

Mireille M. LEE

The Tragedic *Peplos*: a heroic garment transformed

While scholars have recognized the importance of garments and other textiles in Greek tragedy, the particular significance of the *peplos* has not been addressed. The term *peplos* appears in the majority of extant Greek tragedies, including all the plays of Euripides and of Aeschylus, and Sophocles' *Trachiniae*. It is, however, relatively rare in other classical literary genres, occurring only in references to the Panathenaic *peplos* (e.g., Aristophanes, *Knights*, *Birds*) and in comedic parodies of the tragic use of the term (e.g., Aristophanes, *Acharnians*). In contrast, other terms for garments, including *chiton* and *himation*, are exceedingly rare in tragedy, but quite common in other contemporary literature. This paper argues that the tragic *peplos* represents a deliberate borrowing from epic and lyric poetry as a motif of heroic grandeur.

Despite the demonstrable relationship between the *peplos* in early poetry and that in tragedy, its function is quite different in the two genres. Throughout epic and lyric, the term *peplos* appears most frequently as the noun-stem of stock compound epithets (e.g. *krokoepelos*, *eupeplos*), while in tragedy compounds are very rare. In addition, while in early poetry *peplos* appears most frequently in the singular, the tragedians most often employ the plural form of the word as well as the invented term *peploma* apparently as poetic devices. The most important difference between epic and lyric and tragic *peploi* is their narrative functions in the distinct genres. The epic and lyric *peplos* is worn exclusively by women and goddesses, and *peplos*-epithets often serve as identifying labels for the characters. In tragedy, however, *peploi* are worn by male characters as well, frequently representing their emasculation as a result of excessive behavior or luxuriousness (e.g., Aeschylus, *Persians*, Euripides, *Hippolytus*). In early poetry, *peploi* are innocuous objects that lend color to the poems; in tragedy, however, the appearance of *peploi* and other garments is not incidental. They represent significant motives that compel the narrative, such as the *peplos*-web in which Agamemnon is entangled and killed or the poisoned *peploi* of Deianeira and Medea. The inconsistencies between the epic and lyric uses and the tragic function of *peplos* demonstrate that the playwrights adapted the term to meet their own literary needs.

That the tragedians were consciously borrowing the term *peplos* from epic and lyric explains its absence from other contemporary literature. This apparent anomaly can be explained by the fact that, in the fifth century, the word seems only to have referred to the Panathenaic *peplos*. Therefore, tragedians employed the term *peplos* not to indicate contemporary dress, but to evoke an historic, heroic garment that was no longer in regular use.

As a remembered garment the *peplos* retained its significance from epic and lyric, but it was also quite transmutable as a literary device. As a woven textile, the *peplos* is inextricably bound up with women's production and therefore feminine *metis*. The tragedians manipulate the Greek concept of weaving as the embodiment of feminine *metis* to represent the extreme of female craftiness and treachery in the form of the *peplos*.

The particular function of *peplos* in tragedy suggests an emphasis on constructions of gender which were being re-negotiated along with the broader social and cultural changes in Athens in the course of the fifth century. The use of the *peplos* as a literary motif allowed the tragedians to comment upon changing social and gender relations in a tacit manner, without addressing these issues directly, which might have been impossible otherwise.