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Women Claiming Power in the *Oresteia* and *The Penelopiad*

Both Penelope and Clytemnestra, wives originally written about in Homer's *Odyssey*, have been adapted and rewritten through ancient and contemporary times, setting famous examples for how a wife should and should not be. Their similar circumstances set the stage for comparison and judgment of their actions; cousins, they were both mothers, they were both wives of notable leaders whom they waited the return of during the Trojan war, and they were both tempted by suitors in their husbands' absence. In retelling Penelope's story to reveal her flaws, Atwood dismantles the prescription of how an "ideal wife" should be while Aeschylus uses androgynous traits to frame Clytemnestra as the reverse of these ideals or a "bad woman." Clytemnestra is the destructive force to Penelope's passivity, the androgyny to her femininity. But as mortal women, they can only be models for good or bad behavior, lifestyle prescriptions rather than "heroines," a term reserved for divine beings, and as Lefkowitz explains, "Women by their very nature cannot be heroes, because heroes get their title by killing, destroying, or accomplishing something extraordinary like founding a city" (36), all actions reserved for masculine roles. Clytemnestra's destruction is not seen as honorable, and Penelope's loyalty to her husband is just the status quo, leaving scarce room in the narratives surrounding Clytemnestra and Penelope to solicit, if not celebration, then acknowledgement of their intelligence and the power they harness within their separate households. At the root of both Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, is the desire for and harnessing of

power and how Clytemnestra and Penelope are compromised in different ways through this struggle. Closer analysis of both Aeschylus's and Atwood's representations reveal the types of power these women brandish, including their reactions to waiting for their husbands, the way they use their intelligence and deception, and patterns of chaos within the domestic and public spheres that they influence.

Before analyzing these characters more closely, it is important to locate their narratives in place and time to understand the cultural implications of these works. In the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus's goals in constructing Clytemnestra's narrative are not too different from Atwood's goals in portraying Penelope's voice: both authors are writing for their respective cultures and times about gender roles, conveying a message about what is acceptable and appropriate. Extracting Clytemnestra's very small role in the *Odyssey* and fleshing it out to conceptualize the queen as a mastermind in Agamemnon's death, Aeschylus presents the "threat of feminine rule," which is a "recurring theme in Greek myth, and could conceivably be considered a type of 'horror story' told to encourage the maintenance of the proper social roles of men and women" (Wolfe 700-701). Atwood is trying to be true to and emphasize values of ancient Greek culture but in the context of contemporary society. She is not alone in reframing the *Odyssey* through Penelope's point of view, which Edith Hall comments on: "In the tidal wave of feminist versions of the *Odyssey* engulfing the literary scene over the last few decades, the important ideas are private space, weaving and quest" (121-22). In using Penelope, a character who may have been regarded as an ideal wife who possessed intelligence but was nonetheless voiceless and without a "quest," and attributing a voice to her, Atwood exposes imperfections of ancient ideals to our contemporary society where gender roles are fluid but still in question. She is not seeking to answer the question of "what traits make up an ideal or perfect woman?" but instead positing that

there is no such thing. In both narratives gender and power are intimately connected—traditional masculine or feminine traits determine the outcomes and consequences these women face in their pursuits of power.

These cultural ideals regarding gender roles and control are brought to light in the *Oresteia* and *The Penelopiad*, but Clytemnestra and Penelope were intimately connected in the *Odyssey* from the start, where they existed mostly to be used to represent the dichotomy of how women (especially wives) can or should be. Because of their similar situations, Steve Reece explains, “there exists the potential that Penelope will prove to be as faithless as Clytemnestra, that Odysseus will suffer at the hands of the suitors the same fate as Agamemnon did at the hands of Aegisthus” (104). Agamemnon's ghost in Hades establishes these archetypes when speaking with Penelope's slain suitors: “The fame, therefore, of her virtue shall never die, and the immortals shall compose a song that shall be welcome to all mankind in honour of the constancy of Penelope. How far otherwise was the wickedness of the daughter of Tyndareus who killed her lawful husband; her song shall be hateful among men” (Homer). These traits of constancy and wickedness mark Penelope and Clytemnestra respectively and seem to be, by Agamemnon's account, the only means of mortal women creating legacies for themselves and being praised by gods, since the option of being a hero through leadership or triumphs in battle is not accessible to women. Affected by their husbands' and society's views of women, “Clytemnestra remains the 'bad woman' to Penelope's 'good woman' and stands as a stereotype of the malleable Greek woman at the time: she is easily led astray or kept on the straight path depending on which man holds the reins” (Wolfe 695). Power, for women, is slippery and difficult to harness except through undermining the institution of marriage. One way we see this implicated is through the wives' respective responses to waiting.

In both the *Oresteia* and *The Penelopiad* we see wives waiting for their husbands to return from war. While Odysseus's time away is more prolonged than Agamemnon's, Clytemnestra still, at the very least, performs the role of any wife in the situation of a husband returning home after being absent during a long war in saying, "These rumors ate away at me, to the point / that I had to be released, against my will, / from the noose of suicide, more than once" (Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 873-75). She presents herself as a loyal wife, helpless and desperate enough to want to kill herself in the absence of her husband and also overly-indulgent, insisting Agamemnon walk on a lavish fabric of expensive crimson dye. Her words, of course, contradict her later actions and demonstrate Clytemnestra's androgyny. She performs the emotions of a wife in her speech to Agamemnon, but it is all part of her scheme towards his destruction, showing the multiplicity of her words. Her speech lacks the "straight talk" Orestes values in *The Libation Bearers* when he says, "Feminine delicacy veils / words in obscurity, man to man, a conversation / is confident, with plain speaking and straight talk" (Aeschylus 665-67). These lines allude to the chaos believed to result in a woman ruling, warning of the harms of a woman's deception that are inherent to femininity. Clytemnestra's speech contains obscurity or multiplicity in lines like "I endured all this and now my mind is free from pain" (Aeschylus 895). What she "endures" could be the long wait, but it could also be the betrayal and anger she feels towards Agamemnon's sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia, and her mind "free from pain" is not due to a happy reunion but instead the imminence of her plan of vengeance coming to fruition. She consciously veils her words to gain political power that would otherwise be denied to her.

Further emphasizing Clytemnestra's androgyny, it is also possible that Iphigenia's death is just a pretext for killing Agamemnon, covering up her hatred for her husband, hatred she feels out of jealousy of, as R. P. Winnington-Ingram suggests, "Agamemnon himself and his status as

a man. For she herself is of manly temper, and the dominance of a man is abhorrent to her. Thus, when she kills her husband, it is not only an act of vengeance, but also a blow struck for her personal liberty” (132). This idea separates Clytemnestra's character further from feminine or nurturing traits that might otherwise have been her saving grace. If it is not solely for vengeance of her daughter that she kills Agamemnon and instead to achieve masculine power, it is less convincing for her to lay claim to Orestes in *The Libation Bearers* when she insists, “This breast once nurtured you, cradled your sleep, / your soft mouth sucked the milk that made you strong” (Aeschylus 897-98) especially when earlier his former nurse makes a more emotional claim to him as his caretaker when she learns of his supposed death: “But this, I've never known agony like this, / I withstood all the other troubles, flushed them out, / but my dear Orestes, I spent my soul on him” (Aeschylus *The Libation Bearers* 745-47). She also lists the ways in which she cared for him. Comparing these two interactions shows how Aeschylus “makes the Nurse, and not Clytemnestra, display a mother's affection and a mother's grief,” establishing Clytemnestra and Orestes as “unnatural mother and unnatural child” (Winnington-Ingram 139). Clytemnestra's offerings to him are biological—she gave birth to him, nursed him, and sent him away from her home for his safety, while Cilissa, his nurse, expresses deeper mother-son bonds with him despite having him forced into her care.

Clytemnestra as a predominantly masculine, and therefore unredeemable, woman is perhaps not what Aeschylus intended to portray in the *Oresteia*, considering he does offer vengeance over Iphigenia as an understandable, albeit not popular, reason for Clytemnestra's actions, and we are not given direct evidence to support the belief that Clytemnestra is not speaking truthfully when she defends her actions as vengeance for her daughter. The Furies certainly side with this, and rather than dismissing their case, Athena holds a fair trial to

determine whether or not Orestes was justified in killing his mother. Defense of Clytemnestra's actions as "personal liberty" is perhaps appealing to a contemporary audience, and as Lefkowitz writes on Clytemnestra, Madea, and other unpopular women in Greek myth:

Modern women may admire these destructive women because they took action and used their great intelligence to right what they considered to be personal wrongs against themselves. But even the chorus of Corinthian women, who at first sympathize with Madea's desire to punish Jason for deserting her, condemn the form that her revenge takes. (49)

Lefkowitz is referring to Madea killing her children to take revenge over their father, demonstrating the limits of the chorus, even a sympathetic one, to justify violence. It also further highlights the struggle and tragedy that befall women who seek power outside of their traditional roles, that they are never portrayed short of mad, selfishly committing tyrannical acts of violence to upset the social order.

Penelope's power is understated in comparison to Clytemnestra's and her methods of achieving power differ drastically. Penelope also waits for her husband, whose journey is prolonged while she is affronted with suitors in his wake. Her sentiments in *The Penelopiad* are portrayed similarly to the false ones Clytemnestra expresses when Penelope says, "Many nights I cried myself to sleep or prayed to the gods to bring me either my beloved husband or a speedy death" (Atwood 89). While the *Oresteia* is primarily Orestes' story, interpreted to the audience by choral witnesses "expressing traditional wisdom, or viewing the action in broader historical or theological perspective" and struggling or failing to "construct fully satisfactory explanations for what they experience" (Foley xxxvii), *The Penelopiad* is primarily Penelope's story with a contemporary interpretation of traditional choruses weaving in additional alternative meanings.

End of Sample

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