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INTIMATE COMMERCE

*Exchange, Gender, and Subjectivity
in Greek Tragedy*

Yδ 361



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INTRODUCTION

Exchange, Gender, and Subjectivity



*In human society, it is the men who
exchange the women, and not vice versa.*

— CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, STRUCTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

THE TRAGIC EXCHANGE

In the second choral ode of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, the chorus sings of the matched contest between the hero Heracles and the river-god Achelous for the hand of the princess Deianira. The two heroes wrestle in the dust, the language of the ode vividly evoking the male world of athletic contests and war. Meanwhile, Deianira, the prize for which they fight, "sat on a distant hill, waiting for the man who would be her husband. . . . And suddenly she is gone from her mother, like a calf abandoned" (*Trachiniae* 523–30).

This scene is paradigmatic of a structure termed by anthropologists "the exchange of women." In the broadest sense, the term refers to the movement of a woman from one man to another as a bride, a gift, or, as here, a prize. Whether the exchange is amicable (as in a marriage) or hostile (as in this contest), the transfer of a woman between two men constitutes the social world, generating bonds between the men and defining their social identities. So, in this scene, the competition for Deianira brings the two heroes together in a wrestling match so intimate as to be almost erotic. Their relation of antagonistic equality gives way to a rela-

tion of domination as Heracles emerges victorious over Achelous. The woman is the suture between the two men. The competition over this woman also defines the men as social subjects: as heroes and mighty competitors, as winner and loser, as subjects of action. At the same time, it positions the woman, Deianira, as the object of their action, silently awaiting its outcome.¹ This contest illustrates with particular clarity the dynamic that forms the focus of this book: a woman is passed as an object between men, her movement generating and defining an entire social order.

Greek tragedy dramatizes the exchange of women with almost obsessive regularity: imported as brides, captured as war-booty, given as gifts, won in competitions, stolen through rape, hoarded as treasures, bequeathed as inheritances, even offered as sacrifices to the gods, women become objects of a transaction that provides a focal point for tragedy's exploration of social and economic relations, gender, and the nature of the self. Sometimes tragedy seems to present the exchange of women as a socially constructive system; more often than not, however, something goes wrong: the woman refuses to go from one man to another, or goes with vociferous complaint, or tries to exchange others rather than be exchanged herself. The result of these failed transfers is catastrophe: the relationships between men that should be cemented are instead sundered; the men who should be declared virile and heroic subjects are emasculated and eviscerated; the social order that should be instituted is more often left in ruins. By the end of each play this havoc is contained; the male self and his world are rebuilt and resecured, but upon a foundation that has been shown to be essentially unstable.

The tragic exchange of women, I shall argue, calls into question the social world it calls into being. As a generative structure, the exchange reveals tragedy in the process of constructing its normative social hierarchies, gender relations, and subjects. But the tragic exchange is, by nature, a system ever in crisis and always prone to failure, and it opens to interrogation the world and subjects it structures, exposing their fault lines, constitutive exclusions, and foreclosed alternatives. The exchange of women allows tragedy to expose the genealogy of its own social world, in order not only to justify and inaugurate that world, but also to examine and reimagine it, and to reproduce it precisely as a world open to and under debate.

This commerce in women lies at the dense intersection between the

material and the psychological, and extends simultaneously in both directions. On the one hand, exchanging women is a marked example of a more general system of gift exchange; as such it mediates between different economic levels, between competition and cooperation, and between elitism and egalitarianism, all mediations central to fifth-century Athens as it debates the nature and extent of its democracy. On the other hand, this transaction opens insistently onto questions of subjectivity. The exchange is built around a distinction between the male giver and the female gift, but this distinction collapses once the woman refuses her role as object. In dramatizing the woman's attempt to position herself as a subject, tragedy reveals the ways in which a subject is constructed, the material factors by which it is determined, the social hierarchies within which it is articulated, the relation of self to other and to ideology. The study of the tragic exchange, then, will enter into debates on both Athenian economic and social formations and the ancient conception of the gendered self.

This book examines three tragedies structured around exchanges of women: Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, and Euripides' *Alkestis*. There are, to be sure, other tragedies and even other genres in which the movement of women between men features prominently and to which the approach I propose here could be fruitfully applied. But since I believe that the individual transactions can only be understood within the context of their plays and, conversely, that they can illuminate the entire play, I here limit myself to these three dramas rather than undertake a broad survey. Even so, I do not pretend to exhaust these three plays, aiming to supplement rather than to supplant the excellent work already done on them.

In *Trachiniae*, Deianira, won by Heracles in the contest against Achelous, is driven to desperate measures by Heracles' introduction into the house of the slave-girl Iole, his war-booty and concubine. Having been an object of exchange in her past, Deianira tries to position herself as its subject: in return for the "gift" of Iole, she gives Heracles a robe smeared with what she thinks is a love charm. But the love charm is in fact poison, and in Heracles' agonizing demise we see the fatal effects of a woman's gifts. At the same time, unable to define herself successfully in male terms (as a gift-giver, as a hero, as an aristocrat), Deianira is found, in a central scene of the play, seeking other modes of subject-formation, and constructing herself as a subject by imagining a subjectivity for the silent and

passive Iole, a subjectivity not compromised, as hers had been, by misogynist stereotypes. This fantasy of a free female subject is harshly foreclosed with Deianira's death (in a suicide that both transgresses and resecures gender categories); nonetheless, the possibility of a female subject, once raised, refuses to evaporate, and it returns to interrupt the play's final scene, in which a dying Heracles bequeaths his authority and property to his son along with his concubine Iole.

Two exchanges, the theft of Helen and the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, lie behind Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. A war is fought for Helen, but was this obscure object worth the price: the life of Iphigeneia, sacrificed by her father so that the ships might sail; the lives of countless Greek soldiers; the life, ultimately, of the king Agamemnon, who returns from Troy only to be murdered by his adulterous wife Clytemnestra, and with him his prize of war, Cassandra? The trade in women reaps no benefits in this play, but exacts a heavy toll: the social bonds that should be created dissolve in impious war; the men who should be declared subjects are instead turned into objects, as Greek soldiers return as dust in urns and Agamemnon himself is reduced to a corpse. The agent of this destruction is Clytemnestra, who avenges the female victims of exchange, her daughter Iphigeneia and her sister Helen. But whereas Clytemnestra punishes the violence wrought over women, Cassandra offers forgiveness; and while Clytemnestra's overdetermined transgressions justify the exchange's gender hierarchy, Cassandra's forgiveness redeems the male subject and repairs the psychic damage that has been shown to be the true return on a traffic in women.

Euripides' *Alceste* dramatizes a literal exchange: Alceste offers to die in the place of her husband Admetus, graciously giving herself to buy him life. But the life he receives is not worth living, as he discovers, for though Alceste's self-sacrifice wins her praise and fame, it brands Admetus as a coward. Even in the supreme act of uxorial devotion, a woman would seem to be a dangerous gift-giver, as Admetus loses not only his reputation, but also his masculinity and legitimacy. These losses are recouped by his relationship with Heracles, a relation sealed in the last scene of the play by the exchange of a mysterious woman who turns out to be Alceste herself, returned from the dead. No longer the brave and heroic subject of her own fate, Alceste is returned as a gift, silent and veiled. This final episode would seem to reaffirm the objectification and circulation of women as the foundation of male social relations, but Alceste's silence, her reduction to a deathlike state, reminds us of the vio-

lence behind this economics and injects a profound sense of discomfort into this ostensibly happy reunion.

The position of women in classical Athens was severely circumscribed, as a number of recent studies have detailed.² Women were not citizens in the democracy (although citizenship passed through them to their sons), and they had no political rights. They lived in a state of life-long minority, always subject to a male *kurios* ("owner," "lord," or "guardian"), first their father, then their husband; they could own little if any property and could make few economic decisions independent of this male guardian. In a city in which glory and power were won and wielded only in the public arena—the marketplace, assembly, law-courts, and battlefield—women were relegated to the domestic space of the *oikos*, the house (indeed, to the women's quarters of the house), and upper-class women, at least, were rarely seen or mentioned by men to whom they were not related. Although the extent to which these bare facts represent the lived experience of Athenian women is much debated (and this is a debate into which I cannot enter here),³ one might imagine that in a culture in which women had only limited rights to themselves, in which barely pubescent girls were given in marriage (one Greek term for marriage is *ekdosis*, a "giving away") from father-guardian to husband-guardian, the contrast in exchange between active men and passive women would be particularly stark.⁴

Tragedy's representation of the circulation of women reflects this state of affairs and also, without doubt, reproduces it: it reaffirms the integrity and mastery of the male givers in contrast to the object status of the female gift; it valorizes the necessary exclusion of women from positions of social dominance by dramatizing the catastrophe that results when they attain such positions; it dismantles any foundations upon which a valid female subject or an equal relation between male and female could be raised. But even as it reproduces a familiar and unequal gender organization, in the process of this very reproduction it exposes its constructed, arbitrary, and contingent nature. This is key, for what is shown to be constructed is open to reconstruction, rearticulation, reimagination. Tragedy thus encourages us to ask after the genesis and history of such concepts as woman, gender difference, male domination, the individual subject, social and economic hierarchy, the state. Not only is this anti-essentialism fundamental to feminist critique, but it is also, I believe, one of the boons offered us by the study of an alien culture, as ancient

Athens in many ways is. In exposing the historical contingency and ideological investment of another culture's social arrangements, we may come to question the necessity, inevitability, or even desirability of our own.

REAFFIRMATION, RESISTANCE, NEGOTIATION

Taking the exchange of women as a point of entry into a culture is hardly a new approach. The topic was opened by Lévi-Strauss, for whom the circulation of women in marriage is the "elementary structure of kinship."⁵ As the practical instantiation of the incest taboo, the trading of women comprises the basic social cement, creating lasting affinities between different men, families, and communities. Lévi-Strauss built a (male) society upon this trade; Freud had laid the same foundation for the (male) subject. The Oedipal complex, the most critical moment in male psychological development (according to the Freudian model), is in essence an exchange of women: the little boy renounces his desire for his mother, "giving" her to his father; in compensation he receives paternal approval and the tacit promise of a woman of his own. For Freud and Lévi-Strauss, then, the exchange of women is the foundation for an entire social and subjective order.

Given the times in which they wrote and their individual projects, it is no surprise that these founding fathers should have viewed this commerce in a positive light, emphasizing the benefits of the structure for a society that is always for them (explicitly or implicitly) male-dominated and male-oriented. But, more recently, feminist theorists have been quick to point out how these boons for the male givers are won at the expense of the female gift. Gayle Rubin, in her ground-breaking 1975 article "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," argues forcefully that the exchange of women is predicated upon and reproduces a system of gender inequity:

If women are the gifts, then it is men who are the exchange partners. And it is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage. The relations of such a system are such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation. As long as the relations specify that men exchange women, it is men who are the beneficiaries of the product of such exchanges—social organization.⁶

Not only a cultural organizing structure, "the exchange of women is a profound perception of a system in which women do not have full rights to themselves."⁷ The "exchange of women" thus becomes for feminists a theoretical shorthand for a psychological and social order founded upon, productive of, and complicit in the objectification and oppression of women.

If we return, by way of example, to the passage from *Trachiniae* that opened this chapter, at the risk of great oversimplification we might see the Freudian and Lévi-Straussian approach emphasizing the positive social results of Deianira's exchange: Heracles' victory over the monstrous Achelous (and, by extension, the victory of the "civilization hero" over all the forces of barbarity), the marriage of the hero and the princess, the emergence of culture out of nature. For Rubin and those feminists who have followed in her footsteps, this exchange might bear a very different valence; they might focus not on the glorious fray, but rather on its prize, Deianira, objectified, marginalized, reduced to a terrified and bereft calf. More is at stake here than a simple choice between two readings; the question is one of finding a way to read tragedy—or any text—in a manner that recognizes the more oppressive aspects of its ideology without condoning them, or, conversely, that uncovers resistance within the text or culture to such oppressions without the anachronistic retrojection of modern politics.

Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz, in her recent study of the exchange of women in Euripides, offers a nuanced and provocative approach to this problem.⁸ Focusing on the exchange as a means of reproducing normative (unequal) gender relations, Rabinowitz provides a sophisticated and insightful reading of Euripidean tragedy, uncovering a bedrock of male anxiety and a compensatory dynamic of containment of female sexuality and subjectivity. She stresses the "ideological work" these plays did in encouraging the audience's compliance with the cultural practice of marriage exchange, as well as in the passivity and constraint of women it entailed; thus her reading of Euripides is also a critique of the misogynist culture of ancient Athens. Facing tragedy's prevalent oppression as both a feminist and a classicist, she seeks a "third position" between complicity in an ideology of gender asymmetry and a resistance that reinscribes women as victims, a balance between "read[ing] the text with the ideology, as the author would have us do," and "read[ing] against that position in various ways" (1993: 23). She argues that Euripides tacitly—

"almost despite himself" (ibid.: 27)—acknowledges the female strength he works to control, and she imagines an ancient female audience who watched subversively and found positive models of empowerment in a genre designed for their suppression.⁹ In this audience she finds hope for the "misfiring" of tragedy's patriarchal ideology (ibid.: 12).

While there is little argument that Athenian culture in general and tragedy in particular are male-oriented, and while most feminist readers of tragedy must sympathize with Rabinowitz's refusal to condone their misogyny, nonetheless, this sort of critique runs the risk of oversimplification: of the role of female characters, who fall into categories of praise or blame; of tragedy, which becomes an instrument of oppression; and of ideology itself, which is pictured as repressive, monolithic, and masculine.¹⁰ The genders become radically polarized in this scenario by a system of exchange (and a state-produced genre) that is always good for men and bad for women.¹¹ It is perhaps this conviction of tragedy's repressive agenda that leads Rabinowitz to seek resistance largely outside of tragedy, in the female audience. This is problematic, however, not only because the evidence for women's presence at the dramatic festival is far from conclusive,¹² but also because it is essentializing and dangerous to assume that women watched in a radically different way from men.¹³ Presumably audience reactions (whether that audience was all male or mixed in gender, as it was in status, age, occupation, nationality, etc.) were diverse; if that is true, it is not because tragedy failed to control all its possible valences and interpretations, but rather because it actively encouraged multiple readings, both complicit and subversive.

Like Rabinowitz, I look for a "third position," a middle ground between tragedy as "misogynist" and tragedy as "feminist," and between the classic approach to the exchange, which highlights its benefits for male society, and the feminist critique, which emphasizes its oppression of women. I do not seek this position in a dialectic between male text and female reader, however; rather, I see these two hermeneutics as coexisting within the text itself—indeed, within the very structure of the exchange of women.¹⁴ The tragic exchange, in my view, is generative, not merely repressive: it creates social relations and subjects, male and female. Much of this creative energy, as Rabinowitz so rightly notes, is in the service of a reproduction of various relations of domination, especially those oppressive of women. But, I think, if we imagine the tragic exchange as constructing social relations as well as imposing and re-

inforcing them, then there is room for hope that alongside the more oppressive mechanisms will also be generated less oppressive alternatives.¹⁵

The exchange rests upon and perpetuates a distinction between male subject and female object, but tragedy, by giving this object a voice, shows up the essential speciousness of the dichotomy. Tragedy's dramatization of the transaction raises insistently the possibility of a female subject, whether the woman tries to participate actively in exchange (as the heroines do in the three plays examined here) or merely offers her subjective (and often critical) view upon it. This female subject is, of course, a male fantasy: I take it as a given that tragedy was produced by men for men, and that the subject at issue in the tragedies is male. Moreover, this fantasied space is one that is always, with varying degrees of panic, foreclosed: the female subject is always shown to be invalid, subjected, dangerous, or impossible. Nonetheless, this foreclosed female subject offers a site of potential resistance built into the very structure of the exchange. When the exchange is reinscribed within the plays (two of the three plays here conclude with transfers of women, as if this brings resolution), so too is the woman, whose presence disrupts even as it enables a smooth and easy reciprocity. It is in the ambiguous status of the woman as a space of resistance institutionalized within the exchange that I see the plays themselves taking up the "third position" that Rabinowitz advocates.

Returning once more to my example from *Trachiniae*, rather than focus exclusively on either the glorious struggle of the male heroes or the lonely plight of the female prize, I would emphasize the way the ode juxtaposes the two, casting the pall of the latter over the epinician splendor of the former. This scene of heroic contest is filtered through—maybe even witnessed by—its female victim, and the ode's sympathy for her draws under suspicion not only the contest but the heroic identities and society built upon it. Deianira watches from afar, unhappily, critically, maybe even subversively. As the prize of this contest, she constitutes its fulcrum, but also an instability right at its core, an instability the contest generates as surely as it does the stable male subject. Thus resistance, as Foucault says, is not opposed to power, but is everywhere within it, its product, and contributory to its dominion.¹⁶

This necessary imbrication of power and resistance in tragedy—of reinscribing the exchange and challenging it—is not merely structural, however, but active, practical, and political. In their work on radical democracy, Laclau and Mouffe suggest that every social or ideological

institution is a site of hegemonic negotiation, a site of ongoing struggle over the temporary and variable articulation of the terms of discourse and the relation between different discursive or political spheres. Inherent in these continuous struggles are potential subversions as well as oppressions, potentials that are actualized or suppressed in the course of political debate.¹⁷ The exchange of women, I propose, is precisely such a nodal point of hegemonic negotiation in tragedy. It is a site at which power is articulated through a condensation of certain class relations, gender relations, and subject positions. But because this articulation is contingent and provisional (not essential or inevitable), it contains the possibility of endless rearticulations. The exchange thus can be oppressive and hegemonic, reconfirming gender inequality and a world owned and ruled by male subjects; but at the same time it is potentially subversive, constantly calling attention to its own exclusions and violences, and laying open to critique the society and subjectivities founded upon it.

Once we view the exchange as a site of constant, active negotiation between the hegemonic and the counterhegemonic, we can escape the false and reductive polarity between a repressive, misogynist tragedy and a revolutionary, protofeminist tragedy. The "third position" Rabinowitz and others have sought between these two extremes is precisely this site of contestation, and the ambivalence of the audience is firmly rooted in the ambiguities of the text. To say this is not, however, to revert to a New Critical or Deconstructionist fetishization of the free play of poetic ambiguities. The ambiguities at issue here are less poetic than political: the possibilities raised in discursive negotiation are stances that could be taken up in practice. Women were exchanged in practice in Athens—in marriage, concubinage, slavery, prostitution—and the plays thus have their half-life in the lived experience of individual men and women. While it is difficult to be much more specific about this relationship, we can see tragedy as constituting a discursive framework, a set of problems, issues, and alternatives, that could then be taken up in different modalities and with varying effects in practice. Thus, discourse and practice form a continuum, as the business begun in the theater of Dionysus is finished in the household, the marketplace, the law-courts, and the assembly.

Not all of the possibilities tragedy raises were equally viable in practice, of course, within the specific political regime of fifth-century Ath-

ens.¹⁸ Negotiation is not the same as neutrality, and if the counter-hegemonic shares a platform with the hegemonic in tragedy, in practice it is generally either subsumed or ostracized (indeed, that is the nature of hegemony). Nor is there neutrality within tragedy itself.¹⁹ Tragedy may question the trade in women, but it ultimately reinscribes both the system and its attendant hierarchies and oppressions. Often the woman's very critique of the exchange justifies her subjection and serves in the end to bolster the elite male subject her critique had threatened. And yet, if the questions raised receive all too familiar answers, if alternatives are eliminated and radical potentialities barred from political actualization, that does not obviate the advantages of raising the questions and posing the alternatives. Our reading of tragedy, then, must take notice of both the multiplicity of options the plays offer, and the dynamics by which they make some of those options viable and others not.

Implicit in this conceptualization of the exchange as a site of hegemonic negotiation within tragedy is an analogous understanding of the role of tragedy itself within the Athenian democracy. Just as the tragic world is under debate within the tragic exchange, challenged even as it is reconfirmed, so Athenian ideology is contested within tragedy. Most readings that see tragedy as either enforcing or opposing "Athenian ideology" assume an ideology that is monolithic, univocal, and repressive. In this context Althusser is often invoked and tragedy declared an Ideological State Apparatus, the hand that wields the hammer of Athenian "state ideology."²⁰ Of course, in some sense, this is accurate: tragedy was sponsored by the democratic state for the education as well as the entertainment of its citizens. The plays themselves were only a part of the annual festival, the City Dionysia, which also included sacrifices, a parade of those young men raised by the state who had reached adulthood, the presentation of tribute by Athens's subject nations, and the crowning of victorious generals.²¹ So it is with much justice that tragedy has often been seen as a sort of initiation into Athenian citizenship and a celebration of civic ideology.²² However, even to speak of the state and its ideology in these terms is to reify what I think is really a dynamic and open-ended process. That is to say, if tragedy is in some way an "apparatus" of Athenian ideology, that ideology is as complex and contested as the tragedies it produced. Tragedy, then, neither imposes nor opposes "ideology"; rather, it is engaged in an ongoing and contentious process of formulating, reformulating, articulating, and inter-

rogating an ideology that itself, like tragedy, contains the possibility of its own critique.

THE SOCIAL ECONOMY OF EXCHANGE

If the exchange of women is a particularly fertile site for negotiation in tragedy, that is in part because it opens simultaneously onto two of tragedy's central concerns: social relations and the gendered self. As a social transaction, the trade of women is rooted in the materiality of tragedy's social world:²³ the relations of a woman's exchange (both gender and class relations) are a condensation of tragedy's broader social and power relations. At the same time, as a structure that generates subjects, the exchange is a window onto the tragic subject and what we might call tragedy's psychic economy. These two areas—the material and the psychological—are inseparable: material relations are the sediment of individual strategies and the determinant for further strategies; subjectivities are formulated within and by material relations. The transferral of a woman lies at the point of intersection between these two areas, and their necessary overlap and interpenetration around the transaction is a central focus of this study.

In order to reach this intersection between the social and the subjective, I have found it profitable to approach the exchange of women through two different methodologies at the same time. In discussing the economic and social issues that surround the exchange—the economic level it occupies, the relations of exchange it reproduces, its costs and profits (economic or symbolic), the social interests it reveals or conceals—I use key concepts borrowed from Karl Marx and Pierre Bourdieu. From these theorists I take a belief in the primacy of social and economic relations, the concept of class interest (however loosely we define class: see below, note 32), a conviction of the ideological function of literature (that is, its implication in the reproduction of social relations), and the observation that economic relations are often obscured by ideological enchantment. For a precise conception and terminology of “the subject,” on the other hand, I turn to psychoanalytic theory (primarily in the forms associated with Jacques Lacan and Melanie Klein), which affords a concept of the self and a theory of gender, a vocabulary in which to speak of complex internal processes, and a mechanics for the

individual's psychic investment in objects and people external to himself or herself.

Again, I shall insist throughout upon the total imbrication of these two sets of concerns around the transfer of women; hence I have resisted methodological homogenization in the chapters that follow, allowing economic and psychoanalytic concerns and theories to coexist, to illuminate and complicate one another.²⁴ That is not to suggest that either the economic or the psychoanalytic theories I use are incomplete in their own terms, but rather to take seriously the location of the exchange between the two and to take advantage of the doubled theoretical wealth that location affords.²⁵ I realize, further, that in choosing this combined approach rather than working within a single theoretical framework, I run the risk of oversimplification or of mixing water and oil.²⁶ But I am not trying to reconcile these two theoretical approaches across the board, but hope instead to let them supplement and complement one another around the specific issue of exchange, materialism elucidating the social underpinnings of the transfer of the woman, psychoanalysis pursuing its psychological effects. By approaching both economic and psychoanalytic theories with a set of questions that are strictly tangential to these theories' broader aims, I hope to avoid the fraught issues of orthodoxy surrounding each methodology.

Finally, it may seem a peculiar oversight that a project with the word “gender” in the title should make no mention of feminism as a theoretical model. I do not mean to marginalize the female, which is so central to the project as a whole; however, I consider it one of the strengths of feminism that it can work with other, more formal methodologies.²⁷ Though feminism's relationship with both Marxism²⁸ and psychoanalysis²⁹ has historically been tense, I am not trying to redeem or appropriate these methodologies for feminism so much as to allow the concerns and terms of feminism to complicate both economic and psychoanalytic theory, and to theorize the implication of gender in other social relations. My focus, therefore, like that of most recent feminist work, falls on what Rubin calls the “sex/gender system,” rather than on “women” as such: the tragic exchange, I argue, serves not so much to oppress or manipulate a preconstituted and clearly defined group, “women,” as actually to constitute that group.³⁰ The “women” thus constituted are, of course, a male construct: on the most literal level, each female character is at heart a male actor. We must not confuse females on the stage, then, with “real

women," ancient or modern, nor conceive of "women" as a universal or essential category; instead we must approach the tragic woman as a fantasy—fictional and ideologically invested—through which the male subject thinks about himself and his place in the world.

Exchange, at its most basic level, is about social relations, about equality between partners and hierarchy within that equality; it is about social norms and how they can be manipulated by the socially adept; it is about different sorts of capital (symbolic, political, financial) and the ways in which they can be evaluated, invested, and interconverted. All of these issues are central to a tension in fifth-century Athenian society between elitism and egalitarianism, a tension played out and mediated in part through the City Dionysia.³¹

Athenian society was structured simultaneously by an ideology of equality and an unspoken elitism.³² *Isonomia*, the equality before the law on which the Athenians prided themselves, was not only an ideal, but to a large extent a practical reality as well: most civil positions were filled by lot with strict term limitations and accountability, and the vote of the *dēmos*, the people, whether in the courts or the assembly, was final. Within that ideology of *isonomia*, however, there remained inequalities based on wealth, birth, education, or access (afforded by leisure or geographical proximity) to the centers of power. Such advantages were manifested not only in greater de facto political power (for example, the powerful generals tended to come from a few old families), but also in an implicit—if largely unarticulated—valorization of the idea of a hierarchy within a society of equals.³³ Josiah Ober has argued that this tension between "mass" and "elite" was rife throughout the fifth and fourth centuries and that the outbreak of overt civil conflict during this time was prevented largely by its continual negotiation within such institutional arenas as drama and legal and political rhetoric.³⁴ This negotiation between equality and hierarchy is central to Greek tragedy. Indeed, J.-P. Vernant has suggested that the conflict between the civic group and the heroic individual is built into the very structure of tragedy in the opposition between the protagonist and the chorus.³⁵

One way in which the tension between equality and elitism is played out in tragedy is through the theme of exchange, whether the medium of exchange be words, blows, goods, or women. In the most general terms, exchange relates the two participants simultaneously in a relationship of

equality and of hierarchy.³⁶ On the one hand, the very act of exchange—especially on a public occasion such as a marriage—declares a certain basic equality between the two exchangers, or creates one where it did not already exist. On the other hand, if the exchange is subjected to closer scrutiny, it usually also suggests an inequality between the partners, setting up a debt relationship that subordinates (if only temporarily) one partner to the other.³⁷

Thus exchange is simultaneously cooperative and competitive; at one pole lies *xenia*, "guest-friendship," an amicable relation between equals often institutionalized through the reciprocal exchange of gifts; at the other, the *agōn*, competition, be it a wrestling match, a lawsuit, or a war.³⁸ But these two poles collapse constantly into one another: the *agōn* contains a seed of homoeroticism; *xenia*, a latent hostility. The two especially tend to collapse when the object of exchange is a woman. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her important book *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, studies the role of women (and especially their exchange) in the negotiation of "male homosocial desire," the term she uses to describe a continuum of relations between men that ranges from aggression to homoeroticism. She shows how in the exchange of women, heterosexual eros—the desire for the woman that at first glance seems to motivate her transfer—often functions as a blind for a more profound homosocial impulse, a desire for relations between men.³⁹ In tragedy, as in much of the English literature Sedgwick studies, the homosociality at the core of the exchange is both erotic and agonistic. Erotic desire, as in Athenian homosexual practice, is hierarchical, not reciprocal, and sexual lust slides easily into the lust for domination. As for the woman, fetishized as object of desire, she at once both obscures the more complex desires beneath the exchange and bears the brunt of the violence into which these desires erupt.

The relations of domination latent within even the most amicable exchanges have a corollary in the economic register. Much excellent work has been done on the economy of gift exchange in ancient Greece.⁴⁰ Following Marcel Mauss's famous *Essai sur le don*, scholars have identified gift exchange as a symbolic transaction, spontaneous and reciprocal, aimed not at financial profit but at social union.⁴¹ In contrast to the base exchanges of goods and money between strangers in the marketplace, gift exchange was the preserve of an elite class, those who could afford, whether by economic or "symbolic" capital, to deal in such intangibles.

The economic distinction between the symbolic exchange of gifts and the commercial exchange of commodities, then, is the basis of a social distinction, and a prop of elitism.⁴²

The separation of these two economic (and hence social) tiers is not ontological, however; instead, it is the result of a self-interested mystification of the relations of exchange. Marx writes of the process of fetishization in which the relations of exchange—socially embedded power relations—come to be reified in and occluded by the movement of objects.⁴³ Bourdieu expands upon this, arguing that this fetishization is fundamental to the reproduction of a social elite: when economic wealth is misrepresented or misrecognized (“euphemized” or “enchanted”) as symbolic wealth, the material basis of social differences is in turn obscured, so that the power of the elite, like the value of the gifts they exchange, comes to appear inherent and unalienable.⁴⁴ To “disenchant” the symbolic gift exchange, then, to expose it as no more than an idealized form of commodity exchange and to lay bare the power relations that lie concealed beneath it, is to challenge the social prerogatives built upon it.

In tragedy, this labor of disenchantment often falls to the woman. The exchange of women is part of the elite economy of gift exchange. Women are ideal gifts within this economy,⁴⁵ for their value is inherently mystified, that is, it appears to resist the precise accountancy of the marketplace. Their exchange, too, is easily mystified, as the financial negotiations of the betrothal are overshadowed by the wedding ceremony, with its fertility symbolism, mythic precedents, and cosmic implications. Beneath this symbolic exchange, however, always lurks the economic: women are bartered for a profit, whether it is measured in money, prestige, social alliances, the favor of the gods, or other women. When the heroines in these plays try to engage actively in the exchange, they reveal the unsavory economics behind it: in their mouths, gifts become crass commodities and the trade in women a form of prostitution.

By subjecting the exchange of women to a strict accountancy, the heroines of these plays expose to critique the mystified social relations that underpin this business and the elite male subject predicated upon it. This critique, however, does not ultimately undermine the elite economy. Tragedy disenchanters the elite economy and elite subject in order to re-examine the bases of elitism, which is shown to rest not on wealth or birth alone, but also on morality or behavior. Thus elitism and the elite subject can be reinscribed in a form with which each individual in the au-

dience, regardless of his actual status and with varying degrees of idealization and wish fulfillment, could identify.⁴⁶ Elitism and elite values are reaffirmed in the complementary fantasies of the democratic nobleman and the noble *dēmos*. But even while it enables this productive convergence, the woman’s disenchantment of gift exchange is an act of bad faith⁴⁷ that declares her failure as an aristocrat (and, indeed, a fundamental incompatibility of status and gender for women) and justifies her exclusion from active participation in the elite economy that traffics in women. Thus the hierarchy of man over woman is yoked to the hierarchy of elite over masses (aristocrat over nonaristocrat, gift exchanger over commodity exchanger), and the subject who emerges supreme from the exchange is both a man and a gentleman.⁴⁸

The desire that drives the exchange, the nexus of homoeroticism and aggression at its core, the investment of objects with psychic significance, the enchantment and disenchantment of economic relations: these material issues gesture always toward the psychological.⁴⁹ The social and economic relations of exchange find their telos in the lived experience of individuals; subjects carry their entire social world within them, reproducing it even as it produces them. Thus a study of the social economy of trading women directs us toward an investigation of this trade’s psychic effects.

THE SUBJECT OF EXCHANGE

Exchange generates subjects. Structured around the opposition between male givers and female gift, the tragic exchange opens always onto questions of gender and subjectivity. The movement of the female object defines the two men oppositionally as subjects—as agents of action, giver and receiver, father-in-law and son-in-law, or winner and loser. While the men’s subject status comes into question generally only when the exchange fails, the woman’s subjectivity is inherently problematic.⁵⁰ Structurally, the woman functions as an object, but though her object status may be an enabling fiction, it is a fiction nonetheless; Lévi-Strauss himself recognizes this when he concedes that the woman in exchange “could never become just a sign and nothing more, since even in a man’s world she is still a person, and since in so far as she is defined as a sign she must be recognized as a generator of signs.”⁵¹ On the one hand, the woman is not as obvious or secure a subject as the man; on the other, she

is not a complete object, a point that is brought out clearly in all three of the plays studied here by the presence of a silent woman who is the pure and passive object of male activity. Between these two poles—the full male subject and the full female object—the plays' heroines try to define a subjectivity for themselves, in the process exposing the components and modalities of the tragic subject.

J.-P. Vernant, in his essay "The Tragic Subject,"⁵² proposes that tragedy in effect creates a new discourse of the subject:

The invention of Greek tragedy, in fifth-century Athens, amounted to more than just the production of the literary works themselves, objects for spiritual consumption designed for the citizens and adapted to them; through the spectacle, reading, imitation, and establishment of a literary tradition, it also involved the creation of a "subject," a tragic consciousness, the introduction of tragic man. Similarly, the works of the Athenian dramatists express and elaborate a tragic vision, a new way for man to understand himself and take up his position in relation to the world, the gods, other people, himself, and his own actions.⁵³

He argues that tragedy presents the individual as a problem, "the subject of a debate and interrogation that, through his person, implicates the fifth-century spectator, the citizen of democratic Athens" (1988: 242). Vernant's formulation suggests the appropriateness of this new tragic consciousness for an audience of men growing ever more accustomed to treating every issue as a topic of debate. The tragic subject is embedded not only within its dramatic world but also in the social relations and material conditions—the "moment," as Vernant puts it—of fifth-century Athens. We must be careful, then, as John Jones most forcefully reminds us, not to retroject the quiescent, reflective, and fully realized subject of modern drama onto the masked characters of ancient theater, nor to apply uncritically to the latter methodologies designed to explain the former.⁵⁴ Bearing this warning in mind, and aiming again at that space between the material and the psychological where the exchange is located, we need to define a subject that is both psychologically complex and historically specific; a model for such a subject is offered by Louis Althusser, a post-Marxist philosopher strongly influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, in his famous essay, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)" (Althusser 1971: 1–60).

As Althusser defines it, the subject is a socially constructed being that reflects upon itself in terms given by the material conditions of its exis-

tence. How does this work? Ideology constitutes the subject by "hailing" or "interpellating" the individual. Althusser imagines a scenario in which an individual is stopped on the street by someone (say a policeman) calling, "Hey, you there!" In this moment of recognition ("by this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion"), the individual becomes a subject within ideology, becomes the person who was called, and accepts that appellation as its own.⁵⁵ That the subject is constructed in and through ideology does not diminish its psychological integrity, though. It is part of the effect of ideological interpellation that it interpellates "concrete, individual, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects" (ibid.: 47), that is, subjects who misrecognize their ideologically constructed basis: "The 'obviousness' that you and I are subjects—and that that does not cause any problems—is an ideological effect, the elementary ideological effect" (ibid.: 46).

The notion of interpellation is seminal in theorizing a historical subject, a subject fully constructed in and through its material conditions. Following to its end the logic of Althusser's interpellation means accepting the total interconvertibility of the material and the psychological; the relations of production and power become, in a very real sense, a part (in fact, for Althusser, the basis) of the subject's interior relation to itself and its world.⁵⁶ The tragic subject, then, is a wholly social phenomenon, hailed into being by ideological institutions such as exchange.⁵⁷ Althusser thus provides a precise theoretical tool for excavating the subjects of exchange, allowing us to move freely between social issues and subjective, economic theory and psychoanalytic, and to understand the mutually productive relations between the two realms. And by rooting the subject in its historical conditions, Althusser will help us to avoid the pitfall of retrojecting a post-Romantic subject into the premodern era, and thus (it is to be hoped) to escape the just criticism of those who argue against the unquestioning presupposition of a transhistorical category of the subject.⁵⁸

The theory also suggests a mode of power that is generative, that creates subjects, rather than one that simply manipulates or represses preexistent subjects. Such a flexible model of power is necessary, as I argued above, if we are to do justice to tragedy's ambiguity. Althusser does, however, open himself to more reductive readings.⁵⁹ The very fact that Althusser imagines the interpellating agent in the first instance as a policeman, a representative of the law, implies a repressive model in which the subject is hailed as subjected to the law and subjectivization

necessarily entails subjection. Indeed, his own application of the model at the end of the essay, the hailing of Peter by God, seems to attribute an inexorable, irresistible, and unilateral authority to the interpellating "deity."⁶⁰ Tragedy itself belies such a monolithic and repressive system. Both men and women are variously and often contradictorily hailed in an ongoing process, so that the tragic subject seems more a collocation of different interpellations than a unitary and stable self.⁶¹ Moreover, tragedy often dramatizes characters—male and (more often) female—rejecting their interpellations, negotiating with the interpellating agent, themselves hailing others, or simply refusing to turn around when called.

In order to reap the full potential of Althusser's extremely useful mechanics of the self, then, we must open him up and read him as flexibly as his text allows. Judith Butler, reading Althusser through her (Derridean) notion of iterability, suggests an illuminating reformulation:⁶² power, she argues, is reproduced through the citation of its own authority; each citation is simultaneously a stabilization of the law and the potential for miscitation, deconstruction, or subversion. Thus, in her view, every interpellation is a moment of crisis, not only for the individual hailed but also for the hailing power. There is always the possibility, in her reading, that instead of turning at the policeman's "Hey, you there!" the individual will challenge the authority of the law that hails him. Thus, rather than being constructed from above by a unidirectional and irresistible interpellation (as Peter is hailed by God in Althusser's example), the subject is constructed through a dialogue between the self and the law, and ideology is ever at stake when we speak of the subject. This dialogue between the subject-in-information and ideology-under-negotiation is precisely what I see happening in tragedy's exchanges. The exchange interpellates subjects (and reproduces itself through these interpellations), but each hailing is also a potential crisis and the reproduction of a potential challenge.

Thus we can return to the idea of hegemonic negotiation, able to see, via Althusser and Butler, the tragic subject himself or herself as a site as well as an object of contestation. The subjects, male and female, hailed by the exchange are contested creatures, subjects in process, constantly under construction and reconstruction, not hailed into being once and for all, but constantly hailed and hailed again by different interpellations, some of which they accept, some of which they reject, some of which reaffirm the power of the interpellating authority, some of which undermine it. Moreover, if we accept the analogy I have been implying between

the tragic exchange and tragedy itself, it is a similarly complex, heterogeneous, variably complicit and resistant subject that tragedy interpellates in its audience: that is to say, tragedy interpellates its audience as Athenian citizens.

Althusser's theory of interpellation offers an indispensable model for understanding the interrelation between the social and the subjective. His "Notes towards an Investigation" were not intended to be exhaustive, however, and require supplementing on each side. Althusser himself recognizes this need in his incorporation of economic Marxism on the one hand, and Lacanian psychoanalysis on the other. The latter is a particularly salutary supplement, as Althusser's model alone does not elaborate the affective experience of interpellation, nor can it account specifically for gender.⁶³ One of the main contentions of this book is that the interpellating ideologies at work in the exchange of women are simultaneously class and gender ideologies, hailing subjects into a dense matrix of class and gender hierarchies. To understand the ways in which these various interpellations permeate the subject and determine his or her psychic relation to the world, we must cross the bridge that Althusser builds between his own psychology and Lacan's.

For Lacan, the individual subject exists within the "symbolic order," the order of language, law, and ideology. He imagines a scene in which a child first sees himself in a mirror; in the moment of self-recognition, the child becomes a subject. The dynamics of the scene thus far replay those of Althusser's interpellation, with the important distinction that for Lacan, the "obviousness" of the subject in ideology is never complete, but becomes the focus of intense psychic manipulations. When the child recognizes himself in the mirror, he mistakes for his genuine self the mediated, alienated mirror image: the self-recognition is thus a misrecognition, and the subject within the symbolic crystallizes around an essential dehiscence.⁶⁴

This subject, for Lacan as for most post-Freudian psychoanalysis, is implicitly male. Further, the symbolic itself is, as Lacan admits, "androcentric," ontologically grounded by a transcendental masculine figure, the Name of the Father.⁶⁵ It is only under the auspices of this symbolic Father (through a necessarily imperfect and misrecognized identification) that the boy can become a subject, an existential filiation enacted through the Oedipal complex, in which the boy relinquishes his mother in obedience to the paternal law. In exchange for her, the boy receives the

phallus, emblem of his prerogative and paternity within this symbolic order and "the symbolic token which can later be exchanged for a woman."⁶⁶

Where does this leave the woman? She is a fantasied "other" who vouchsafes for the man his subject status:⁶⁷ not only does the mother as object of exchange guarantee the Oedipal identification with the father, but it is the mother in the first instance who functions as a mirror for the boy.⁶⁸ Moreover, the division and loss of self-presence that the man accepts with entry into the symbolic (the splitting of the "real" self and the mirror self, of signified and signifier) is disavowed by being projected onto the woman. A wounded, lacking subject, subjected within the phallogocentric symbolic,⁶⁹ she is "the site at which the male subject deposits his lack,"⁷⁰ and his tragedy of loss is played out on her "castrated" body.⁷¹

The world Lacan describes is familiar in its outlines to students of classical Athens, an androcentric universe governed by a transcendental king and father, Zeus. The phallogocentrism of the culture has often been noted:⁷² from the herms, the ithyphallic statues that stood at roadsides and in front of private homes, to the disembodied "penis birds" that ornament pottery, the equation of penis with phallus and the naturalization of male authority was virtually unchallenged. The Athenian family, to be sure, was very different in its structure from the modern Western bourgeois family that rears the psychoanalytic subject; nonetheless, they share the element most essential to Freudian and post-Freudian psychoanalysis, the overwhelming emphasis on the father-son bond.⁷³ The numerous institutionalized means in Athens toward securing the identification of son with father (initiation rituals, citizenship and inheritance laws, homoerotic pedagogy, not to mention tragedy itself) insert the individual subject into this paternal symbolic.

And of course the subject thus hailed, in Athens as in Lacan, is male. There were, strictly speaking, no female Athenians,⁷⁴ and the woman is relegated to the role of cultural other. Just as the Lacanian male subject is reassured of his authority and authenticity in contrast to the lacking woman, the Athenian citizenry was constructed in contrast to a variety of others—slaves, barbarians, but especially women.⁷⁵ The exclusionary logic of the Athenian democracy was replicated on the tragic stage, where the female subject, as Froma Zeitlin says in her important article "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama," is "designed primarily for exploring the male project of self-

hood in the larger world" (1990: 69).⁷⁶ Tragedy, she argues, allows its male characters, male actors, and male audience to experience what the culture defines as feminine, "for the purpose of imagining a fuller model for the masculine self" (Zeitlin 1990: 85), but also in order to explore his constitutive exclusions—weakness, madness, pathos, corporeality, deceit, in short femininity—and, I would add, by eliminating those exclusions under the name of woman, to resecure himself and his world.⁷⁷

This securing of the male self, however, is always incomplete, tenuous, and, at base, impossible. For Lacan, the imagined lack of the female other guarantees for the male subject a conviction of his own plenitude and self-presence, but one that is essentially false; as a disavowal of his lack, she always declares as well as denies that lack.⁷⁸ This is what Lacan means when he says, notoriously, that "The woman does not exist": even as a fantasy, she cannot secure him.⁷⁹ The opposition between lacking female other and sovereign male self is thus always liable to failure and in need of constant, compulsive psychic maintenance.

The exchange of women is a nodal point in tragedy for this fragile alterity. Built upon the structural opposition between male self and female other (and their radical polarization as subject and object), the exchange seems to authenticate the male subject. The fact that the female object can be exchanged defines the men, minimally, as those who cannot be exchanged; thus the male subject (on the stage and in the audience) is guaranteed as "free, autonomous, and inviolable."⁸⁰ Yet, as I have suggested, the exchange obsessively raises the specter of the female subject, filling in what should be a site of absence. When the heroines in tragedy refuse their role as objectified other and claim the position of self, not only do they interrupt the social mechanism of the exchange, but they also jeopardize the male subjects who are predicated upon their supposed lack: the corollary in tragedy to a female subject is a male object—a corpse.

The disastrous results of female subjectivity within the exchange necessitate an immediate foreclosure upon that subjectivity. The female subject is always, in the end, shown to be illegitimate or impossible. For the heroines of the three plays discussed here, subjectification is subjection, and their failed subjectivity is a testament to the power of the symbolic law and its legitimate sons. Yet in the very effort of disenfranchisement is revealed the artificiality of the Lacanian schema;⁸¹ the tragedies, by suggesting the possibility of a female subject only to delegitimize it, reveal the process by which woman is constructed as lacking, as other, as object, and by which man, correspondingly, is guaranteed as

self-present subject. Naturalizing ontology is disrupted, and within this genealogy of the male self and female other can be imagined alternatives: a valid female subject, a male other, a relation between self and other not predicated on lack, a symbolic in which men are not divided or women abjected.

In order to discuss these alternatives in a positive way (rather than as disasters and psychic failures), it will be necessary to leave Lacan and turn to another psychoanalytic theorist, Melanie Klein. In Klein's model (1984), the distinction between self and other (paradigmatically the child and the mother) is not stable, nor is it predicated on lack. The relationship between them is so fluid, so muddled by projections and introjections, that the object seems to exist within the subject and the subject within the object. Psychic development, in this model, is a process of separating self from other; the telos, however, is not the disavowal of the other as lacking, but rather the acceptance of the plenitude and autonomy of the other. A relationship of alterity like the one Klein imagines would mean a radical rearrangement of tragedy's gender organization, one in which the exchange of women would be impossible. But though the plays do acknowledge the intimate interconnection between male subject and female object, this psychic economy is ultimately abandoned in favor of the Lacanian, and the female other is not accepted in the end, but is murdered so that her body may seal the Oedipal pact between father and son.

And yet, if this alternative is repressed, it is not eliminated altogether, but rather is incorporated at the very heart of the exchange, embodied in the figure of the silent virgin, a female other ontologically different from and radically inaccessible to the male self. The virgin is a fantasy of pure *physis*: in her virginity she seems to exist prior to the penetration of ideological interpellation; by her silence she seems to stand beyond the linguistic mediation of the symbolic, and standing thus outside the symbolic ("ek-static," as the French feminists put it), she offers a dream of a genuine and unmediated self, a self beyond ideology or gender.⁸² This is, of course, only a dream, and one that the plays themselves ultimately dispel, for as soon as the virgin speaks, she, too, is subjected to the overdetermined logic of the paternal symbolic. But if this space of radical alterity is ultimately foreclosed and shown to be impossible, nonetheless it persists as a potential site of resistance and change, a vantage point from which to examine the symbolic order, and from which it seems no longer unbounded, universal, or inevitable.

Thus when we look at an exchange like that which opens this chapter, we must recognize the complexity of the relations between the male competitors and their female prize. The lonely calf who waits on a hillside, Deianira is the victim of this transaction—oppressed within its social and psychic economy—but also a potential challenge to it. In her dual position—simultaneously at the center of the exchange and beyond it—the woman both reaffirms and destabilizes the exchange, as well as the social relations from which it emerges and which it reproduces, and the elite male subject who enjoys its rewards. The traffic in women shows us in microcosm tragedy's world under negotiation; it reproduces that world, with all its oppressions and hegemonic exclusions; it also reproduces alternatives, instabilities, and resistances. The chapters that follow record these ambiguous returns on tragedy's intimate commerce between the sexes.