CHAPTER FIVE

SILENCE II: SOLIDARITY AND COMPLICITY

The previous chapter examined two kinds of Euripidean silences: male characters who are physically silent for long periods (over a hundred lines) after their first entrance; and women who engage with the vocabulary of silence (σιγή, σιγάω, σιωπή, σιωπάω) to encompass concepts of keeping personal secrets. There is still another signification of silence in Euripides, and that is the willingness to keep silent the secrets of others. This is usually undertaken by a female chorus; Euripides also invents two characters who perform this same function—Hippolytus and Theonoe—who, interestingly enough, are both self-professed virgins.

‘Silent’ Female Choruses

It has often been observed that no intrigue in Greek tragedy can be successful without the complicity of the chorus.1 In the case of Euripides, all but one of his extant intrigue tragedies have female choruses, and their complicity often includes a promise to ‘keep silent.’2 There are, of course, limits to any Greek chorus’ involvement in a plot,

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1 E.g., Paduano (1985), 159.
2 ‘Intrigue tragedies’ are those with a plot that involves deceit and creates an opposition between the hero/heroine and his/her victim. This is in contrast to plays in which the plot centers on a battle (Children of Heracles, Phoenician Women), or the long-term aftermath of a battle (Trojan Women), or both (Suppliant Women); Alcestis is somewhat unique in focusing on a domestic crisis (mourning for the death of a wife) which ends happily. In ‘intrigue tragedies,’ the intrigues aim at death (Hippolytus, Bacchae, Iphigenia in Aulis), murder (Medea, Andromache, Electra, Heracles, Ion, Orestes, the fragmentary Antiope), maiming (Hecuba), or escape (Helen, Iphigenia in Tauris). Sometimes the intrigue fails (in Ion, Creusa’s attempt to poison Ion thankfully fails; in Andromache, Menelaus’ plot to murder Andromache’s son is thwarted; in Iphigenia in Aulis, Agamemnon’s attempt to deceive his daughter is uncovered). In all the above mentioned tragedies, only Heracles has a male chorus, and the intrigue (in mid-play) is Heracles’ murder of Lycus. One might also include the disputed Rhesus and the satyr-play Cyclops (both of which have a male chorus, and an intrigue).
given the conventional physical separation between actors and choruses in the theater. Euripides, however, goes beyond the mere physical and enables his female choruses to share in the development of an intrigue by endowing them with a communal personality that is constantly engaged morally and ethically with a heroine. One of the crucial elements in this is the creation of female friendships. The female solidarity that so often operates in Euripides’ tragedies (and, for that matter, in Aristophanes’ comedies Ecclesiazusae, Thesmophoriazusae, and Lysistrata) is based on the mutual dependence and propinquity of Athenian women in real life. Certainly Athenian men had an awareness that women visited each other, borrowed things from each other, and established intimate friendships. Euripides represents women as a cohesive group. The reverse does not happen, and Euripidean men cannot appeal to a male solidarity or a common ‘manhood,’ but only specific shared personal experiences.

A crucial determinant in whether a female chorus keeps silent about a particular intrigue is female solidarity; in Medea, Hippolytus, Iphigenia in Tauris, and Helen, the choruses agree to keep secrets because they are convinced that the heroine’s interests coincide with their own. In Ion, the chorus women refuse to keep silent about Xuthus’ secret because of their loyalty to their mistress, Creusa, which they express as a condemnation of the infidelities of men. In Iphigenia in Aulis, however, the chorus women do not break the silence imposed on them by Agamemnon, because there exists no female friendship between themselves and Iphigenia and Clytemnestra, and so (surprisingly) female solidarity does not operate.

The oaths to silence made by Euripidean female choruses differ from male silences in two important respects. First, the ‘silence’ of these female choruses is rarely the equivalent of ‘muteness’ or ‘not speaking,’ as in the case of ‘partially mute’ men in the previous chapter. Although some form of the Greek word sigaô is used in reference to virtually all these ‘silent’ female choruses, this does not mean that choruses stop communicating; it means that when they speak to anyone other than their heroine, they do not mention her plot. In the Hippolytus and Iphigenia in Tauris, this goes one step further and involves half-truths or lies. The extent of the chorus’ communication varies from play to play; and indeed, it seems a Euripidean convention that choruses tend to avoid lengthy conversations with actors other than a single heroine or hero with whom they might share some rapport. Choruses invariably make small rejoinders at the end of competing speeches made in an