

The Silent Women of Tragedy

a series of monologues

Chrysothemis:

Why - how could they do this? Is the blood already shed not enough? From Tantalus, the founder of our line, this family has tried its hardest to destroy itself, and it seems that I am the only one who wants this pointless bloodshed and rivalry to end.

Don't tell anyone I said this - my only hope is to remain respectable - but I don't blame Helen for trying to get out. Her daughter was going to marry Orestes, but I have heard that she is now betrothed to Neoptolemus - the son of Achilles? That would be a far better match for Hermione, no matter how awful he is. At least her children won't start killing each other.

And - it makes no sense for Electra to avenge our father. The daughter avenging the daughter-killer! A dangerous precedent. I would not be so opposed to the death of Aegisthus, but murderous matricide will simply start the cycle anew. Will I be expected to avenge her? I do not wish to spill blood.

But the Tantalids, the Pelopidae, the Atrides cannot comprehend diplomacy, peace or forgiveness. Their unearned self-belief is their downfall. I suppose I should say we, but I cannot identify with these people, my family. Perhaps I shall let themselves destroy each other and take power myself, ending the cycle of bloodshed. I will not be pursued by the Furies for my refusal to engage. The status of women will work to my advantage here.

Orestes is a favourite of the gods though. Even after what he's done, they might forcibly forgive him.

How can I think these things, wish for my siblings to die? I can't, I can't do that while superior about refusing to spill blood. But the familial bloodshed must end.

I might exile myself. Travel to a land, if one exists, where peace and women are valued.

But every land I know of engaged in the Trojan War, so they cannot value peace.

All I can do is disapprove, so I will.

This twisted family tree, watered with blood, will one day kill itself, driving my family to extinction. I hope it happens soon.

Hermione:

The world will always remember my mother. Her notoriety is infamous. Perhaps that is the only way to be remembered. I do not want to be remembered, though. Women are only remembered when they can be used. Or, sometimes, when they are in pain. My aunt is notorious too, the husband-killing, daughter-avenging Clytemnestra. I wish my mother loved me enough to avenge me - or remember me once in ten years. But then, I suppose Electra - oh, and Chrysothemis - felt the same way about Clytemnestra. She seemed to care more about her dead daughter than her living ones. That's probably why Electra wanted to kill her. She can't have loved her father that much. He abandoned her too.

This is the Trojan War. Families abandoned. Children raised by mothers, or by servants. Sons sometimes taken to replenish the dying armies, like my new fiance. Daughters forgotten except as a gift for fellow generals, who are probably more excited about the dowries. Neoptolemus can't care

about me that much, unless he fantasies that I'm as beautiful as my mother. Isn't he in for a disappointment!

My parents were disappointed too, coming back after ten years to discover that their daughter is merely pretty rather than stunningly, dazzlingly, war-startingly beautiful. Oh, well. Maybe I should destroy even the average beauty I possess, so these men will forget me. Their eyes will glide over me as they do over plain girls.

I could order one of my maids to switch places with me. One of them is prettier, my parents will prefer that, and she can be sold off to the highest bidder, dragged to Epirus or Phthia or Mycenae, whoever I'm engaged to now. But it's not like the lot of a slave-girl is better than mine, I don't want to live their life. I can barely dress myself, let alone make the bed or sweep or... anything else. My incompetence is deliberate, to keep me trapped.

No, I must obey. I will dress myself as plainly as possible, downplaying my beauty, and then I will be married off and forgotten, if I'm lucky. I don't want anyone to be killed over me. I don't want to bear children who could be abandoned.

I want to disappear, to become invisible.

I want to be forgotten.

Eurydice:

So this is it. The end.

I wasn't sad at my sister-in-law's death, though I was horrified at the discovery of the incest at the heart of the royal family. I never fit with them, so I stayed home when Creon and Haemon went to visit. But I did move in, when my husband became the new king, and I raised the children of Oedipus and Jocasta without allowing my disgust with their origins to transfer to them. At least, until I discovered that Haemon and Antigone were still betrothed - my son could not be allowed to marry a girl whose father was her brother. Almost no-one would be good enough for my baby. No-one – and certainly not her.

But he loved her, he confessed, and so I simply delayed the marriage as long as I could, hoping he would reconsider. I was horrified again when she was condemned to death - this was not the way to do this. I didn't want her to marry my son, but I didn't want her dead - and Creon decided at one point to condemn her sister, a sweet girl, too.

But he changed his mind about that, and then about Antigone - but alas! Too late. But it was worse, far worse - my son found her dead and, in the heat of his anger and grief, killed himself.

It is well-known that a parent should not have to mourn their child - at least once the child has grown to adulthood. Once you think that they are safe. I will not mourn my son - I refuse to outlive my child - and so I, too, will die.

This is the end. This is my end.

Iphigenia:

I thought that if I was a dutiful daughter, the perfect princess, I would be happy and adored. I thought that my parents would love me, I would get a good husband, I would have a good life as a queen. But it seems that there is no reward for perfection but death.

My father always praised me as his sweet princess, his dutiful eldest daughter. But I suppose it was not true, he must have hated me, for how else could he bear to kill me? Or perhaps he thought that I would think it was my duty to let him sacrifice me, or that I would not know how to disobey, or that I was so stupid that I would not realise what he was planning to do.

I didn't at first. I was simply glad to marry Achilles, aristos Achaion; I did not consider that it could be a trick. That my father would lie to me. But I knew, when I arrived at Aulis. When I felt the hot, still air - too still for a port. When the soldiers I had known since my infancy refused to look me in the eye. When the man who would be my husband wouldn't even see me, or my mother.

And yet my father still pretended, for a while. And yet he killed me.

Mother knew, too. I heard fragments of her argument with Father, angry, jagged words. She was like a mother bear, like a lioness with cubs - her anger made me feel loved, protected. Safe. On the day of my wedding - not to Achilles, but to Death - she wept as she watched the slaves style my hair into elaborate braids and paint suns onto my cheeks. She tried to protect me from the knowledge, but as she looked in my eyes before we left the tent - for of course she could not miss her daughter's wedding, no matter the trap she knew it to be - she realised that I already knew. She hugged me close, and spoke in my ear: 'Face your death with courage, daughter. He will pay.'

And so I walked to the altar. And now I smile at my betrothed. He bares his teeth in response, angry to have been used for such a thing. Not considering that I might feel the same way. Not considering that women, too, have honour. I smile, too, at my father. My executioner. I smile to leave his household, I smile to challenge him, I smile because I know that I will be avenged.

He thinks daughters do not matter, however dutiful they are.

He will learn.

He will learn in blood and death.

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