

War, Maternal *Ponos*, and Communal Trauma in Athenian Tragedy

The voices of women lamenting the losses of husbands, brothers, and sons or the capture of their city and the loss of their freedom became an integral part of the tragedians' repertory on war. Women's expressions of grief offer opportunities for discussing war from the vantage point of trauma for combatants and their families and for exploring unsettling emotions for the audience, forced to confront the pain of others (*pace* Sontag 2003). Their stylized performances thus furnish deeper insights into the effects of war trauma than has been acknowledged in major studies of laments (e.g., Foley 2001; [Loraux 1998 is an exception]). On the other hand, the proliferation of female characters, tragic and comic, who participate in dramatic scenarios of the city at war, such as Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, or enact the poignant suffering of Trojan female captives at the hands of the Greek victors (Euripides, *Hecuba*, *Andromache*, *Trojan Women*) must be tied to the historical reality of the Peloponnesian War, waged by the Athenians in support of the empire.

Like *Lysistrata*, who claims boldly that women carry a double burden by first giving birth and then sending their sons to battle (589-90), mothers' laments in tragedy, especially in Euripides' *Suppliants*, lend support to the same idea. The Argive mothers' laments seek to impress upon their Athenian hosts their immeasurable grief, notably by way of lamenting the toil and pain (*ponos*) of childbirth, now forever lost (919-24, 955-63). Lamenting the death of their sons whose bodies they claim for burial, seeking Theseus' intervention to this effect, their *ponos* is articulated through their 'embodied' memory of the original birth wound (ὕφ' ἥπατος / πόνους ἐνεγκοῦσ' ἐν ὠδῶσι, 919-20)—a wound reopened by the trauma of losing a child. While women's laments were excluded from the official venue of the state funeral at the cemetery of

the Kerameikos in Athens, playwrights recognized women's authority to speak about and against military enterprises by engaging with their civic toil as mothers.

This paper explores the expression of female war trauma by relating the experience of mourning mothers to collective trauma, experienced by the community as a whole, making use especially of Jonathan Shay's work on combat trauma. Clytemnestra, Medea, and Hecuba have already begun to be analyzed through the lens of war trauma (cf. Lush 2014; Rabinowitz 2015); their revenge against kin and non-kin can be further analyzed through the angle of maternal *ponos* in relation to war trauma. In addition, fragmentary tragedies such as Euripides' *Hypsipyle* offer important new insights on the effects of war trauma. While Hecuba, for example, exhibits signs of alienation, typical of PTSD and combat trauma, Hypsipyle's persistent laments as a slave nurse over the loss of her natal children bring her back to the expedition of the Argonauts and Jason, to whom she bore twin sons. Abandoned by Jason and bereft of her children, whom she was forced to abandon when she fled Lemnos, her repetitive recounting of her harrowing past further allows us to explore the links between lament and trauma. In addition, in her reduced circumstances, Hypsipyle remains trapped in the past, a victim of men's heroic ventures, despite the chorus' admonition to stop living in the past (Kannicht *TrGF* 5:754).

The combined exploration of women and combat trauma is a new area of research (e.g., Gaca 2010; Fabre-Serris and Keith 2015; Konstan and Meineck 2014). This brief foray into tragedy explores female responses to trauma with a view toward contributing to an understanding of the cultural aspects of war trauma, germane to the Athenians' experience during the latter half of the fifth century B.C.E.

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