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Forward to "Mothers in Mourning"

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Foreword

Gregory Nagy

In the poetics of classical Athenian tragedy, it is conventional for a woman to react to the death of a loved one by singing a song of lamentation. The representations of these mythical laments as performed by mythical women are modeled, it is commonly assumed, on the real practice of lamentation as performed in all its myriad varieties by real women during the archaic and classical periods of ancient Greece. Such an assumption oversimplifies the mythology and the poetics of women's laments as represented by Athenian state theater. *Mothers in Mourning*, by Nicole Loraux, reexamines both the practice of women's lamentation and the representations of this practice, showing that the theatrical mimesis or "representation" of laments in tragedy is just as real, from the civic standpoint of the Athenian state, as is the practice of laments in "real life." When Athenian state theater represents a lament, this representation is far more than a mere fiction for the citizens who are the audience.

The idea that theater fictionalizes speech-acts such as laments goes back to Plato. In the *Laws*, for example, it is argued (658a-659c, 669b-670b) that theater appropriates real genres from real occasions and makes them make-believe. What turns the real into make-believe is mimesis or representation, inherent in theater. We may note that *eîdos*, a word used by Plato in the sense of "genre," is also used in the sense of "form" in his theory of forms. For Plato, theater merely represents genres, just as it merely represents reality.

As Loraux points out, Plato's condemnation of mimesis as a feature of theater in general and of tragedy in particular is specifically correlated in Book 3 of the *Republic* (395d-e) with the condemnation of imitating women's behavior, especially when it comes to lamentation. For

Plato the problem here is twofold: there is a danger not only in the representation but also in the reality that is being represented, namely, the real behavior of real women as they lament their dead.

For Plato, then, a lament in tragedy is a matter of mimesis or representation in the negative sense of an imitation, a fiction, where make-believe persons mourn for a make-believe dead person in a song that merely imitates a real occasion. From the standpoint of Athenian state theater, however, mimesis is not mere representation: rather, it is archetypal reenactment. That is, the songs of lamentation heard by the civic audience of Athenian state theater are taken to be archetypal, not derivative, in relation to the real-life laments of real-life people. Far from being an *imitation* of real-life genres, the dramatized lament of Athenian state theater is taken to be a *model*.

We might expect such a model lament to follow professional rather than nonprofessional norms, and it is perhaps for this reason that the diction of tragedy does not distinguish, as does the diction of epic, between two types of lament—the professional *thrênos* and the non-professional *góos* (sung by next of kin). In the language of tragedy, they are treated as the same thing.

For the civic audience of Athenian state theater, the laments of tragedy are not only realistic: they are more real, even, than the laments sung by real women at real funerals. Moreover, unlike the potentially subversive laments sung by real women, these ultra-real laments heard by Athenian citizens in their state theater must be politically safe: after all, a lament staged by the state is presumably the self-expression of the state, as far as the Athenian audience is concerned.

And yet, things could go unexpectedly wrong, even in Athenian state theater. A notorious example is recorded by Herodotus (6.21): in the year 492, the dramatist Phrynichus presented

his Athenian audience with a tragedy about the capture of the Ionian city of Miletus by the Persians in 494. The dramatic representation of this holocaust, which marked the bitter end of the Ionian revolt, struck too close to home. The emotional impact on the audience—a veritable explosion of tears—led to such a political uproar that Phrynichus was fined one thousand drachmas as punishment for having “reminded” the Athenians “of their own misfortunes”: that is, the Athenians’ political self-identification as Ionians made them feel that the misfortunes of their fellow Ionians, their “kinsfolk,” were really their own. Accordingly, any future performance of this tragedy about the capture of Miletus was interdicted by the state: tragedy must represent the grief of the Other, not of the Self. The Other must be distanced from the Self, whether in time (hence the appropriateness of myth in general) or in space (hence the appropriateness of Persia in Aeschylus’s *Persians*). Emotionally, Ionian Miletus was not far enough away from Ionian Athens.

Such a permanent interdiction of a tragedy was tantamount to the banning of memory—that is, of certain kinds of memory. Here we confront the essence of the ancient Greek idea of *amnesty*, and Nicole Loraux has chosen this topic as the coda for her book, “Of Amnesty and Its Opposite.”

Loraux argues that the ancient Greek mentality of amnesty is essential for understanding the mentality of lament. The obvious starting point is the affinity that exists between grief and anger. The emotions of grief, which are the wellspring of lament, spill over into emotions of anger, even rage. Ancient Greek literature is flooded with these spillovers, starting already with the *Iliad*: here the grief felt by Achilles over the slighting of his heroic honor undergoes a lethal metastasis into a form of anger so intense that it matches the cosmic dimensions of the rage manifested by Zeus himself in his divine reaction to human wrongdoing. The absolute quality of this cosmic anger, analyzed by Leonard Muellner in *The Anger of Achilles: Mênis in*

Early Greek Epic (another book in the Myth and Poetics series), is analogous to the absolute nature of the epic expression *pénthos álaston* ‘unforgettable grief’. The laments of women, of mothers in mourning, depend on the mentality of absolute grief: such grief, and the absolute anger that goes with it, can never ever be erased from the mind. Here we see the ultimate justification for revenge, for the spirit of vendetta, for all the horrors of retaliation against earlier horrors.

Is there any social solution? Is there ever any absolution for absolute grief? Is there any way for society to solve the eternal problem of endless cycles of retaliation, of ever new wrongs committed to avenge the wrongs of the past? The relevance of these questions, as Loraux suggests, surely transcends ancient Greek history. She mentions the Dreyfus affair and the “Vichy syndrome”—and we may extend the grim catalogue of grief ad infinitum, recalling such catastrophes as the Jewish holocaust of the Third Reich and, more recently, the tragic events in Palestine, Bosnia, Rwanda, and the list goes on.

In the year 403 before our era, the Athenian state presumed to devise an absolute solution for absolute grief: it presumed to legislate the erasure, even the absolution, of absolute grief. The word for this social solution was *amnesty*, the formal civic act of selective non-remembering. I say “selective” because this ancient Greek model of amnesty did in fact systematically *remember* some essential things while systematically *forgetting* other things deemed no longer essential for the future. Amnesty is anything but value-free. The Athenian amnesty of 403 simultaneously validated the restored democracy and invalidated the overthrown oligarchy, which was thereafter to be known forever as the régime of the Thirty Tyrants. The horrors of the era of the Thirty were selectively remembered—and selectively forgotten—but this selectivity was rendered absolute by the law. Nearly a century earlier, in the year 492, the same kind of absolute selectivity had been applied by the state to the

Athenians' feelings of grief over earlier horrors—in this case, the atrocities suffered by their fellow Ionians.

In all these cases, the premier expression of grief was lament. Such is the political as well as poetic power of women's lament, of mothers in mourning.