

# Transgendering Clytemnestra

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Many Greek tragedies have mysteriously evaded the controlling influence of time; they are read today with as much admiration and emotion as they would have inspired in their first audiences. Works immortal, they rekindle in modern readers the passionate fires of ancient times and peoples. Two names still common on modern lips are those of the great poets Aeschylus and Homer. While Aeschylus penned tragedies for the theatre in the early fifth century BC, Homer, in the eighth century BC, composed epics of Greek culture that encompassed in their scope “material for [many] tragedies.”<sup>1</sup> The relationship between these forms of narrative is evidenced in the shared myth of Agamemnon’s murder by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in both Homer’s epic poem *Odyssey* and Aeschylus’ tragedy *Oresteia*. In comparing the different angles with which these poets choose to treat the same tale, certain discrepancies are immediately apparent regarding the role, treatment, and function of Clytemnestra.

I will argue that the differences in Clytemnestra’s characterization in these two works are predominantly related to gender: whereas in Aeschylus’ work she is cast as manly, Homer casts her as womanly. In *Oresteia*, she commands the play; in *Odyssey*, she remains but a shadowy figure on the outskirts of the story. This is evidenced, first in the immediacy and manner of her portrayal, second, in her dominance or subservience to men, and third, in her degree of responsibility for Agamemnon’s murder. Furthermore, these gender related distinctions correspond to Clytemnestra’s function in each text; Aeschylus creates Clytemnestra as a tragically human heroine, whereas Homer uses her, coupled to Aegisthus, to foil the central situation of Penelope and the Suitors. Let us consider Clytemnestra’s predominance and characterization first in Aeschylus’ trilogy and then in Homer’s *Odyssey*.

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics in Critical Theory Since Plato*, ed. Hazard Adams, ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 23:17.

In *Oresteia*, “the play belongs to Clytemnestra” and it is in her “mouth that Aeschylus puts the greatest poetry he ever wrote.”<sup>2</sup> Clytemnestra dominates in *Agamemnon* as well, and remains highly prevalent in the following two plays of the trilogy. She exists in *Oresteia* as a charged character: rounded, complex, intelligent, powerful and entirely human, though tragically fitted and flawed for revenge. Aeschylus presents Clytemnestra as a heroine in her own right, awarding her a voice of her own to convince us of her case, to plead with our judgment and, with arguable success, to sway us to her favour. She delivers a considerable number of lines - second only to the chorus in *Agamemnon* - and her words are laden with strength, cunning and pride. In addition, Aeschylus frames her portrayal through the criticisms and remarks of multiple perspectives. The Watchman, her son, her daughter, the Furies, and others, all give diverse, though consistently strong, portrayals of her character. In this web of voices, Clytemnestra is not presented favourably. She is, for instance, called a “venomous snake” by her son.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, she is presented as articulate, aggressive, compelling and dynamic. Aeschylus has designed Clytemnestra to overstep her womanly boundaries through her words, as is exemplified when the chorus says: “Woman you speak with sense like a prudent man.”<sup>4</sup>

Conversely, in *Odyssey*, Clytemnestra is presented as the antithesis of the “prudent man-like woman” of Aeschylus’ play. In Homer’s text, Clytemnestra is a denied voice. She never speaks on her own behalf, but is instead cast and characterized mainly by her slain husband’s ghost, whose words are anything but kind. Homer’s audience is clearly not expected to empathize with Clytemnestra but to condemn her as a “sluttish wife.”<sup>5</sup> Homer uses Clytemnestra primarily to foil Penelope and demonstrate the dangers and choices available in the tense situation with the suitors. Clytemnestra is the unfaithful wife. She deceives her husband in accepting a lover’s advance, and then also conspires to murder him. Her behavior leads Homer to state that “there is nothing more deadly or vile than a woman.”<sup>6</sup> The taint of Clytemnestra’s crime is not hers alone, but is extended onto all of womankind. This occurs when Agamemnon rages that “with [her] thoughts surpassingly grisly [she] splashes the shame on herself and the rest of her sex, on women still to come, even on the one whose acts are virtuous.”<sup>7</sup> Agamemnon insists on equating Clytemnestra and womankind with evil in his rant to Odysseus; he cautions Odysseus not to trust his wife, though she is faithful, for “there is no trusting in women.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Edith Hamilton, “Hearts with Strings of Steel,” *Three Greek Plays* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965) 154.

<sup>3</sup> Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, trans. David R. Slavitt. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997) 221.

<sup>4</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. Louis MacNeice, *Stages of Drama*, ed. Carl H. Klaus, Miriam Gilbert and Bradford Field (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991) 1029.

<sup>5</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Richard Lattimore (New York: Perennial Classics, 1999) 424.

<sup>6</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 427.

Apart from this disdainful one-sided sketch of Clytemnestra's character, the only other viewpoint is that of Nestor. His portrayal is more sympathetic; he removes her accountability, perceiving her as "entangled" in the "doom of the Gods," and not personally evil, as her nature was honest.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, Nestor remarks that once Clytemnestra was in the arms of Aegisthus, "she was as willing as he was."<sup>10</sup> The culmination of these two narrow perspectives on Clytemnestra paints her as a fallible, pliable woman, who appears only marginally in the narrative of Agamemnon to show evil capabilities of an unfaithful woman.

The characterizations of Clytemnestra in Aeschylus and Homer illustrate that the two poets chose to present her relationship and relative dominance or subservience to men in entirely opposite ways. In *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra holds the power in her relationships, domineering Aegisthus and Agamemnon. She is in the traditional male role: in control. The reverse is true in Homer's work. Here Aegisthus is the dominant figure. He seduces Clytemnestra, she cannot help but submit to his will, as she is in the traditionally passive woman's role.

The dichotomy created in the person of Clytemnestra is also evident in her dominance or subservience to men. Aeschylus manifests dialogue exchanges between Clytemnestra and men where she is the winner of the debate. One such instance follows Agamemnon's return, where Clytemnestra greets him, exultant and full of false praise, with cloths for him to walk on. She approaches him, calling to her women to spread the foot cloths, "her speech [...] is loaded with fulsome complications and rich ironic undertones."<sup>11</sup> Agamemnon chides her for an over-lengthy welcome and refuses to walk on the "embroidered stuffs – stuff for gossip," thundering the rebuke: do not by woman's methods make me effeminate [...] nor strewing my path with cloths make it invidious [...] I tell you honour me as a man."<sup>12</sup> After reasoning and debating, Clytemnestra finally commands Agamemnon to give way and let her have mastery.<sup>13</sup> He submits to her desire, only to be lead into the palace and to his slaughter.

Similarly, Clytemnestra rules Aegisthus. Aegisthus appears only after the murder as a buffed-up braggart, full of threats for the chorus and of little consequence. He is repeatedly baited by the chorus who call him a 'woman', a man who could not strike a man himself, but left it to Clytemnestra like a

<sup>7</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 432-4.

<sup>8</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 456.

<sup>9</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 266-9.

<sup>10</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 272

<sup>11</sup> Bernard Knox, «Clytemnestra Triumphant,» *The Norton Book of Classical Literature*, ed. Bernard Knox (New York: W. W. Norton & Knox Company, 1993) 312.

<sup>12</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1012-3, 1015, 1020.

coward.<sup>14</sup> The chorus scolds him for letting Clytemnestra be the strong one, chiding him as weak and girlish. This insult carries into *Libation Bearers* where Orestes also calls the ruling couple “a pair of women – for he is a woman as surely as she.”<sup>15</sup> Aegisthus is chastised for adopting the passive role and willingly being lead by Clytemnestra, which further reinforces her masculine role. This is evidenced where she quickly cools him from the insults of the chorus, ordering him to stop the quarrel. Her language is authoritative but clam: “No, my dearest do not so [...] start no more.”<sup>16</sup> Clytemnestra, as depicted in these and other instances in *Oresteia*, has power and control over the men in her life, again stepping beyond her traditional female sphere.

Once again, Homer interprets Clytemnestra’s role as the reverse of the above. In Homer, she is the subservient one to be ruled as a woman. Clytemnestra never appears directly in the text and little insight is given into her relationships except through the brief portrait of Nestor. Originally, in his account, Clytemnestra is situated closely along the same lines as Penelope when faced with suitors. Clytemnestra is a beautiful wife left absent while her husband was away at war. She is approached by courtiers like Aegisthus, who “kept talking to Agamemnon’s wife and trying to charm her.”<sup>17</sup> At first, Clytemnestra, like Penelope, “would not consent to the act of shame, for her own nature was honest.”<sup>18</sup> Unlike Penelope, her nature does not have much fight in it; she must submit to the greater will of her seducer.<sup>19</sup> Here Homer shows Clytemnestra as the passive one, the one who succumbs to the sexual pressure around her.

This reading of the myth lends itself to Homer, as it presents a strong foil for Penelope, a constant reminder of the path Penelope decides not to take. Even in the after life, the parallel between them is remarked: “Odysseus [...] you won yourself a wife endowed with great virtue [...] not so the daughter of Tyndareos [who] fashioned her evil deeds.”<sup>20</sup> Clearly, Homer emphasizes Clytemnestra primarily in connection to her adultery and sexual betrayal, rather than on her crime as conspirator to Agamemnon murder. She is seen foremost as subservient to Aegisthus, as a “sluttish women,” sexually betraying her husband, the weaker of the pair.

The relative strengths and weaknesses of Aegisthus’ and Clytemnestra’s wills in the two texts are directly related to how each poet chose to interpret Clytemnestra’s degree of responsibility for

<sup>13</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1052-4.

<sup>14</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1858, 1872.

<sup>15</sup> Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, 286-7.

<sup>16</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1900.

<sup>17</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 264.

<sup>18</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 266.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 193, 199, 200.

Agamemnon's murder. Aeschylus describes the murder of Agamemnon as predominantly Clytemnestra's doing, with Aegisthus as her assistant. Aeschylus also examines Clytemnestra's motivation for the murder in greater depth considering her remorse, and following through in *Libation Bearers* on the consequences of her act. Homer, however, deals with Agamemnon's murder as Aegisthus' doing, where Clytemnestra is a conspirator by default. He offers little in terms of her motivation, except for her "evil womaness" and decides not to pursue the subsequent actions. As the act of murder itself is transformed from one rendition to the other, so is the involvement and character of Clytemnestra.

In *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus takes care to establish Agamemnon's own violent crimes prior to his murder. The play leaves open the interpretation that Clytemnestra is not an ultimately evil character, tending to excuse her on the grounds of motivation. Aeschylus vividly recounts the slaughter of Iphigenia upon the altar, "the pathos and horror of that sacrifice [...] Aeschylus intends us to realize what the girls mother must have felt."<sup>21</sup> After this brutal act, it can be deemed that Clytemnestra's implacable hatred was justified. Hamilton noted that "we are never allowed to forget her anguish for grief for her daughter."<sup>22</sup> It is not impossible to imagine how that hatred kindled for ten years until his return, and how it hatched her plot for murder.

Beyond the insight Aeschylus proffers into Clytemnestra's motivation, he also depicts the murder solely as her doing. She greets Agamemnon with veiled words, lures him into his bath and to his death. Then, with the help of Aegisthus, she ends Cassandra's life as well. She triumphantly steps out to face the chorus, announcing the murder: "I stand here where I struck, above my victims; so I contrived it – this I will not deny."<sup>23</sup> Clytemnestra explains how she trapped him under a robe, "inextricable like a net for fishes," and stabbed him, fiendishly rejoicing in the spurts of his blood as in "God's gift of rain for the crops."<sup>24</sup> The deed was hers. She propounds: "Mine is the glory."<sup>25</sup>

Her glory was Aegisthus' shame. It is the reason that the men admonish Aegisthus so heavily for merely standing on the side while Clytemnestra deals the blows: she is the manly one, the villain, the one strong enough to cut down the king. Appropriately, she is the one too, who suffers the most for the crime. Remorse floods her, as is literally seen in her suckling the dragon in the dream in *Libation Bearers*. This guilt is then swiftly followed with her deathblow, dealt by the hand of her son. However, even in death, she is not one to be passive. She returns as a ghost in *Eumenides* to rouse the Furies to their charge, spurring them to follow her son, rack him with sorrows, and avenge her death. Thus, in Aeschylus'

<sup>21</sup> Hamilton, 154.

<sup>22</sup> Hamilton, 155.

<sup>23</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1592-3.

<sup>24</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1595, 1606.

<sup>25</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1610.

*Oresteia*, Clytemnestra is the murder, her hand stained with blood, though she remains thoroughly human in her motivation and remorse. She is presented as a man who can bring about the vengeance due.

The method of Agamemnon's murder is completely different in *Odyssey*. Homer illustrates his manner of death in greatest detail through the eyes of the prophetic Old Man of the Sea. Proteus describes the murder as Aegisthus' exploit. In the lengthy passage, Clytemnestra is never mentioned once. He explains the snare as Aegisthus' "treacherous stratagem."<sup>26</sup> Aegisthus posts a sentry for Agamemnon's arrival, assembles twenty great fighting men, and ambushes the king.<sup>27</sup> They "led him in all unsuspecting of death, feasted him and killed him feasting, as one strikes down an ox at his manger."<sup>28</sup> From this perspective, Clytemnestra is involved only by default, passively acquiescing to Aegisthus, the man. In Agamemnon's own report of his death, he claims that Aegisthus "work[ed] out [his] death and destruction" exactly as Proteus told, though inserting "with the help of [his] sluttish wife."<sup>29</sup> He attributes the death of Cassandra to Clytemnestra, but his own to the sword of Aegisthus. Agamemnon blames Clytemnestra nonetheless for her conspiratory role as an accomplice, linking the evil done to him with her womanhood. Homer manipulates the myth to mirror Penelope with Clytemnestra; both are women who must fend off (or succumb to) predatory suitor in the absence of their husbands. Since this is his aim, he also parallels the suitors with Aegisthus. They are the villains who steal wives and conspire against the lord of the manor, "while eating up substance of his house."<sup>30</sup> Further, the ambush plan that Aegisthus sets is reused by the suitors where Antinoös schemes to trap Telemachus, requesting, "a fast ship and twenty companions, so that I can watch his return and lie in wait for him."<sup>31</sup> Homer thus knits all the fibers of Agamemnon's murder myth, uniting it as a foil to the central plot.

In reviewing the overall presentation of Clytemnestra in both Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Homer's *Odyssey*, the transgendering of her character in each representation becomes evident. Where in Aeschylus' works, she is a character in her own right, dominating the scene, ruling her relationships, orchestrating and committing murder. She is man-like and will exact revenge. On the contrary, in Homer's *Odyssey*, she is denied a voice, remaining a marginal figure that lives in the shadow of dominant Aegisthus, his silent conspirator and passive assistant. She is evil and woman-like, succumbing to the pressure of a suitor too strong for her feeble female self. Clytemnestra's role and treatment in these legendary texts is directly related to the underlying purpose of the tale. In Aeschylus, she is the tragic heroine we sympathize with, though still cannot condone. However in *Odyssey* she is merely a literary

<sup>26</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 529.

<sup>27</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 521-5.

<sup>28</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 534-5.

<sup>29</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 409-411.

<sup>30</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 142-3.

<sup>31</sup> Homer, *Odyssey*, 669-70.

device used to reinforce Penelope's goodness and further the major narrative thrust. Both in the *Odyssey* or *Oresteia*, whether silent or not, Clytemnestra was a complicated queen.

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