

Agalma in Euripides and Its Implications for Women in 5th Century Athens

As many scholars have already demonstrated (Barlow 1971; Steiner 2001; Stieber 2011; Wohl 1998), Euripides commonly uses the term *agalma* to describe female characters in his tragedies. This term, however aurally pleasing it may be during performance, becomes problematic on the visual level when one examines its implications for ancient Greek women with real bodies. This paper explores the ways in which Euripides employs the term *agalma*, and how the application of this term creates an image of the female body as a commodity: a piece of art that has been systematically created, evaluated, and to some extent reproduced – something that lacks originality and dimension (Wohl 1998). A female character whose body has been evaluated against predominantly patriarchal criteria and reduced to the status of a piece of art, perhaps a painting or sculpture, is severely limited in respect to her agency in the drama. While Euripides certainly grants agency to many of his female characters (Foley 2001), Euripides subtly undermines their agency by comparing their bodies to *agalmata*. The female character absorbs the perceived static demeanor of the artwork and fails to reach her full potential as a participant in the narrative (Worman 1997, 152). This paper addresses all instances of the term *agalma* when used to describe a female character, primarily from Euripides' *Helen*, *Hekabe*, *Elektra*, *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, and *Hippolytos*. Given the recent concern over body image issues in society today, it seems appropriate to analyze the difficult issues that are raised by Euripides' application of the term *agalma*, at the very least to address how the media negatively impacts the ways in which women perceive and critique their own bodies, but also perhaps to begin to understand the potential, ancient body image issues of 5th century Athens.

Bibliography

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