than a preface. Just as a reminder, and for general interest, I will mention some of the reasons for making tragedy mainly a matter of listening.

There are, first of all, some historical reasons. A profound, Cratylean sense of having roots in their language was natural to the Greeks, and they loved their words (which they called "names"). We must remember how extensively in fifth-century Athens the rules of listening dominated those civic orations that we rather inaccurately call a literary genre. I would go so far as to say that in the Athenian theater listening was, for the tragic audience, like a sensitive reading, on a par with the "depth" of the text.[3] In fact, if we follow Jean-Pierre Vernant and think of the member of the ancient audience as a listener with sharp hearing for whom "the language of the text would be transparent at every level, with all its polyvalence and ambiguities,"[4] we have to credit this all-powerful listener with an attention that, to say the least, could not have been very free-floating; credit him, too, with resources of memory such as we no longer command. He must have had an astonishing ability to compress the long business of unraveling the complexities of the signifier into the short span of a theatrical performance. A fiction, perhaps, but a necessary fiction, which the reader must use when he begins to lose himself in the polysemic depth of the text and the endless quest for resonant echoes.

The historian has now slipped away from the scene. The text remains, and people who are going to do something with it at the present time. In the forefront of them are the

director and actors. We should not really hope that they are going to give substance to the idea of its being a spectacle.[5] If we question him, the director will admit the difficulty that he has in persuading his actors to speak—simply to speak, and not to act—the great textual units that make up a tragedy, such as the chorus in the *Agamemnon* on the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the account of Deianira's death in the *Trachiniae,* or the sacrifice of Polyxena in the *Hecuba.*[6]

So it remains for the reader to put his entire trust in the text. Indeed, as a reader of the tragedies I had no choice in the matter. I was forced to do so from the moment that I had to admit, in trying to bring out the ways in which women die in Greek tragedy, that these ways were to be found in the text. I found nothing but recitals of events. It was as if female death could be entrusted only to words; that only words could see it through. There were historical reasons for this, of course, reasons arising from social conditions. It was in the depths of her house that a Greek woman was supposed to live out her existence as young girl, as wife, and as mother; and it was shut up in her house, far from the gaze of others, that she had to end her life. All this is true; but propriety, even when founded on sociology, has never been able to explain everything.

One can easily accept that the sacrifice of a virgin—that sheer deviation—can happen only in narrative. So tragedy puts virgins on the stage only to remove them and deliver them out of sight to the slaughterer's knife. An outrageous execution becomes a satisfying fiction, the stages of which are described by messengers in a technical language that loads an unthinkable act with all the weight of reality. It is a fruitful act to kill young girls in imagination, in a narrative. But there was also the suicide of wives, and this complicates matters for us, in that it, too, was described and not shown to the audience. Was it because they were on the brink of a

social transgression that these desperate women had to fly to their quarters—shadowy, hidden, mysterious—to put themselves to death, so that a nurse or an attendant had to come and tell the public what they had done? Undoubtedly, it is this reluctance to die in public that marks the limit of the invention of femininity in tragedy: the way in which distraught wives go back to conventional life in order to end it. But this is not all. To have recourse to the order of language[7] in order to kill Phaedra or Deianira may be one of the constitutive features of tragedy in its Greek form. At least one should not underestimate the real benefit, in terms of the imagination, that these deaths, and the fact that they were only described, must have brought to an audience of citizens.

In connection with these deaths that are put into words I would repeat what Baudelaire said about beauty, when he defined it as "lending itself to conjecture." Death by report lends itself to conjecture vastly more than does violence exposed to the public view. In itself the setting of women on the stage was already an excellent opportunity for the Athenian citizen to ponder the difference between the sexes. It was a chance to state the difference before obscuring it, and then to find it again, all the richer for having been obscured, and more firmly based for having been finally reaffirmed. The death of a woman, however, because it dramatizes and concentrates all the elements of this development, is the ideal place for this process of the imagination. This is all the more true in that tragedy uses for the spoken description words of multiple meaning, words that are somehow "in the know."[8]

There are precise words, such as *aiōra* and *airesthai,* which have a technical meaning in religious and sacrificial language;[9] very general words, such as *bainein,* a colorless description of the act of walking ("she is gone, the

wife . . ."); names of "regions of the body"—the throat, for example.[10] All these words are used in tragedy and are deflected to provide the texture of a discourse which can be clearly heard and which, under the surface of speech, always proclaims the difference between the sexes. So it is by examining the texts word for word that I have tried to understand what, within the performance, is at work in the words when a messenger describes the death of a woman.

It is now time to come to the text.

However, I would not like to embark on this long-term study without thanking those to whom I communicated all or part of my researches for their suggestions and remarks—in my seminar at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales and at the universities of Toulouse, Trieste, Cornell, Princeton, and Harvard. And I am particularly grateful to those who invited me to come and speak about the death of women in tragedy, and so gave me the chance to write these pages: Gregory Nagy in the first instance, and Claudine Leduc. My thanks go also to Maurice Olender, to whom this book owes its existence, and to Patricia Williams, who welcomed it warmly to Harvard University Press; to Anthony Forster, who devoted all his skills as a translator to these pages; and to Claire Forster and Bernard Williams, for their vigilant and enlightened advice.

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INTRODUCTION

IN GIVING their lives for their city, the Athenians who fell in war won "unfading praise and the most glorious of burial-places—I do not mean the place where they rest, but the renown they have left behind, which will be remembered forever . . . For the whole earth is a burial-place for famous men, and, to proclaim what they were, it is not enough to have an inscription engraved on a stone in their own country. In foreign lands an unwritten memorial of the choice they made dwells in all and everyone." These are words of Pericles, as Thucydides reports his funeral oration (IV.23.2–3): words on the death of a group of men.

Compare what a fragment of an epitaph has to say about the death of one woman in the same city, Athens: "Time will never, Nicoptoleme, efface the eternal memory of your worth, the memory that you bequeathed to your husband."[1] The men died in a war fulfilling the civic ideal to the utmost. The woman, submitting to her destiny, died in her bed—at least that is what is most likely. To the men the city gave a fine burial-place and a panegyric in the form of an *epitaphios* delivered by the leading politician of the day; and what is more, the eloquent words of Pericles declared that the epitaph engraved on the Kerameikos monument would pale by comparison with the universal and imperishable renown of these heroes. As for Nicoptoleme, unknown despite her warrior name that tells of victory in battle, a brief

private memorial was enough—a few lines engraved on a funeral stone, and the statement that her husband will never forget her. A stark contrast, too striking perhaps to be absolutely typical. And yet . . . Certainly not all Athenian men died in battle, but every epitaph shows in one way or another that the city would always remember the qualities of the dead man. Not all Athenian women died in their beds, but it was always left to the husband, or at least to the family, to preserve the memory of the dead woman.

At the level of social expectations, the city, in effect, had no comment to make on a woman's death, even if she was as perfect as she could be. A woman was allowed no accomplishment beyond leading an exemplary existence, quietly as wife and mother alongside a man who lived the life of a citizen. Quietly—this at any rate was the life that Pericles recommended, in his funeral speech, to the widows of Athenians fallen in battle. The glory (*kleos*) of men lived on, carried to the ears of posterity by the thousand voices of renown. The glory of a woman had no spokesman but her husband, ever since Penelope stated that only the return of Ulysses would revive her diminished *kleos* (*Odyssey* XIX.124–128). It was the husband who, after the death of his wife, would be the repository of her memory. If she survived her husband, it was for a woman not to get herself talked about among men, in terms of either praise or blame. The glory of a woman was to have no glory.[2] This certainly does not make any easier the task of someone who wants to probe the silent reality of women's lives in Athens. But this is not my intention, and I shall stick resolutely to the *logos,* even if it means basing myself on a literary genre that in Athens granted to the death of women a treatment completely different from the private one of intimate mourning.

However, although it complicates the problem, we must consider briefly how to read epitaphs. They give the impres-

sion that a woman could not control her own death. For someone whose virtues had to concentrate on the well-being of her husband, there was no heroic end: if a "fine death" is seen as a qualifying test, it was a man's preserve. The death of a wife simply drew to a close a life of love and devotion, of good humor and discretion; and a husband would know, afterward, how "to speak very well" of that life.

In these conditions, what sort of public statement could be made about the death of a woman? Certainly not historical writing, especially if the historian were called Thucydides and the subject were Greece. Because it is a recital of wars and political decisions, the Thucydidean treatment of history made no mention of women, even in their lifetime. As one might expect, Herodotus was less categorical, but predictably he was interested only in women who were barbarians or the wives of tyrants, or who died violent deaths; or he made a woman's death an excuse for mentioning an unusual funeral rite.[3] Even so, the accounts are only brief and do not display any great elaboration. But there was a genre that, as a civic institution, delighted in blurring the formal frontier between masculine and feminine and freed women's deaths from the banalities to which they were restricted by private mourning. This was tragedy, where, as indeed in Herodotus, women died only violent deaths:[4] but in the world of tragedy, even if death was encountered on the field of battle, it was always classed as violent, and men suffered from this convention no less than women. So, for a while at least, a balance was reestablished between the sexes.

Women in tragedy died violently. More precisely, it was in this violence that a woman mastered her death, a death that was not simply the end of an exemplary life as a spouse. It was a death that belonged to her totally, whether, like

Sophocles' Jocasta, she inflicted it "herself upon herself"[5] or, more paradoxically, had it inflicted upon her. It was a brutal death, whose announcement was curt—thus for the wife-and-mother of Oedipus "one word is enough, as brief to utter as it is to hear: she is dead, that noble figure Jocasta"; but the manner of the death, painful or shocking, gave rise to a long recital. For the event, as soon as it was announced in its stark nakedness, evoked a question that was always the same: "How? Tell us, how?"[6] So the messenger gave an account, and it was thus that tragedy broke the silence that was widely observed in the Greek tradition on the manner of death.

In tragedy women's deaths are described in the same way as men's. But there is still a distinction to be made: in the type of violent death, there is in practice a difference between men and women, and here the balance between the sexes is broken again. On the men's side, death, with few exceptions—such as the deaths of Ajax and Haemon, who committed suicide, and that of Menoeceus, who offered himself up as a sacrificial victim—takes the form of murder. Thus it was a case of murder, but family murder (*oikeios phonos*), when the sons of Oedipus, technically as warriors, killed each other on the field of battle. As for women, some of them were murdered, such as Clytemnestra and Megara, but many more had recourse to suicide, as the only escape in a desperate misfortune—Jocasta and, again in Sophocles, Deianira, Antigone, and Eurydice; Phaedra and, again in Euripides, Evadne and, in the background of the *Helen,* Leda. Finally, in the case of young girls, the sacrificial knife was the favored instrument of death, and, to the host of wives who killed themselves, one must add the group of virgins who were sacrificial victims, from Iphigenia to Polyxena and including Macaria and the daughters of Erechtheus.

I shall not be particularly concerned with murder, though I shall sometimes mention the forms it takes in tragedy. As murder was more evenly divided between men and women, it is certainly less relevant to distinguishing between the sexes in their relations to death. Where the deaths of women are concerned, the suicide of wives and the sacrifice of virgins must obviously engage most of our attention.

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The Rope and the Sword

A Woman's Suicide for a Man's Death

"For a woman it is already a distressing evil to remain at home, abandoned, without a husband. And when suddenly one messenger arrives, and then another, always bringing worse news, and all proclaiming disaster for the house . . . ! If this man had received as many wounds [*traumatōn*] as were reported to his home through various channels, his body would now have more cuts [*tetrōtai*] than a net has meshes . . . Those were the cruel rumors which made me more than once hang my neck in a noose, from which I was wrenched only by force" (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 861–876).

Beyond the lie that the queen handles with consummate skill, there is a truth, or at least an apparent truth, proper to tragedy, which is expressed in these words of Clytemnestra as she welcomes Agamemnon on his return to his palace. The death of a man inevitably calls for the suicide of a woman, his wife. Why should a woman's death counterbalance a man's? Because of the heroic code of honor that tragedy loves to recall, the death of a man could only be that of a warrior on the field of battle. Thus the children of Agamemnon in the *Choephoroe* dream for a moment of what might have been their father's glorious death under the walls of Troy; and, on merely being told of her husband's death, his wife, immured in her home, would kill herself