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The Tragic 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. krokopeplos, 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.