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Male Lament in Greek Tragedy

Much work has been done in the last ten years on the use of ritual lament in tragedy. A pervasive assumption of this work is that lament was a female responsibility in ritual, hence a female activity in tragedy. Only Foley (2001.28-29), to my knowledge, has considered male lament in tragedy a possible topic for investigation. This paper attempts to redress the imbalance in the focus of current scholarship, and to marshal new material from tragedy. It will be seen that, if we had only the evidence of tragedy to inform us, we might not think of lament as a particularly gendered genre. This conclusion changes our understanding of lament in tragedy, and of 5th-century attitudes towards lamentation.

I base my remarks on a study by Elinor Wright, whose analysis of the meters and stylistic features of tragic lament permits the first comprehensive identification of lamentation in tragedy by a set of objective criteria. Beginning with passages where a ritual lament is surely being portrayed (*Pers.* 908-1077; *Seven* 961-1004), she isolates "essential recurring features" which "seem by their frequent appearance to represent laments for the audience". She identifies 42 passages with these features, far more than have ever been examined in current scholarship. In 18, a male laments; in 26, a female (usually solos). The respondent (usually the chorus) is male in 14; female in 11. Five plays have only male lamentation; six only female. These figures do not suggest an overwhelmingly female genre. What lament was in real life is another question; but because the evidence of tragedy has come to be used as evidence for real life, it is important to assess that evidence correctly.

But how are these laments treated in context? Are not the males stigmatized for indulging in a "female" act? Do not males try to control female lamentation? With Wright's study as a guide, I discuss several laments to show that these assertions are not always so: the laments of Teucer (*Ajax* 922-1039), Creon (*Ant.* 1261-1346), and Oedipus (*OT.* 1307-1366), seldom discussed, show Greek males lamenting freely without criticism. Even in Euripides' *Suppliants*, often adduced as a template for 5th-century suppression of lament, suppression is not pervasive, nor are attitudes uniformly critical. Lastly, I discuss laments in the *Persians* (256-289, 908-1077) and the *Agamemnon* (1448-1576), often adduced to prove how lamenting feminizes males. I argue that a comprehensive view of lament in the former, and the consideration of the context of the latter, show that the gender/lament issues in the two plays are more complex and ambiguous than previously acknowledged.