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"Thank Heaven for Little Girls:" The Economics of Virgin Sacrifice in Euripidean Tragedy

In this paper I argue that scenes of virgin sacrifice in tragedy can be productively viewed within the discourse of the *khoregia*. As a site of contestation, the *khoregia* relates the aristocratic need for self-presentation with the democratic display of the dramatic performance. The leitourgic practices of fifth-century Athens suggest a "compromised elite" that was required to submit to the demos (P. Millett "The Rhetoric of Reciprocity in Classical Athens" in *Reciprocity in Ancient Greece*, eds. C. Gill et al. Oxford 1998). As the tragic *khoregia* involved a prominent individual within an 'economy of prestige', however, the potential for aristocratic display in the *khoregia* complicates the traditional monolithic construct of fifth-century Athenian social culture (cf. P. Wilson "Leading the Tragic Khoros" in *Greek Tragedy and the Historian*, ed. C. Pelling. Oxford 1997). Much like the *khoregia*, scenes of virgin sacrifice could be inflected along different ideological lines and thus blur class distinctions.

In the *Hekabe* Odysseus' justification of Polyxena's sacrifice (306f) serves as a program for promoting the mystified value of the aristocratic warrior: civic strife and elite ethics are invoked in order to validate the aristocratic position that it is the prerogative of nobility to assert itself above the needs of the lower classes. The sacrifice of Polyxena -- an act demanded by the in-group of the Greek host -- serves to maintain the elite economy of prestige within the community. Similarly Hekabe's speech (585f) reaffirms Polyxena's elite status and promotes the social position of the elite vis-à-vis the community through her essentializing of 'noble character.'

In the *Iphigeneia in Aulis* the corrupt state of the text has contributed to the undervaluing of Klytaimestra's crash course in economics (1146-1208). For Klytaimestra the sacrifice of Iphigeneia represents an obscene commodification of a precious object -- her daughter. Yet at the same time there is a competing representation that is expressed through the rhetoric of Panhellenism (i.e., most notably by Agamemnon, Menelaos, and Iphigeneia). This vision supports elitism and the elite system of *xenia*. As an elite transaction with a thus ennobled community, the sacrifice of Iphigeneia mystifies the value of the elite *oikos* and promotes its privileged role within the community. Klytaimestra's view of the sacrifice does not, however, simply endorse a more 'democratic' model. I argue that the concern for the traditional elite marriage networks informs this process of demystification.

By viewing the sacrificer as a *khoregos* and thus situating the virgin sacrifice within a contemporary discourse of expenditure, we can better understand the political and social dynamic at play in these tragic scenes. Class distinctions are transfigured into a normative democratic model from which the whole community can benefit from the elite "expenditure of self". Susceptible to being co-opted by different ideologies, the representation of virgin sacrifice articulates a complex process of assimilation between democratic and aristocratic thinking.