

THE TEMERITY AND FEAR OF EURIPIDES' HEROINES – FROM ARCHETYPE TO REAL LIFE

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Abstract

After a brief account of the different contexts in which the characters we are going to analyze appear, the paper focuses on two opposite forms of temerity: one that means courage, usually specific to young age, and temerity that has a deeply negative connotation, synonymous with defying the gods. We shall then debunk the prejudice that fear is a feminine trait, while courage means virility. True only on a physical level, but taken for granted by most commentators, this idea is refuted by the tragic authors on the moral level. The tragic heroine proves to be, par excellence, capable of heroism. The paper closes with a review of the explanations – from archetype to prototype and reality - that could be given for this pre-eminence of the female character in Greek tragedy.

Keywords: courage, feminine, heroism, sacrifice, primacy.

As soon as you focus on the topic of fear in Greek tragedy, you cannot help noticing that fear and its opposite, courage, are put into perspective through one another, that is, precisely through the contrast between them. This remark could seem banal and somewhat didactic, if this first appearance were not belied by the abundance of hues, often contradictory, dialectical or complementary, of the characters and of the situations they have to face. Out of this reflection, seemingly naïve, a series of queries and sometimes of answers were born, whose complexity exceeds by far the limits of only one paper. We shall nevertheless try to account for some of them.

Speaking of courage, the first characters that come to the fore are the heroic virgins of Euripides: Iphigenia, Makaria, Polyxene. The very young Menoikeus joins them. One of the first characteristics that stands out in relief in the case of these heroes – and not only in theirs – is their young age. Youth is the age of temerity, of temerary heroism, of enthusiasm, but also of a kind of unconsciousness. All these heroes who sacrifice themselves quite easily for the public good, or are immolated to gods, are very young. A contemporary commentator reminds us that « unmarried youngsters of both sexes have not yet assumed their adult roles or their education has not been completed, and that is why they are perceived as less civilized (untamed) and more likely to uncritically

accept the adults' rethoric ». (Foley, 2001 : 123). It is true, on the other hand, that the gods are those who always require young prey. Only what is young is agreeable to the gods. The animals to be sacrificed are also usually young.² Youth is, therefore, the age when life, although not fully lived yet, is most easily and somewhat foolishly forsaken. Their sacrifice gains a greater value precisely because of their young age. The contrast and inadequacy, on a strictly human level, between their age and the event of death is well expressed by the metaphor, frequent in Greek tragedy and present in other European cultures as well (such as ours), of death as a wedding.

However, temerity occurs very often in a negative sense: not as courage, but as defiance of gods. Many tragic heroes challenge the gods, thus making themselves guilty of the worst form of *hybris*: Kapaneus in *Phoenissae*, Pentheus in *Bacchae*, Hippolytus, Xerxes in *The Persians*, and even Agamemnon, as we pointed out in another paper (« The Red Carpet – Symbol and Foreboding of Death in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* »). Nevertheless, in the case of this last character, the feeling of fear also appears, in the first instance – with a positive connotation, namely the fear of gods. The temerity of the young heroes who sacrifice themselves for their countries and that of the characters who defy the gods, that is, both types of temerity mentioned above, courage and recklessness, meet, perhaps, in a kind of unconsciousness. The availability and readiness to die for your kin and the foolishness to oppose the gods can both be seen as forms of juvenile incognizance, although in the latter case the heroes are not necessarily very young. The analogy stops here, because heroism gives life a meaning, a value, while death through *ἀσέβεια* (impiety) cancels, we could say, its meaning, proving it petty, inessential and weak. Even if dying by challenging the gods or by comparing yourself to them is sometimes a hypostasis of death not lacking sublime and not without a certain greatness, the end, emptied of any sense, at the opposite pole of the heroic death, is always dreary; sublime, perhaps, because of its potential of representation on stage, therefore with possible aesthetic valence, but trespassing, through excess, against the sense of measure and harmony on the moral level.

If we take a glance at Sophocles' plays, we find out that the significance of a courageous deed is best brought into relief by the attitude of the two pairs of sisters, Antigone-Ismene and Electra-Chrysothemis. Antigone and Electra are the courageous ones, who launch out bravely, heroically, into fulfilling the moral or the divine law, while Ismene and Chrysothemis are by no means the mature, wise and temperate sisters who fight against a youthful enthusiasm, but characters dominated by fear, mediocrity and cowardice, hypocrisy moreover, at the antipode

of their sisters by their lack of strength, of determination and firmness, advocates of relativism and compromise, invoking reasons of practical, mercantile and utilitarian order, and blaming the weakness of the female nature, in front of the pure and elevated idealism that animates Electra and especially Antigone, who take risks and give themselves up for the sake of principles.

*Nūn αὖ μόνα δὴ νῶ λειμμένα σκόπει ὄσῳ κάκιστ'όλούμεθ', εἰ νόμου βία ψῆφον
τυράννων ἢ κρατὴ παρέξιμεν.
Ἀλλ' ἐννοεῖν χρὴ τοῦτο μὲν γυναῖχ ὄτι ἔφουμεν, ὡς πρὸς ἄνδρας οὐ μαχομένα (Antigona,
vv.58-62),*

(« And now, think about it: when only the two of us are left, are we not going to perish even more deplorably, if we rebel against the laws and against the almighty king, trespassing against his orders? Let us not forget: we are women, and we cannot confront men » – our transl.)

answers Ismene to Antigone, rejecting her when she asks for help to bury Polyneikes. It might be interesting to notice here that in Antigone's case courage and fear are the two faces of the same coin: the fear of gods is the one that gives her courage in her relationships with humans.

In the dialogue between Electra and Chrysothemis in Sophocles' *Electra* (vv. 392-399), Chrysothemis proves that she hates her father's murderers only by paying lip service and accuses Electra of lack of measure, mistaking measure for mediocrity, as people do so often, especially when it comes to courage. She advises her sister

to be cautious and ponderate ³, but for Electra *καλῶς φρονεῖν* (to think well) means not betraying her family and revenging her father's death, while for her sister it means not opposing the mighty ones and not suffering. It has been said that Chrysothemis is a *μή* (no) character, which means unheroic, and her main feature is passivity, inactivity, attributed to her feminine nature.

*Γυνὴ μὲν οὐδ' ἀνὴρ ἔφους,
σθένεις δ' ἔλασσον τῶν ἐναντίων χερί ,*

(vv. 997-998),

(« You were born a woman, not a man. In your aem you have less strength than your enemies » – our transl.)

she says to Electra.

Why are Ismene and Chrysothemis not right when they invoke their womanish weakness as an excuse? Why are, along with them, the unending series of interpreters not right when they say that everything related to fear is feminine, while everything related to courage is masculine? To believe that

woman is weaker morally, too, not only physically, that she is not, in general, capable of heroism and those ready to die for an ideal are exceptions, considered downright « virile », as it has so often been said about Electra and Antigone, about Medea and Clytemnestra, is a vision that seems to be refuted right from the start by the tragic authors. It is true that in *Antigone*, Kreon is outraged because the one who dares to oppose him is no other than a woman and says:

Ἦ νῦν ἐγὼ μὲν οὐκ ἀνὴρ, αὕτη δ' ἀνὴρ
εἰ ταῦτ' ἀνατὶ τῆδε κείσεται κρᾶτη

(vv. 484-485)

(« No, I am not a man, she is the man, if this authority she is assuming stays unpunished.
» - our transl.)

In *Agamemnon* 11, we are told: ὧδε γὰρ κρατεῖ γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον ἐλπίζον κέαρ («For this is the rule of the hopeful heart of a woman full of manly will » - our transl.). Consequently, fear is an attribute of femininity, as the commentators say, while courage means virility. We should add: fear as physical weakness, yes. Fear as a supposed moral weakness, no. At least this is what Greek tragedy speaks of, from the beginning to the end.⁴ Whether they kill or they sacrifice themselves, Antigone, Electra, Iphigenia, Phaedra, Makaria, Polyxene, Alkestis, Medea, Clytemnestra, all are embodiments of courage – of manhood, yes, but what is the meaning of manhood anymore when all of them are women? There is no comparable masculine gallery. Orestes, Ajax, Agamemnon, Iason or Aegisthus, Admetus, Eteokles or Polyneikes are rather characterized by weakness, doubt, hesitation or reluctance, or by petty goals. They have by far less stoutness and will power. Maybe only poor Oedipus, maybe the very young Menoikeus, too⁵.

If only one tragic heroine is “mannish”, she is an exception. If there are two, this cannot be a coincidence anymore and we must already question its significance. But if there are a lot of them, then we cannot say that all are virile: we must admit that the heroine of Greek tragedy is, by her nature, as a prototype, strong, hard-bitten, courageous. She is, par excellence, capable of heroism. By virtue of their greater physical strength, men fight in wars (like in *The Persians*, in *Seven against Thebes*, in *Phoenissae*). They are taken to the battlefield *in corpore*, sometimes without their previous consent, without being asked for their opinion. On the contrary, they grudge and rebel. Other times they are, it is true, impatient and eager to fight (like in *Iphigenia at Aulis*) There is, no doubt, a mentality, an ethics and an education of the warrior, built on the values of bravery and heroism, but death on the battle field, even when the death of each warrior is particularly described, is rather seen as a collective act. Self-sacrifice

or the act of courage as an individual action, conscious and fully assumed, of the main character which stands out of the crowd and excels as such, coming to the fore and triggering or solving the tragic conflict, has as its agent, in Greek tragedy, the woman.

If we focus again on Euripides' plays, Medea is described from the very beginning by the nurse as a temerarious, fierce nature, full of courage. Her feelings are always extreme. In fact, temerarious characters are marked every time by pride and by the greatness, or even violence, of their feelings. If, in Sophocles' works, Antigone's and Electra's courage is emphasized by contrast with their sisters' behaviour, Medea's figure becomes even more imposing by antithesis with Jason's. For him, marriage is a social and financial arrangement, a kind of business, whose goal is wealth and a steady situation. Jason is a coward, inane and ungrateful opportunist, who first used Medea, and now wants to do the same with the members of the royal family of Corinth, with whom he wants to ally for strategic reasons. Medea speaks about marriage like an idealist, mentioning the oath the spouses had taken and their mutual feelings, but she is deemed by Jason irrational, just like Sophocles' heroines by their sisters full of practical spirit and of a realism of the blackest dye. Medea is full of courage even when, by a subterfuge, pretends to be the obedient and flatterer woman wanted by Jason, in order to make him accept the wedding gifts meant to kill his new family. Her only fear is to become a victim, to be humiliated, to be an object of mercy : « καίτοι τί πάσχω; βούλομαι γέλωτ' ὀφλεῖν ἐχθροὺς μεθεῖσα τοὺς ἐμοὺς ἀζημίους » (*Medeia*, vv.1049-1050) (« But what is this weakness of mine? Am I going to be mocked at by my enemies, leaving them unpunished? » – our transl.).

Phaedra also embodies a type of temerity. For her, death is the only way to escape the sacrilegious attraction she feels for her stepson, Hippolytus. Besides the courage to die to save her honor, Phaedra also has a temerity of love, just as she has a certain fear, because the states of exaltation spurred by love alternate with those of reticence, and boldness with shame; first she launches out in her imagination on Hippolytus' footsteps, while he goes hunting in the mountains, then she draws back to her bed of illness shamefully covering her face with a veil and regretting her indecent but overwhelming feelings. Just like Medea, Phaedra is afraid of only one thing: of being humiliated.

Phaedra: Δέδοιχ' ὅπως μοι μὴ λίαν φανῆς σοφή.

Nurse: Πάντ' ἄν φοβηθεῖς ἴσθι· δειμαίνεις δὲ τί;

Phaedra: Μὴ μοί τι θησέως τῶνδε μηνύση τόκῳ

(vv. 518-520),

(Ph: « I am afraid you are too skillful »; N: « Everything scares you! Why are you afraid? »; Ph: « I don't want you to tell something to Hippolytus ».)

says Phaedra, as she tries to stop the nurse. She dies for the sake of a principle, too, of a moral law, but also turns Hippolytus into a victim of her passion, in fact wanting nothing else than to dishonor him, not so much in order to take revenge, as to not make her parents and husband ridiculous, to save her own reputation and especially her children's, whose mother would have otherwise been called an unfaithful wife. Phaedra's moral stature, although darkened by her final gesture, somewhat too prudent, oriented towards a practical goal (because she makes a compromise, she commits a wrong, for the sake of her children, for their future) and therefore not as high, maybe, as the one of the other tragic heroines, is highlighted by the contrast with the nurse's, who incarnates the spirit of the ignoble man, cunning, cynical, unscrupulous, ready for any compromise to get out of a difficult situation, to save his/her life or his/her dear ones'. Life is not, however, the most precious good and it does not have a price in itself. It gains a price and a meaning when there is something for which it is given up. It is not worth living unless there is something for which it is worth dying. This is how we could synthesize the perception of human existence in Greek tragedy and this is the essence of any theory of the tragic. It is precisely the opposite of the nurse's theory in *Hippolytus*, that life shouldn't be taken too seriously and what really matters is only to get along and live as well as you can or keep on living at any cost. The great tragic heroes are profound and grave natures, for which life always has a stake that is higher than it: in Phaedra's and Medea's case – honor, in Antigone's – the divine law, in Oedipus' – the city's welfare and the moral law, in Electra's – the filial devotion, in Alcestis' – the matrimonial love and commitment, in that of Iphigenia, Makaria, Polyxene and of Menoikeus – patriotism, in Hecuba's – motherly love, and the enumeration could go on.

As far as the pre-eminence of the female character is concerned, we could very well wonder: how could this primacy of the heroines in tragedy be explained, in a world in which women's status was at the opposite pole? Written by men, played by men and intended for an audience made up of men, tragedy, closed inside a masculine circle, places women at the forefront, in a society where women could never be at the forefront. How can this huge difference between the woman's status in tragedy and that in real life be explained?

Some specialists suggest that in most cases in tragedy the women are the ones who are sacrificed, having, consequently, a passive role. From this perspective, they do nothing more than willingly accept what used to be an

imposed sacrifice. The topic of the freely agreed sacrifice appears in six of Euripides' tragedies, all of which were composed during the Peloponnesian War. Therefore, the poet might have sought in this pathetic motif a chance to exalt patriotism. Euripides is the one who discovered and brought forward this new topic: the spontaneous acceptance of the sacrifice by the victim, which adds to the traditional motif of the prey the new dimension of heroic freedom and dignity. However, these are only considerations of a historical nature, because this way of assuming self-sacrifice, that transforms it into a heroic act, is precisely the one we are trying to explain, and the one that irreversibly carries women out of their once passive role, humble and helpless, which is that of a 'lamb of sacrifice', as we could say in Christian terms, and turns them into the driving characters of the drama. We must add here that next to the martyr virgins stays the very young Menoikeus, which is a male, thus excluding the hypothesis that women are the only ones to be immolated on the gods' altars. And if Euripides is the first to rework and enrich this motif, reversing its significance, how could Antigone's and Electra's roles be explained in Sophocles? They are not preys required by gods, killed on altars, but the former sacrifices herself and the latter risks her life⁶. As we have pointed out, their virtues are emphasized by antithesis with their sisters, since they are particularly active. Triggering the plot itself of the tragedies, they are the ones who take action.

Other explanations have been tried, too, according to which women are, for instance, a kind of substitute by means of which it would be possible to explore certain controversial topics and situations which men prefer to approach indirectly and not by themselves. However, it is very difficult to imagine a wizard killing his children in order to avenge his unfaithful wife, as Medea did, or how somebody could replace a motherly love, aggrieved and fiery in its revenge, like Hecuba's, with a paternal one. This is the reason why women's heroism and courage do not have, in tragedy, anything masculine, even when the epithet 'manly' is attached to them: because they preserve, together with their courage, the most delicate shades of their feminine soul, because they do not lose anything from their femininity.

Others think that tragedy could have been a kind of initiation in the mysteries of womanhood – in the tensions, complexities, vulnerabilities, in the irrational and ambiguities which men would have rather suppressed or controlled, tragedy thus embodying « a more complete model for the masculine self » (Zeitlin, 1996). Another explanation that has been given is that these so-called virile women were brought on the stage in order to warn the masculine

public, showing them what they had to avoid: the woman with a strong personality, like almost all tragic heroines, the virgin able to oppose even the authority of the state leader, the too clever and skillful wife.

Although the female character enjoys, in the fictional frame of tragedy, an independence and a freedom of choice that she was not allowed in the real world, the psychologic source of inspiration of the writers of tragedy must have undoubtedly been reality. Without forgetting that tragedy was born from myth, that its plot is placed in a faraway, legendary and exemplary world, archetypal we would say, *in illo tempore*, we must remember that some of the male spectators of tragedy might have had at home a sister or a daughter in which they could intuit a potential Electra or Antigone, or might have feared that the quiet but resolute wife, although not wild, superstitious and barbarous, could turn, if it comes to the crunch, *mutatis mutandis*, into a Medea.

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Notes

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Mircea Eliade, quoted by Alexandra Ciocârlie in her article called « Sacrificiul creator » (The Creative Sacrifice) (1999: 1-3), 2000, wrote in his « Comentarii la legenda Meșterului Manole » (Commentaries to the Legend of the Master Manole) : « the human sacrifice is present on the doorstep of any initial activity, therefore any time when the act of Creation is repeated » (p. 66); « any life that is sacrificed before wearing out all its possibilities of manifestation...turns into a new form of life...which continues the tragically interrupted life of the victim » (92); « any violent death meaningfully fulfilled – namely a sacrificed, not an accident – triggers a force that not only makes possible “the transmission” of life, but guarantees the perennity of the new creation that it had engendered » (p. 97). These remarks refer especially to the rites of construction that imply the building of live creatures at the foundation of buildings in order to insure their stability, but they may also refer to other types of activities. Eliade notices the analogy between these rites and Iphigenia’s sacrifice: «The body in which the sacrificed creature continues its existence is often so hidden that we could hardly imagine it as a means of survival. For instance, Iphigenia is immolated in order to accomplish the expedition against Troy. We could say that she gains a “body of glory” which is the war itself, the victory itself; she lives in this expedition » (p. 115). (our transl.)

[← 3]

As Florica Bechet points out in « Electra, the Father's Daughter » (2000). Considering Clytemnestra a so-called « feminine » character, in fact just negative, as the commentator rigorously proves using elements of vocabulary, makes sense only if we stay within the boundaries of Sophocles' Electra, which offers a limited perspective on this heroine, that is, only the final episode of her life as Sophocles tells it. But if we take into account the whole cycle of the Atrides, Clytemnestra is a powerful, redeeming heroine, who kills to take revenge, just like Hecuba or Medea. Her affair with Egist contributes, undoubtedly, to the crime she commits, but this does not make her more feminine at all. It is worth noticing that this duplicity, this combination of rightfulness and rascaldom is emblematic for the complexity, made up every time of different ingredients, of tragic characters. Deeply human, accounting for the entire range of features, thoughts and feelings man is capable of, they illustrate, more than the heroes of any other literature, everything that is human. Coming back to Clytemnestra, none of her traits suggests womanish weakness. On the contrary, she acts with a force and determination that place her among the most “manly” heroines of Greek tragedy. As a matter of fact, she is the one we are told about most clearly, in Aeschylus' play Agamemnon, that has ἀνδρόβουλον κέαρ, a heart full of manly will. Other interpreters exaggerate in the opposite direction, considering Clytemnestra straight away androgynous. At Sophocles, she is a hateful figure, by her distorted attitude towards her children and by her servility towards Aegisthus. Thus, Electra's deep aversion to her « unmother mother » μήτηρ ἀμήτωρ, is fully legitimate.

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G. Perotta (1931: 212 sq) said about Iphigenia, Alcestis, Makaria or Phaedra that they are « the embodiment of the heroism of those with a feeble body, but with a big heart. »

[← 5]

Orestes, precisely by his dual situation, of his father's revenger and his mother's killer at the same time, is doomed to confusion, instability and indecision. His hesitation to kill his mother is understandable. Instead of the firm and unabated action of the monumental, strong and majestic characters, we have, in his case, the view of a pathologic inner divulsion, with no end. Euripide's Electra also feels remorse and regrets, Iphigenia or Medea hesitate, but the overall impression they make is not one of confusion and aberration. On the contrary.

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In Euripides, Electra participates directly, physically, in her mother's killing.