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**The Poor Other: Expressing Class through Female Characters in Greek Drama**

The study of women in Greek drama has become a blockbuster topic and tragic women have been subjected to a host of academic and political agendas. In recent years, scholars applying models based on gender and performance (Bassi, Zeitlin), anthropology (Foley), socio-linguistics (McClure), as well as psychoanalysis and various forms of Marxism (Ormand, Rabinowitz, Wohl) have explained the complex social roles that women played. These studies attest the degree to which the representation of women in drama was overdetermined, yet the alterity model that subtends these studies tends to eschew notions of class. As a supplement to analyses of gender hierarchy and identity, this paper addresses the relationship between gender and class through the transvestite figure of the tragic woman.

Recent iconographic studies (Osborne, Miller, Stears) suggest that late fifth-century Attic society deployed female figures as semiotic vehicles for the expression of aristocratic as well as democratic sentiments. Literary evidence further attests to the allegorical potential of women to represent social factions — particularly internal others like the poor — through a shared semantic field (cf. Aesch. *Septem* 181-95, Arist. *Pol.* 1269b35-41, Xen. *Oik.* 4.2-3, Plato *Ti.* 90e6-91a1, Ps.-Xen. *Ath. Pol.* 1.5, Ar. *Frogs.* 948f). Building on the notions of overdetermination and cross-dressing, I develop Marjorie Garber's (*Vested Interests* 1992) model of transvestism to interpret women in tragedy. For Garber the transvestite mode functions as a type of displacement to indicate the place of a "category crisis" elsewhere in society. When social categories become blurred, the transvestite effectively displaces these anxieties onto gender boundaries. Tragic transvestism, as a displacement from the axis of class onto the axis of gender, could effectively structure low class characters within a predominantly elitist narrative.

Euripides' *Electra* offers a prime example of negotiating class through a female character. Electra herself straddles aristocratic as well as *banausic* roles, but markedly problematizes her social position (300f), whereas the farmer cheerfully accepts his lower class role — despite his aristocratic lineage. She mimics the poor Athenian household that could not afford slaves (cf. Arist. *Pol.* 1322b37-23a6) and is constrained to fetch water at the fountain, but performs this role only to highlight the outrage committed by Aegisthus against her (54f) — as if engaging in a competition for prestige with fellow royals. With the farmer's offer of *xenia* (341f), Orestes launches into a critique of the criteria for nobility and Electra chides the farmer for his crossing of class boundaries. Electra functions to mediate the class concerns and anxieties presented by the farmer and Orestes. As the poor but well-born daughter, subordinated yet goading Orestes to act, she performs the aristocratic ritual of vendetta before the democratic *polis*. Before a heterogeneous audience such class and status dissonances could be displaced onto female characters played by men and thus obscure more problematic class relations within the *polis*. This explains why scholars can talk about Electra's "double vision" (Arnott). As late fifth century elites became more uncomfortable vis-à-vis the practices of democratic Athens, anxieties about the permeable borders of rich/poor and master/slave could be reconciled by the transvestite figure on stage. Such displacements could, however, also

channel democratic civic-mindedness through women — a familiar iconographic practice. The transvestite mode of performance naturalized in Athenian drama served as an effective mechanism for displacing and diffusing class concerns.