The Heroic Female

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Redefining the Role of the Heroine in the Tragedies of Vittorio Alfieri

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For Dad

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INTRODUCTION[1]

Of all the characters that populate Alfieri's nineteen tragedies, perhaps the most fascinating is Clitennestra in the tragedy **Agamennone**. She is a "bad girl", an adulteress, a murderess who kills her own husband, easily swayed by her duplicitous lover, and, worst of all, disobedient to all societal rules that would keep her faithful, patient, and self-sacrificing. Alfieri himself condemns her actions, and yet it is not difficult to feel sympathy for such a character. After all, she is forced to endure the sacrifice of her daughter's life to state needs, and at the hands of her own husband. Clitennestra seems the most human of characters in this tragedy, her husband less so. Other female characters in Alfieri's tragedies, too, are captivating, and they reflect important values in the Alfierian world: familial and intimate ones, but also ones of strength, intelligence, and reason. Such characterizations could not have been created by chance. Yet, critical studies on the female characters in Alfieri's tragedies are lacking. There are scores of texts on the grand Alfierian themes, on his political leanings, on the degree of his relationship to the Enlightenment, on the tyrant in his tragedies, as well as on more specific topics such as his anti-gallic tendencies, religious aspects of his work, and the Alfierian tragic language. The one critical work that focuses on the Alfierian heroine was published in 1926 and has never been improved upon in subsequent years. In the 1970's, a few isolated critical works of a comparative and decidedly feminist slant began to deal with the heroine in Alfieri's tragedies, yet even these are limited in scope. In short, it seems that Alfieri's female characters have been almost systematically overlooked.

Frankly, it is puzzling. If there is a lack of critical interest in the heroines of such tragedies, it is not the intention of the author. These female characters are not minor ones; they often figure prominently in the tragedies. Ten of the tragedies, **Antigone, Virginia, Rosmunda, Ottavia, Merope, Maria Stuarda, Sofonisba, Mirra**, and the posthumous **Alceste**, are entitled with the heroine's name. Alfieri surely placed characters such as Clitennestra, Mirra, Elettra, and Merope in prominent positions in order to speak to us in some way. Yet, the female characters are dismissed in criticism, disappearing under an avalanche of male-oriented topics of study. In fact, in the body of critical literature that exists on Vittorio Alfieri's tragic works, the most frequently researched topic is clearly the

opposition of male tyrant to male hero. Giorgio Bárberi Squarotti, for instance, speaks of this conflict as the "centro ideologico da cui le tragedie alfieriane si sviluppano."[2] Squarotti goes on to define the hero as a positive character who functions as the champion of liberty against the tyrant. Both tyrant and hero are typically titanic in stature, exceptional human beings whose epic struggle is the focus of the tragedy[3]. Critical literature, in fact, focuses on this male champion of freedom, yet often Alfieri's female characters are true heroines, and sometimes there is no male champion of freedom present in the tragedy. Walter Binni goes further than many other critics in dealing with the role of the female in Alfieri's tragedies. He mentions the "base eroica che non manca mai alle grandi figure femminili alfieriane",[4] and, indeed, with those he considers exceptional—Micol, Mirra, Merope—he initiates an analysis of their roles, yet his study does not focus on their function and importance in Alfieri's work.

Other Alfierian critical studies discuss the related themes that inevitably deal with the same basic conflict. Inherently linked to the tyrant motif is the theme of power as the corrupting factor that causes the tyrant to act as he does. Squarotti analyzes the "esorbitanza del potere", the "patologia del potere che è quella di chi sente la condizione di re come esercizio senza confini né morali, né religiosi, né affettivi, né di sangue."[5] If the tyrant is associated with power, the hero is the embodiment of the search for liberty from this power, and therefore, in an absolutist world, the symbol of individualism. Bruno Maier attributes the unity and coherence of Alfieri's work to a "ben definito motivo dominante, fuoco centrale dell' individualismo alfieriano: il concetto-mito della libertà."[6] Walter Binni speaks of the "ansia di libertà"[7], and refers back to the theme of power as the "corruttore della libertà".[8] Again, the basic conflict arises in different terms: tyrant/hero is synonymous with power/liberty.

The concept of individualism is intrinsically joined with those of the hero and of liberty. Says Maier :

> Individualismo significa, per il poeta astigiano, senso altero e profondo dell'"io", ...e quindi lotta aperta e violenta contro il mondo esterno, contro il "limite" della medesima realtà, contro ogni tirannide che si opponga alla necessaria libertà dell'uomo. Questo magnanimo individualismo fu concepito dall'Alfieri come ideale di libera e alta vita..."[9]

In the same statement, the themes of individualism and liberty are present with those of tyranny and heroism of the "io". In the case of Alfieri's tragedies, the "io" will be represented by the positive hero, champion of liberty.

Even though the bulk of criticism is centered on this male-oriented conflict between hero/tyrant, and its related themes of power, liberty and individualism, certain critics venture into new territory by including the role of the family in these tragedies. Yet, although these analyses discuss an important aspect of Alfieri's work, they prove to be limited in scope. Perhaps the basic problem lies in a statement Nicolò Mineo makes, “La tematica politica cede... spazio ed evidenza ad una problematica individuale e familiare.”[10] The term "cede spazio" is revealing: as long as political themes are considered central to Alfieri's tragedies, while his more intimate themes are viewed as so secondary that they can only be squeezed in among the more massive and important political ones, the familial motif is treated as only of minor importance, not crucial to an understanding of his work. Indeed, even as the critics purport to be discussing familial issues, the discussion almost always becomes intertwined with that of the *polis*. In Giorgio Barberì Squarotti's analysis, the familial aspect is studied always in function to the tyrant.

> Per poter manifestare in modo più efficace le conseguenze abnormi della tirannia come malattia del potere l'Alfieri finisce a insistere sulle manifestazioni di essa là dove più può accompagnarsi con il patetico: nell' ambito familiare, degli affetti fra padre e figli, fra gli sposi, fra gli innamorati, poiché qui più chiaramente può farsi visibile sulla scena la conseguenza atroce della patologia del potere nel momento in cui calpesta ogni legame naturale di sangue...[11]

It is an appropriate statement that Squarotti makes—certainly family does function as a vehicle to make tyranny appear even more vile—yet the immediate link of family to tyranny serves to squelch any further discussion of the role of family in the tragedies on its own merit. There is no apparent significance attached to it than its *polis*-centered function. In addition, if we read this citation carefully, the woman—as mother, sister, daughter—is not even mentioned in the list of family relationships. Curiously, father-son relationships and even lovers' relationships are given more prominence than those of mother-daughter, father-daughter, sister-sister, etc. Thus, within an already limited discussion of family ties, the role of the female member of the family is more limited, even non-existent. She disappears first under the weight of the importance of the male, and then, under the preponderance for *polis*-centered themes.

Walter Binni recognizes the familial element in Alfieri's tragedies as he describes "un mondo di affetti intimi, 'umani', familiari...”,[12] and he mentions the merits of the familial aspects of the author's work as he goes on to call it a "visione più vasta e articolata...varia ed intera", and therefore

successful.[13] Yet, in his more specific analysis of **Merope**, he states that this world "meno gigantesca e titanica...perde di quella intensità tragica e di quell'impeto profondo."[14] Thus, the success of Alfieri's familial vision translates to a loss in the inherent tragic tenor of the work. Human emotion, to Binni, pales in comparison to titanic duels.

And yet this human emotion of the family or any human emotion for that matter, figures prominently in Alfieri's tragedies. Alfieri's insistence on the crucial importance of "forte sentire" is commonly recognized as central to his tragedy. Laura Sannia Nowé explains the author's interest in the "'perplessità' del cuore umano...la psiche...dei personaggi...(la) calda passionalità,"[15] while Squarotti underscores the psychological aspect of the tragedies as he states that "i personaggi devono spiegare e spiegarsi, e mettere a nudo il loro cuore, e parlare quanto più è possibile di sé e dei propri sentimenti"[16] and Guagnini speaks of the modernity of Alfieri's vision in the "conflittualità interiori...(e) passioni contrapposte" of the characters.[17] There can be no greater motor to great tragic theater than "forte sentire" says Alfieri, and yet Alfieri's emphasis on emotion, sentiment, passion, is constantly viewed through the lens of political themes. Nowé sees power as the true center of the tragedy; Maier speaks of sentiment, but always in reference to the hero figure; Fabrizi begins with a discussion of human nature but ends up with one that deals with power and other related topics; Binni includes "forte sentire" but goes back always to the liberty/power, tyrant/hero mold. Passion refers always to the search for liberty in which female characters, of course, do not take part.

In an effort to exhume these poor heroines from their untimely critical graves, this book aims to present questions that might lead to a new direction in reading Alfieri's tragedies. Perhaps we should begin this re-reading of the tragedies by asking: "Who is the hero?" In the tragedy **Agamennone**, for instance, although entitled for the male member of the family, the female characters Clitennestra and Elettra give the tragedy life; it is they on whom the tragedy focuses. Certainly, in **Oreste**, again entitled for a less fully developed male character, it is Elettra who is the true heroine against the threat of the tyrant. In **Virginia**, the heroine dies for her right to liberty. It is Antigone who confronts the tyrant directly, and who dies for her convictions. Therefore, the "uomo libero" concept appears much too limited—"donne libere" should be an integral part of the discussion. Even if one were to insist on the basic hero/tyrant formula, and its related themes of power, liberty and individualism, the discussion is not complete without the inclusion of the female Alfierian protagonist. It is

erroneous to believe that women do not take part in the search for liberty: even those who do not function as true heroines or protagonists assist in the hero's search. Micol, Bianca, Agiziade and Agesistrata, to mention only a few, all take part in their loved ones' struggles. Women figure also in the exploration of the theme of individualism: if we accept Bruno Maier's definition of individualism, are not Mirra and even Clitennestra women who struggle against "il 'limite' della medesima realtà"; are not Antigone and Micol women who assert themselves "contro ogni tirannide che si opponga alla necessaria libertà dell'uomo" or, in this case, "donna"; does not Virginia have a "senso profondo and altero dell'"io""? It is difficult to deny that Mirra is the greatest example of what Guagnini calls "conflittualità interiori...tragica grandezza di personaggi lacerati da passioni contrapposte e dal senso dei limiti posti alla loro azione umana."[18] One might consider also that it is not only the hero that can be female, but the tyrant itself. A case in point is the tragedy **Rosmunda**, in which Rosmunda is a particularly vicious tyrant. Also, Poppea in **Ottavia** functions as the catalyst to tyrannical behavior on the part of Nerone. The insistence on orienting critical discussion to the male presence, therefore, is unsatisfactory even if only for reasons of completeness and accuracy.

In addition, the admiration for Alfieri's titanic hero/tyrant figures as somehow representative of Alfieri's views on the greatness of certain individuals (including himself) may be misplaced. These are certainly exceptional characters, and yet they may not be entirely positive ones. The excesses that these figures create in the name of liberty or tyranny diminish them as spokespersons for the author himself. In fact, it is often the woman who is the voice of reasoned passion against the insanity of the hero/tyrant conflict. She is the representative of "forte sentire", that all-important quality that evokes human feeling, emotion, and love. "Forte sentire" refers to much more than noble actions and irrational acts inspired by patriotic passion. If, as Guagnini avers, Alfieri wanted his theater to teach men to be "insofferenti d'ogni violenza", and vanguards of "vera virtù"[19], then it is the woman who is his teacher. In Alfieri's tragic world, men are violent: even the hero, in his search to end the violence of tyranny, must often use violence to achieve his end. Women are often the only characters untouched enough by the bloody struggle for power that they can remain free to think and feel clearly.

The critics' insistence on orienting their analyses to the political realm is questionable, since it is quite clear that Alfieri placed the tragic consequences of *polis*-centered conflict squarely in the midst of the family. The intimacy of affection and rejection, love and hate that Alfieri presents to us within a familial atmosphere is perhaps more difficult to

analyze than the more concrete political themes, and yet they are vital to a total comprehension of the tragedies. We have shown that Walter Binni sees a loss of tragic intensity in this less titanic world, a minor world as he sees it, and yet, we might ask ourselves, do not the gains in human qualities and psychological realism outweigh any such loss? And might not such gains constitute no loss at all, but an incredible enrichment of the entire tragedy's pathos and meaning? Within the framework of the tragic family unit, it is generally the woman who characterizes human nature in all of its aspects, and who is the center of familial thematic content. If the critical world minimizes the importance of the family in our author's tragedies and of the emotions that are tied in with familial issues, then it becomes clearer why the heroine and female characters in general, are marginalized as objects of critical study. If emotion, family, feeling and sentiment are intrinsically linked to the feminine presence, then just as those elements of tragedy are subjugated to *polis*-focused topics, so is she.

It is most interesting to note in which ways the feminine presence is dispensed with in critical essays. Some critics, such as Giorgio Barberì Squarotti, as already noted, overlook the female familial relationships. Many others view the female characters always in their function to the male "hero": Giovanni Getto, for instance, discusses Micol in the tragedy **Saul** in function to the heroic attributes of David. Most revealing is this statement, "il carattere di lei è degno dell'eroe."[20] The hero, then, is the one in which all virtue resides, and to whom all others' virtue is compared. Later, Micol is studied as the "desolata figlia" of Saul.[21] Micol is not evaluated on her own merit as a character. Getto makes some very interesting evaluations of the dynamics within the family, and yet lacking is the sense of Micol herself as an integral part of the tragic formula, instead of simply serving as counterpoint to Saul's ravings and complement to David's heroic presence.

Most troubling is perhaps the definition of woman itself that is presented indirectly in these critical works. More than a few scholars refer to the female characters' fragility, delicacy, tenderness, and so forth. These are the characteristics that are expected of the feminine presence, and they are the only ones that are therefore visible to the critic's eye. Walter Binni appears to contradict himself as he examines Mirra's complexity as a figure: he insists on her "delicata fragilità femminile" even as he recognizes her strength of spirit and of action. "Si oppone sino all'ultimo alla rivelazione della sua passione, rifiuta di concedersi a quella, si sforza di sfuggirle... con la morte...e si punisce per averne solo pronunciato il terribile nome."[22] It is difficult to reconcile "fragilità" with such evidence of her great inner strength. When describing Agiziade, he uses again the

word "delicata",[23] just as Merope introduces elements that are "teneri".[24] Interestingly enough, it is Guagnini who makes somewhat of a breakthrough in including women not only as protagonists, but in recognizing among the female characters their differences: although no women are included in the category of "difensori di libertà" or "tiranni", he does recognize the female protagonists' individuality as "donne tenere" but also "donne forti", as well as "madri".[25]

Finally, a more fundamental question regarding Alfieri as author arises. If, as Alfieri believed, the author is a rebel and a nonconformist in life as in his work, must not such an attitude be applied to more than just the political aspects of his life and work? It must be at least considered that Alfieri created strong, representative, capable female characters on purpose, to represent the possibility of such a thing. With the rise in the eighteenth century of an awareness of woman's capabilities, surely Alfieri, as an informed and well-traveled man, must have come into contact with such thinking; possibly he might have included his conclusions in his work.

There exists a small number of works that seek to examine more closely the role of the female characters in Alfieri's tragedies. Important insight is gained from these studies despite some drawbacks in their approach as a whole. The oldest and most complete study of the heroine in our author's work is **L'Eroina alfieriana** by Ines Ceccoli, published in 1926. In her very thorough examination of the heroine, Ceccoli studies each tragedy individually in order to analyze the totality of the female presence in Alfieri's work. Immediately, one may note that Ceccoli does see the "heroic" in the Alfierian female characters. In the characters of Agesistrata, Antigone and Sofonisba, she points to their "virile" heroism. Such a statement, on the surface, seems positive in its assessment of their courage and resolve in the face of tyranny, but Ceccoli makes it clear that the label is not entirely to be coveted. Throughout her work, the critic labels and divides feminine and masculine virtues: the feminine ones are those of family sentiment and tenderness while the masculine ones are those of patriotism and courage. True feminine behavior must not cross over into the realm of the masculine. In this manner, Agesistrata is seen as masculine in her patriotic fervor and also as cold since, as a woman, she should be more interested in family than in ideals. Sofonisba has a "coraggio superiore al suo sesso, che toglie ogni fascino di femminilità."[26] Ceccoli, therefore, not only sees courage as the territory of the superior, masculine character and not of the female world, but she sees its presence in the female realm as a destructive force that distorts true femininity. In

fact, she continues to claim that Sofonisba's courage makes her a "figura...molto difettosa".[27] Antigone's virile heroism is rendered less unnatural only by the existence of what Ceccoli calls her "delicatezza tutta femminile".[28]

In point of fact, Ines Ceccoli stresses what she sees as Alfieri's "concezione ideale della femminilità":[29]

> Essa è concepita come creatura eletta, compagna all'uomo...consolatrice del suo dolore, animatrice della sua gloria...unica creatura di elezione e di virtù in mezzo alle indegnità e alle bassezze dell'ambiente che la circonda; e, con versi spesso ispirati e ferventi, canta l'amore, intima comunione di spiriti...sogno di dolcezza a un tempo e di grandezza spirituale.[30]

We are in partial agreement with the spirit of these statements. Ceccoli places the female presence on a plane above the indignities of that which surrounds her; she attributes to her the capability for spiritual greatness, and notices her capacity for love. All of these observations have an element of accuracy in them. As we have already noticed, the heroine is often not embroiled in the same violent struggle in which the male hero or the tyrant is involved, and therefore, in a certain sense, she is above the fracas. At the same time, she often represents and defends family considerations to those who seek to destroy them, that is to say, she fosters love above politics. And quite a few heroines are capable of greatness, both spiritual and otherwise—in their actions, their words, or a combination of both.

The problem with Ceccoli's interpretation is that the heroine is seen completely in function to the male hero. She exists for him, to serve him, be his companion, console him, inspire him. The woman has the capability for great thoughts and words—"con versi spesso ispirati e ferventi"—yet they are always uttered in her devotion to the male. Just as problematic is the insistence on placing the woman in this "sfera superiore" as she calls it, which is not superior at all in terms of character development. Although she acknowledges the presence of elements in Alfieri's tragedies that represent a "vita reale e psicologica"[31], she avoids any interpretation of the heroine within this capacity, viewing her instead strictly within that "sfera superiore". In this way, the heroine becomes an abstract, one-dimensional figure who represents delicacy, tenderness, and spiritual sweetness as opposed to a figure that might be more complex and, consequently, more interesting. Those characters that she labels as "feminine" adhere in her view to the Alfierian ideal "della donna mite e pietosa".[32] Says the critic, "le donne alfieriane...abbiano tenue la voce e timido il gesto."[33] Thus, Virginia is feminine as a "vittima dolorosa...dell'ingiustizia"[34], Elettra's

femininity consists in her tenderness towards her family members, Eleonora fits the ideal with her "mitezza" e "sommissione"[35], Agiziade has the qualities of "tenerezza" e "mitezza femminile"[36], and Mirra is the consumate feminine presence with her many virtues: purity, youthful grace, serenity and, of course, "pieghevole sommisione"[37].

In this way also, those that drift outside that one dimension are defective, as we have seen with Sofonisba. Bianca, according to Ceccoli, retains a feminine fascination because she remains "estranea a pensieri di vita pubblica"[38], that is, she remains safely within the bounds of femininity. But, Maria Stuarda, perhaps the most political of all heroines, lacks the "fascino di grazia e di femminilità".[39] Most intriguing is the critic's study of the character Ottavia. This heroine would seem to fit the criteria for the ideal woman as Ceccoli describes her "delicata femminilità" of "donna e debole", "sottomessa con una mitezza di martiri"[40] Yet, she does not escape noticing that she functions also as "la vittima che grida il suo disprezzo e la sua condanna in faccia al tiranno."[41] It is difficult to reconcile an ideal, weak and submissive woman with the same woman who has the strength and bravery to hurl invectives at the tyrant, in this case, also her husband. Since the critic cannot attribute this type of strength to Ottavia without rendering her unfeminine, she reconciles the contradiction by attributing the "unfeminine" characteristics to Alfieri himself. That is, Alfieri used her as his own mouthpiece, therefore never intending to create of her a female presence other than the "ideal" one.

Ceccoli borrows definitions of femininity from the oldest of traditional stereotypes and generalizations. Even when the evidence of contrary behavior is quite obvious, she seems to rationalize it to fit her theory. The character of Rosmunda is just such a case. Rosmunda does not fit any of the requirements for idealization: a politicized tyrannical figure that is not timid, tender, or delicate, she breaks all the rules of femininity. Yet, the critic calls her behavior feminine while borrowing from a medieval tradition of the dangers of female wiles and evilness. She mentions her "gelosia femminile", her "rabbia, tutta femminile", and her "malvagità femminile".[42] Feminine, curiously, refers to timidity and jealousy, tenderness and anger, delicacy and spite. Ines Ceccoli's definition of femininity, with such contradictions, rests on shaky ground.

In the 1970's and 1980's, a number of other studies emerged regarding the feminine presence in Alfieri's tragedies. Franco Betti's work entitled **Vittorio Alfieri** and Nicoletta Tinozzi Mehrmand's dissertation (completed under the supervision of Betti), **Virginia e la Tragedia Femminile nel Teatro Alfieriano**, seem to be closely linked in some ways. Each seems to

follow somewhat in the tradition of Ceccoli's critical work, although each makes great strides in their interpretations of the female characters. Franco Betti again makes a number of ambiguous statements regarding femininity. When speaking of Micol, he reiterates Ceccoli's assessment of what it means to be truly feminine. He states: “Her attitude and words express the feminine tenderness and frailty of the other heroines such as Isabella, Bianca and Octavia.”[43] Here again, femininity seems synonymous with tenderness, delicacy and frailty. Elsewhere, he speaks of Argia's "delicate femininity"[44] and Clitennestra's "fragility" and "submission to the dictates of faith".[45] Bianca, he states, "tempers the ferocity of the action with her exquisitely feminine presence".[46] We do not disagree that Bianca "tempers the ferocity of the action" nor that she highlights the intimate ties between factions[47] as Betti also points out. In fact, the woman's role within the family unit is crucial to the tragic formula. It is the "exquisitely feminine presence" concept that oversimplifies the role of the woman. In fact, Betti creates contrasting labels for the female characters' actions: he mentions Bianca's "passionate femininity", Clitennestra's "savage femininity", and Virginia's "idealized womanhood”[48], without reconciling the fact that these definitions of femininity are contradictory.

However, Betti is less intent than Ceccoli on rationalizing the disparity between this feminine ideal and the actions of the heroines. In this manner, he validates the possibility of greater complexity in the development of Alfieri's women. He sees Octavia's dual nature as does Ceccoli, and although he tends to emphasize the "feminine" side, he does not try to explain away the other, unfeminine behavior. Most interesting is Betti's assessment of Antigone. He points out Antigone's delicate nature, yet later calls her an "undaunted soul" with a strong will that "dominates the whole action".[49] In this portrayal of Antigone, Betti not only attributes great strength to the female character, but clearly states the great importance she has in her function as a protagonist in the tragedy. Furthermore, in his discussion on the character Bianca, although, as we have seen, he highlights her "femininity", he also discovers that "it is mainly through her eyes that we perceive all the depth of human emotion".[50] She is, therefore, a sensitive and observant member of Alfieri's female characters. Micol also "blooms in the humanity she exudes".[51] Betti has begun to isolate the traits in these characters that render them unique and important in the author's tragedies: their "humanity" as he calls it is nothing less than their ability to feel, interpret, and act upon human emotion, and that creates of them rich and complex characters infinitely more interesting than those abstract figures that Ceccoli had delineated for us in her criticism. Betti,

while still adopting some traditional views of these women, feels their worth:

> Alfieri's theater is entirely populated by captivating feminine figures. How far these women are from the conventional representation of women in eighteenth-century literature! How much more dense is their psychological and emotional life; how much more willful their presence.[52]

Nicoletta Tinozzi Mehrmand's work **Virginia e la Tragedia Femminile nel Teatro Alfieriano**, which, by its title, promises to be an in-depth study of the heroine in Alfieri's tragedies, is problematic. The feminine presence in the tragedies is not mentioned until the final two chapters. When the critic finally does arrive at an analysis of a heroine, she begins with an entire chapter on the tragedy **Virginia**. Although she states earlier that in tragedies of pure political contrast "viene meno il sentimento ispiratore del poeta"[53], Mehrmand chooses to study the most atypical of tragedies, one that is almost completely politically motivated, and consequently, a female character who represents the political and spiritual ideal of liberty. Thus, although Virginia is a strong, capable figure, the discussion must necessarily run away from her as an individual character and towards the "idea-mito", that is, liberty and patriotism. The chapter inevitably becomes a discussion of tyranny, liberty, the people and the individual.

The final chapter deals with the female character in more complete terms. Mehrmand discusses the other Alfierian women and sees the strength, resolve and heroism of some: Clitennestra, for instance, is an "eroina", a "figura dominante" with an "enormità della passione"[54]. With other characters, as Betti does, she sees their worth as protagonists but minimizes it by constantly returning to the theme of weakness and fragility. Powerlessness becomes confused with weakness. In this way, Ottavia is "coraggiosa e dignitosa" but "piena di...debolezza femminile".[55] Isabella is an "eroina" "risoluta e ardita", but her charm comes from her "dolcezza e femminilità".[56] Antigone is labeled a protagonist that is "forte e ricca di energia", but the critic then points to her "trepidazione di una donna"[57] as if it is an uncontested fact that women are imbued with this quality. Some characters seem overwhelmingly feminine, with no unfeminine characteristics to redeem them: in Timoleone, Demarista is described with the statements "debolezza di donna", and "crudele fragilità"[58] However, in her study the critic does call attention to the unique ability of the female character to represent human values and emotions in the face of inhumanity. She states:

> Le figure femminili...(sono) portavoci di sentimenti umani e delicati che, contrapposti alle violente passioni degli altri personaggi, mettono in rilievo l'azione tragica. [59]

Despite the fact that, even here, she mentions the existence of delicacy in the female life, and despite the obvious detachment of the female from tragic action, that is, as a counterpoint to the "true" action, Mehrmand does highlight the importance of human sentiment in Alfieri's work, what he calls "forte sentire", and the heroine's integral role in interpreting it.

In 1977, Bertilia Herrera was the first critic whose critical work featured an analysis of the female characters in Alfieri's tragedies that was neither full of traditional, stereotypical views of women, nor dependent on male-oriented topics for validation. This comparative and feminist study of the heroines in Racine, Schiller, and Alfieri's works seeks to examine the role of the feminine presence in tragedy. We may draw some interesting insight from her analysis, although the topic is analyzed from the point of view of the condemnation of patriarchal society's attitude toward women. This patriarchal society includes, for Herrera, the three authors under consideration, each of whom is seen as misogynistic since women do not enter into their philosophical or metaphysical schemes.[60] She initiates her attempt to prove Alfieri's misogyny by drawing a direct correlation between his life and his heroines. She concludes that he has a narrow conception of women by isolating a passage in his **Vita** in which he refers to the "intoppi" that he experiences with various women. Yet, she omits the fact that, in this work, much more glaringly obvious than these unimportant affairs is his long-standing and unwavering admiration and love for Louisa Stolberg. His description of her reveals no frivolous, empty-headed woman, but one who is extremely intelligent, sensitive, and forthright:

> Besides understanding the English and German languages she possessed a complete knowledge of Italian and French and was intimately acquainted with their national literature. Neither was she ignorant of anything essential in the learning of the ancients, having read the best translations extant in these four languages. Hence I could converse with her on every topic and never felt myself more happy than when living with her alone, secluded from all other society.[61]

In her analysis of Alfieri's heroines, the critic asserts that the fate of these women is caused by specific flaws in the male individuals, and in patriarchal society in general, and that in the portrayal of these characters, Alfieri seeks to define an ideal woman as subjugated to the male counterpart. Therefore, Giocasta, in her view, is a product of a patriarchal

society that uses her as a reproductive tool—"vera madre" and martyr—and she fits the ideal of a simpleton who fails to see through Creonte's schemes.[62] Herrera uses Joly's psychoanalystic reading of the texts to insist that the real object of **Antigone** is to insert the image of "la bonne mère".[63] And she concludes that Merope's fate is entirely determined by both patriarchal premises and male flaws: "Merope illustrate(s) the lot that befall(s) a defenseless widow in a world of male violence." Because she relied on her husband for protection, in widowhood, she is vulnerable to the power wielder.[64]

In these studies, Bertilia Herrera makes some astute observations about women being deprived of protection or treated as negotiable commodities, but the conclusions at which she arrives from these observations are questionable due to the tone of feminist outrage that she adopts throughout her work. When discussing Virginia's plight, she rails that such "protection...would have been unnecessary, had men and women been equal in the eyes of the law"[65], and later that "woman's lot is much the same in barbaric societies and in supposedly civilized ones...Women are simply and totally unprotected."[66]

Furthermore, in her feminist zeal, Herrera equates the female characters' lots with approval by Alfieri. We may agree that she correctly sees the problems of the heroines in terms of male rulings and actions, male manipulation and ruthlessness, slander/blackmail, thirst for power, etc., and that this patriarchal society stresses submission, dependence and other "feminine characteristics". Yet, in such a condemnation of the male characters and their patriarchal society, Alfieri is also condemned as condoning, indeed advancing such oppression. Alfieri's position, she states, is "unambiguous", showing a lack of "understanding or compassion for his heroines".[67] Any momentary fairness that the critic sees in Alfieri's treatment of the female characters she immediately invalidates. She observes that Virginia is allowed to express herself and is believed by her family, but only because the author had a specific goal in mind. Virginia, in addition, is provided with political awareness and is a symbol of freedom, yet she states, in another comment designed to negate such a reality, "When a man conceives of freedom...he seldom—if ever—extends it to woman. Alfieri and Schiller are no exceptions."[68] Rosmunda's power she labels disparagingly as a "novelty", and sees it in her feminist viewpoint as a flawed power, for: "In her thirst for vengeance, she fails to realize that, as a woman, she should not expose another woman to the kind of bestiality that was inflicted upon herself by a man."[69] Elsewhere, she admits that Alfieri humanizes Clitennestra's story, but he does it

"unwittingly"[70], as if the author could create a character without forethought and intent.

There are some problematic aspects of Herrera's analysis of the author's tragedies. Herrera's critical theory is weakened considerably because she analyzes Alfieri's work in reference to her own belief system, instead of in strict relation to itself. In addition, instead of evaluating Alfieri's representation of women in relation to that which came before him, Herrera unfairly and ahistorically judges Alfieri's work by twentieth-century standards of possible "feminine" behavior. In addition, the fact that the patriarchal presence in these works often functions oppressively with regard to women immediately leads her to conclude that the author is advancing just such oppression; that he sees men as superior because they are powerful and women as inferior because they are powerless. Yet, it is possible that the author reveals such behavior in an effort to discredit it, to call attention to its destructive nature. Indeed, the male is often destroyed, at his own hands or at those of another, at the end of these tragedies. The woman, although seemingly powerless and impotent to act at times, is potent in her independence of spirit and of mind, in her humanity, in the sense of reality she possesses. These heroines, in our view, are rarely strictly pawns in a male game of aggression and power. In attempting to prove the author's misogynistic intent, the critic fails to recognize the female role as anything more than that of victim, therefore impoverishing tragedies and characters that are often rich and complex in nature.

With the studies of Marianne Hirsch in 1989 and Lois Cech in 1984, criticism that deals with the feminine presence in tragedy at last takes some new directions. Although more limited in scope—Hirsch deals specifically with mothers and daughters in literature, while Cech deals only with the character of Electra—each brings well-researched and thoughtful insights to the existing body of criticism. Both avoid traditional critical approaches that would seek to pigeonhole the female characters into roles that are dependent on those of the male characters for their existence; they also avoid subjugating their critical theories to preconceived agendas. The questions they raise and the insights they offer do much to help break the mold of Alfierian criticism.

Marianne Hirsch, in her critical work **The Mother/Daughter Plot—Narrative, Psychoanalysis, Feminism**, seeks to remedy the void in critical study of the female figures of mother and daughter by examining their marginalization in literature as well as in criticism. She points out that mother and daughter figures are generally "neglected by psychoanalytic theories and submerged in traditional plot structures".[71] Although Hirsch's book is not in essence a study of Alfierian tragedy or of eighteenth-

century tragedy—it is a broader analysis of mother/daughter plot in the history of literature—it is still quite relevant. Hirsch finds Antigone and Giocasta intriguing subjects for study as characters that have been written and rewritten throughout time, and her theories are useful in considering Alfieri's interpretations of these women. The traditional treatment of the character of Giocasta is of particular concern and interest to the critic, as she is constantly silenced and ignored in her importance in her role as mother. The critic asks, "Why do even feminist analyses fail to grant Jocasta as mother a voice and a plot?"[72] Hirsch continues in this vein in her study of Antigone. She views Antigone as a challenge to the patriarchal state, since she asserts a "female value system that stresses loyalty, fidelity, relationship over the expediencies demanded by Creon's politics"[73], that is, Antigone represents and demands respect for family values that the tyrant constantly seeks to subjugate to his political agenda. We will examine Hirsch's studies in more depth later in our study, but for now, we may observe that, at last, a critic is concerned with revealing the female character's "voice", her function, and her relevance within the tragic plot structure.

In her study of Alfieri's character Elettra, Lois Cech writes an excellent analysis of the author's interest in psychological realism and, in particular, in the heroines' psychological makeup and actions, without entertaining preconceived notions of "feminine" or "femininity". As others have pointed out, Cech reiterates Alfieri's concern for exposing "human motivations" that "demonstrate not only...shifting emotions and attitudes but subtle qualities of character as well".[74] The result is greater complexity in the characters and greater dramatic realism. The difference in Cech's study lies in the fact that she ascribes to women as well as men this complexity and realism of character. She states:

> The overall effect of Alfieri's eye for realism, growing out of his concern for individuals, results in a remarkably modern characterization of the principals of his dramas.[75]

If we support such a statement, then we cannot possibly accept the one-dimensional female characters that other critics have sought to present to the critical audience. These figures are multi-dimensional creations that are human, that is, unique, and relevant in themselves and in relation to other characters. For corroboration, Cech refers to Enzo Orlandi's observation on Alfieri's treatment of his characters:

> That he ascribes equivalent responses to the men and women in the drama (Oreste) speaks for an underlying egalitarianism as well as a subtle understanding of humans.[76]

Finally, a critic has given Alfieri some credit for being cognizant of his intent in creating his tragic figures. He has not unwittingly created more complex female characters; he has done so knowingly and with particular intent—in order to be true to human behavior and motivation. Furthermore, Cech examines Alfieri's divergence from the eighteenth-century attitude toward the inviolability of the classics' plots and relationships, and its resultant insistence on maintaining the status of women as consistent with the original. The critic explains:

> Alfieri's difference lies in his desire to understand the nature of mankind and the dimensions of human behavior... Such introspection applied to literary characters can easily result in the psychological realism found in the alfierian characters.[77]

With such a statement, Lois Cech has pronounced Alfieri ahead of his time, a free-thinker not strictly tied to traditional considerations, and therefore capable of fresh approaches to literature and to his characters' roles (including those of the female). Interestingly, she attributes such possibilities for change, for the creation of realistic, human heroines, to the significant changes in women's roles and in men's responses to women occurring in eighteenth-century Europe.

In **Myth, Religion and Mother Right,** J.J. Bachofen states: “We have often marked the level of a society by the freedom from male domination which has been gained by women.”[78] With such a statement in mind, we might ask, "How do we rate the eighteenth century? Did women's roles and women's issues have any importance in that time? More pertinent to our topic, if there was movement towards a type of eighteenth-century feminism, how might it have affected the views of our author?

There is no lack of evidence that indicates a vigorous discussion of woman's function, role in society, and essence in the eighteenth century. One historian calls this debate "only words”[79] with no action attached. Yet, most others see progress in the mere existence of debate, as well as evidence of real progress that took many forms. Regina Janes is correct in stating that the term "feminism", when applied to the eighteenth century is an anachronism (but, for want of a better word, we shall apply it here), and that there was no type of feminist "movement" such as the kind that took place in the 20th century; yet, she is quick to remind us that there was “a

widespread dissatisfaction with the condition of women that found various expression in satire and in sober counsel, in theoretical arguments, practical proposals, and practical action."[80] Lois Cech points out that feminism was a "significant feature of eighteenth-century intellectual activity".[81] Indeed, it seems that modest strides were made in some places, and greater ones in others, that attested to the emergence of an awareness of the status of women in society and a desire to act on such awareness. In the Age of the Enlightenment, it is simple to attribute such forward thinking to the *philosophes* themselves, to their love of liberty and their rejection of traditional thought. However, the reality of the situation is more complex: the Age and the enlightened ones were not at all sure of their position on such an issue (if they held to one at all), and the debate on women as well as the evidence of progress is riddled with contradictions and incongruities, it "was by no means clearcut and uncompromising".[82] This observation is revealing:

> Au siècle des Lumières, le discours sur la femme est soumis à un double processus de rationalisation et de diversification...Tandis que des auteurs comme la Dr Roussel ou le littérateur Thomas jettent les bases du féminisme paternaliste avec la prétention inavouée de soumettre les femmes par la séduction, d'autres féministes, comme Condorcet, donnent déjà au féminisme le plus authentique une forme étonnamment moderne.[83]

This inconsistent process of discovery is crucial to an understanding of Alfieri's heroines.

Before we speak of progress in the area of women's discovery and self-discovery, we must first realize that much remained unchanged. On the more conservative end of the spectrum, there was no sweeping reformation of views toward women; the changes were sometimes quite subtle. And, therefore, it is possible to study that era and dismiss any small changes as insignificant. In fact, Abby Kleinbaum writes that there was "no trend toward opportunity and freedom of women"[84], even as he points to small triumphs later in his studies. There were, to be sure, some Enlightenment thinkers whose misogyny was never changed by new and fresh ideas in other areas. Rousseau looked at women still as inferior, submissive creatures who lacked genius and artistic ability and who, instead of acting as partners for men, should lead separate and unequal lives. Desmahis's double standard allowed that the virtues normally attributed to men, such as force and courage, were a deformity in women.[85] In England, the century was marked by the economic and social degradation of women. These women were reduced to a position of economic dependence on a husband who became her only respectable

means of support. After marriage, a wife's state of idle passivity became a symbol of status and affluence for her husband. Women unfortunate enough to remain unmarried, were "a blank...socially and economically".[86] Elisabeth Badinter asserts that as women strove to escape their traditional roles of wife and mother, patriarchal society, threatened by her new-found autonomy, sought to return her to her "sacred duty" as mother.[87] Yet, as Cech points out, although attempts to introduce liberal legislation were defeated by conservative forces, and inequality of sexes was flagrant, the potential for change existed.[88] It is exactly this potential for change and its result that we must examine, for it was certainly quite real in the eighteenth century and must have been deeply felt.

If we read the writings of the *philosophes*, the enlightened thinkers whose intellectual musings dominated the period, we immediately note the inconsistencies in their views towards women. Maria Ines Bonatti points out that although man still had a firm grasp on his power and his rights in society, the "'invasione femminile nei campi culturali più diversi si fa pressante, che i moralisti e i filosofi cercano di definire le caratteristiche intellettuali e morali delle loro interlocutrici."[89] Questions were opened which tried to define woman's role and her worth in society—such questions were in themselves the sign of emerging transformation. There were basically two trends of thought: one which sought to domesticate and separate women based on their sexual differences, that is their biological function as mother and societal one as wife; and the other that argued for greater female equality based on reasons of natural law.[90] These two schools of thought were not mutually exclusive; one does not find deeply divided camps that champion only one of these opinions. Instead, often both concepts appear in the same place, from the same author—such a contradiction indicates the difficulty in abandoning old views of women even as new ones were sought.

Numerous scholars point to these inconsistencies in Enlightened thought. Kleinbaum mentions that Chevalier de Jancourt and Montesquieu believed in the natural equality of all; marriage, therefore, was not a result of natural law, but it was a civil contract between two partners. Neither man, however, examined the possibility of revising such a contract to eliminate the authority of the male in marriage. Kleinbaum points out the paradoxes present in essays by Antoine Thomas who deplored women's oppression throughout history, yet believed that women were not the intellectual equals of men and should be relegated to domestic duties. Diderot, in attacking Thomas's lack of sensitivity toward women, exhorted that women were oppressed by nature and civil law. But, even if he would end the tyranny of civil law, Diderot could not change the nature of

women who were imperiled by pregnancy, dominated by the uterus, and who had an inferior capacity for sexual pleasure. D'Alembert called for better education for women, since women are not lacking in genius but only in knowledge, yet he contradicts himself in praising Rousseau's **Emile** in which education is very different for men and women and Sophie is taught that women are created to fulfill domestic duties.[91]

Franco Fido discusses the Italian contribution to the discussion on women. He mentions Giuseppe Maria Galanti, who was a classic case of contradictory thought on the subject. This same man who did not want rape punished (since honest women should suffer in silence) wrote a very enlightened statement which deplored the condition of women and which focused on the practical aspects of the question, such as education, rather than physiological or psychological ones as the French did. Here he states, in direct contradiction to his position on rape, that the so-called virtue of decency is used in a relative manner to blackmail women into submission.[92] Bonatti mentions other glaring examples of contradictory thought. She points to Poullain de la Barre, a feminist who called for the abolition of all differences between the status of the two sexes and their respective roles, yet declared that one must not "rinunciare alla pienezza della propria femminilità."[93] In this way, sex roles were still differentiated but the philosophist was able to eliminate at least the mental and intellectual differences between man and woman. Gasparo Gozzi wanted an expanded educational curriculum for women that was more in keeping with the times, yet the content of this expanded curriculum was tied to practical concerns: the enhancement of one's feminine grace through the art of intelligent conversation with men. The education of women was no longer seen as a threat to domestic tranquility, and was even seen as a necessary part of the woman's formation, but education for women was far from being viewed as a tool for personal enrichment instead of for the gratification of the male partner.[94]

Emblematic of the dual nature of the debate on women is the exclusion of women from the masonic lodges of the period, the same lodges that existed to promote ideals of egalitarianism. Somehow, social egalitarianism did not include women, as if they remained outside society. However, with much pressure to admit women, there were some lodges that finally opened their doors to the female sex. The first seems to have been in 1751 in the Netherlands; here, educated and gifted women were admitted and rituals were re-invented to allow the full participation of women. French lodges admitted women in the 1770's and 1780's with the expected controversy and debate over these experiments in sexual parity. Of course, masonic proceedings were insular and secret, which allowed

just enough freedom from societal scrutiny, with its intact prejudices, rules, and limitations, to allow them to digress from the reality outside the walls of the masonic lodge.[95]

The contradictions of the period existed also outside the realm of the philosophical world. The reality of women's existences was full of these inconsistencies—of stagnancy and of steps taken forward. Women were no longer persecuted as witches, but were still regarded suspiciously as retaining a dual nature—of being part of life-giving nature as well as the forces of anarchy and disorder. Change toward the status of women was seen as positive, yet this assumed inherent link to anarchic forces, her passion and energy, were eyed warily as something to be controlled. The enlightened view of virtue and progress—restraint, rationality, social usefulness—sprang from male value systems, and were in direct opposition to what women seemed to stand for—emotionalism, enthusiasm, irrationality. Therefore, enlightened calls to educate women, to introduce them to the progress of the Enlightenment, were in part a question of subjecting them to male ideals and were, therefore, contradictory in themselves. Phyllis Mack hypothesizes that social emancipation was conditional on the woman's ability to assimilate, to strip herself of female peculiarities and behavior, the very thing that made her a woman.[96]

In the commercial world, women were earning their own living. Most notably, they participated fully in publication trades as editors, printers, publishers, distributors, and writers. These newspaperwomen advanced many of the ideas of the Enlightenment through their trades, even as they were excluded from them. One scholar points out:

> Yet, one could argue that these women transcended those limitations in the way they lived and worked day to day. Like their contemporaries, they were disrespectful of ecclesiastical and political authority, intrigued by heresy and willing to sacrifice economic security and personal freedom to promulgate new ideas. They were independent women playing distinct roles in their trade and...they could see themselves as having a political impact...through the avenue of molding public opinion.[97]

Politically, women were finding a voice. In France especially, with the advent of the Revolution, women believed they could finally attain their goals. Even though, in typical contradictory fashion, the **Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen** did not explicitly extend to them these rights, women organized and demanded equal education, reformation of the existing marriage laws, the protection of female trades and political representation. Suddenly, clubs, political meetings, and journalistic representation sprung up to support their cause. Olympe de Gouges wrote