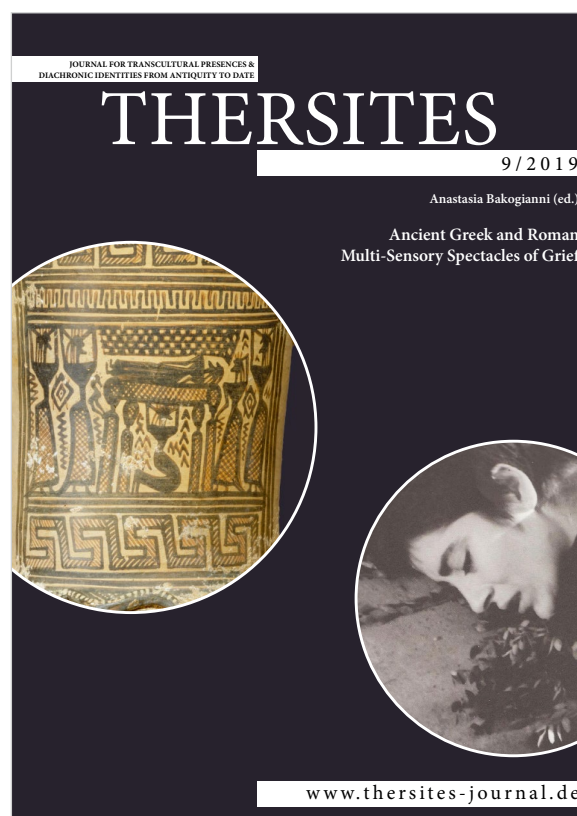


Alessandra Abbattista
(INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR)

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thersites 9 (2019), pp. 19–43
<https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol9.118>



Suggested citation:

Abbattista, Alessandra: The Tragic Nightingale Between Lament and Revenge,
In: thersites 9 (2019): Ancient Greek and Roman Multi-Sensory Spectacles of Grief / Anastasia
Bakogianni (ed.), pp. 19–43.
<https://doi.org/10.34679/thersites.vol9.118>

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ABSTRACT

The analysis of the nightingale theme in ancient Greek tragedy sheds fresh light on the emotional contradictions present in female laments. Classical scholars have traditionally interpreted the tragic nightingale as a symbol of ritual lamentation. In light of its use in the myth of Procne, Philomela and Tereus, they tend to emphasise its association with grief, loss and mourning. They have overlooked, however, the nightingale's dramatic connection with vengeance. I argue that Attic dramatists reproduce the call of the nightingale during key moments of their revenge plays and use it to create an effect of high suspense for their audiences. Through a reversal of the mythological transformation of Procne, they capture the tragic heroines in their dramatic passage from lament to revenge. This is particularly striking in the metamorphosis of the Sophoclean Electra, who caught between grief and anger performs the vengeful lament of the nightingale.

KEYWORDS

Nightingale, lament, revenge, Procne, Electra

ALESSANDRA ABBATTISTA

(INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR)

The Tragic Nightingale Between Lament and Revenge

1. Introduction

IN ancient Greece,¹ female lamentation was a socially constructed and ritually sanctioned expression of grief in response to death.² Defined as the ‘principal speech genre of women’,³ it was the vocal mode through which suffering was manifested either publicly or privately. Its performance in ancient Greek tragedy might be justified by the history of this poetic form, that has constantly seen women as responsible for mourning their next of kin.⁴ Paintings on vases and funerary plaques evidence that women were expected to raise laments in funeral rites from the archaic to the classical age.⁵ However, the fact that the celebration of funerary ceremonies was recognised as a female duty does not imply that tragic laments were performed merely to express powerlessness, loss and suffering. A lamenting woman was the medium through which the inexpressible pain and wrath in the case of loss were violently externalised.⁶ In fact, it is through ritual lamentation

¹ This article is part of the PhD thesis, entitled *Animal metaphors and the depiction of female avengers in Attic tragedy*, I defended at the University of Roehampton in 2018. I would like to thank my supervisors Prof. Fiona McHardy, Prof. Susan Deacy and Dr. Susanne Greenhalgh, and my examiners Prof. Judith Mossman and Prof. Mike Edwards for their feedback. I am also grateful to Prof. Marco Fantuzzi, Prof. Filippo Carlà-Uhink and Dr. Anastasia Bakogianni for their suggestions.

² For a definition of grief, and discussion of its representation in ancient Greek tragedy, see for example Cairns (2014) 656-659 and Foley (2014) 863-866.

³ McClure (1999) 44.

⁴ Alexiou (1974) 10.

⁵ See for instance the *prothesis* scenes depicted on: the Attic geometric *krater* (750-735 BCE) from Dipylon, Kerameikos, by Hirschfeld Painter, National Archeological Museum of Athens 990; the Attic geometric *krater* (c. 740 BCE), attributed to the Hirschfeld Workshop, The Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York 14.130.14; the Attic Black-Figure *pinax* (second half of the sixth century BCE), by the Gela Painter, Walters Art Museum of Baltimore 48.225. For the role of women in funeral rites see Bakogianni in this issue (51).

⁶ Holst-Warhaft (1992) 1-10.

that female characters manifest both their suffering and anger in their tragic experience of bereavement.

The contradictory emotions expressed by female lamentation are illustrated by the nightingale theme in ancient Greek tragedy. When tragic heroines are metaphorically associated with or associate themselves with the nightingale, they perform ritual lamentation to express their vengeful intentions. In the *Suppliants*, the Danaids refer to the nightingale with the aim of lamenting their abduction from Egypt to Argos on the one hand, and revealing their desire of punishing the wantonness of their cousins on the other.⁷ The Aeschylean Cassandra modulates the lament of the nightingale not only to cry out her tragic status at the end of the Trojan War, but also to anticipate the accomplishment of the vengeful plan of Clytemnestra against Agamemnon.⁸ Sophocles metaphorically employs the nightingale to depict Electra in her reduced status because of the death of Agamemnon and to highlight her eagerness to take revenge against Clytemnestra.⁹ Euripides evokes the nightingale to give voice to the suffering of Hecuba for the sacrifice of her daughter and the death of her son, and to set the scene for her revenge against Polymestor.¹⁰ In the *Helena*, the Chorus calls upon the nightingale to comment on the lament that Helen simulates for the feigned death of Menelaus to help them escape Egypt.¹¹ By playing the role of mourning avengers, these tragic heroines are represented simultaneously as suppliant, helpless and pitiful, but also as unforgiving, threatening and ominous.

2. The Song of the Tragic Nightingale

With the aim of explaining the contradictory emotions in the tragic depiction of mourning avengers, I set out to outline the lexicon of the nightingale. Rarely used as a masculine form, the feminine noun ἀηδών, ‘nightingale’, probably derives from the present participle of the Ionic and poetic verb αἰείδω, ‘I sing of / chant’.¹² In ancient Greek lexicographic sources, the term is also explained by the fact that the nightingale was believed to αἰεῖ αἰείδειν,

⁷ Aesch. *Supp.* 62.

⁸ Aesch. *Ag.* 1145, 1146.

⁹ Soph. *El.* 107, 149, 1077.

¹⁰ Eur. *Hec.* 337.

¹¹ Eur. *Hel.* 1110.

¹² Chantraine (1968) 23.

‘sing continually’.¹³ Aristotle claims that both the male and the female of the nightingale are able to sing. However, by inferring gender norms in birdsongs, he claims that most of the ancient poets identify the female as the songstress.¹⁴ Aristotle’s inference is confirmed by the metaphorical employment of the nightingale in ancient Greek tragedy.

Attic dramatists make use of the feminine noun ἀηδών not only in the description of actual nightingales,¹⁵ but also in tragic characterisation. Among its occurrences, it is significant that the term is mainly applied to female characters.¹⁶ The only exception is the metaphorical employment of the nightingale in the depiction of Palamedes.¹⁷ Furthermore, Attic dramatists evoke the nightingale in tragic characterisation through alternative linguistic expressions. Instead of the feminine noun ἀηδών, they connote the general noun ὄρνις, ‘bird’, with specific attributive participles and adjectives, such as ἀτυζομένα, ‘distraught with grief’, ἀέθλιος, ‘wretched’, and ἄπτερος, ‘without wings’, to indicate the nightingale.¹⁸ Although these expressions might have referred to other bird species, the noun ὄρνις probably indicates the nightingale in light of the myth of Procne, Philomela and Tereus.

On the basis of classical sources,¹⁹ Procne, the daughter of the Athenian king Pandion, was given in marriage to the Thracian king Tereus, and she gave him a son, Itys. As she felt isolated and alone, she asked her husband to bring her sister Philomela from Athens to Thrace, but on the way Tereus raped Philomela and cut out her tongue to prevent her from revealing his crime. Philomela wove a tapestry to unveil her terrible story to her sister

¹³ *EM* α 122,1; *EG* α 29,1.

¹⁴ Arist. *HA* 536a28-30.

¹⁵ Soph. *OC* 18, 672; Eur. fr. 88,2 N, 556,1 N, 931,1 N.

¹⁶ The tragic heroines metaphorically compared to the ἀηδών are: the Danaids (Aesch. *Supp.* 62), Cassandra (Aesch. *Ag.* 1145, 1146), the Women of Trachis (Soph. *Trach.* 963), Eriboea (Soph. *Aj.* 629), Electra (Soph. *El.* 107, 1077), Polyxena (Eur. *Hec.* 337), Helen (Eur. *Hel.* 1110) and Procne (Aesch. fr. 291 R; Eur. *Rhes.* 550, fr. 773,24 N).

¹⁷ Eur. 588,3 N.

¹⁸ The tragic characters metaphorically compared to the ὄρνις are Electra (Soph. *El.* 149), Deianira (Soph. *Trach.* 105) and Heracles (Eur. *HF* 1039).

¹⁹ See for a reconstruction of the myth of Procne, Philomela and Tereus: the *scholium* ad Ar. *Av.* 212; the *hypothesis* of the Sophoclean *Tereus* in the *P. Oxy.* 42, 3013; [Apollod.] *Bibl.* 3.195,6.

Procne and the two women decided to take vengeance. They slew, cooked and served Itys as a special feast for Tereus. As soon as Tereus discovered the truth, he tried to pursue the two sisters with murderous intentions. Zeus took pity and transformed them into birds: Procne became a nightingale, Philomela a swallow and Tereus a hoopoe.²⁰

According to Sommerstein et al., there were two main traditions of the myth of Procne, ‘both aetiologies explaining the nightingale’s song’.²¹ The first that would seem to develop from a Boeotian or Asian saga is the version attested in the Homeric tradition;²² the second is the version provided by Sophocles in the *Tereus*, which is the only extant, though fragmentary, tragedy staging the mythological metamorphosis of Procne into a nightingale. In the *Odyssey*, the nightingale is evoked in the depiction of Penelope, who split between the defence of her household and the attack of her suitors is imagined to sing like Aedon, the personification of the nightingale.²³ Creating an emotional link between Penelope and Aedon, the nightingale is specifically connoted by a verb of mourning. In comparison with Penelope, Aedon’s song is linguistically represented through the acoustic verb ὀλοφύρομαι,²⁴ which used transitively means ‘I lament over, bewail’, and intransitively ‘I lament for the ills of others’, hence ‘I feel pity’.²⁵ By citing Pherecydes, the scholiast explains the metamorphosis of Aedon by the lamenting nature of the nightingale’s song. Metamorphosed into a nightingale, Aedon θρηνεῖ δὲ ἀεὶ ποτε τὸν Ἴτυλον, ‘forever laments Itylus’.²⁶

Because of the intertextual relationship between the epic and the tragic versions of the myth of Procne, the nightingale has been generally interpreted as a symbol of female lamentation. Loraux connects the image of the

²⁰ For discussion of the myth of Procne, Philomela and Tereus, see Pearson (1917) 221-226; Chandler (1934) 78-84; Thompson (1966) 16-22, 95-121, 315-325; Dobrov (1993) 189-234, (2001) 105-132; March (2000) 119-139; Fitzpatrick (2001) 90-101; Monella (2005); Sommerstein et al. (2006) 141-159; Milo (2008) 7-20, 125-154; Scattolin (2012) 119-142.

²¹ Sommerstein et al. (2006) 142.

²² For examples of female laments in the Homeric epics, see Carruesco in this issue (2-3, 5-8 and 16-17).

²³ Hom. *Od.* 19.518-529.

²⁴ Hom. *Od.* 522.

²⁵ Hom. *Il.* 8.33, 202, 16.450, 22.169; *Od.* 11.418.

²⁶ Pherec. fr. 102 M.

nightingale with the myth of Procne in order to discuss the ritualised performance of female laments in ancient Greek tragedy. As she argues, the nightingale does not give voice only to bereaved mothers, but also to the suffering of all tragic heroines.²⁷ Similarly, Suksi compares the mythological metamorphosis of Procne with the stagecraft of tragic lamentation. Just as the gods transformed Procne into a mourning nightingale, Attic dramatists transmute horror and chaos into ordered and melodic compositions.²⁸ By specifically referring to fr. 583 R of the Sophoclean *Tereus*, Milo argues that Procne establishes the taxonomic form of tragic lament. This fragment, which she compares with the laments raised by other tragic heroines, namely Medea²⁹ and Deianira,³⁰ represents Procne as bewailing her misfortunes, status and disillusionment.³¹ Given the lamenting nature of the song of the nightingale in ancient Greek tragedy, its connection with female vengeance requires further investigation.

3. The Tragic Reversal of the Myth of Procne

I turn now to the differences between the epic and the tragic versions of the myth of Procne to outline the vengeful connotations of the nightingale in Attic tragedy. The first difference appears in the representation of the mythological metamorphoses of Procne, Philomela and Tereus. Whereas in Homer Aedon is captured in her solitary transformation into a nightingale, on the Attic stage Procne is imagined as having abandoned her human aspect altogether, as her sister, and being pursued by her husband. However, the choice of bird in the representation of the metamorphoses of Procne and Philomela varies in the literary tradition. Since Hesiod, and especially in the Latin versions of the myth, the metamorphoses of the two sisters are inverted: Procne is transformed into a swallow and Philomela into a nightingale.³² Moreover, the choice of bird in the mythological metamorphosis of Tereus varies within the tragic tradition. In fact, Procne is described as a

²⁷ Loraux (1998) 57-66.

²⁸ Suksi (2001) 646-658.

²⁹ Eur. *Med.* 214-230.

³⁰ Soph. *Trach.* 144-150.

³¹ Milo (2008) 33-47.

³² Hes. *Op.* 564-569; Verg. *Ecl.* 6.78-81; *G.* 4.511-515; Ov. *Am.* 2.6, 7-10, Ov. *Met.* 6.494-676.

κιρκήλατος, ‘hawk-chased’, nightingale in Aeschylus.³³ Sophocles provides instead a new model, used in later versions of the myth.³⁴ As a result of Procne’s revenge, Tereus is transformed into a hawk, from whose stomach Itys springs up in the form of a hoopoe. Transmitted by Aristotle in the section of the transformative changes of birds, fr. 581 R of the *Tereus* evidences the Sophoclean remodelling of the myth of Procne.³⁵ As Sommerstein et al. argue, Sophocles drew on earlier versions of the myth to stage the transformations of Procne and Philomela, but signalled a turning point in the literary tradition for the mythological metamorphosis of Tereus.³⁶

Another difference in the comparison of the versions of the myth of Procne, Philomela and Tereus includes its geographical details. Whereas the Athenian origin of Procne is not in doubt, it is the location of her marriage with Tereus and of her consequent metamorphosis that varies. The Sophoclean *Tereus* sets the story of Procne, daughter of Pandion, king of Athens, in Thrace.³⁷ According to Thucydides, Teres, the founder of the empire that extended over Thrace, should not be confused with Tereus, the mythological husband of Procne.³⁸ Thucydides locates the marriage of Procne with Tereus in Daulis, rather than in Thrace. By justifying the poetic attribution of the epithet Δαυλιάς, ‘woman of Daulis’ to the nightingale, he argues that Tereus married Procne in Phocis, where the Thracians used to dwell. He adds that, because of their geographical distance, it is unlikely that Athens and Thrace cemented an alliance through the marriage of Procne. Likewise, Strabo refers to Daulis as the place from which Tereus was believed to derive before conquering Thrace.³⁹ In his mythological version, Pausanias sets

³³ Aesch. *Supp.* 62; cf. Hes. *Op.* 203; Hyg. *Fab.* 45.

³⁴ Soph. fr. 581 R; cf. Arist. *Av.* 209-214; [Apollod.] *Bibl.* 3.195,6-8.

³⁵ Fr. 581 R, which Aristotle (*HA* 633a17-28) transmits and erroneously attributes to Aeschylus, has been interpreted as belonging to the Sophoclean *Tereus* by Walker (1893); Pearson (1917); De Dios (1983); Dobrov (1993) 189-234; (2001) 105-132; Monella (2005); Sommerstein et al. (2006); Milo (2008); Scattolin (2012) 119-141. The Sophoclean authorship of the fragment has been questioned by Burnett (1998) 183, Fitzpatrick (2001) 90-101 and March (2000) 119-139, who suggest it was composed by Philocles, Aeschylus’ nephew.

³⁶ Sommerstein et al. (2006) 142.

³⁷ See the references to Thrace in the *hypothesis* of the Sophoclean *Tereus* (*P. Oxy.* 3013, 6,21).

³⁸ Thuc. 2.29, 3.

³⁹ Strab. 9.3, 13.

instead the marriage alliance between Procne and Tereus in the city of Megara.⁴⁰ From Milo's perspective, the reference to Megara is not surprising, when taking into account that it was the site of the heroic cult of Pandion and of the tomb of Tereus.⁴¹ Nevertheless, as she argues, Daulis should be considered as the most archaic setting of the myth of Procne, and Thrace as a Sophoclean innovation that Thucydides criticises.

The last, but most significant difference to consider, is the motivation and modality of Procne's vengeance. In the earliest versions of the myth, it seems that Aedon, envious of the prolificacy of her sister-in-law Niobe, accidentally kills her own son Itylus. As attested in the Homeric depiction of Penelope, she is said to murder her own son δι' ἀφραδίας, 'on account of folly'.⁴² In the tragic versions of the myth on the other hand, Procne commits infanticide as a deliberate act of vengeance. Despite the difficulty in determining whether this belonged to a different myth playing out comparable themes, it is the motif of jealousy that causes female vengeance both in the epic and tragic traditions. In the *hypothesis* of the Sophoclean *Tereus*, the term ζήλοστυπία, 'jealousy' is specifically used in the description of the vengeful reaction of Procne to the infidelity, rape and violence of Tereus.⁴³ According to Fontenrose, there were different stories revolving around double marriage and infanticide, which could have generated the myth of Procne.⁴⁴ He points out that female jealousy, when caused by the introduction of another woman within the family, brings about wrath and violence. Sommerstein et al. give emphasis to Philomela's rape to justify Procne's vengeance. In reaction to the violent act committed by Tereus against her sister, Procne vengefully kills her own son. Yet, as they argue, 'rape, or the avenging of rape, might not necessarily in itself guarantee the sympathy of the male audience'.⁴⁵ Milo also identifies rape, mutilation, infanticide and *teknophagia* as innovative themes in the Sophoclean representation of the myth of Procne. Commenting on fr. 589 R, she infers that the adjective

⁴⁰ Paus. 10.4, 8.

⁴¹ Milo (2008) 11-12.

⁴² Hom. *Od.* 19.523; cf. Pherec. 102 M.

⁴³ *P. Oxy.* 3013, 6,26.

⁴⁴ Fontenrose (1948) 125.

⁴⁵ Sommerstein et al. (2006) 153.

ἄνοος, ‘without understanding’,⁴⁶ refers not only to Tereus but also to the two sisters, and indicates their psychological and physical state of madness.

The intra-familial vengeful dynamics in which Procne, Philomela and Tereus are tragically involved have been explained in the light of the festival of Dionysus. Commenting on *Tereus*’ fr. 595a R, Kiso argues that λίβανος, ‘frankincense’, which suggests a sacrificial scene, reveals the Dionysiac influence on the Sophoclean staging of the myth of Procne.⁴⁷ The term is also used by Euripides to denote the fragrant resin, burned as incense in honour of Dionysus.⁴⁸ In reference to the worship of the god in Thrace, Dobrov identifies the scene of recognition between Procne and Philomela before revenge is committed as a Sophoclean innovation. From his perspective, the woven robe, sent to Procne by her sister on the occasion of the Dionysiac festival, might have served to highlight the contrast between Thracian savagery and Greek civilisation.⁴⁹ Milo also debates to what extent Dionysus is involved in the vengeful act of Procne, with particular reference to fr. 586 R of Sophocles’ *Tereus*.⁵⁰ She argues that the tapestry woven by Philomela might have been connected to a Thracian festival in honour of the god.⁵¹ Filicide, dismemberment and cannibalism, which occur in both the cult of Dionysus and the myth of Procne, are identified by Burnett as particularly suitable themes for tragic plays. She specifically notes that ‘the knife that Procne used to kill Itys is said to have been buried by the Erinyes under the tree where Agave was to kill Pentheus’.⁵² McHardy also argues that the misdeed committed by Procne, just like that of other infanticidal mothers, is an appropriate tragic topic.⁵³ The tragic heroines metaphorically compared to Procne are represented as affected by a form of divinely inspired madness, although their acts of vengeance are committed rationally.

⁴⁶ Soph. fr. 589 R, 1.

⁴⁷ Kiso (1984) 67-68.

⁴⁸ Eur. *Bacch.* 144. For the use of frankincense and other sweet-smelling herbs in Roman religion see Clancy in this issue (103-106).

⁴⁹ Dobrov (1993) 189-234.

⁵⁰ Milo (2008) 62-63.

⁵¹ Cf. Ov. *Met.* 6.586-600.

⁵² Burnett (1998) 178; cf. Nonn. *Dion.* 44.265-276.

⁵³ McHardy (2005) 129-150.

Drawing on these interpretations, I would add that the myth of Procne was adapted to the Dionysiac context of tragic plays to build up the characterisation of mourning avengers. Through a reversal of the mythological metamorphosis of Procne, Attic dramatists represent female characters as performing the lamenting song of the nightingale to prepare for a vengeful resolution. Whereas Procne becomes a nightingale to lament the death of her son after killing him, tragic heroines are compared or compare themselves to the nightingale to modulate their lament before vengeance is committed. Creating a dramaturgical moment of suspense, the simile of the nightingale foreshadows the tragic implications of female lamentation in revenge plots.

4. From Ritual Lamentations to Vengeful Laments

My reading of the nightingale-woman metaphor in ancient Greek tragedy is supported by gendered perspectives on ritual lamentation. As Seaford states, women played a fundamental role in death rituals, which the city-state was not only prescribed to celebrate, but also tried to restrict in the fifth century BCE.⁵⁴ Despite the necessity of honouring the dead through a collective experience of lament, funerary legislation was in fact promulgated to restrict female involvement in ritual mourning.⁵⁵ Alongside restrictive reforms to the celebration of female lamentation, there were an increasing number of funeral orations, where death in the service of the city was praised.⁵⁶ This change of attitude towards death and mourning in the fifth century BCE reveals what Loraux calls ‘the invention of Athens’.⁵⁷ As she states, female lamentations were replaced with the ἐπιτάφιοι λόγοι, ‘funeral orations’, because of their political and social power in controlling public attitudes towards death.⁵⁸

Classical scholars have extensively discussed why the democratic *polis* considered female laments dangerous and therefore attempted to control

⁵⁴ Seaford (1994) 74-105.

⁵⁵ [Dem.] 43.62; Pl. *Leg.* 958d-60b; Plut. *Sol.* 21.6, *Lyc.* 27.1-3; *cf.* the funeral legislation discussed by Palmisciano (2017) 105-110, namely LSCG 97 (=LGS 93a), LSCG 77c (=LGS 74c); Cic. *Leg.* 2.64-66; Stob. 4.24; Diod. 11.38.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Pericles’ speech in Th. 2.34.

⁵⁷ Loraux (1986) 15-41.

⁵⁸ For discussion of the ἐπιτάφιος λόγος in classical Athens, see also Derderian (2001) 161-188, Marchiandi and Mari (2016) 177-201; Palmisciano (2017) 206-218.

them in the actual celebration of funeral rites. As Seaford explains, there were no economic reasons behind the political restrictions on female mourning. Rather, it was a social attempt to contain the aristocratic clan cults, which aimed to consolidate private property and heritage rights for the γένος. In the classical period, Athens tried to limit cases of rivalry between kinship groups, because the solidarity of the relatives of the deceased and its public manifestation was decisive in fostering civil conflicts.⁵⁹ Foley also argues that the political restrictions on female lamentation in the celebration of funeral rites were caused by its social implications. As she states, female ‘mourners were thought prone to foment vendetta, to consolidate aristocratic political rivalries, or to undermine public rhetoric promoting war and other service to the state’.⁶⁰ According to McHardy, in the society of the fifth century BCE, where bloody feuds were rejected in favour of a kind of revenge through the laws, women were thought to be more conservative and bloody-thirsty than men.⁶¹ Female lamentations were considered dangerous, since they were able to incite reciprocal violence and emphasise the concept of loss rather than the honour of dying in battle.⁶²

The Athenian attempt to limit the prominence of women in death rituals and their public expression of grief has raised many questions regarding the tragic performance of ritual lamentation.⁶³ According to Foley, it did not correspond to contemporary Athenian ritual practices, but rather it reveals the continued gendered tensions in the transition from the aristocratic world to the democratic *polis*.⁶⁴ As Dué argues, since ‘in recent years laments have been interpreted as powerful speech acts, capable of inciting violent action’, it is necessary to redefine the representation of mourning in ancient Greek tragedy.⁶⁵ I argue that the vengeful implications of female lamentation are evidenced by the tragic employment of the nightingale met-

⁵⁹ Seaford (1994) 74-105.

⁶⁰ Foley (2001) 112; see also Marchiandi and Mari (2016) 183, 198.

⁶¹ McHardy (2004) 92-114.

⁶² See also Loraux (1986).

⁶³ For discussion of the vengeful connotations of female lamentations in ancient Greek tragedy, see for instance Sultan (1993) 92-110; Billing (2007) 49-57; Stears (2008) 139-155.

⁶⁴ Foley (2001) 19-56.

⁶⁵ Dué (2012) 236.

aphor. The nightingale is evoked by Attic dramatists to represent tragic heroines who through ritual lamentation incite vengeance within and against their family. Its allusion to the mythological metamorphosis of Procne intensifies the transgressive role of mourning avengers in tragic plays staging intra-familial conflicts. When female characters reproduce the lamenting song of the nightingale, they actively participate in the vengeful dynamics of their household.

Through a comparison of ritual lamentations with tragic laments, it is possible to demonstrate the mediating function of the nightingale's song in the characterisation of mourning avengers. Alexiou outlines three kinds of female lamentations in the ancient Greek world: the θρήνος, 'lament', the γόος, 'weeping', and the κομμός, 'choral lament'.⁶⁶ The θρήνος, which is a lyric song modulated by professional groups of non-kin members, presented gnomic and consolatory elements.⁶⁷ The γόος, which is the solo song modulated by the kin of the dead, was characterised by inarticulate wailings and yells. The κομμός, which is a specific form of lament accompanied by wild gestures, was associated with Asiatic ecstasy. However, according to Alexiou, this archaic distinction disappeared in the classical period and a mixture of all three forms was used to express a poetic lament. This is shown by the employment of the nightingale in the tragic stagecraft of ritual lamentations. Its song in fact gives expression to the three forms of lamentations indiscriminately in female characterisation. When female characters compare themselves to or are compared to the nightingale, they perform a θρήνος to give voice to their grief.⁶⁸ As the tragic product of their lamentation, the γόος sounds like the song of the nightingale.⁶⁹ They raise an οἶκτος, 'piteous wailing', to express their suffering, bereavement and loss.⁷⁰ The noun, which can also mean 'pity, compassion', specifically denotes the continuous and composite laments of tragic heroines. By merging these different forms of lamentation in the song of the nightingale, Attic dramatists stage the ritualised performance of the tragic laments of female characters.

⁶⁶ Alexiou (1974) 102-4; cf. Palmisciano (2017) 62-80.

⁶⁷ See also Cannatà Fera (1990).

⁶⁸ Aesch. fr. 291 R; Soph. *Aj.* 631, *El.* 10.

⁶⁹ Aesch. *Supp.* 73, 116; fr. 291 S; Soph. *Aj.* 628; Eur. fr. 773,25 K.

⁷⁰ Aesch. *Supp.* 59, 64; Eur. *Hec.* 519; cf. Soph. *Aj.* 525.

There is no evidence of the musical similarities between ritual lamentations and tragic laments. However, as Suter argues, from a metrical analysis it is possible to deduce that a tragic lament was performed ‘in lyric or spoken meter’, ‘alone or with other characters’, or ‘in a κομμός with the Chorus’.⁷¹ She specifies that in the common tradition a chorus accompanied a soloist, so that an imaginary dialogue between the dead and living could be created.⁷² This is evident in the tragic laments performed by nightingale-like heroines on the Attic stage. Despite the difficulties in defining the relationship between female lamentation and tragic laments, the dominant role of the Chorus in directing the emotional response of the audience cannot be denied. Witnessing, accompanying, delivering warnings and supporting the lamenting speeches and songs of tragic heroines, the Chorus mediates the interpretation of the nightingale’s song. By alluding to the mythological metamorphosis of Procne, Attic dramatists could metaphorically reproduce the nightingale’s lament, thus translating a ritual performance into a dialogical response to death. In fact, when a tragic heroine associates herself with or is associated by the Chorus with the nightingale, the lamenting sound ἴτυς, ‘Itys’, usually resonates. From Homer to tragedy the name of the slain child of Procne is employed as an interjection of grief,⁷³ and reproduces the effect of funeral mourning with its repetitions and alliterations.⁷⁴ Just as in ritual lamentations the name of the dead was repeated to compensate the loss of a beloved, the name of Procne’s son is the tragic tune of female laments.

The dialogical nature of female lamentation is also evidenced by the linguistic description of the nightingale’s song in ancient Greek tragedy. Defined as ἀοιδοτάτα ὄρνις, ‘the most tuneful bird’,⁷⁵ the nightingale is portrayed as clever and expertly arranges its song.⁷⁶ Its activity is expressed, for example, by the verb συντίθημι, ‘I compose’,⁷⁷ and by the verb μελοτυπέω, ‘I strike up a strain, chant’,⁷⁸ which consists of the noun μέλος,

⁷¹ Suter (2003) 3; cf. Palmisciano (2017) 222-224.

⁷² Cf. Palmisciano (2017) 7, 40, 48.

⁷³ Hom. *Od.* 19.522; Aesch. *Ag.* 1144; Soph. *El.* 148; Eur. fr. 773,26 K.

⁷⁴ Aesch. *Supp.* 112-6; see also De Martino (2008).

⁷⁵ Eur. *Hel.* 1109-1110.

⁷⁶ Eur. fr. 88,2, 588,3 N.

⁷⁷ Aesch. *Supp.* 65.

⁷⁸ Aesch. *Ag.* 1153.

‘song’, and the verb τυπώ, ‘I model’. Just as a poet/musician crafts a composition, the tragic nightingale alternates λίγεια, ‘acute’,⁷⁹ with βαρέα, ‘deep’, notes.⁸⁰ Moreover, the polyphonic effect of the song of the nightingale is expressed through the employment of the adjectives ξουθός, ‘shrill’,⁸¹ ὀξύφωνος, ‘high-pitched’,⁸² and ὀξύτονος, ‘sharp-sounding’.⁸³ Oxymoronic expressions, such as the νόμος ἄνομος, ‘unmusical song’,⁸⁴ referring to the call of the nightingale, suggest that tragic laments were perceived as denied or suppressed songs on the Attic stage.⁸⁵ The acoustic contrasts created by the tragic nightingale cannot be simply considered as the product of its musical virtuosity. I argue that its clear, shrilling, and polyphonic voice was considered particularly effective by Attic dramatists for giving voice to mourning avengers. In light of the mythological metamorphosis enacted by Procne, the nightingale is employed as a musical signal of a turning point in revenge plots.

In addition to the acoustic details of its performance, the song of the nightingale suggests the violent bodily expression of female lamentation. The tearing of cheeks,⁸⁶ the rending of hair and clothes,⁸⁷ the beating of breasts and the continuous shedding of tears,⁸⁸ distinctive gestures during the performance of real-world funeral rites, are deployed in the tragic characterisation of nightingale-like mourning women. By evoking the mythological metamorphosis of Procne, the nightingale expresses not only her grief at the death of her son. It recalls also her κότος, ‘wrath’ in taking revenge against her husband.⁸⁹ Thus, the subversive role played by women in inciting vengeance through lamentation was re-imagined in all its tragic

⁷⁹ Aesch. *Ag.* 1146, 1154.

⁸⁰ Aesch. *Supp.* 113.

⁸¹ Aesch. *Ag.* 1142.

⁸² Soph. *Tr.* 963.

⁸³ Soph. *Aj.* 630.

⁸⁴ Aesch. *Ag.* 1142.

⁸⁵ For an interpretation of the νόμος ἄνομος and the ‘denied song’ in ancient Greek tragedy, see Verrall (1889) 131; Fraenkel (1950) 518; Fleming (1977) 222-233; Segal (1993) 16-21; Raeburn and Thomas (2011) 190; Fantuzzi (2007) 173-199.

⁸⁶ Aesch. *Supp.* 70-71.

⁸⁷ Aesch. *Supp.* 120-122.

⁸⁸ Aesch. *Supp.* 113, *Ag.* 1143; Eur. *Hel.* 1110.

⁸⁹ Aesch. *Supp.* 67.

implications for the Attic stage. By adapting the myth of Procne to the Dionysiac context of dramatic festivals, Attic dramatists could steer the action towards a vengeful resolution. Through a reversal in the causes and effects of the nightingale's song, tragic heroines are imagined to metaphorically abandon their human aspect in the passage from lament to revenge.

5. The Mourning Avenger Electra

Among the tragic heroines who are compared to the nightingale, the Sophoclean Electra is the most transgressive. By modulating the lamenting song of the nightingale, she actively participates in the vengeful act of matricide plotted and committed by Orestes. The gendered contradictions of the involvement of Electra in the cycle of revenge of the House of Atreus have been widely debated by classical scholars. Defined as 'at once the victim and the agent of the Furies', Electra challenges the gender ideologies of fifth-century Athenian society with her lamenting voice.⁹⁰ Burnett recognises the disturbing effect of the lament raised by Electra, but denies her an active role in the vengeful act of matricide. She distinguishes the impulse to revenge shown by Electra from the 'pragmatic, masculine plan' of Orestes.⁹¹ In her analysis of the ethics of tragic lamentations, Foley defines instead the Sophoclean Electra as a 'sacrificial virgin', who actively participates in the matricidal act committed by Orestes.⁹² She argues that Electra and Orestes do not respectively represent the female and male avengers of Agamemnon, but they do assume complementary roles in the slaughter of Clytemnestra. As Foley states, 'in Electra, female and male [...] pursue different paths until the final scenes bring them back together'.⁹³ The path followed by Electra is ritual lamentation, through which she can invoke and set the scene for the vengeful act of matricide.

The boundaries between past and present offence are blurred in the aggressive lamentation raised by Electra throughout the Sophoclean tragedy.

⁹⁰ Winnington-Ingram (1980) 228.

⁹¹ Burnett (1998) 119-141.

⁹² Foley (2001) 145-171.

⁹³ Foley (2001) 148.

According to Wheeler, the transgressive nature of Electra needs to be considered alongside the ambiguous representation of her sexual identity.⁹⁴ Depicted as a virgin affected by ‘jealous frustration’, ‘passion and pique’,⁹⁵ Electra performs a perverted form of marriage.⁹⁶ Wheeler argues that it is her *παρθενεία*, ‘virginity’, that might have unsettled the audience, by revealing ‘male nervousness at the prospect of women escaping control’.⁹⁷ From his perspective, Electra does not assume quintessentially masculine attributes to incite and accomplish revenge, but her liminal status displays the complexity of her dramatic role. As he states, ‘she is pugnacious yet motherly, emotional yet rational; she transgresses, but in defence of patriarchy and patriliney’.⁹⁸ The complex identity of Electra is also discussed by McHardy, who argues that mourning and nubility are the two main aspects of her defiant depiction.⁹⁹ Her performance of ritual lamentation as an unmarried girl would have been perceived not only as out of control, but also as threatening. Electra initially incites Orestes to revenge, but on learning about his death decides to take on his vengeful role. As McHardy explains, Electra transgresses gender boundaries by taking on the role of avenger. Wright provides a more nuanced interpretation of the vengeful identity of Electra:¹⁰⁰ rather than arguing for either a positive or negative reaction by the fifth-century Athenian audience, he focuses instead on the tragic representation of emotions in her controversial depiction. He observes that, despite the lamenting nature of Electra’s voice, ‘the number of references to positive emotions, such as joy or pleasure, is extraordinarily high’.¹⁰¹ However, due to the tragic ‘tendency to pervert positive experiences into negative ones’, the joyful lament of Electra displays nothing but the disruption of the blood ties in her own household.¹⁰² Belonging to the tradition of female lamentations, the opening monody of Electra expresses hopelessness,

⁹⁴ Wheeler (2003) 377-388.

⁹⁵ Wheeler (2003) 380.

⁹⁶ For more details of the interpretation of the tragic representation of Electra as performing a perverted form of ritual marriage, see Seaford (1985) 315-323.

⁹⁷ Wheeler (2003) 378.

⁹⁸ Wheeler (2003) 383.

⁹⁹ McHardy (2004) 92-114.

¹⁰⁰ Wright (2005) 172-194.

¹⁰¹ Wright (2005) 177.

¹⁰² Wright (2005) 178.

despair and bereavement, on the one hand, and danger, power and violence, on the other.

Through analysis of the nightingale theme, it is possible to interpret the controversial identity of Electra, who through lamentation incites vengeance within and against her own household. The nightingale metaphorically occurs in ring composition, both at the beginning and the end of the Sophoclean tragedy, and serves to capture Electra in the dramatic passage from lament to revenge. Embedded in the vengeful dynamics of her family, Electra is depicted nightingale-like because of her unending lament for the death of Agamemnon. The intent of Electra is not only to mourn and preserve the memory of her father, but also to incite revenge against her mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, both guilty of the man-slaughter. Waiting for her brother Orestes to avenge the archaic honour and the tragic misdeeds in her family, she opens the tragedy with an excessively prolonged lament. In the prologue, Orestes while plotting his deceitful plan of vengeance against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus hears weeping sounds.¹⁰³ Having started to wail off-stage, Electra enters to modulate a unique lyric song that assumes the tunes of the nightingale's lament. The fact that the tragedy stages a monody before the entrance of the Chorus highlights the lamenting song of Electra. By comparing herself with the nightingale, Electra cries out her suffering, as follows:¹⁰⁴

{ΗΛ.} Ἄλλ' οὐ μὲν δὴ
 λήξω θρήνων στυγερῶν τε γόων,
 ἔστ' ἂν παμφεγγεῖς ἄστρων
 ῥιπᾶς, λείσσω δὲ τὸδ' ἥμαρ,
 μὴ οὐ τεκνολέτειρ' ὥς τις ἀηδῶν
 ἐπὶ κωκυτῷ τῶνδε πατρώων
 πρὸ θυρῶν ἠχῶ πᾶσι προφωνεῖν.

El. But I will never cease
 my wailing and bitter laments,
 as long as I see the resplendent rays
 of the stars and this daylight;
 like that nightingale, deprived of her child,

¹⁰³ Soph. *El.* 77-81.

¹⁰⁴ Soph. *El.* 103-109.

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I shall cry out in grief, for all to hear,
at these doors of my father's house.

Electra's song establishes, from the beginning, a connection with the concept of death, which is enhanced by her prayer to chthonic deities, such as Hades, Persephone, Hermes and the Furies.¹⁰⁵ The polyptoton of the nouns γόος, 'wail' (81, 104), and θρήνος, 'lament' (88, 94), emphasises the lamenting nature of her monody. Mediated by the image of the nightingale, the lament of Electra not only expresses her grief for the death of her father, but also describes her tragic condition. By evoking the myth of Procne, the nightingale gives voice to the dirges uttered by Electra in her lamentation. The indefinite article τις (107), which literally means 'some', is referring here to the nightingale, so that the connection between Electra and Procne can be established. Electra shares with Procne the status of deprivation, isolation and suffering. Having been deprived of her father, she is now waiting for her brother to take revenge against her mother.

Electra imitates the mourning song of the nightingale not only to commemorate her father's death, but also to denounce the crimes committed by her mother Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. By transgressing the democratic legislation on funeral rites, Electra manifests both her grief and anger publicly. She performs in fact ritual lamentation in front of the palace's entrance (108-9), so that she can be heard and seek revenge. The compound adjective τεκνολέτειρα (107), which is a Sophoclean *hapax*, creates a subtle connection between the vengeful lament of Electra and the mythological metamorphosis of Procne. It consists of the noun τέκνον, 'child', and the verb ὄλλυμι, which means 'I slay' in the active form and 'I lose' in the passive. For, the term has been translated either as 'child-slayer'¹⁰⁶ or as 'child-deprived'.¹⁰⁷ I argue that both despair and violence characterise the song of the nightingale in the comparison between Procne and Electra. The difference consists instead in the fact that, whereas Procne raises her lament after the death of her son, Electra modulates the lamenting song of the nightingale to anticipate the death of her mother.

¹⁰⁵ Soph. *El.* 110-112.

¹⁰⁶ Jebb (1880); Dugdale (2008); Raeburn (2008).

¹⁰⁷ Campbell (1881); March (2001); Roisman (2008).

The vengeful connotations of the lamenting song of the nightingale are acoustically conveyed in the tragic monody of Electra. With the accompaniment of the Chorus, she manifests both her suffering and anger for the death of her father to incite vengeance against her mother. Although the women of Mycenae warn Electra about the dangerousness of her lamentation, Electra carries on her performance, as follows:¹⁰⁸

{ΗΛ.} Νήπιος ὅς τῶν οἰκτρῶς
οἰχομένων γονέων ἐπιλάθεται·
ἀλλ' ἐμέ γ' ἄστονόεσσ' ἄραρεν φρένας,
ἄΐτυν, αἰέν ΐτυν ὀλοφύρεται,
ὄρνις ἀτυζομένα, Διὸς ἄγγελος.

El. Foolish is the child who
forgets parents pitifully dead;
but more congenial to my mind is the mournful
bird that laments for Itys, Itys, evermore,
distraught for grief, the messenger of Zeus.

Electra ignores the warnings of the Chorus and justifies her lament as filial piety by evoking the nightingale's song. The nightingale is connoted by the adjective *στονόεις* (147), which can mean 'full of moaning',¹⁰⁹ but also have the factitive meaning of 'causing groans'.¹¹⁰ The present participle of the verb *ἀτύζομαι*, 'distraught with grief' (149), emphasises the lamenting nature of Electra's song. By creating a connection with the Homeric depiction of Penelope,¹¹¹ the verb *ὀλοφύρομαι*, 'I lament' (148), suggests the modality through which Electra mourns the death of Agamemnon. Moreover, the name of the slain son of Procne is used as an interjection of grief. Encapsulated between the two accusative forms of *ΐτυς* (148), the adverb *αἰέν* connotes the ever-lasting lament of Electra. The term, which in ancient Greek means 'forever', creates a dramatic connection between Electra and another mourning heroine. The concept of eternity, which justifies the excessive du-

¹⁰⁸ Soph. *El.* 145-149.

¹⁰⁹ Hom. *Il.* 24.721; Soph. *OT* 187, *Ant.* 114.

¹¹⁰ Hom. *Il.* 8.159, *Od.* 9.12, 11.383, 17.102, 21.60; Aesch. *Pers.* 1053; Soph. *Trach.* 886.

¹¹¹ Hom. *Od.* 19.522.

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ration of Electra's lamentation, is in fact enhanced by the mythological reference to Niobe (150-2). Transformed into 'a rocky grave', Niobe was believed to 'forever shed tears' after the death of her offspring.¹¹² By modulating the song of the nightingale and referring to the ceaseless tears of Niobe, Electra would have created a tragic effect of pathos in the audience. She does not intend to cease her lament until Orestes comes back home and takes revenge against their mother for the death of their father.

Employed in ring composition, the nightingale's song concludes the lament of Electra to prepare the scene for the vengeful act of matricide committed by Orestes. As soon as Electra is informed of the feigned death of her brother (929-80), she takes on the role of mourning avenger. She claims revenge, by invoking Nemesis (790), the personification of retribution, responsible for ensuring that wrong-doers receive their punishment. The reference to Nemesis emphasises not only the grief suffered and expressed by Electra, but also the disruptive impact of her lamentation on the tragic plot. When Electra tries to persuade her sister to join her in avenging their father, Chrysothemis replies: 'you were born a woman, not a man, your arm is weaker than your enemies' (998-9). In contrast to her sister, Electra shows her loyalty to the dead and her heroism in her desire for revenge. Thus, the Chorus comments on the vengeful intentions of Electra.¹¹³

{XO.} [...] πρόδοτος δὲ μόνα σαλεύει
Ἥλεκτρα, τὸν αἰὲ πατρός
δειλαία στενάχουσι, ὅπως
ἅ πάνδυρτος ἀηδῶν,
οὔτε τι τοῦ θανεῖν προμη-
θῆς τό τε μὴ βλέπειν ἐτοι-
μα, διδύμαν ἐλοῦσ' ἐρι-
νύν· τίς ἄν εὔπατρις ὄδε βλάστοι;

Ch. But betrayed, she endures the storm alone,
Electra, forever the death of her father
sorrowfully lamenting, like
the plaintive nightingale,

¹¹² Cf. the myth of Niobe in Hom. *Il.* XXIV 602ff; [Apoll.] *Bibl.* III 46.

¹¹³ Soph. *El.* 1074-1081.

with no care about death,
but ready to leave the light;
could she overcome the double Furies?
Who could be born so noble?

Deserted by Orestes and Chrysothemis, Electra is depicted, through a nautical metaphor, in her courage to ‘endure the storm’ (1074). She carries on performing the lamenting song of the nightingale to justify her vengeful intentions. Her suffering for the death of her father is expressed by the adjective δειλαιος (1076), which does not occur in Homer and is specifically used in tragedy with the meaning of ‘wretched, sorry, paltry’.¹¹⁴ Her wretched condition is also represented by the present participle of the verb στενάχω (1076), which is frequently used as ‘I groan, sigh, wail’ in the Homeric tradition,¹¹⁵ and transitively as ‘I bewail, lament’ in tragedy.¹¹⁶ Moreover, the adjective πάνδυρος, ‘all-plaintive’, which can connote a song¹¹⁷ and specifically a lament,¹¹⁸ here is used by the Chorus to compare Electra to the nightingale (1077). However, the everlasting lament of Electra is interrupted by the recognition of Orestes at the end of the play. Freed from her perpetual waiting and suffering, she is asked by her brother to conceal her joy by carrying on her lamentation. From being an expression of grief and powerlessness, the lamenting song of the nightingale becomes the ominous sign that vengeance is about to happen. This is evidenced by the reference to the δίδυμη Ἐρινός (1080), ‘the double Erinys’, the avenging deities in charge of punishing perjury, homicide, and unfilial conduct. This reference made by the Chorus is specifically used at the end of *Electra* to anticipate the killing of both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Without losing its transgressive connotations, the lament of Electra foreshadows the accomplishment of her vengeful intentions. Employed to create an effect of suspense in the fifth-century Athenian audience, the nightingale signals the dramatic passage from lament to revenge in the metamorphic depiction of Electra.

¹¹⁴ Aesch. *Cho.* 517, *PV* 580; Soph. *Ant.* 1311, *El.* 758, *OC* 513, *OT* 1347; Eur. *Hec.* 156.

¹¹⁵ Hom. *Il.* 4.516, 8.334, 18.318, 23.317, 21.417, 24.123; *Od.* 8.95, 534.

¹¹⁶ Aesch. *PV* 99; cf. Eur. *Phoen.* 1551.

¹¹⁷ Aesch. *Pers.* 941.

¹¹⁸ Eur. *Hec.* 212.

6. Conclusion

Through a close analysis of the nightingale theme, it is possible to illuminate the emotional contradictions of female lamentation as performed in ancient Greek tragedy. The image of the nightingale gives voice both to the grief and anger of tragic women in response to death. By transgressing the norms prescribed by fifth-century Athenian funeral legislation, aimed at controlling the dangerous implications of ritual lamentation, Attic dramatists metaphorically reproduce the call of the nightingale in key moments of their tragic plays. Through discordant notes, they display the affected status of female characters, in order to provoke a tragic effect of suspense in their audience. When the plaintive, shrilling and sharp-sounding nightingale is evoked, female characters are transformed into mourning avengers. Through a reversal of the mythological metamorphosis of Procne, tragic heroines like the Sophoclean Electra are represented as performing ritual lamentation before revenge is committed. In fact, they metaphorically modulate the song of the nightingale in the dramaturgical passage from lament to revenge. This reading of the nightingale-woman metaphor in ancient Greek tragedy not only opens new perspectives to interpret the contradictory depiction of mourning avengers, but offers also ideas for modern adaptations and representations of Sophocles' *Electra*.

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