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Body and Voice in Greek Tragedy

Greek tragic drama is a genre that captures with particular clarity literature's always ambiguous relation to the exposure of the human body. Tragedy is shaped by a tension between its characteristic subject matter, the representation of bodily suffering, and its status as a literary artifact, which implicates it in culture's constant project of protecting, covering, disguising, concealing, and ignoring the body—and, especially, replacing the body's adventures with forms of speech.

That bodily suffering is the proper subject of tragedy is claimed by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, when in chapter 11 he identifies *pathos* as one of the three key components of the tragic plot, and goes on to define it as “destructive or painful experience [*praxis*], such as deaths out in the open and excessive pains and woundings and other such things” (*Poetics* 1452b 11–13). But like many of Aristotle's general pronouncements about tragedy this statement is stunning in its inaccuracy when measured against the evidence of extant tragedy: the relative absence of direct presentation of physical violence, physical pain, and death is one of the most frequently noted features of Greek tragic drama.¹ With only a few exceptions, most notably the suicide of Sophocles' Ajax, the violent acts and gruesome deaths with which tragedy is certainly concerned regularly take place off stage and are characteristically narrated by messengers rather than placed before the spectators' eyes. Commentators who draw attention to this fact often link it to the newness of drama as a form in the classical period and to the rudimentary physical resources of the Greek theater, which lacked the trapdoors and obscuring curtains of the later stage.² But the reasons for this placement of the suffering body on the periphery of the Greek tragic theater are not primarily technical, and it is important to an understanding of tragedy to identify the thematic significance of that displacement. Further, that displacement must also be considered in connection with the question of what the bodies that *are* present in tragic drama are doing, for if tragedy by and large keeps bodies in states of extreme suffering hidden from view, it, unlike the narrative forms its messenger's speeches echo, always is presenting us with the sight of human bodies, and they have to be doing or representing something.

For illumination of what is at stake in tragedy's indirect presentation of bodily suffering, one can begin with tragedy's great precursor, the *Iliad*, a poem that more successfully than other works in the tradition it initiated—until perhaps the development of film with its spectacular in-

ventory of special effects—fulfills the task of making “deaths out in the open and excessive pains and woundings” its subject. The warrior heroes of the *Iliad* operate under conditions in which it is always in their interest to avoid the realization or recognition of their bodies’ existence. In part this is because the Homeric epics exemplify with particular clarity a widespread way of perceiving the body: that awareness of the body is centered in its capacity for pain and disfunction; that people don’t think about their bodies when they don’t hurt; and consequently that awareness of the body entails an unwelcome recognition of vulnerability and mortality (so that, correspondingly, not thinking about the body becomes a way of denying mortality). This tendency expresses itself in English usage in the way the word *body* is used most frequently to refer to a corpse.

In the *Iliad*, one of the two main Greek nouns used for the body—*sōma*—occurs only in reference to corpses or to living bodies viewed as objects of prey.³ Furthermore, the poem offers an extraordinarily rich and detailed vocabulary of body parts—a recent commentator offers the following list: shoulder blades, collarbones, ribs, sections of arms and legs (elbow, hand, wrist, palm, knee, shin, thigh, flat of foot, ankle, and heel), jugular veins, food pipes, windpipes, lungs, livers, guts, fat around the kidneys, tendons, nerves, and marrow⁴—but much of this vocabulary comes into play only as those parts are assaulted, pierced, traversed by spears, and ground into the dust.⁵ No reader of the *Iliad* fails to be impressed by the poem’s vivid accounts of the body materializing as it is severed from the animating *psychē*, or spirit, that makes it not a series of parts but a purposive whole.

To take an example that comes relatively early in the poem,

This man [Phereclus] Meriones, when, chasing, he overtook him,
struck through the right buttock, and right through,
straight to the bladder, under the bone, went the spearpoint.
He fell to his knees, crying out, and death misted over him.

[*Il.* 5.65–68]

Phereclus’s right buttock and pelvic bone and bladder only become significant, are only noticed and mentioned, as they become the points at which Meriones’ spear invades Phereclus’s body and transforms it into lifeless matter. The poet’s naming of these body parts represents the body’s assertion of itself as the warrior dies. In the world of the *Iliad*, death involves reduction to the body rather than escape from it, as can be seen in the opening lines of the poem, where there is a contrast between the “ψυχάς” (spirits) of the heroes, which go to Hades, and “αὐτοῦς” (themselves), which are eaten by dogs and birds (*Il.* 1.3–4).

An Iliadic hero is identified by his constant willingness to risk this form

of embodiment, while at the same time, of course, always hoping to avoid it. This hope takes the form of a constant impulse to replace bodily engagement with speech, an impulse that is realized temporarily in the sometimes protracted verbal battles that precede and delay actual combat. A hero is always trying to keep himself identified with, not his body, but a specialized form of speech, the *euchos*, or boast.

The boast is honor or glory (what is in other forms denominated by the terms *kleos* and *kudos*) in the form in which the living hero himself proclaims and transmits it.⁶ By boasting, a hero is able to go on using his voice rather than his body as a way to impress himself upon the world. His desire is fulfilled within the linguistic structure of the poem when his own voice is heard, announcing himself in the form of a name and a narrative, perhaps a genealogy and a claim to certain accomplishments. This evocation of the hero's voice can be opposed to another form of enunciation, which it in a sense tries to forestall: the narrator's use of his own voice to record the expiration of the hero's voice with the departure of his *psychē* and the coming into focus of the tendon at the back of his neck as his enemy's spear moves through it to lodge beneath his tongue.

The nature of the heroic boast is exemplified by the words of Euphorbus, the Trojan who kills Patroclus, as he taunts Menelaus:

Son of Atreus, Menelaus, divinely-born, leader of armies:
give way, get back from the corpse, let the bloody spoils be,
for no one before me of the Trojans, or their famous allies,
struck down Patroclus with his spear in the great battle.
Therefore let me win great glory among the Trojans,
or I will strike you down and take sweet life from you.

[Il. 17.12–17]

This passage makes explicit the intimate connection between the live man's speech and the body of the dead man on which his ability to speak depends: both the continued survival that makes the speech possible and the claim to fame the speech contains must be referred to that dead body.⁷ Furthermore, the speaker's continued success is linked to making sure that body remains only a body. Euphorbus is bent on preventing the Greeks from recovering Patroclus's corpse and turning it back into a cultural artifact through rituals of mourning and burial. Thus the speech that supplants bodily suffering defines itself by pointedly alluding to that suffering as an attribute of someone else. At the same time, however, Euphorbus's words reveal what a fragile and precarious mode of replacing physical engagement with speech the battlefield boast represents: if these words celebrate the speaker's emergence from one risky engagement, they also provocatively invite another.

This activity of courting and evading the form of embodiment that comes with death is meanwhile threatened by dangerous reminders of the body in another form—reminders of the body's inclinations toward comfort and gratification, inclinations that arise in the body's needs for nourishment and rest. Heroism requires a shutting off of awareness of that aspect of the body as well, a dulling of the senses that signal the body's need for preservation lest responding to them become a goal that might distract the hero from his task of recurrently jeopardizing that state of preservation. Thus the difference between Achilles on the brink of his greatest burst of heroic energy and more ordinary heroes is that he has no interest in stopping to eat as Odysseus insists they must do (*Il.* 19.154–237).

This conflict between fighting and remembering the demands of the body is most poignantly represented in the scene in *Iliad* 22 in which Hector's mother, Hecuba, tries to persuade him not to stay outside the city and confront that elemental force that Achilles has essentially become. Here the complete alienation from his body to which Hector is committed by virtue of his position as the chief Trojan hero can be measured in the way the call of the body that he must resist is expressed not through his own body but through that of his mother. Hecuba appeals to Hector with a physical gesture, pulling aside her dress to bare her breasts and holding one of them in her hand. She grounds her spoken appeal in this gesture of calling attention to her body:

Hector, my child, honor these and take pity
on me if ever I gave you a breast that causes release from care.
Be mindful of them, dear child, and ward off this dreadful man
from *within* the wall.

[*Il.* 22.82–85]

Hecuba tries to recall Hector to the value of saving his own body by reminding him of the attachment he once had to hers. She reminds him of a time when, as a child, he shared a preoccupation with the needs of the body that she, as a woman, continues to feel, but that he, as a grown man, is committed to ignoring.

Hector remains determinedly unmoved by the sight of his mother's breasts, although as he waits for the onslaught of Achilles he begins to feel some of the concern for his own safety that she has tried to evoke. He silences that fear, however, by listening to the projected voices of his fellow Trojans. He imagines the reproaches of Polydamas, taunting him with the errors of judgment that have led him to this pass, and quoting to himself the insupportable words he would have to hear from the Trojan population if he were to retreat and yield to Achilles without interposing his own body between Achilles and victory. "Hector trusting in his own

strength destroyed the people" (*Il.* 22.107). Hector ignores the body of his mother to listen instead to the voice of the community—the community that deploys speeches of praise and blame to keep its warriors constantly fighting and dying on its behalf—and so resists the temptation to remember his mother's body and the answering care in his own body from which hers had once released him.

The hero's instinctive shift of attention from body to voice thus generates both the glorious sense of transcendence and the constraint that define his condition. The words he utters allow him to assert a freedom from the vulnerability of his body that matches the freedom of his ambitious thoughts. But, at the same time, the words of the community toward which he defines himself (a self-definition signaled here by Hector's internalization of those words) serve to limit that freedom, coming between him and any impulse to think about his body's preservation at the expense of his duty as a warrior. An Iliadic hero pursues a state of mobile disengagement from the body, a state in which he never lingers to sink into inactivity and sensuality—in the dangerous company of women⁸—and never pauses to be caught by an enemy and turned into mere body—in the even more humiliating company of animals. But that pursuit is also always doomed by the way the words that draw attention away from the body remain nonetheless bound to the body's energies: the heroic boast works on its hearer like a physical assault and calls forth a counterattack on the speaker's body; the expression of communal shame sends the hero back to the battlefield to put his body on the line once again.

If warriors on the battlefield pursue indifference to their bodies through a form of speech that is at once triumphant and precarious, that at once signals and places in jeopardy the survival of their bodies, the larger community of which they are specialized members pursues the same indifference more systematically and less hopelessly through the cultivation of activities in which the body is not at risk. The members of that larger community can be said to pursue a form of forgetfulness of the body that is implicit in Hecuba's appeal to Hector, but that he cannot allow himself to entertain. For the breast that Hecuba offers to Hector is said to be "λαθηδής" (bringing forgetfulness of care); the attention to the body that she urges on him is paradoxically the means to another form of obliviousness to it, a form that is far more reliable and long-lasting than Hector's brusque and courageous denial. And this double activity of being solicitous to the body in order to ignore it is a model for the enterprise of the social community of which the warrior remains an anomalous, even marginal member—the enterprise of assuring survival for its members and continuity for itself through the establishment

of arenas of spoken rather than physical interaction as its main focus: the council, the banquet, the funeral, the legal proceeding.

Just as speech, though essentially disembodied, must nonetheless issue from a specific body, so these forms of activity may displace bodily engagement, but they cannot ignore the body altogether; rather the body is relegated to peripheral vision, seen only out of the corner of the eye, as indeed all of our bodies are much of the time. In a council of war, it is not entirely forgotten that the relative status of the speakers is largely determined by their physical endowments, nor that their conversation will eventually be translated into physical action. At banquets, speeches and songs about deeds of physical courage are juxtaposed to the satisfaction of bodily desires for food and drink. In a legal trial, it is not entirely forgotten that the proceedings are a precarious alternative to direct physical retribution. In a funeral, the participants busily affirm their own continued life while admitting the mortality of another person, whose unanimated body is present among them. And as many myths remind us, these civilized, social occasions are susceptible to disruption through outbreaks of the kind of physical aggressiveness, whether competitive or sexual, that civilization is always trying to quash or contain.⁹ Nonetheless, those occasions generate forms of speech in which allusion to the body is better institutionalized and controlled than in the provocative battlefield taunt.

As one such specialized form of speech, poetry is itself bound to this distanced apprehension of the body. This is particularly apparent in the Homeric epics, where song occurs in the context of the banquet, where the body is fed and forgotten (the speaking begins after the participants have, in a recurrent formula, "put away their desire for food and drink"), and where the term *Hecuba* applies to her breast, "bringing forgetfulness of care," closely recalls the qualities attributed to song.¹⁰ If the *Iliad* stands out for its detailed awareness of all the body's vulnerable parts and celebrates the achievements of men whose business it is constantly to expose their bodies to risk, it and the *Odyssey* both are finally more concerned with human efforts to find ways of keeping the body out of view. Thus, in crucial junctures of the action in both poems, the central hero is seen to make a decision to avoid bodily contact and substitute speech instead: Achilles in book 1 of the *Iliad*, when he stops in the middle of drawing his sword with the intention of killing Agamemnon and continues his argument with him instead in the realm of abusive speech (*Il.* 1.188ff.); Odysseus in book 6 of the *Odyssey*, when, confronting Nausicaa as a naked stranger, he sagely decides to avoid the conventional suppliant's gesture of clasping her knees and instead begins to appeal to her solely through elaborately ingratiating speech (*Od.* 6.127ff.). And a major focus

of the Homeric poems could be said to be an exploration of the often ambiguous consequences of such substitutions.

Tragedy thus inherits from epic a peculiar status as speech that represents—both in the sense that it is and in the sense that it depicts—the displacement of the body by speech. And this displacement remains central to tragedy both formally and thematically throughout its history, even though the form of drama involves the literal presentation of human bodies as narrative does not. How intrinsic this displacement is to both tragedy's concerns and its mode of presentation can be illustrated through the example of Aeschylus's *Persians*, a play that derives a certain definitive force from its status as our earliest extant example of the genre.

In the *Persians*, the event that the play is about—the defeat of the Persian navy at the battle of Salamis—is depicted only indirectly, through scenes of first a messenger bearing news of the defeat to the Persian capital of Susa and later, at the very end, the defeated Persian king Xerxes himself returning. Thus the main actors of the play are not the Persian soldiers whose bodies go catapulting off the ships to be fed on by fishes, but the messenger who carries the news and the Persian queen, Xerxes' mother, who receives it. Those bodily misadventures are catalogued in the speeches of the messenger, but with an eerie, aestheticizing detachment:

Artembares, captain of ten thousand horse,
is dashing up against Silenia's rugged shore.
And the chiliarch Dadarkes struck by a spear
sprang from his ship with a nimble leap.

.....
And, dying, Chrysan Matallus, leader of thousands,
commander of three thousand dark horse,
stained his flourishing, bearded chin the color of fire,
dyeing his skin with a crimson hue.

[302-05, 314-17]

Not only are those deaths tempered by such strange, heartless metaphors, but they are not even the central event of the messenger's speech. The climax of his account is not an evocation of the many Persian corpses that fill the shore and fields of Salamis, but an event not unlike that which is occurring on stage, Xerxes' observation of and responses to his army's defeat from a seated position at a distanced vantage point.

Xerxes wailed aloud, seeing the depths of woe.
He occupied a seat in view of all the army
on a high hill near the open sea;
and rending his clothes and shrilly crying out
commanded all his host.

[465-69]

Xerxes' gesture of rending his clothes is in fact the central action and dominant visual symbol of this play. Evoked first in a premonitory dream of the queen's and then in this account of his behavior at Salamis, it is also his one action when he finally appears on stage at the end of the play. And the nature of this foregrounded gesture suggests an important dimension of tragedy's relation to the depiction of bodily pain. For this, of course, is a gesture of mourning. Mourning is an activity in which living people respond to someone else's transformation into a dead person. The forms that mourning takes allude to death—they attempt in some way to represent it—but, of course, do not duplicate it. This is nowhere more apparent than in the gestures mourners make toward their own bodies, gestures that simulate the assault on the body involved in death, but stop short of imitating it. These assaults never penetrate beyond the body's surface: they are glancing blows to the breast or scratches on the surface of the cheeks, or they are more destructive acts of tearing apart deflected from the actual body onto its appendages: hair or clothing. This displacement is also implicit in the sung or spoken laments that are also important aspects of mourning; those laments are about death—they direct our attention to death—but they emanate from living bodies and thus also distract us from the contemplation of the silent dead. Expressions of mourning are in part, like Euphorbus's boast over the body of Patroclus, manifestations of a vitality that derives from the morbidity of another.¹¹

Mourning responds to death through a form of mimesis that falls short of direct imitation, not because of the absence of the necessary technical resources, but because of a commitment to avoiding it. Not only does mourning provide one of the clear formal sources of tragedy—for this early play shows just how great is the debt of tragedy to lyric forms, prominent among them the *thrēnos*, or lament¹²—but it also offers a model for the mode of mimesis that tragedy remained even as it developed away from its roots in lyric into something more, in our sense, dramatic. The model provided by mourning of a form of stylized gesture that is more allusive than mimetic applies well to the movements of those bodies that are present in the theater in the greatest number: those of the members of the chorus, who perform highly formalized dance movements while commenting on the actions of others, often indeed including expressions of how glad they are that these things are not happening to them. The role of onlooker, which is the distinctive privilege of the oriental ruler in the *Persians*,¹³ is the regular condition of the usually marginal figures who make up the choruses of most tragedies.

Finally, in the *Persians*, the status of the play as a collection of speeches that are related to bodily suffering in much the way that Xerxes' gesture

is, is reflected in a metaphor applied successively by the messenger and the queen to the activity of telling the story of the Persian disaster. Arriving in Susa, the messenger alludes, as messengers so often do in tragedy, to the painfulness of his task and adds, “ὄμως δ’ ἀνάγκη πᾶν ἀναπτύξαι πάθος” (nonetheless it is necessary to unfold [*anaptuxai*] the whole *pathos*) (254). Shortly afterward the queen repeats this same language as she requests him to tell the story. She has responded in silence, she says, “ἐκπεληγμένη κακοῖς” (struck by sorrows) (290–91), but “nonetheless it is necessary for mortals to endure what the gods give: unfolding (*ἀναπτύξας*, *anaptuxas*) the whole *pathos* tell me, even if I groan, who died” (293–96). The queen seeks with the messenger’s aid a passage from a silent response to all these deaths—one that mimics them too closely, as her language, “struck by sorrows,” suggests—to a verbal retelling that is part of a process of endurance and survival. The metaphor of unfolding suggests that this spoken recreation of the *pathos* is as much like the cloth that surrounds and protects the body, absorbing the blows that are directed against it, as it is like the vulnerable body the telling cautiously exposes.

Other plays of Aeschylus similarly thematize the substitution of spoken for physical forms of engagement. In the *Seven Against Thebes*, the course of the future battle in which the brothers Eteocles and Polyneices are destined to kill each other is determined in advance through a dialogue in which Eteocles decides on the order of battle by matching the captains of the attacking Argives described to him by a messenger with the Theban heroes who will be stationed as their opponents. Each of the heroes evoked in this dialogue is identified above all through his shield and the devices pictured on it—not by his body, that is, but by a protective appendage to the body that also serves as a field for symbolic representations of the self. This play repeats the curious tension between violent actions and their oblique evocation in speech found in the *Persians*, but with a significant temporal inversion: the events spoken about are not past ones to be worked through and forgotten but are future occurrences that this dialogue not only evokes but hastens. This is not a form of dialogue that undoes or forestalls physical violence, that achieves a kind of institutionalized stability in which human beings can operate in a state of comfortable obliviousness toward the body. And indeed the play ends with the dead bodies of the two brothers being brought in to be lamented over by their sisters. Thus the *Seven* provides a differently weighted example of this generic ambivalence, one that we will see is matched in other plays by the other extant tragedians.

A more successful dramatization of the containment of the physical by the spoken is offered by Aeschylus’s surviving trilogy, the *Oresteia*. There

the connection between the passage from bodily engagement to speech and those forms of experience that are cultural, institutional, and—in this stage of Greek cultural history—civic is overtly expressed in the juxtaposition of the two final plays: the *Libation Bearers* and the *Eumenides*. One of the many brilliant features of the *Oresteia* is its use of the trilogy form to create a progressive series of dramatic actions that represent variations on one another. This formal feature is, of course, linked to the trilogy's thematic concern with repetition, specifically, repetition from generation to generation and repetition as the consequence of a vision of justice based on retribution.

The variation that is of particular concern here is the reformulation in the *Eumenides* of the confrontation between mother and son that occurred in the *Libation Bearers*, a reformulation that involves not only the use but the invention of a new form of spoken engagement, the legal trial. The scene in the *Libation Bearers* in which Clytemnestra and Orestes face one another as he prepares to kill her is explicitly centered on the issue of remembering the body through the inclusion of a gesture of bodily exposure that echoes Hecuba's gesture in *Iliad* 22.¹⁴ Here too a mother tries to dissuade her son from a course of action by exposing her breast and reminding him of his onetime dependence on it.

Hold off, child. Have reverence, my son, before this
breast, at which many times, a sleeping baby,
you sucked in with your gums the nourishing milk.

[896–98]

As in the case of Hecuba and Hector, Clytemnestra's insistence that her son confront the existence of her body is at once an appeal to him on the basis of what he owes to her for giving him life and an attempt to remind him of what he would like to forget: that he too has a body. As in the gruesome deaths of the *Iliad*, this appeal brings the body into focus by using a specific term for a part of the body, a word more commonly found in medical and scientific treatises than in tragic poetry, “τὰ οὖλα,” the word for the gums, a part of the body one normally does not think about.

Clytemnestra's gesture is characteristically at once a plea and a subtle threat. She is eager to remind her son of his body, both in order to call forth a sense of indebtedness, a respect for the physical link between them, and in order to remind him of his own vulnerability, specifically, to vengeance for her death; she is insisting that the corporeal inextricability of his life from hers will inevitably be inverted to make his death follow on hers. But, like Hector, Orestes refuses to be moved by this appeal and, like Hector, listens instead to the voices of the larger com-

munity—here issuing from the mouth of his unrelated male companion Pylades, who reminds him of the voice of divine authority, Apollo's oracle, that in this trilogy recurrently endorses the communal forgetfulness of the bodily link between Orestes and Clytemnestra that justifies Orestes' act.

The communal voices that intervene in these episodes to prevent either Hector or Orestes from taking his mother's body into consideration succeed so well in part because they give a further ideological elaboration to already powerful constraints. For a grown man to respond positively to the sight of his mother's breasts would be either to reverse time and revert to childhood or, worse, to violate the taboo against incestuous desire. The erotic response that these episodes present as unrealizable is acted out in another scene from the Trojan legend, against which these should be read: in a story alluded to by Aristophanes (*Lysistrata* 155),¹⁵ Menelaus, having recovered Helen after the war, is about to kill her in revenge for her adultery but drops his sword at the sight of her bare breasts. The impossibility that a grown son should respond like either a child or a husband is especially closely linked to the concerns of the *Oresteia*, where the irreversible progression of time is not only accepted but celebrated as the medium of the trilogy's ultimate resolution; where Orestes' action in killing his mother comes to represent the son's separation from his mother as part of his initiation into manhood;¹⁶ where that action demands that Orestes take his father's part by reversing his father's Menelaus-like submission to his wife; and where care is taken to make it clear that for Orestes vengeance has none of the pleasurable erotic charge that it does for Clytemnestra.

The voice of Apollo is brought even more directly into the drama when, in the final play of the trilogy, the *Eumenides*, Apollo appears to speak for Orestes in the trial at the Areopagus. That trial can be understood as a highly mediated reenactment of the confrontation of mother and son, a reenactment in which the mother is no longer present in the form of a living human body, but is rather represented by dreadful spirits who are explicitly said to lack the stamp of human form (412), while the son finds a new voice and a new arena of speech—the trial—in which to gain new independence from his mother's and his own body. As the trial begins, Orestes announces that the rituals of purification that he has undergone have released him from the silence enforced by the previously polluted state of his body—which had been contaminated by his mother's blood—and he is no longer “ἄφθογγος” (voiceless) (448). This newfound voice allows him to state over and over again, in fact, three different times (463, 598, 611), that he does not deny that he has killed his mother.¹⁷

Orestes' avowals are made in the context of a legal debate in which the

significance of that action is redefined through a form of argumentation, argumentation that aims explicitly at denying what Clytemnestra's gesture so eloquently asserts: the physical link between mother and child. For the outcome of the trial depends on the argument, advanced by Apollo and endorsed by Athena at the moment of decision, that Orestes' killing of Clytemnestra is less significant than the action it avenged (her killing of Agamemnon) because there is between mother and son no physical link that might be comparable in weight to the marriage tie between her and Agamemnon: the mother does not contribute to the body of the child but only provides a place of incubation for the seed provided by the father.

This assimilation of a large portion of the final play of the *Oresteia* to the highly specialized form of spoken interaction represented by the legal trial serves in multiple ways to signal the playwright's involvement in the cultural process of deflecting attention from the body for the sake of its preservation: the very institution of the trial represents an effort to avoid the repeated bloodshed of retributive justice; furthermore, this particular trial becomes an overt consideration of the importance of the body which results in a decision that one of its most important functions—the development of new life within the body of the mother—is insignificant; *and*, the creation of a situation in which the characters are by definition speakers rather than actors deflects attention from the body in the ways I have suggested.

The evolution of tragic action into legal trial traced in this trilogy not only signals the civic, political orientation of the form, but also highlights the formal, stylized character that is essential to tragedy's civilizing aims. The trial, presented here as an arena for speech alone, represents *within* the drama the artificial stylization of experience that in itself drama also represents. In the decisive scene of the trilogy the single remaining human agent, Orestes, shifts into the role of a speaker in a specialized form of dialogue and experiences a discontinuity between the event and its retrospective recreation in speech comparable to that between the event a drama imitates and its recreation on the stage by an actor. And thus Aeschylus in this scene grounds tragedy's capacity to present the kind of resolution and renunciation of violence achieved there in its limited physical realism.

Aeschylus's *Oresteia* represents a high point within the genre of tragedy of confidence in the efficacy of civilized forms as specifically based in the Athenian *polis*, and it belongs in time to a high point of Athenian self-confidence. The works of the other two extant tragedians register a similar tension between exposing the body and escaping from the body into speech with a less certain resolution in favor of speech, with less confi-

dence in the capacity of civilized rituals and civic institutions to preserve the body by channeling its energies into speech. In a number of plays the unruliness that is thought to reside in the body asserts itself and, as a consequence, wounded and suffering bodies make their way into the theatrical space. As a number of critics have recently pointed out, this phenomenon can be correlated with the greater prominence of female figures in tragedy than in any other public activity in classical Athens aside from ritual. In that culture (as in many, perhaps all, others) women were felt to be more closely identified with the body than men and to have, because of their natural involvement in childbirth, a special connection to bodily pain and, because of the inner space enclosed within their bodies, a special susceptibility to penetration and possession by demonic external forces. Thus female figures in tragedy are often the primary site of physical suffering that is then communicated to men, and male figures often experience pain by becoming or feeling themselves to become like women.¹⁸

Many of the most insistent examples of the body asserting itself in tragedy come from Euripides, whose preoccupation with the pathology of the irrational was even more pronounced than that of Aeschylus and Sophocles. In the *Bacchae*, for example, Pentheus's resistance to the physical transformations granted by Dionysus is avenged as he himself becomes more and more identified with the body, changing before the audience's eyes first into a woman and then into a macabre assortment of dismembered body parts.

A particularly telling example, from the point of view of our consideration of speech, is Euripides' *Hippolytus*. Like the *Bacchae*, the *Hippolytus* is a play in which a young man's refusal to acknowledge the body—in this case Hippolytus's studied avoidance of all erotic experience—is avenged through the body's violent assertion of itself, first in the lovesick body of a woman, Phaedra, and finally, through a complicated sequence of events, in the violent destruction of Hippolytus's own body.¹⁹ Thus the action contains two widely separated incidents in which a suffering body is exposed to view: at the beginning of the play, the Nurse wheels the sick Phaedra out of the house, and at the end Hippolytus's companions bring his mangled, dying body back to his father's house.

While they are segregated at the beginning and end of the action, these incidents are nonetheless closely linked by a chain of cause and effect. Phaedra is sick with love for her stepson Hippolytus because Aphrodite wants to take vengeance on Hippolytus for his neglect of her. Phaedra confides her feelings to her nurse, who reveals those feelings to Hippolytus. Hippolytus expresses his horror at what the nurse is communicating in violent words that Phaedra overhears. Stung by those words,

Phaedra takes the action she has been tending toward throughout the play and kills herself, attaching to her body a tablet containing an accusation of rape against Hippolytus. When Theseus, her husband and Hippolytus's father, finds her dead and reads her message, he curses Hippolytus. The curse is realized when Hippolytus's chariot is overturned and his body is mangled.

The separation of these linked incidents is necessary to the preservation of a decorum proper to tragedy, as was proven when Euripides' first version of this play—a version in which Phaedra approached Hippolytus directly and told him of her feelings—was received as a scandalous failure. In this second version, that shocking juxtaposition in the same open space of the desiring body of Phaedra with the desired body of Hippolytus is replaced with an intricate network of speeches and, in one case, a written message: Phaedra's confession, the Nurse's revelation, Hippolytus's explosion of horror, Phaedra's tablet (which, tellingly, is attached to her dead body), Theseus's curse; and speech itself becomes a major thematic preoccupation.²⁰ But, while an evidently necessary decorum is thereby preserved, this speech is unsuccessful in containing and deflecting the contagion of suffering that transmits itself from Phaedra's body to Hippolytus's.²¹ In this play, speech does not offer relief from the body's pressures but is rather contaminated by them; it manifests itself in forms that are wrenching, duplicitous, and violently destructive.

This failure of speech to displace the body is echoed in Euripides' rewriting of *The Libation Bearers* in his *Electra*. There Orestes' inability to transcend his mother's murder is expressed as her body, which has not been evoked at the moment of the deed, invades his subsequent speech. Euripides' Orestes is incapable of the calm, abstracted admissions of his Aeschylean counterpart; rather he is haunted by graphic, somatic images of his crime:²²

Did you see how she, wretched, from her robe
brought forth, showed forth her breast amidst the gore—
oh me—on the ground
casting down the limbs that gave birth? And her hair, I . . .
[1206–10]

Finally, one play, from the very end of the history of Greek tragedy as we know it, succeeds, as perhaps no work in that genre does, in foregrounding the body and resisting the body's subordination to speech without turning its action into the exposure of bodily pain: Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, a play that takes as its subject death—if not exactly the death in the open prescribed by Aristotle—without portraying death as the unwelcome self-assertion of the body. In several of Sophocles' plays, a conviction that civilized structures must find room for what seems to

lie beyond their bounds is expressed through an insistence on the acceptance of a disturbingly obtrusive body, for example, the dead body of Polyneices in the *Antigone* or the diseased body of Philoctetes in the *Philoctetes*. But in the *Oedipus at Colonus*, that conviction is conveyed through a focus on a living body that is not in pain. There Sophocles places the living body of Oedipus before the audience's eyes as a way of offering them access to those dimensions of experience that the human mind insists on thinking of as alien—the sacred, the wild, the criminal—and thus, uncannily enough, locates in the body.

The whole of the *Oedipus at Colonus* centers on the figure of Oedipus as he arrives as an old, blind wanderer at Athens to find an appropriate resting place and to end his life. The action consists simply of his arrival led by his daughter Antigone, his initial seating of himself in the sacred grove of the Eumenides, his removal to a new, secular seat at the behest of the troubled chorus, and then successive encounters with Theseus, who accepts his presence and offers him protection, and with representatives of his Theban past. These Thebans, now that he has been identified through Apollo's oracles as imbued with power, want to enlist him in the factional fighting that has broken out there: Creon wants to appropriate his power for Thebes and Eteocles; and Polyneices wants his father's support for the Argive expedition he is leading against Thebes. After Oedipus resists these attempts to move him from his station, endowing his sons not with his blessing but with a curse—the curse of their mutual fratricide—the final action of the play consists of his voluntary departure to his destined and mysterious death.

Throughout this sequence of events the audience is kept constantly aware of Oedipus's body, partly through this initial dramatization of the question of where on the stage it should properly be placed, partly through his seated posture throughout this series of encounters, and above all through the fact that he is blind. Deprived of vision, which we tend to think of as the most cerebral of the senses, he becomes more dependent on those features of the body that we think of as being more bodily, in particular, the sense of touch. Because he is blind, every movement that he makes is articulated through the directions spoken either by the daughters on whose bodies he must depend or by the chorus who in one notable scene give him elaborately explicit instructions about how to proceed from one seat to the next (118–202).²³

The question that remains central throughout the play, that of what the proper valuation of Oedipus and his extraordinary life should be, is grounded in the question of what the proper valuation of his body should be. Oedipus himself views his body as a prize; he tells Theseus that he offers his body to Athens as a gift (576–77). And the difference between

the Athenians represented by Theseus and the Thebans represented by Creon is precisely that Theseus is willing to place the same value on Oedipus's body, and he welcomes its permanent placement in Athenian soil. The Thebans cannot accept this view,⁴⁴ and they want somehow to coopt Oedipus's power without actually having his body in their territory; as Oedipus learns to his fury from his loyal daughter Ismene, they want to take him back to Thebes but to settle him just outside the border of the city rather than inside it.

The Thebans' crucial failure of vision represents not just a failure to appreciate the religious status indicated for Oedipus by the gods' oracles—that of a cult hero whose continuing power emanates from his entombed body—but a failure to accept the paradox of which his body serves as a constant reminder, the paradox that Oedipus is simultaneously criminal and sacred. This paradox is made palpable by reminders that the whole of Oedipus's life is united in the continuity of his body, that the body that now has an extraordinary religious power is the same body that once entered into horrifically transgressive contacts with the body of his father and with the body of his mother.

The continuousness of Oedipus's experience is inscribed in his body in a variety of ways: in his blighted eyes (the token by which Theseus recognizes him when they first meet [552–53]), which memorialize the moment when his dreadful crimes became known; in the continuous condition of pollution that makes him unwilling to be touched by Theseus even after he has performed rites of purification for his entrance into the sacred grove at the beginning of the play and has been accepted as an Athenian citizen (1132–35); and in his age, through which it registers one of the essential facts the play bears witness to, the passage of time.⁴⁵ For the passage of time, which for Sophocles represents the form in which the workings of the divine are most nearly apprehended by mortals (607–28; cf. *Ajax* 646–92), is crucial to the reversal of Oedipus's fortunes that is now being enacted.

This reversal of fortune accompanies a revaluation of himself and of his crimes on Oedipus's part. He himself explains on several occasions that this revision, which makes possible the play's presentation of his own acceptance of his life and consequently his willing and peaceful death, occurred only through the passage of time, which allowed his initial shame and self-hatred to ebb away (for example, 437). The connection between Oedipus's self-revaluation and his willing identification with his body is expressed when he tells the chorus, as they respond in horror to the revelation of his identity, that what they fear is really “ὄνομα μόνον . . . οὐ γὰρ δὴ τό γε / σῶμ' οὐδὲ τὰργα τὰμ'” (only my name, and not my body or my deeds) (265–66).⁴⁶ The very passivity of Oedipus's body as

it appears for most of the play, where its only action consists of sitting down, is a constant expression of that revaluation, for Oedipus repeatedly proclaims that he has shifted from seeing his role in his crimes as an active one to seeing it as a passive one, or, as he puts it, from seeing himself as the doer to seeing himself as the sufferer of his crimes (266–67, 538–39).

Oedipus's acceptance of his body as the register of his entire history is accompanied by a reluctance to engage in those forms of civilized speech that attempt to keep the body at a distance. Indeed his increasing detachment from other people is expressed in the way he knows them as mere voices, with the notable exception of his daughters, who are repeatedly alluded to as extensions of his body—as his eyes or as his body's supports (146–47, 848, 866, 1109)—and with whom he maintains a constant physical contact that betokens his refusal to recoil from his unholy double kinship with them.⁷ It is only out of courtesy that he leaves the grove of the Eumenides, where he knows himself to belong, to return to the secular space that the chorus describes as a “λέσχη”—using the term for a meeting hall or public building designed for conversation (167). His encounter with his son Polyneices is preceded by an extended debate over whether he would be willing to engage in conversation with him, in which he is finally persuaded to do so only by Antigone's pleading. Indeed the whole action of the play can be seen as Oedipus's temporary diversion from the sacred space where he is now at home to enter briefly and reluctantly into the dialogues that define the social world with which he no longer identifies.

Unlike Orestes in the *Eumenides*, Oedipus never feels himself to be so freed of the pollution of the past as to be able to speak painlessly of his crimes or to feel comfortable in the setting of a legal trial. This difference is dramatized during Oedipus's encounter with Creon, who tries to turn their dialogue into a trial like that of Orestes. Creon announces that he is amazed that the Athenians are willing to accept Oedipus when their city contains the Areopagus with its special court for the trying of homicides (939–59). Oedipus answers with a speech that is at once a legal defense—on the ground that his parricide and incest were committed in ignorance—and an angry protest at having to engage in such a defense at all (960–1013). The depth both of his sense of innocence and of his continuing pain at having to speak about his crimes can be measured in the bitter reproach in which he portrays Creon's speech of accusation as worse than his own past actions: “one thing I do know: you willingly speak evilly of me and [my mother] for these things; but I married her unwillingly and I speak of those things unwillingly” (985–87). As Oedipus's crimes remain part of the history that is incorporated in his body,

they also remain painful and difficult to convert into speech. This entire scene is pervaded by a sense of the inappropriateness of speech: it begins with Oedipus addressing Creon as “ὦ φθέγμα’ ἀναιδέες” (oh voice without shame) (863) and ends with Theseus proclaiming “ἄλις λόγων” (enough of words) (1016) and dispatching his men to recover Oedipus’s daughters, whom Creon has taken captive.

In this episode of the *Oedipus at Colonus*, by contrast to the scene from the *Eumenides* discussed earlier, tragedy mimics a trial only to signal its unwillingness to adopt that form, suggesting that one of the forms of inclusiveness the play celebrates is the achievement of justice without forgetfulness of the past or blindness to the body. Instead of embracing the stylization of drama by assimilating it to a trial, Sophocles insists on what drama succeeds by simulating: a felt connection between the words being spoken and the lived experience of the speaker.

Throughout the play, Oedipus is presented as someone for whom, more than for others, speech is closely tied to the body and to the superhuman realm the body represents. This portrayal emerges especially from his blindness, which means both that speech must play for him the role of his missing sense of sight (“φωνῇ γὰρ ὄρω” [I see by voice], he tells the chorus at 137),³⁸ and that his own increasingly oracular speech communicates a numinous inner vision (for example, 74). As his identity as a hero is progressively realized, Oedipus’s speech becomes less and less that of human interaction and takes on a superhuman power: his utterances become prophecies and curses.

The unparalleled stress throughout the *Oedipus at Colonus* on the embodiment of the living man is finally matched by the depiction of a death that is not experienced as the reassertion of a willfully overlooked body. Rather this is a death in which the body truly disappears; what is arguably the most powerful messenger’s speech in surviving tragedy reverses the normal properties of that form, for it quotes a voice of inhuman authority—the divine voice that calls out, “ὦ οὗτος, οὗτος, Οἰδίπους, τί μέλλομεν/χωρεῖν;” (oh, you, you Oedipus, why do we delay?) (1627–28) but has nothing to tell us about the adventures of the body. The messenger can only recount that he and Oedipus’s daughters left Oedipus instructing Theseus in what should be done, walked a little way, then turned around and saw “τὸν ἄνδρα τὸν μὲν οὐδαμοῦ παρόντ’ ἔτι” (that man not being anywhere anymore) (1649)—a line that perfectly captures the now-you-see-it-now-you-don’t quality of Oedipus’s death. The extraordinary sense of finality that this play achieves is reinforced by the way its ultimate obliteration of this body generates a necessary silencing of the human voices that survive it; for with no corpse there can be no lamentation,

and so there is no interplay between the absent suffering body and the present speakers;³⁹ rather, as the final lines of the play direct, the mourning ceases with the hero's life.

Notes

Versions of this paper were delivered at the Whitney Humanities Center, Yale University, and at Cornell University during spring 1987. In revising it for publication, I have benefited from the questions raised by members of those audiences and from comments by P. E. Easterling, Lars Engle, and Sara Suleri.

- 1 This discrepancy has led one commentator to argue that Aristotle cannot mean what he apparently says and to suggest that he has in mind a distinction between events in the visible world and events taking place in the mind. Gerald Else, *Aristotle's Poetics: The Argument* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 357–58.
- 2 See the discussion by Peter Arnott, who stresses the constraints imposed by the availability of only three actors to play all the speaking roles. *Greek Scenic Conventions* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 134–38.
- 3 This fact was first noted by the Alexandrian scholar Aristarchus (K. Lehrs, *de Aristarchi studiis Homericis* [Leipzig: Hirzelium, 1882], 86, 160. See also Hermann Koller, "Soma bei Homer," *Glotta* 37 [1957]: 276–81) and has been variously interpreted. Bruno Snell uses it to support his claim that Homeric man did not think of the body as a whole as part of a larger argument that the early Greeks had not yet developed a capacity for abstract thought. *The Discovery of the Mind*, trans. T. G. Rosenmeyer (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 5–8. Snell's evolutionist approach has received a number of recent challenges: on the Homeric view of the body, see Norman Austin, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), 113–14, who stresses the opposition between the living body seen as a series of limbs in animated relationship to each other and the dead body seen as an inert whole. For this view, see also James M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 178, 255.
- 4 Emily Vermeule, *Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 239; and, for a comparable list of words for the parts of the head, 96–97.
- 5 This is not, of course, to deny the role of body parts in epithets and other references to the living, but those references tend to concentrate on a few visible extremities, such as the arms, the head, the feet (e.g., "swift-footed Achilles"). The impulse not to identify living characters with their bodies reflected in that tendency is carried further in the frequent use of epithets referring to hair (an expendable part of the body that resembles clothing and is often highly ornamented), clothing, and armor. On the identification of people primarily with their heads in the Homeric poems, see R. B. Onians, *The Origins of European Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), 95–100.
- 6 On the significance of the boast in Homeric poetry, see Leonard Charles Muellner, *The Meaning of Homeric EYCHOMAI through Its Formulas* (Innsbruck: Inst. f. Sprachwissenschaft d. Univ. Innsbruck, 1976).
- 7 This grounding of heroic claims in the bodily suffering of another can be compared to the way torture uses one person's bodily suffering to substantiate another's claims, as analyzed by Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 27–59.
- 8 The hero's need to avoid the company of women is dramatized in the account of Hector's visit to the city in book 6. See the discussion by Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, 121–22.

- 9 On mythical accounts of the banquet as the setting for an eruption of violence, see Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), passim, esp. 44, where the connection between this theme and boasting is noted.
- 10 This conception of poetry receives its most explicit expression in the works of another early hexameter poet, Hesiod: *Theogony*, 53–55, 98–103.
- 11 Margaret Alexiou points out that a strong contrast between the mourner and the dead person is a recurrent conventional feature of the lament. *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 171–77.
- 12 See Jacqueline Duchemin, "Du lyricisme à la tragédie: réflexions sur l'Agamemnon et les Perses d'Eschyle," in *Serta Turyniana*, ed. John L. Heller (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1974), 122–42.
- 13 The way the words Xerxes speaks when he finally appears have the effect of distancing him from his own suffering even as they bemoan it may explain the response of those modern critics who find his appearance ludicrous rather than pathetic. See the discussion by Phillip Mitsis, "Xerxes' Entrance: Irony, Myth, and History in the *Persians*" (forthcoming in a festschrift for Gordon Kirkwood).
- 14 On this scene, see Charles Segal, "Tragedy, Corporeality, and Language: Matricide in the Three Electra Plays," in *Interpreting Greek Tragedy: Myth, Poetry, Text* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986), 337–58.
- 15 This story is said by a scholiast on that passage to have also been told by Lesches, author of the cyclic epic the *Little Iliad*, and by Ibycus and Euripides.
- 16 See Froma I. Zeitlin, "The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in the *Oresteia*," in *Women in the Ancient World: The Arethusa Papers*, ed. John Peradotto and J. P. Sullivan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 170–71.
- 17 This restoration of a voice to Orestes in effect completes the silencing of Iphigenia's voice that accompanied the transformation of her body into that of a sacrificial animal (*Agamemnon* 228–38).
- 18 See Nicole Loraux, "Le lit, la guerre," *L'Homme* 21 (1981): 37–67; Ruth Padel, "Women: Model for Possession by Greek Daemons," in *Images of Women in Antiquity*, ed. Averil Cameron and Amélie Kuhrt (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983), 3–19; Froma I. Zeitlin, "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama," *Representations* 11 (1985): 63–94. Cf. also Emily Vermeule's observation (*Aspects of Death*, 101) that one of the aims of the heroic taunt in the *Iliad* is to turn the opposing warrior into a woman or a defeated animal.
- 19 Cf. Nicole Loraux's comment ("Le Lit, la guerre," 58–59) that, in dying, Hippolytus in effect acquires a body.
- 20 As Bernard Knox points out in a classic essay on this play, "The *Hippolytus* of Euripides," *Yale Classical Studies* 13 (1952): 3–31, reprinted in *Word and Action: Essays on the Ancient Theater* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 205–30.
- 21 On the contamination of specifically female speech in this play, see Nancy S. Rabinowitz, "Female Speech and Female Sexuality: Euripides' *Hippolytos* as Model," in *Rescuing Creusa: New Methodological Approaches to Women in Antiquity*, ed. Marilyn Skinner, *Helios* 13,2 (1987): 127–40; on the female body as the locus of conflict and suffering, see Froma I. Zeitlin, "The Power of Aphrodite: Eros and the Boundaries of the Self in the *Hippolytus*," in *Directions in Euripidean Criticism*, ed. Peter Burian (Durham: Duke University Press, 1985), 68–74.
- 22 On the comparison between these scenes, see Segal, "Tragedy, Corporeality, and Language," 355–56.
- 23 On the stress on sitting throughout this play, see A. M. Dale, "Seen and Unseen on the Greek Stage: A Study in Scenic Conventions," in *The Collected Papers of A. M. Dale* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 125–26; Charles Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 367; and, in connection with Polynices, P. E. Easterling, "Oedipus and Polynices," *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Association* 193 (n.s. 13) (1967): 5–6.
- 24 Creon's devaluation of Oedipus's body causes him to view it as wholly material, like

the Iliadic *sōma*. Thus at 858 he alludes to Oedipus as a “θύσιον,” the word for a piece of property seized in reprisal for a wrong. Cf. 1330, where Polyneices, in saying his brother has stripped him of his fatherland, uses a verb, “ἀποουλάω,” that usually applies to the stripping of spoils from the body of a defeated enemy.

- 25 At several points, the passage of time is evoked through its effects on the body: at 110 Oedipus calls attention to his age by saying he is no longer the “ἀρχαῖον δέμας” (former figure) of Oedipus; at 346 he tells how Antigone grew up by saying “κατίσχυσεν δέμας” (she grew strong in body).
- 26 Cf. 355, where Oedipus asks what oracles have been given about “τοῦδ’ . . . σώματος” (this body); 766, where he characterizes his former view of himself as guilty as a physical disease.
- 27 Correspondingly, he conceives of his rejection of his son Polyneices as an expulsion from his body: “σὺ δ’ ἔρρ’ ἀπόπτυστός τε κἀπάτωρ ἐμού” (go, spat out and unfathered by me) (1383).
- 28 Cf. also 325; and 963, where Oedipus refers metaphorically to Creon’s speech as a dart launched by his mouth.
- 29 This connection is reflected in the messenger’s statement that Oedipus’s death was “οὐ στενακτὸς οὐδὲ σὺν νόσοις / ἀλγινὸς” (neither lamented nor made painful by disease) (1663–64).