

Sylke Rene Meyer

Animal Husbandry, Tragedy, and the Patriarchal Psychosis

In this article Sylke Rene Meyer traces the historical derivation of tragedy as a patriarchal cultural achievement. To this end, she organizes the pertinent developments, and shows how tragedy came into being with the transition from nomadic to sedentary agrarian societies, principally through the onset of livestock farming in the Mediterranean. Tragedy in this context is the reinterpretation of pre-patriarchal myth in the mindset of this new way of life, and can be seen as developing in response to the male guilt complex in early patriarchal society, serving as a non-religious exculpation instrument and collective therapy. Until today, the dramatic form consolidates power by privileging an ideology of change (that is, drama) that individualizes conflict as an opportunity for personal growth, and in so doing, distracts from the systemic conflict that can be solved only by subverting the dominant social order. Sylke Rene Meyer is Professor of Screenwriting and Dramaturgy at the International Film School in Cologne. She works as a writer and director in theatre, film, and mixed media works, some of which have received significant awards.

Key terms: psychoanalysis, Neolithic revolution, patriarchy, feminism, sacrifice.

MY STARTING POINT is the Neolithic revolution – the transition from a nomadic to a sedentary lifestyle, from a matriarchal to a patriarchal social order. The question of whether and to what extent matriarchy actually ever existed has been contested and remains a subject of controversy.¹ For the purposes of this essay, I define matriarchy as: ‘She has to agree.’ A society in which sexual intercourse has to be consensual, I call matriarchal. ‘It has to be her choice.’ She controls reproduction.

In spite of its name, the Neolithic revolution is much rather a period than a revolution that took place roughly between 10,000 BCE and 2000 BCE. The Neolithic revolution marks the recognition of paternity, written language, and the acquisition of surplus product, hence the privatization of the means of production, such as machinery, land, livestock, and humans – namely, women, slaves, and children. Sedentary cultures constituted the discourses around family, homeland, nationalism, and class (to name a few).² Following critical theory in its analysis of the acquisition of surplus product as a defining event in the formation of class

society and the simultaneous dissolution of primitive communism, the Neolithic revolution can be seen as the most formative step in human organization until now. In his book *The Origin of the Family: Private Property and the State*, Friedrich Engels demonstrates that patriarchy and capitalism are fundamentally related. The oppression of women is not contradictory to capitalism but its formative condition.³

One aspect of the Neolithic revolution is the introduction of animal husbandry, hence the slaughter of animals. The pre-Neolithic hunter, having limited means, slew his prey in a more or less equal fight, whereas the rancher butchers the helpless animal. In a world where animals and humans lived closely together and animals were generally seen as creatures with personality and soul,⁴ the killing of a bound living being must have felt terrifying.⁵

Breeding animals also allowed humans to recognize and understand paternity. Constantly interacting with the herd, early shepherds must have realized that no offspring are generated without the presence of males. Paternity, then, was readily apparent and

acknowledged.⁶ (In English the context resonates in 'animal husbandry' and 'husband'.) Until this time, parentage had been based on the familial relationship to the mother. The recognition of paternity led to the displacement of matrilineal succession in favour of patrilineal succession. Monogamous marriage was introduced, replacing social mating systems.

The man developed a genuine interest in the protection of his paternity. He wanted to be sure that his wife gave birth to his children only and that his children would inherit his property. Hence anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss's understanding of marriage as a reciprocal alliance between men. Women are the objects of marriage, not a part of marriage.⁷ The new order is based on and maintained with violence.

With farming and the domestication of animals came land ownership – territory that must be defended. Homelands and sovereignty develop. Violence becomes a part of everyday life – violence that the patriarch wields over his family, violence that men wield over women, adults over children, slave owners over slaves, the rancher over animals, the ruler over his subjects. All are examples of forceful power structures unknown in hunter-and-gatherer societies.

When violence is used, the perpetrator feels and then represses guilt, and the victim is traumatized and then dissociates from the trauma. A new social order based on collective trauma is created: our social order. Until this time people certainly experienced a fear of mortality. Yet collective repressed trauma, brought on by guilt over and above individual misconduct, must have been previously exceptional. With the emergence of private ownership of women (and so of slaves, children, and animals) the first traumatic repetition compulsion, induced by the systemic and constant use of violence, arose.

Sacrifice, Ritual, Myth

The internalized and repressed feeling of guilt caused by executed violence needed to project outwards again. Instead of following the instinctive primate impulse to flee from

horror, eventually to be haunted by it when it resurfaces in nightmares, the impulse was turned around by embracing the repugnance. Thus the sacrifice – the execution of horror in an autonomous procedure of carefully chosen paybacks – came into being.⁸

Sacrificial ritual is the subversion of horror; the performed ritual transforms everyday killing into an abstraction of higher order. Illusion of mastery offers redemption to the traumatized collective. This reversal of flight is ritualized and follows a predetermined course, the sanctification of terror.⁹ What an intellectual masterpiece of mankind! Men have actively inverted the impulse to run from their fears and seek refuge from the horrific in the horrific (in the form of human sacrifice). Thus sacrificial rituals are the manifestation of the compulsive repetition of the specific violence that came into being with patriarchal society.¹⁰

Such assertions about prehistoric times lack appropriate documentation and therefore remain speculative. Scientific data are quite often inconclusive, hence it can only be surmised that in hunter-and-gatherer societies ritual sacrifice would not have held the same meaning and potency. Representations of pre-patriarchal myth can be found in cave paintings like those in Chauvet or Lascaux, and in sculptures such as the statuettes of women found in Lespugue and Willendorf, both dating back to around 25,000 years ago.

The most common themes in cave paintings are large wild animals, no hunts, rarely humans, and some signs. The female statuettes with the apparent large size of their breasts and abdomens, and the detail put into their vulva, have led scholars to interpret the figures as a fertility symbols. Ritual killing and death rituals might have also existed: the slain animal soon to be eaten by the group was likely commemorated with a ritual of thanks given for support and sustenance.

The psychoanalytical concept of the two main forces in human behaviour, *Thanatos* and *Eros* – the death drive and the libidinous drive – also suggests a destructive and violent core in human nature that might have manifested itself in bloodthirsty outbreaks.

However, simply to kill a captive animal and to entertain the notion of ritual sacrifice seems to be meaningful only when it is compared with the systematic killing of helpless animals in everyday life. Such rituals only come about with the slaughtering of animals and, as a rule, with a sedentary way of life.

Yet ritual sacrifice has to have meaning, a 'why' and a 'what'. Without a justification myth, it would be merely frightening. In myth, the threat of cruelty and violence continued to be drawn on as a means of power and as a justification for ritual. Ritual, for instance the sacrifice of one's own child, is sanctified through mythology. Myth not only explains, but also justifies ritual. 'Myth does not stand by itself but is tied to ritual'.¹¹ Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac (or, according to the Islamic version, Ismail) and the sacrifice of Jesus, whose blood the faithful drink in the eucharist, are rituals that are meaningful only through myth, that is, the Bible or other sacred books. Only in the transformation of flight into refuge is the horrific imbued with meaning: the horrific becomes myth.

Myth – in Brief

Ritual requires justification through myth. However, not every myth is tied to a ritual. Many myths have simply been told, interpreting the world (like creation myths) and transmitting ideas and history. It is generally agreed that the true writing of language (not only numbers) was invented in Mesopotamia, in ancient Sumer, around 3200 BCE. Yet residues of non-recorded, pre-patriarchal myth may be found in the recorded narratives of patriarchal mythology of which the oldest is most certainly the Sumeric *Gilgamesh* epos, written around 2800 BCE. The protagonist's name, Gilgamesh, means literally 'his ancestor was a hero' and also 'his offspring is a hero'. Thus the name seemingly refers to patrilinearity.

The epos tells us of Gilgamesh's heroic actions and his friendship with Enkidu, a humanlike being who was created by the goddess Aruru, the mother goddess, one of the seven great deities of Sumer. The story of

Noah, the deluge, and vast parts of the Greek mythology are rooted in the *Gilgamesh* epos. The Sumeric language died out around 2000 BCE. Therefore ancient Greek is the world's oldest recorded living language going back to 1400 BCE.

Greek mythology dates from c. 900–800 BCE and was recorded by essentially two authors, Hesiod and Homer. Hesiod offers in his *Theogony* (*Origin of the Gods*) the fullest account of the earliest Greek myths, namely the creation of the world and the origin of the gods, a mythology greatly informed by the Sumeric *Gilgamesh* epos and with a strong presence of pre-patriarchal mythical residues, featuring powerful female gods like Chaos, said to be one of the first beings to exist in the universe, and Gaia, Goddess of the Earth, mother of Kronos and grandmother of Zeus.

Homer penned the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* usually dated to the eighth century BCE.¹² The *Iliad* describes the decade-long siege of Troy and the final victory of the Greeks by tricking the Trojans with a wooden horse. The *Odyssey* describes the ten-year homecoming of Greek warrior Odysseus after the fall of Troy. Although the Trojan war originated from myth (a quarrel between the goddesses Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite, which led ultimately to the abduction/run-away of Helen by/with Paris),¹³ the war itself was most likely a historical event that took place in the thirteenth or twelfth century BCE in Troy, believed to be located in modern-day Turkey, excavated by German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann in 1868.¹⁴ The Homeric epics therefore mark the transition from mythical to historical time.

Finally there is the mythology of the first five books of the Bible, in Judaism called the Torah, meaning 'law' or 'teaching', also called the Pentateuch. The mythical nexus of the books is just like the Greek mythology informed by *Gilgamesh*. It describes a creation myth similar to the Greek and Sumeric narratives, but soon moves on to tell the family history of patriarch and cattle-breeder Abraham (Avrām in Hebrew, meaning 'the sublime father') and his offspring in a monotheistic world view.¹⁵ Seven generations later, Abraham's descendant Moses

led his people out of Egypt and slavery. A forty-year odyssey of homelessness and wandering follows, made bearable only by believing in the Promised Land.

The narrative of the Pentateuch empowers the homeless wanderers as God's people and serves as an entitlement to claim property of land (Palestine), women (Hagar, Sarah) and children (Isaac, Ismail). Cattle-breeding was the main source of income for these people living a semi-nomadic lifestyle. The shepherd became an integral topos in patriarchal culture. The Hebrew deity Yahweh derives from Amen-Ra, the Egyptian God of the herds,¹⁶ so it is no accident that shepherds were present at Jesus's birth – less as a reference to the underclass in early Christendom than as a reference to the founders of religion. Thus: 'The Lord is my shepherd.'

The myth of the shepherd appears over and over again in patriarchal iconography, including the cowboy as an anarchic adversary of the cattle baron (representing the archetypal patriarch in the Western film genre), that is modern tragedy. The Bible not only leaves out all pre-patriarchal polytheistic references, but also condemns a belief system as such as heretical. Lilith, 'the spirit in the tree' in the *Gilgamesh* epos, and according to non-canonical records Adam's first wife who had left him, became demonized just like the former Hebrew queen of heaven Asherah, once worshipped as the consort of Yahweh.

Politics and Post-Diction Narrative

As explained, the systematic violence in patriarchal society created collective neuroses that led to the fabrication of the idea of the reversal of horror, and ultimately to human sacrifice. Sacrificing makes sense only if offered to some higher power; thus all rituals presuppose the existence of deities. We offer to receive. Second (and obviously), sacrifice requires an offering – sometimes a lambkin, but often a human: the daughter (such as Iphigenia) or the son (such as Isaac) of somebody has to be killed.

That is a high price to pay, psychologically and economically. Consequently, concepts

were embraced that offered exculpation for the perpetrator (the one killing animals, women, children, enemies in an everyday practice), yet overrides ritual sacrifice. Tragedy is one such concept. Another is the *vaticinium ex eventu* or post-diction narrative that came into being with the monotheistic Abrahamic faiths. Both tragedy and post-diction narrative have dominated western culture ever since. Both derive from myth, and both are political narratives.

In a post-diction narrative, an etiology *ex ante* is introduced – the *vaticinium ex eventu*, which translates into 'foretelling after the event'. Everything is prophesied as exactly that. In the New Testament, for example, the mythical nexus is reorganized around one protagonist, who is Jesus. The New Testament turns the story of the crucifixion, the human sacrifice of Jesus (the passive one), into the story of the saviour (the active one) simply by employing the structure of a post-diction narrative. A prophecy became true: God had sent his son to die for us.

In retrospect, Jesus's entire life narrative intends his crucifixion. The saviour is our Lord and therefore no longer a victim. We have not killed him, for he killed himself. The victimization is reversed: he sacrificed himself 'for our sins', thus we do not need to feel guilty. The human sacrifice of Jesus in the Christian religion has been performed in every Eucharistic service since, as an act of repetition compulsion: 'Take this and eat it: it is my body' (Matthew, 26:26); 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me' (Luke 22:19); 'Take it; this is my body' (Mark 14:22). The Eucharist elevates the sacrifice and fills it with its psychopathological purpose through the mythical narrative: his body we eat, his blood we drink. The transfer of the blood-shedding sacrifice into the sphere of logos turned out to be a brilliant intellectualization. No further sacrifices need to be performed but the symbolic one.

Tragedy: Mythology in a Dramatic Form

Tragedy is mythology interpreted within the dramatic form. The Trojan War, the central historical event of antiquity, was a pervasive

theme in Greek theatre. Greek mythology describes the Trojan War as a war to do with an abducted woman, and thus it clearly pertains to the significant patriarchal violation of property.

It is notable that in classical theatre the audience was already familiar with the plot. New stories were rarely written; instead myth was newly staged and told in a new way. People did not come to the theatre because they wanted to learn what the plot was about. They came to experience how the plot would be told this time round.

Tragedy originated in the theatre of ancient Greece 2,500 years ago. Tragedy is one of the dramatic forms. The other form is comedy. In tragedy the protagonist dies, in comedy all ends happily. Tragedy invokes in its audience an accompanying cathartic sensation. The dramatic form has been addressed first by Aristotle in his *Poetics* (335 BCE). The word 'tragedy' comes from *tragos* and *oide*, which means literally 'he-goat' and 'song'. Its origin remains a subject of debate. Some scholars suggest that the word refers to a goat having been sacrificed before the theatrical performance. Others suspect a goat was given afterwards, as an award for the best performance. Still others connect the origins of tragedy with Dionysus, the satyr-like transgressive God and his ritual symbol, a goat's penis.

These explanations are not mutually exclusive. Considering the presence of pity and awe (*eleos* and *phobos*) as formative elements of tragedy, it seems surmisable to connect tragedy with the whining of slaughtered animals, and through the element of pity, the trauma of the shepherd slaughtering the wailing creature. He silences the lambs.

Tragedy has been analyzed, defined, and, criticized, passionately and extensively.¹⁷ At this point, I will define tragedy not by its agency or content, but by its form. Based on Aristotle's analysis, a narrative structure is a tragedy when it consists of the following elements:

- Tragedy has one protagonist.
- The protagonist has a character flaw (*hamartia* and *hybris*). The word is rooted

in archery, referring to the notion of missing the mark (*hamartia*: missing the target, failure, fault, error). When the protagonist fails, he does so as a result of his own actions and his own obstinacy (*hybris*: extreme pride or arrogance).

- The protagonist has one goal, a very specific, ideally visible and tangible goal. The tragedy tells us whether the protagonist reaches his goal or not. In tragedy the hero reaches his goal but dies; in comedy he lives.
- A tragedy is subdivided into three (or five) acts, with a beginning, middle, and end. The acts are separated by turning points – *peripeteia*, a reversal of circumstances, from good to bad, or from bad to good. In tragedy, the first turning point is a reversal of fortune from bad to good, because the second one has to be from good to bad. In comedy, it is the other way round.
- The protagonist makes at least one critical discovery (*anagnorisis*). *Anagnorisis* means 'recognition' and refers to a sudden realization. His *hamartia* and *hybris* put the protagonist in error. *Anagnorisis* is the devastating realization of having been oblivious. ('I married my mother and killed my father.')
- At the end of act two, the protagonist has to decide between two equivalent options – his *di-lemma*, meaning literally double-proposition, an either/or. In the adaptation of the myth by Aeschylus, Agamemnon's willingness to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia in exchange for a favourable wind triggers a chain of events. It was his decision.
- The protagonist must have a strong motivation to reach his goal. From his perspective, reaching the goal is a matter of life and death. (Oedipus must know the cause of the plague to prove his worthiness as a king, and so on.)
- The protagonist acts onstage. He mimics human behaviour. His actions cause conflict. To meet the consequences, he acts again and causes more complication. His actions are the cause of his tragic fall.

If a narrative form meets these criteria, the tragic effect will unfold and the audience will experience a cathartic sensation.

'As if' and Catharsis

Catharsis (*kátharsis*: 'cleansing') is a state that gives us a sense of expansiveness, belonging, and greatness that goes well beyond our corporeal skin. It is an ecstatic condition, a Dionysian trance state in which the audience member actually loses himself. The nature and effect of catharsis has been much discussed – even whether something like it exists at all, or, if so, whether it prevents the viewer from critical thinking.¹⁸ Neuroscience research gives no definitive answers, but it does give sufficient evidence to infer that the cathartic effect may be described, at least in part, with the following terms: mirror stage, mirror neurons, empathy, and identification.

The term 'mirror stage' was coined by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan. According to Lacan, a child recognizes his image in the mirror between six and eighteen months, at which he reacts with a 'moment of jubilation'. Lacan calls this an *Aha-Erlebnis*, the German term for a moment of insight or an 'ah-ha' experience. For the first time the child experiences himself as an autonomous being. Because the 'I' appears during the 'mirror phase' and is based on an image, it constitutes a whole sphere of images within the psyche. Lacan refers to this sphere as 'the imaginary'. The moment of jubilation is therefore also a narcissistic moment of omnipotence, in which the 'Ideal-I' appears. The 'mirror stage' is therefore tantamount to the birth of the ego.

As the child develops, he individuates more and more from his Ideal-I, from the mirror image, and learns to differentiate between the self and the external image of the self. The individual recognizes the image of himself as something separate from the self and develops the ability to shift perspectives: I slip into the external image, the imaginary image, and take it on as my own. The term 'mirror phase' describes the dualistic ability of humans to differentiate between oneself and an image, and yet be

able to identify with it simultaneously: I know I am not you, but convince myself I am you.

'Mirror neurons' are brain cells, which were discovered in 1995 by Italian researcher Giacomo Rizzolatti and his colleagues while conducting animal research.¹⁹ We owe our ability to empathize with others to the existence of mirror neurons, nerve cells that release the same stimulus while watching an action as if one were actively participating in the action oneself. The observation of the facial expression of emotion of another activates mirror neurons in the pre-frontal cortex and leads to the experience of the same emotion. We empathize in a kind of 'as if' loop. Mirror neurons allow us to watch an actor undergo sorrow and fear and to experience it as our own sorrow and our own fear.²⁰

Tragedy is an 'as if sacrifice'. The tragic dilemma forces the hero to choose between two equivalent alternatives. Loss is at the centre of every decision made, hence we are reluctant to make decisions. All the possibilities are temporarily open to us, and once a decision is made, one door will be closed and will never be open to us again. The dilemma at the end of the second act transforms the role of the protagonist (and us) from perpetrator to plaintiff – a similar yet different exculpation method to the post-diction Jesus-narrative. Now the protagonist has a loss to mourn. The power of identification compels the spectator to mourn this loss, as well, in the full splendour of cathartic exhilaration.

The hero must choose between two equivalent alternatives. A loss will necessarily be lamented, and it stands in the foreground. That is the price. That is what he must sacrifice. If Agamemnon goes to Troy, he will lose his wife, his family, and eventually his life. Oedipus has to decide between saving his people from the plague or keeping his eyesight and rulership. This is either/or. Men in an ancient Greek theatre watching Oedipus blinding himself have the opportunity to experience pleasure in sacrifice: screaming and crying. Finally liberated from the guilt feelings, they encounter their own trauma therapeutically.

Analogous to tragedy, in which the viewer is brought to catharsis by means of identification, comedy functions by a disidentification with the protagonist.²¹ Comedy helps us confront feelings of fear in that we project those feelings on to another. And in tragedy we experience fear. In both cases, the dramatic form translates collective dream imagery – the collective neuroses – into storytelling.

The question of why only the Greeks developed tragedy is one of the unsolved problems of classical scholarship. Only a few similar forms were developed in world theatre.²² Many aspects might have played a role. Firstly, ancient Greeks might not have been able to eradicate the myths lightly because of their long history of written language. The myths had been written in stone (and papyrus). Secondly, they might have been too secular a culture to find comfort in a post-diction narrative. From Democritus' explicit atheism to Xenophanes' satirical poems, myth was secularized before and furthermore through the dramatic form.

Democritus was one of the two founders of ancient atomist theory. The atomists held that there are small indivisible bodies from which everything else is composed, and that these move about in an infinite void. They contended that gods do not exist, but are fabricated by human imagination and storytelling.²³ In the matriarchal, archaic world, one still feared the *chthonian* (underworld) gods. In the tragic world, anthropomorphism and abstract idols carried over into Greek theatre.

Already, starting with the Homeric epics, the narrative shifted from mythological to historical, from religious to political. Causality, inherent in dramatic narrative, replaced destiny. Hence, Christianity banned tragedy. In its sphere the only legitimate narrative was the post-diction narrative of the Bible, until the rebirth of classical Greek ideas and values in the Renaissance heralded the modern world view. Third, the republic of Athens was a democracy, not receptive to a linear aristocratic narrative that claims power and property to one man because a god had given it to him.

Written language, secularism, and democracy are only three considerations regarding

the birth of tragedy. Other aspects related to demography, geography, climate, and so on may have also played an important role. The dramatic form is a system of thought ideated by growth through change, and death caused by not-changing respectively. The absence of either/or written language, secularism, and democracy seems to be a *differentia specifica* in the cultural context of post-diction narratives, ancient Egyptian pharaonic culture, and, later, Chinese dynastic cultures, in which both form and content were sacrosanct and unalterable. In contrast Hellenistic culture achieved with its drama the reinterpretation of the pre-patriarchal/matriarchal myth into the mindset of the new order.

Cry or Die: Tragedy and Psychoanalysis

In Athens, public displays of mourning, including lamentation, were illicit.²⁴ Solon, the lawmaker, made feminine expressions of grief a punishable offence – with two exceptions: funeral dirges and tragedy.²⁵ Funeral dirges were performed by professional women mourners who were allowed to wail by using predefined verses and lyrics only. The physical gestures of mourning women evoke connotations of a dance-like choreography. Like tragedy, it seems that mourning laments are theatrical. Only women perform them, whereas in tragedy only men were allowed to be on stage.

In all the thirty-two surviving tragedies (with the exception of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*), the central conflict of the dramatic adaptation of mythic material develops between man and woman. Antigone defies her uncle Creon and buries her brother Polyneices. In the refugee drama about Medea, the mother and wife becomes a perpetrator. Medea casts out her husband Jason because he attempts to gain permission to reside in Corinth by making a new, advantageous marriage.

What a strange and contradictory encounter: Medea, Antigone, Penthesilea act on the stage. In the audience sits a society of men, who prefer their own sex, intellectually and erotically: homophile, but not gay. In antiquity, women were generally not allowed in a theatre, either on stage or in the audience.

When Medea murders her sons, she is played by a man. The entire Greek culture is centred on the apotheosis of male youths and masculinity, including masculine beauty contests at the beginning of the theatrical festivals. The education system is based on the (sexual) love between *erastos* ('the lover', a teacher) and *eremenos* ('the beloved', the student). The male body is adored in the Olympic games: everything of import is based on love between men.²⁶

Even an undoubtedly brilliant man like Aristotle was convinced that women are not only less intelligent than men, but also that women have fewer teeth than men. Why didn't he ever bother to count? The aggression indicates sublimated fear and guilt. The nature of those fears might be detected in what Joan Bamberger identified as justification myths.²⁷ These myths typically feature a fearsome, cruel, and vindictive earth goddess who murders her children and, in the end, is killed or banished by her heroic son. Mythology conjures a frightening picture of the feminine, suggesting that the collective neurosis of men is the fear of the feminine: this 'patriarchal normality is as a form of fear of the feminine'.²⁸

Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, the only surviving complete trilogy of the classical tragedies, explicitly deals with the transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal social order.²⁹ Orestes kills his mother and, in a novel twist, is not punished with death. In the Homeric epic poem, murder and punishment are given voice in insanity. Aeschylus' tragedy discharges the matricide because, in the new logic, matricide no longer exists. Only paternity exists. The mother's womb is perceived as just a breeding container for sperm. In Aeschylus' play Athena states drily:

It's now my task to give my final verdict. And I award my ballot to Orestes. No mother gave me birth – that's why in everything but marriage I support the man with all my heart, a true child of my father Zeus. Thus, that woman's death I won't consider more significant. She killed her husband, guardian of their home.³⁰

Orestes is not saved by divine intervention. Instead, Athena intervenes as the voice of rationality and science, referring to the

circumstance of her birth: bursting out of her father Zeus' forehead. Zeus had swallowed her mother Metis, the goddess of wisdom: 'put her away inside his own belly', another matricide, a pregnancy-envy.³¹ He put the fruit in his belly, then delivered a brain child. Logos ruled over nature.

The tragedy does not reject myth; it interprets it in a new way. Orestes goes free because the old matrilineal order has been dissolved. Maternal rights have been abandoned and the ancient goddesses with them. In the end, a compromise is effected, but it leaves a bad taste. The old goddesses are given house rights, and Orestes is liberated from insanity. He moves to Arcadia, starts a family and dies at the ripe old age of ninety from a snake bite (*sic!*). Unsatisfied, the Erinyes retreat – as the Greeks would have been well aware (see also Euripides' version) – in a resolution that is far from reconciliation.³² The concluding satyr play, which supposedly yielded reconciliation, has been lost (as has Aristotle's chapter in *Poetics* on comedy).

Fear of the Disempowering Feminine

Matricide as the central theme of the *Oresteia* clearly reflects the very real fear in emerging patriarchy of the disempowering feminine. The denial of maternity and the empowerment of the phallus is matricide. Just as Orestes, representing man in general, is haunted by the Erinyes, men are haunted by their nightmares.³³ Freud argues in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that fear and aggression are repressed by culture, generating guilt in response to these socially unacceptable emotions and, hence, creating the necessity for punishment:

The aggression is introjected, internalized, actually sent back to where it came from; in other words, it is directed against the individual's own ego. There it is taken over by a portion of the ego that sets itself up as the super-ego, in opposition to the rest, and it now prepared, as 'conscience', to exercise the same severe aggression against the ego that the latter would have liked to direct towards other individuals. The tension between the stern super-ego and the ego that is subject to it is what we call a 'sense of guilt'; this manifests itself as a need for punishment.³⁴

For Freud, the historical source of guilt feelings lies in the son's murder of the ancestral father, as the father has kept all the women for himself. Yet, it also makes sense to speak of an 'Orestes complex', rather than an 'Oedipus complex', as a formative event. Neither envy and castration anxiety nor the forbidden desire to possess the mother and to murder the father, but rather the feelings of guilt toward the mother, the matricide, produce the fundamental sense of guilt within the patriarchal social order. In other words, it is the Orestes complex that forms 'collective neuroses', Freud's term for the collective repression of drives through culture. In exactly this way, tragedy performs a therapeutic service by helping the audience come to terms with its anxiety.

At the end of the nineteenth century, millennia after the satyr strapped on a gigantic phallus and Solon banned public lamentation, psychoanalysis came into being. The dialectic relationship between psychoanalysis and tragedy is striking. In a letter written in 1896 to Wilhelm Fliess, Sigmund Freud outlined for the first time his Oedipal theory, which he based on an analysis of the tragedies *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*. He alluded to mythological material as a translation of the id into the language of the super-ego.³⁵

His research in turn influenced his contemporaries in art. Also in 1896, Chekhov published *Uncle Vanya* (to be followed by *Three Sisters* and *The Cherry Orchard*). In almost all areas of art and life, a fascination with the human psyche ensued. Authors such as Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov explored landscapes of the soul and the impossibility of action. Female characters (re)appeared on stage: to lament. The conventional hero of action and the avenger exited the scene. Nora in *A Doll's House*, Indra in *A Dream Play*, replaced Hamlet and Wallenstein, and the three sisters longed for Moscow.

In the modern era, public displays of mourning were no longer penalized but instead pathologized.³⁶ Just as tragedy is for society what psychoanalysis is for the individual, Freud referred to his treatment for hysteria as a cathartic method.³⁷ Psychoanalysis came into being just like tragedy

within the context of the ban on lamentation. With the emergence of the medical discourse of hysteria in the nineteenth century, female lamentation breaks into the public sphere. The hysterical theatre is a form of resistance: 'She's acting out, that's only theatre, she's overly dramatic.' It is her tragedy.

Hysteria was the formative symptom, the starting point for psychoanalysis. One could say that hysteria incorporates the protest against the ban of lamentations. Yet the ban on public lamentation remained. Emily Davison died while trying to throw a suffragette banner over King George's horse in 1913. Many suffragettes were imprisoned and force-fed after going on hunger strike. The 'speaking cure' took the hysterical woman off the streets and reduced female bewailing to the privation of phallus (penis envy). This is another matricide. Psychoanalysis enforced the ban on public lamentations and transferred the mourning from the public back to the private sphere – the couch.

Today the ban of laments and lamentations works best within the ideology of 'positive thinking', a branch of popular psychology pertaining to practices towards human happiness. The ban on lamentation is now moved from external illicitness to a self-proposed exercitation of the oppressed and exploited individual. In television shows, mourning women wail in old gestures and verses. They bemoan the stroke of fate, not systematic oppression. Yet current research shows that advancement in social mobility is today even less likely than it was in 1850.³⁸ Tragedy could disavow this ideology and break the ban, not by embracing emotional manipulations, but by reinventing a non-patriarchal tragedy that brings the power of linearity and language to light, and, at the same time, puts its audience through a controlled traumatization of an 'as-if-sacrifice', the cathartic experience.

Notes and References

1. See Joan Bamberger, 'The Myth of Matriarchy: Why Men Rule in Primitive Society', in *Woman, Culture, and Society*, ed. Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974), p. 263–80. See also Cynthia Eller, *The Myth of Matriarchal*

Prehistory: Why an Invented Past Won't Give Women a Future (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); and dissenting: Johann Jacob Bachofen, *Myth, Religion, and Mother Right*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); and Heide Goettner-Abendroth, *Matriarchal Society: Definition and Theory* at <www.matriarchy.info/uploads/HGA-E-Matriarchal-Society-Definition-and-Theory.pdf>, accessed 2 September 2014.

2. See also Elif Batuman 'The Sanctuary', *New Yorker*, 19 December 2011, p. 72; and Gordon V. Child, *How Labour Governs* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964).

3. Friedrich Engels, 'Der Ursprung der Familie, des Privateigentums und des Staats', in *Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Gesamtausgabe, Werke*, Vol. 21 (Berlin/DDR: Karl Dietz Verlag, 1975), p. 61.

4. Until modern times, animals were tried and sentenced for crimes they had committed. Such animal trials are recorded as having taken place in Europe until the eighteenth century.

5. Within this context, the privilege of the hunt and the decorated hunting room of Renaissance lords can be interpreted as echoes of past innocence.

6. See Richard Borshay Lee, *The !Kung San: Men, Women, and Work in a Foraging Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Barbara Smuts, 'The Evolutionary Origins of Patriarchy', *Human Nature*, VI, No. 1 (March 1995), p. 1–32; Frances Dahlberg, ed., *Woman the Gatherer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Joan Gero and Margaret Conkey, ed. *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991); and Rayna Reiter, ed., *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975).

7. The incest taboo is, therefore, not biologically problematic but instead violates dictates of exogamous exchange – of the exchange of women. See also Juliet Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

8. Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred: Tracks of Biology in Early Religions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996); and Christoph Türcke, *Philosophie des Traums* (München: C. H. Beck, 2008).

9. See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Tabu and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1968); Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed. Benjamin and Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1968).

10. Freud's use of the concept was articulated for the first time, fairly late and in the shadow of the First World War, in the article of 1914, 'Erinnern, Wiederholen und Durcharbeiten' ('Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through'), in Freud, *The Case of Schreber: Papers on Technique and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), p. 145–56.

11. Robert Segal, *Myth: a Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). See also Bronislaw Malinowski, *Sex and Repression in Savage Society* (London: Routledge, 2001); Malinowski and Robert Redfield, *Magic, Science, and Religion, and Other Essays* (Glencoe: Free Press, 1948).

12. Or rather an anonymous group of creators collectively and conventionally known as Homer.

13. Sappho argues that Helen willingly left behind her husband Menelaus and Hermione, her nine-year-old daughter, to be with Paris: 'Her most noble husband

deserted, and went sailing to Troy, with never a thought for her daughter and dear parents.' Sappho, *Untitled*, at <www.anselm.edu/homepage/dbanach/poems.htm>, accessed 3 September 2014.

14. Whether there is any historical reality behind the Trojan War is an open question. Many scholars believe that there is a historical core to the tale, though this may mean that the Homeric stories are a fusion of various tales of sieges and expeditions of the Bronze Age.

15. Greek mythology begins with *Chaos*, a yawning nothingness. Out of the void emerged *Gaia* (the Earth) and some other primary divine beings: *Eros* (Love), the *Abyss*, and the *Erebus* (the personification of darkness). The Sumeric creation of the world is a flood myth, and the book of Genesis in essence combines both narratives.

16. In the fifth year of his reign, around 1340 BCE, the Egyptian king Amenhotep IV took decisive steps to establish Amen-Ra or Aten as the exclusive, monotheistic god of Egypt: he disbanded the priesthoods of all the other gods, and diverted the income from their cults. Yet the Egyptian people did not follow the new system, and the old polytheistic system was re-established shortly afterwards. One minority, however, named the Hebrews, kept the monotheistic system. After a failed rebellion fifty-five years later, they fled Egypt and settled forty years later in Judaea. The former Egyptian god of the herds (sun and fertility), Amen-Ra (now spelled in Hebrew *YHWA*) became the god of their new Mosaic religion. In a similar way, Freud argues that Moses had been an Atenist priest, forced to leave Egypt with his followers after Akhenaten's death.

17. Terry Eagleton examines this issue in great detail in *Sweet Violence* (London: Blackwell, 2003), p. 1–22.

18. See Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977). See also Plato, *Republic*, 607b, 598c4, at <www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0168%3Abook%3D10%3Asection%3D607b>, accessed 3 September 2014.

19. Giacomo Rizzolatti, *Mirrors in the Brain: How Our Minds Share Actions, Emotions, and Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Dr Rizzolatti discovered unique neurons in the frontal and premotor cortex while doing research on the neural representation of motor movements in monkeys. Unlike other motor neurons, these neurons not only fired when engaged in planning a motor movement, but also through the observation of a related movement in another person (or other monkey).

20. Some insight about human empathy we owe to Phineas Gage. In 1848, twenty-five-year-old Gage was the foreman of a crew cutting a railroad bed in Cavendish, Vermont. On 13 September, as he was using a tamping iron to pack explosive powder into a hole, the powder detonated. The tamping iron – forty-three inches long, 1.25 inches in diameter and weighing 13.25 pounds – shot skyward, penetrated Gage's left cheek, ripped into his brain and exited through his skull, landing several dozen feet away. Though blinded in his left eye, he might not even have lost consciousness, and he remained savvy enough to tell a doctor that day, "Here is business enough for you." Gage's initial survival would have ensured him a measure of celebrity, but his name was etched into history by observations made by John Martyn Harlow, the doctor who treated him for a few months afterwards. Gage's friends found him 'no longer Gage', Harlow wrote. The balance between his 'intellectual faculties and animal propensities' seemed gone. He could not stick to plans,

uttered 'the grossest profanity', and showed 'little deference for his fellows'. The railroad construction company that employed him, which had thought him a model foreman, refused to take him back. So Gage went to work at a stable in New Hampshire, drove coaches in Chile, and eventually joined relatives in San Francisco, where he died in May 1860, age thirty-six, after a series of seizures. In time, Gage became the most famous patient in the annals of neuroscience, because his case was the first to suggest a link between brain trauma and personality change.' See www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/Phineas-Gage-Neurosciences-Most-Famous-Patient.html, accessed 3 September 2014.

21. By all means we avoid identifying with the jester. The jester quite often is ugly, even malformed. But at the same time he may tell the truth, confront us with our mirroring image. The court jester, a clown in disguise, is not one of us. This is how we can laugh about horror and cope with our anxieties.

22. Dramatic forms can be found in the Japanese traditional dramatic concept of *jo-ha-kyū* (translated as 'beginning', 'break', and 'rapid') and the structure of some other Chinese and Japanese narratives such as *Kishotenketsu*. Other examples may be found in Sanskrit theatre: see Bharata Muni, *Natyasastra: a Treatise on Ancient Indian Dramatory and Histrionics*, trans. Manomahan Ghosh (Varanasi: Chowkhamba Sanskrit Series Office, 2009).

23. Also Leucippus, Epicurus, Moschus the Phoenician, Posidonius, and Strabo. See also Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, ix, 72, full text at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Lives_of_the_Eminent_Philosophers, accessed 3 September 2014.

24. 'He (Solon) also subjected the public appearances of the women, their mourning and their festivals, to a law which did away with disorder and licence. When they went out, they were not to wear more than three garments, they were not to carry more than an obol's worth of food or drink, nor a pannier more than a cubit high, and they were not to travel about by night unless they rode in a wagon with a lamp to light their way. Laceration of the flesh by mourners, and the use of set lamentations, and the bewailing of any one at the funeral ceremonies of another, he forbade. The sacrifice of an ox at the grave was not permitted, nor the burial with the dead of more than three changes of raiment, nor the visiting of other tombs than those of their own family, except at the time of interment. Most of these practices are also forbidden by our laws, but ours contain the additional proviso that such offenders shall

be punished by the board of censors for women, because they indulge in unmanly and effeminate extravagances of sorrow when they mourn'. Plutarch, in *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. Bernadotte Perrin, 21.4 <www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:2008.01.0063:chapter=21&highlight=ceremonies%2Cfuneral%2Csolon>, accessed 3 September 2014.

25. For more information on the ban of lamentation, see Sheila Murnaghan, 'Women in Greek Tragedy', in *A Companion to Tragedy*, ed. Rebecca Bushnell (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), p. 248.

26. 'The *erastes-eromenos* relationship played a role in the classical Greek social and educational system, had its own complex social-sexual etiquette, and was an important social institution among the upper classes' (Nagy, op. cit., p. 40).

27. Joan Bamberger, *The Myth of Matriarchy*, p. 261–70.

28. Erich Neumann, *The Fear of the Feminine* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

29. It comprises *Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers*, and *Eumenides*, written in 458 BCE.

30. Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 940, trans. Ian Johnston <https://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/aeschylus/aeschylus_eumenides.htm>, accessed 3 September 2014.

31. Hesiod, *Theogony*, 890–2 and 924–6, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White <www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Hes.+Th.+890&fromdoc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0130>, accessed 3 September 2014.

32. In Euripides' version, Orestes practically shoots his way through by taking the king's daughter Hermione as hostage. The happy ending is formed by them getting married.

33. Jean-Pierre Vernant, 'Tensions and Ambiguities in Greek Tragedy', in *A Companion to Tragedy*, op. cit., p. 29.

34. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and its Discontents, and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1964).

35. See Freud, *Totem and Tabu*.

36. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: the Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon, 1978). See also Jean Starobinski, *L'Encre de la mélancolie* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2012).

37. Sigmund Freud, *A Case of Hysteria: Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953).

38. <www.huffingtonpost.com/daniel-luzer/the-social-mobility-fairytale_b_2680097.html>, accessed 3 September 2014.