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*Article*

# Women's voice and Religious Utterances in Ancient Greece

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**Abstract:** This paper tackles the issue of women and religion through a particular looking glass: religious utterances such as curses, supplication, and prayer, as reflected in some passages from ancient Greek epic and tragedy - pivotal literary genres in the ideological discourse of the Greek polis.

**Keywords:** ancient Greece, religion, women, cult, prayer, supplication, sacrifice

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## 1. Introduction

This paper tackles the issue of women and religion through a particular looking glass: religious utterances such as curses, supplication, and prayer, as reflected in some passages from ancient Greek epic and tragedy - pivotal literary genres in the ideological discourse of the Greek polis. First of all, we will try and define in working terms the space of religion in ancient Greece and the role of 'literary texts' as reliable sources for the religious discourse

"Greek religion" is to be understood primarily as political and civic in the sense that the municipal dimension of the polis saturates all its spheres, thereby the gods were one with their *polis* and their citizen, *politai*, as the groundbreaking contributions of Sourvinou-Inwood have shown [32,33,34]. Moreover, in ancient Greece we would better speak of a community of performers rather than a community of believers. The absence of orthodoxy or fixed doctrines in Greek religion has been recognized and stated many a time since the "ritual turn" initiated at the end of the nineteenth century by W. Robertson Smith [30] and recently caught up by Bremmer [4], Bruit Zaidman and Schmitt Pantel [6] among others. Therefore, ancient Greek culture did not produce sacred texts or other documents that attest to beliefs or religious doctrines, as we think of them. Because of these cultural conditions, we have to turn to 'literary' texts in order to reconstruct the religious discourse of the Greeks, including the role of the women in cultic settings. In Greek terms, 'literature' is a far wider encompassing category than our own; as far as epic and tragedy are concerned, we would better speak of social institutions rather than simply literary genres, it is therefore in literary texts that we may find the elements to reconstruct authoritative religious models. As for epic, this is explicitly stated by Herodotus (2.53): "but whence each of the gods came into being, or whether they had all for ever existed, and what outward forms they had, the Greeks knew not till (so to say) a very little while ago; for I suppose that the time of Hesiod and Homer was not more than four hundred years before my own; and these are they who taught the Greeks of the descent of the gods, and gave to all their several names, and honours, and arts, and declared their outward forms." Tragedy too, as an integral part of Athenian political and cultural life,

provides us with revealing and authoritative information about the working of Athenian religiosity. By this statement I submit that religiosity is one of the interconnected dynamics of Greek civic life and that, in this respect, “the separation of ‘religion’ as a discrete aspect of polis life is quite misleading”, as Goldhill has expressed [21]. To be sure, we cannot take an epic or dramatic text as an historical document, nor do they provide us with a straightforward reflection of Greek and Athenian reality, rather with a slanted one. In particular, with its dramatic devices, tragedy nonetheless plays a central role in Athenian *religious debate*, not only as a representation, however partial, of religious practice but even more as questioning and ‘normative engagement’ of religious issues, as shown by Sourvinou-Inwood [34]. In the Athenian context, tragedy joins and replaces to a certain extent epic poetry in its educational function, readapting heroic narratives to the specific reality of Athens, as particularly shown by Havelock [22] and Goldhill [20]

## **2 Words and deeds**

An ancient Greek man, be it an Homeric warrior or a fifth century Athenian man, can express himself and his manhood through words and deeds, both performed in the public space. In fact, to be a full blown man is to be at the same time “a doer of deeds and a speaker of words” as Phoinix, Achilles’ teacher has it in a famous passage of the *Iliad* (9. 438-441):

It was to thee that the old horseman Peleus sent me on the day when he sent thee to Agamemnon, forth from Phthia, [440] a mere child, knowing naught as yet of evil war, neither of gatherings wherein men wax preeminent. For this cause sent he me to instruct thee in all these things, to be both a speaker of words and a doer of deeds. (trans.by A.T.Murray).

As these famous lines highlight, as far as ancient Greece is concerned, deeds mean battlefield exploits, resulting more often than not in killing another man, an “enemy”. Mythological figures apart (such as Amazons), women were barred from *siderophorein*, “bearing arms” they couldn’t partake to warfare, they couldn’t be heroines in Greek terms, that is, they could not kill – at least not by means of

weapons and physical strength, the only way of killing Greeks considered heroic.

Together with his martial abilities, a man must cultivate *logos*, rhetorical skills, in order to be “a speaker of words”, a *rhetor*, that is, a man endowed with verbal weapons in order to fight battles of speeches in public spaces, that is, eminently, assemblies, where men win glory, be they the Homeric warrior assembly or the democratic *ekklesia* of Athens. What about women? Banned as they were from the public space, their voice could not be heard, however wise.

The combination of deeds and words traces a man’s identity in the religious sphere as well, insofar as it matches the two central acts of Greek cult: the deed of sacrifice and the word of prayer. Sacrificing was about killing the victim, the kernel of the ritual was the actual slaughtering of the animal, with all its rich preparation and concluding banquet: sacrificial deeds mirror battlefield feats in that they both managed lethal violence, for which see notably Girard [19].

Likewise, praying paralleled the words spoken in the political arena (in a culture where political and religious spheres were closely knit together), not just because praying was a political as well as a religious act, spoken as it was in public setting, but also because praying to the gods was tantamount to trying to talk them into doing what was requested from them, a form of persuasion well defined in liturgical structures, as tackled in Aubriot [3] and Giordano [16]

If we try and apply the same pattern to Greek women, we will see that in this case too their identity was defined by absence and negation: they couldn’t sacrifice, a subject well treated by Dillon [12] as an extension from the ban from *siderophorein*, and, as I will try and highlight, they couldn’t pray in a public setting. However, Connelly [11] has recently argued that in ancient Greece women played quite a central role in the religious sphere, particularly as priestesses, contrary to their markedly secluded position in the public scene at large. Yet, literary texts show that the contexts where women’s voices were allowed to be heard were restricted to the household and to particular types of utterances (curses and ritual lament) where women could expressly convey their power as women.

## 2.1 Women and Curses

Among other legacies, Greece has handed down to us the *logos*, this elusive term describes the use of language in discussion and dialogue, in separating and analyzing conceptual dominions, of discussing and persuading. The logos is the intellectual tool of “scientific” discourse, philosophical inquiry and public debate. The “logos” thus embodies an intrinsic dialectic between “one” and “the other”, be they real persons or ideas . But besides this dialogic logos we find another category of words, absolute and powerful utterances, heavy with being and truth (*aletheia*). This category can be termed efficacious words, words that *efficit*, realize and found, words not uttered ‘after’ or ‘about’ the reality, but is pronounced together and before reality. Efficacious utterances are to be seen more as real actions than mere “words”. Together with oaths and blessings, curses are a pivotal example of this type of utterances, as shown in Giordano [15]. In our days, the words and the notion “curse” and “cursing” are circled by an aura of the archaic and the “primitive”. They may recall black magic practices, old stories and dark expressions of religiosity or superstition. Some religions make still use of curses, the Islamic Fatwa, the Catholic excommunication and anathema, are some telling examples of them. But as far as the Western world is concerned, curses today find their place almost exclusively in the private sphere, being, when uttered, an expression of frustration and verbal aggression; in ancient Greece, on the other hand, curses were very powerful utterances, whose role extended to the public as well as the private sphere.

The linguistic theory of speech acts provides us with a powerful heuristic model to access the inner structure of curses. In terms of the so-called School of Oxford, as elaborated particularly by J.L. Austin [1], the curse can be defined as a “performative utterance”, endowed with a particular illocutionary value. The performative utterance, or simply performative (a neologism created by Austin) “indicates that the issuing of the utterance is the performing of an action”. These are some examples “ ‘I do’, as uttered in the course of the marriage ceremony”, “I name this ship Queen Elizabeth – as uttered when smashing the bottle against the stem”, “I give and bequeath the watch to my brother” –as occurring in a will. In

these examples it seems clear that “to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing (...) or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it. None of the utterances cited are either true or false. To name the ship is to say the words ‘I name etc.’. When I say, before the registrar or altar, ‘I do’, I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it”.

In particular, the *ara*, the curse, is a performative belonging to the class of commissive, namely those utterances that oblige the speaker to adopt a certain behaviour, like promising, vowing, swearing, with a commissive utterance one who curses obliges and binds not themselves but the event that the curse calls to come off in the reality. The curse as performative is characterized by the power of creating an event, a reality, and to found it, to make it happen, to make it real. Once uttered, the efficacious word is a sort of a natural reality, a power of annihilation, a dreadful force, and an action that can trigger off events automatically. The words of the poet, of the oracle and of the divines, are characterized by the same power.

The curse is furthermore endowed with a religious power, but this ‘religious’ power is entirely dealt with by human beings. It reflects the human will to operate in the world in an entirely different way from prayers. If the prayer connects the human community with the divine one and relies on gods as agents to be solicited for the accomplishment of an event, the curse is intrinsically performative and, like oaths or judicial sentences intends to act directly on reality, thanks to the symbolism conferred by the society on the efficacious word. The gods are often ‘passively’ used as guarantee and defense of the utterance and not as direct agents. This interpretation stresses the social ‘vocation’ of the curse and similar utterances since the first Homeric attestations. In fact, in Ancient Greece the main function of curses was public and not private, and as puzzling as it might seem, their role was perceived in political and social terms. Demosthenes stated that the very guarantors of the Athenian democratic constitution are “the curses, the laws and other safeguards” (20.17).

Curses are one of the means a woman can resort to, in order to defend herself from

offenses. A passage from the *Odyssey* reveals the aggressive aspect of these utterances as well as their performative power. Taken between two fires, Telemachus replies to Antinous, the most prominent of Penelope's suitors, who is urging him to take side and marry his mother:

“Antinous, in no wise may I thrust forth from the house against her will her that bore me and reared me; and, as for my father, he is in some other land, whether he be alive or dead. An evil thing it were for me to pay back a great price to Icarius, as I must, if of my own will I send my mother away. For from her father's hand shall I suffer evil, and heaven [135] will send other ills besides, for my mother as she leaves the house will invoke the dread Avengers; and I shall have blame, too, from men. Therefore will I never speak this word.” *Odyssey*, 2.130-137.

Odysseus's son fears that, should he chase his mother from their house, he would suffer penalties (*poinai*) from the various social actors involved: Penelope's father would make him pay the damage with some sort of ransom, people in the village would discredit him with words of blame and his mother would call the Furies (Erinyes) by uttering curses upon leaving the house. This passage can be further elucidated by some general maxims on behaviours that can cause curses and ensuing disasters in the long conversation between Penelope and Odysseus in the book 19:

“He who is himself hard, and has a hard heart, on him do all mortal men invoke woes for the time to come while he still lives, and when he is dead all mock at him. But if one is blameless himself and has a blameless heart, his fame stranger-guests bear far and wide among all men, and many praise his name”, *Odyssey*, 19.329-334.

Penelope enounces rules that belong to a common ethical code that the Homeric poems have the function of preserving and teaching at the same time. These rules are consistent with the character of other statements referring to *Dike*. In these occurrences, the word acts as agent of social control. The socially damaging behaviours are punished with curses, which in this case correspond to penal consequences *ante litteram* and parallel the conditional curse of Penelope on



Telemachus. They are automatically followed by damages, and by a bad fame after death. The curse as word of blame finds a precise correspondence in the equally efficacious words of blessings, and words of praise, verbal reward and gratification that ensue the socially correct and useful behaviours (l. 333).

Another interesting instance is the case of Althaia cursing her own son Meleager, for having accidentally slain her brother:

By her side lay Meleager nursing his bitter anger, wroth because of his mother's curses; for she uttered a curse, invoking instantly the gods, being grieved for her brother's slaying; and furthermore instantly beat with her hands upon the all-nurturing earth, calling upon Hades and dread Persephone, [570] the while she knelt and made the folds of her bosom wet with tears, that they should bring death upon her son; and the Erinys that walketh in darkness heard her from Erebus, even she of the ungentle heart. (transl. by A.T. Murray, slightly changed) *Iliad*, 9. 567-571

In this passage we find the same deity named by Telemachus in association with his mother, the Erinys, the Furies that act at the same time as curses and as avengers. Both passages reveal the complex nature of the Furies, feminine characters, as both goddesses and personification of curses. The Furies are at same time *daimones*, divine creatures, connected to the course of *Dike*, the right order and Curses, as it is stated by Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 417, “we are called Curses in the house under the earth”. As goddesses they punish whoever violates the right order of things and restore the balance, including the violations inside the family. They appear particularly connected to the sphere of the feminine and the motherly: they may cause sterility and annihilate all forms of life or they may protect and bestow fertility. As Sommerstein [31] among others has shown, the former aspect is particularly evident in their representation as Erinys in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, as fearful and menacing goddesses who may unleash ruin, sterility and contamination on the whole community lest they be deprived of their honour (see *Eumenides*, ll. 780 ff.), or as blessing powers of fertility and prosperity in their aspect of Benevolent (in Greek *Eumenides*). Both actions are triggered by the use of

powerful words, blessing and cursing.

The social function of curses is made all the more interesting by their use by women: cursing is thus a quintessential feminine “weapon” that a mother can use against his son, and that any woman, as woman, is endowed with.

Furthermore, cursing empowers those subjects that for their peculiar juridical status happen to have no other way to defend themselves, such as suppliants, strangers or beggars, and, of course, women. The efficacious word may become an Erinnic power when a right is violated to their detriment and may call thus a vengeance that a mother like Penelope or Althaia cannot accomplish otherwise.

#### *Mourning Becomes Electra* : Cursing and Funerary Lament

A particular type of curse is uttered in occasion of funerary laments for those that died of a violent death. If in ancient Greece as in Mediterranean cultures, women are particularly associated with death rituals, funerary laments performed in occasion of violent deaths, are the arena of feminine agency, as it has been highlighted. In this context, women incite male relative to take revenge against the killer, and Greek literature portrays women in this role as bloody avengers, as McHardy[26] has particularly emphasized. A memorable and famous instance of this type of curse is Electra’s prayer in Aeschylus’ *Libations Bearers*. In the second tragedy of the famous *Oresteia* trilogy, sent by queen Clytemestra, the killer of her husband Agamemnon, Electra and the chorus of Argive women go to the tomb of Electra’s father in order to pour libations on the tomb to try and expiate Clytemestra’s murder. They end up transforming this errand into a ritual call for revenge, which is designed to stir up Agamemnon’s wrath against his murderers, and to invoke the coming of the avenger: Orestes, Electra’s very brother.

**Electra:** Supreme herald of the realm above and the realm below, O Hermes of the nether world, come to my aid, summon to me the spirits beneath the earth to hear my prayers, [125] spirits that watch over my father's house, and Earth herself, who gives birth to all things, and having nurtured them receives their increase in turn. And meanwhile, as I pour these lustral offerings to the dead, I invoke my father: “Have pity both on me and on dear Orestes! [130] How shall we rule our own house? For now we are bartered away like vagrants by her who bore us, by her

who in exchange got as her mate Aegisthus, who was her accomplice in your murder. As for me, I am no better than a slave, [135] Orestes is an outcast from his inheritance, while they in their insolence revel openly in the winnings of your toil. But that Orestes may come home with good fortune I pray to you, father: Oh, hearken to me! And as for myself, grant that I may prove far more circumspect than my mother and more reverent in deed. [140]

I utter these prayers on our behalf, but I ask that your avenger appear to our foes, father, and that your killers may be killed in just retribution. So I interrupt my prayer for good [145] to offer them this prayer for evil. But be a bearer of blessings for us to the upper world, with the help of the gods and Earth and Justice crowned with victory.”*She pours out the libations*

Such are my prayers, and over them I pour out these libations. It is right for you to crown them with lamentations, [150] raising your voices in a chant for the dead. (Transl. by H. Weir Smyth)

Electra’s monologue opens up with a prayer to Hermes *chthonios* (ll 124a- 128), “of the Underworld”, where the messenger-god is invoked to bring Electra’s words to the ears of underground powers and of the dead, so that they may listen to the maid’s requests and vows. The Earth is also an object of invocation, insofar as she is the symbol of life’s cycle: the earth generates every living being, nurtures and receives their mortal remains, as she did with Agamemnon’s body and as she will with the libation. After addressing her father (ll. 130-140), Electra bids the avenger to appear, and goes on cursing the murderers “that your killers may be killed in just retribution”, line 144. This curse uttered in a ritual context takes the place of the juridical, legal, defense (of course, in saying “takes the place of“ we are projecting back a model that not only comes after, but also, as it will be clear, stems from the former situation). These lines are marked by the logic of analogy and retaliation, where we find the motif of curse as a reply to *hybris*, injustice and arrogance, where the curse acts as an agent of *Dike*. In the archaic thought, *Dike*, as we have already seen, is the goddess and the power that maintains and defends the vital functioning of the social as well as of the cosmic balance and order. When this balance is disarrayed, as in the case of a murder, the curse, as word of justice, acts as sanction and defense. Thanks to the belief in its performative power, Electra intends to trigger a mechanism of rebalancing on behalf of *Dike*, calling for

revenge.

## 2.2 *An unwelcome stranger: Women praying in the public space*

Women can therefore express their religious power in the well defined realms of the house and of funerary lament. But what happens when women try to express themselves in the public sphere? In order to provide an answer to the question, we will now turn to Athenian tragedy.

In Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*, the playwright describes the siege of the city of Thebes, ruled through the leadership of Oedipus' son, Eteocles, by the army of his brother Polyneices, striving to gain control of the city. In the first part of the play, king Eteocles opposes the Chorus of Theban women caught in a panic by the attack of the powerful Argive army. This opposition is reflected in two opposing ways of dealing with the gods, and as such, a rich source of self reflection. As I have shown elsewhere [17], many of the ritual procedures and religious elements hinted at in the play, find such a confirmation in other sources as to reasonably suppose that the poet's exploration of religious tensions may allow us to understand and reconstruct some perceptions and features of Athenian attitudes towards the gods. I will offer here a reading of the opposition between Eteocles and the Chorus of Theban women by framing it in the semantic context of the *polis* religion of fifth century Athens. The dialectic confrontation of the scene shows what is described as a typically feminine religiosity, based upon a supplicatory attitude, tendentiously and yet typically described by Eteocles as negative and socially disruptive. The women's position is represented in acts of supplication (*hiketeia*), wailing lament, and in supplicatory prayers (*litai*). Zeitlin [36] has argued that in Aeschylean drama, the playwright uses the opposition between male and female to encompass polis-related issues larger than go beyond the politics of gender, and that "he presents the differing patterns of power relations between the sexes and invokes the qualities symbolically associated with each". Nonetheless, as Easterling [13] and Foley [14] have remarked, these very oppositions reveal a great deal about the representation of women in tragic and

public discourse.

*Men and women, courage vs. Fear* If the prologue is dominated by a martial atmosphere and the *parodos* by female feelings, the first episode with the stichomythia brings the male and the female into direct and open opposition, as Bruit-Zaidman [6] has remarked. After Eteocles' opening speech, the scout enters bringing dreadful news from the battlefield (39-68). He describes in vivid, frightening images the seven heroes ready to fight. With brief, vivid touches he depicts the ritual of oath performed with the blood of a sacrificed bull, the commitment to win or die, and the fierce, almost demonic appearance and courage of the seven heroes. Eteocles and the Chorus react in parallel and divergent ways: both interact with the gods, but Eteocles utters a prayer (*euche*) while the Chorus performs acts of supplication.

Eteocles responds to the news with an address to the gods following a three-part structure: invocation, where the relevant gods are named together with their epithets; argument, where the petitioner states why the god or gods should grant his request; and petition, where the actual object of the prayer is expressed (69-77)

O Zeus and Earth, and ye gods that guard our  
city, and Curse, the potent spirit of vengeance  
of my sire, do not, I entreat ye, extirpate in ruin  
utter and complete, with ravage by the foe, a city  
that speaks the speech of Hellas, and our hearths  
and home. O may they never constrain in slavery's  
yoke a land of freedom and the town of Cadmus!  
But show yourselves our strengths. Methinks it is  
our common cause I urge. For a State that  
prosperous pays honours to its gods. (Transl. by G.O. Hutchinson)

Eteocles' prayer is structured into three parts: invocation, argument and request. The description of the gods as *polissouchoi*, "the land gods", is, in my opinion, the key of the prayer. Their embeddedness brings to light the reason for the interrelated relationship between civic society and the gods. Eteocles' response therefore stresses the theme of reciprocity in the context of a prayer uttered in a

moment of utmost danger. Salvation in a time of war is primarily in the hands of men, in their capacity to act as hoplites should, with order and control against the attack of the disorderly enemy, backed by the support of the gods as allies. Eteocles' prayer is therefore characterized by self-control, and a well supported spirit of 'bargaining', where the common good appear the key of the whole statement, all in tune with what is expected from a man, a ruler, and by a Greek man, as Parker has shown [26].

The Chorus' reaction is markedly different, and shows what we can define as a *supplicatory attitude*. The Chorus of Theban women rushes onto the stage and reacts with uncontrolled cries and expressions of despair to the news. It invokes gods and goddesses in stages mixing the invocation with expressions of helplessness, and sheer panic (79-98). From the outset the women's reaction contradicts Eteocles' clear orders, who after his *parainesis* ordered the men of Thebes to "stand firm courageously" because "invading hordes must not cause panic" (34-5). In the quoted passages and throughout the *parodos* the women react to noises of war, to the shouts of an attacking party and the thunder of horse-hooves. From the performative viewpoint, the reaction of the Chorus, together with the actual noises offstage, would probably have had a strong impact on the audience, who, in their passive position, might have shared the fear of the Chorus. It might be useful to keep in mind therefore that Eteocles' endeavour to reprimand and channel their fear into a manageable ritual form would have found a second, implicit, recipient in the audience itself.

For the women of the Chorus, salvation can only come from the gods and not from men. At lines 93-4 they wonder which god or goddess has the power to save them from destruction and nowhere is there a reference to human resources able to counter the enemy's attack. The Chorus, as Jackson[23] has well analyzed, relies totally on the gods' power in a way that completely negates a human role.

This attitude to the gods seems to express the passive position of the Athenian woman, as mentioned above, barred from carrying arms. This position is embodied in a form of cultic action divisible into: ritual action, supplication

(*hiketeia*) and ritual speech, lamenting prayer (*litai*). They approach the statues of the local gods, fall at their feet, clinging or embracing them (lines 94-9), using gestures which the Greek audience would have immediately understood as supplication, *hiketeia*. The Chorus defines its action as a collective supplication, calling themselves a “company of suppliants”.

Cases of collective supplication to gods are extremely rare and are to be found in cases of defeat, when there is no more recourse to human intervention, as in the case of the Athenian plague (see Th.2.47). Goff [19] argues that the Chorus “are well within their rights, as women of the city, to perform these actions”. The scholar, complying with the idea of Thebes as the anti-polis, holds that in Athenian tragedy Theban women are prevented from fulfilling their ritual function on behalf of the polis; if this is arguable for other tragedies, the *Seven against Thebes* seems to show a rather different picture. In *Iliad*. 6. 287-311 a comparable cultic action is performed by Trojan women, consisting of procession to Athena’s sanctuary, prayer for the city’s salvation and dedication of a gown. Bruit-Zaidman [6] remarks that whereas the Trojan women act on Hector’s recommendation, the Theban women act on their own initiative. I do not agree however that the intervention of the Theban women is ‘traditional’, despite the difference with the Iliadic scene. In any case, as Nappi [27] has shown, , the prayer of *Iliad* 6 is a negative paradigm of prayer that fails because the priestess charged with uttering it, Theanò, is unable to express it in a persuasive and appropriate way for the very reason that she is a woman.

The Chorus itself justifies its action as one dictated by panic and terror (214), when Eteocles’ words oppose their purportedly eccentric behaviour with the ‘correct’ way of addressing the gods. This passage of the *Prometheus Bound* suggests that the supplicatory attitude is a feature associated with women, *Pr.* 1002-3: “Do not think I will turn womanish for fear of Zeus’ decision, and I’ll imitate women supplicating with upturned hands, which I most hate” This association is probably due to the fact that they had little access to the ‘reciprocal’

prayer, associated as it was to the performing of a sacrifice. Dillon [12] highlights the connection between women and kneeling before a god or clinging statues, concluding that “like kneeling to a god, clinging to a statue was appropriate behaviour for women, but also indicates their passivity and helplessness, particularly in the face of sexual violence”. Recalling this element, we can better understand why the very performance of this act could, as Eteocles fears, induce panic in the soldier-citizens.

The difference between the ritual form used by women, defined as *lite*, and other forms of prayer seems to lie not in the invocation to the gods, or in the requests, but in the lack of reciprocity, which we have defined above in the Homeric form of prayer as the argument and in being uttered with a lamenting tone. The word *lite* moreover, is very often associated with supplication. In the *Seven against Thebes* it seems in conclusion to be a type of *lamenting prayer* particularly associated to women, whose peculiarity consists in being supplicatory and performed with a particular wailing tone.

The attitude of the Chorus has often been interpreted as expressing a “desperate and unquestioning faith”, or “genuine, intuitive and irrational” feelings, as Brown [5] phrased it, as if expressing a truer or simply more pious religious feeling. Jackson [23] has rightly remarked that the Chorus has “benefited” in modern criticism from the thought-habits of Christianity and that “to regard passive self-abandonment to the gods as a virtue is much more typical of Christian religious thought than Greek”. One might call reciprocal this attitude too, reciprocity being a very wide encompassing conceptual category, representing different patterns of behaviour. However, the Chorus expresses a type of reciprocity where the unequal status of the partners (gods and men), is not bridged by a common ground of interest or by the direct offering of a gift. Once again, this is coherent with women’s position in Greek society, where they could not benefit of any form of equality vis-à-vis men-citizen.

### *2.3 Eteocles vs. the Chorus: a confrontation of genre and religious attitudes*

Let us now turn to the next scene: the dialogue between Eteocles and the Chorus. It has been noted that the length of this dialogue seems disproportionate to



the play. In my opinion this dialogue defines by way of opposition two different religious attitudes, one positive, “virile and civic”, in Vernant’s words [35], and the other dangerous, negative and marginal. The attitudes are thus represented by Eteocles, the masculine side, who, interestingly, is the only defining voice in the passages under examination; the feminine actor, the Chorus, defines Eteocles’ attitude by way of dissonance. It may be assumed that in Athenian reality, taken as an all encompassing system, the two forms of religiosity coexisted; still we have already seen some consonance between Eteocles and the Athenian point of view.

Aeschylus emphasizes the contrast between Eteocles and the women of the Chorus by creating a series of oppositions in terms of religiosity, as we have stated at the beginning, which take on their value against the background of civic Athenian religion. I will list some of these opposing pairs:

Opposition	Male	Female	Lines
Religiosity	Normative	Marginal	183-4, 187-90, 193-5, 200-1
Relation to gods	Reciprocity	Supplication	216-17, 230-2
Ritual form	Prayer <i>euche</i> <sup>-</sup> + Sacrifice	Supplication + <i>lite</i>	185-6, 230-2, 258, 265-80
Effect on polis	Courage	Fear	250, 252, 262
Domain	Public (outside)	Private (inside)	200-1, 232
Relation to fear	Control	Expression	236-8, 250, 270
Response to danger	Exhortation	Lament	242-4

Table 1: Oppositions between male and female in the *Seven against Thebes*

Ch. Even so, yet the might of Heaven is above all;  
and oftimes in the midst of his distress, it uplifteth  
the helpless, even from cruel woes when clouds are  
lowering over his eyes.  
Et. ‘Tis for men to offer victims and sacrifices unto

the gods when they make trial of the foe; but thy  
task is to hold thy peace and bide within the house.

Whereas Eteocles has stressed the importance of human resources, both in themselves and in dealing with the gods, the Chorus declares here the powerlessness of human beings *vis-a-vis* divine power.

Eteocles states in normative terms how one should ritually behave towards the gods when there is a need to turn to them, in this case before a battle. In doing so, and expressing what Caldwell [9] has termed as genuine misogyny, he tries to put back in order what had been subverted and disrupted by the women's invasion of the public scene and by the performance of anomalous ritual actions.

In his ongoing struggle for control Eteocles needs to divide the religious territory according to the opposing categories of outside-inside and male-female: dealing with and propitiating the gods is men's task, whose appropriate ritual action consists of sacrifices and divination. The opposition between the inside and outside space takes on a further connotation in this passage. The outside of the polis represents the enemy, the barbaric face of disorder (73, 170) and the danger confronting the citizen hoplite force, but it also represents the public sphere, dominated by the men, who deal both with the enemy and with gods as allies, while the women must remain inside the home. Opposing the women, Eteocles seems more prompted by the interest of the *polis* than by his idiosyncratic misogyny, for what matters is "saying what is appropriate", so that the city's defenders won't be discouraged by the spreading of panic, and this is why he asks the women whether their attitude will bring safety to the *polis* (182).

#### *2.4 Confining women's dangerous voices: the strategy of containment*

At this point the Chorus has finally agreed to restrain its wailings (258-63) and Eteocles gives the final directions before uttering his own prayer, in order to create the appropriate liturgical and ritual context to support the men's verbal and ritual actions in preparing to battle. His first command interrupts the women's contact with the statues and ends the formal supplication (264-6):

This utterance likes me better than thy words  
that went before. Aye, and more than this – quit  
thy place about the images and make the better  
prayer: “May the gods fight on our side!”.

Line 265 probably indicates a stage direction, whereby the Chorus distances itself from the statues: after verbal silence has been obtained Eteocles also reduces them to gestural silence. He then asks them to pray in “the most appropriate way” and for him “appropriate” means asking the gods to be partners in battle. This kind of address is of course a customary element of prayers before duels, battles or difficult enterprises, but its occurrence here takes on a clearer meaning because of the opposition to the women’s utterances and is highlighted by the opposition between reciprocity and supplication. The women in fact have already asked for intervention from the gods (130-1, 145, 214, 255), but in a manner of supplication and submission. Eteocles on the other hand, asks the gods to be engaged in the battle as allies, more powerful than men, but still together with them, consistent with his human-centred approach to salvation (267-81).

And now first hear my vow, and then ring out the loud  
and solemn cry of jubilation, our Grecian wont of  
sacrificial shout heartening to our friends, and remove  
the terror of battle.

And now “To the guardian gods of our country, whether they haunt  
the plain or keep watch over the market-place, to  
Dirces’s springs, and to Ismenus’ stream, I make my  
vow that, if all go well and the city with its burghers  
be preserved, they shall stain with blood of sheep  
the hearths of the gods and offer trophies, while I  
will bedeck their hallowed abodes with the spoil of  
the spear-smitten vestments of the foe”.

Such be the tenour of thy prayers unto the gods,  
indulging not in lamentations nor in vain and frantic  
shrieks.

Its several difficulties notwithstanding, this passage can be viewed as a positive ‘rulebook’ of the customary men’s ways to interact with the gods in civic

religion, particularly during wartime. First of all, vow-prayer and sacrifice are mentioned and understood as a complementary pair, verbal and material offerings to the gods that continually renew a two-way relationship; solemn prayers and sacrifices were a part of warfare, uttered before going into battle, but they are also the exclusive lot of men, as warfare is.

The duty of men is therefore defined as their almost exclusive leadership in wartime rituals, and the role of women is contained in the controlled and positive emotional expression of their shrill ritual cry, the *ololygmos*, at line 268, coupled with the paean. Lupas and Petre [24] see in Eteocles' invitation a dangerous reversal of customary ritual because the *ololygmos* "does not accompany the vows but rather the sacrifice". In fact, Greek practice uses the *ololygmos* or *ololyge* in many functions (such as greeting, free prayer, expression of joy), even if its most relevant use is as a high-pitched accompaniment to the sacrifice.

In pointing out the opposition between the order of the citizen's behaviour against the impious and unmeasured attitude of the enemies, Petre [29] remarks that "the piety of the assieged is entirely on the side of order". Still, according to our interpretation, the piety expressed by Theban women is tendentiously depicted as siding more with the barbaric than with the civic, particularly regarding the connotation of disorder and vocal distortion; in this picture we have seen women performing extreme acts and it is important to remind ourselves that as Foley [14] has remarked, "tragedy permits male choruses and actors not only to imitate female behavior but to imitate female behavior forbidden to contemporary women in a public context". The former emotions of disorderly cries are converted into the order of a customary expression. While at the beginning the women uttered "savage sounds" (280), and threatened by this token to spread panic among the population, their newfound vocal expression in the *ololygmos* can provide positive reinforcement to the fighters. With this in mind we can also see the ritual process prompted by Eteocles as a passage from the barbaric to the civic, which, in gender's terms means a passage from feminine to masculine.

After a short hesitation, the Chorus gives in to Eteocles' orders and slowly

transforms its laments into invocations to the gods in more reciprocal terms and with customary ritual addresses including curses against the enemy and wishes *in bonam partem* for Eteocles and the Theban army. Eteocles has therefore eventually succeeded in ‘taming’ the dangerous voices of the women, reducing them once again to devout supporters of men folk.

The conflict between Eteocles and the Chorus, when seen as a larger tension between two types of religiosity in *polis* religion, allows a number of points to emerge. The interplay between *euche* and *lite*, sacrifice and supplication, order and disorder, control and expression of emotions create the dissonance of the *parodos* and the first episode.

## **Conclusions**

I have shown how the *Seven* brings to the fore two contrasting attitudes towards the gods, expressed in different ritual actions through the male-female opposition, where the dominant one (the male) constructs the other as inappropriate or deviating. The expression of painful emotions and fear and the foreboding of slavery, defeat and death contained in the supplication to the gods and in lamenting prayers have the effect of ‘demoralizing the troops’ by making visible the risks and consequences of warfare. The danger embodied in the action of the women is therefore not only that of ill omen, but they may also stir in the hoplitic body exactly those dangerous emotions their morale contrives to master. Eteocles’ struggle for control eventually ends with his death, and the end of the play shows the re-emergence of the women’s lamenting, emotional voices.

The analysis of the use of efficacious and ritual words by women tends to show that in ancient Greece the feminine voice plays a significant role if confined to the closed, internal space of the household, and a woman’s presence in Greek cult must be absent from the public domain, unless properly restrained by a “strategy of containment”, as MacClure [25] has it. The male strategy of containment towards the women in a number of plays that show “how women’s uncontrolled speech disrupts the male -governed household and city unless it is suppressed or transmuted into a ritual form”. or managed by men and converted into controllable ritual forms.

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