

Winner, IAS Frederick T. Haley Writing Award for 2003

*Category: Critical/research/analytical paper of medium length
(5-10 pages)*

Richard Cromwell

The Society of the Oresteia: Male in Everything

When the chorus in The Agamemnon refuses to believe Clytemnestra as she tells them her husband has returned, she observes: “You treat me like some young and silly girl” (40). With this accusation the tone is set early in the Oresteia that there will be a conflict of gender roles. Clytemnestra is confronted with a society that sees her as silly, hysterical, and generally weak of both mind and body, based solely on her gender. And yet, when she strives against the grain to be what the society will not let her be, she is derisively called domineering and manly. Caught between being looked down upon for being a woman and being looked down upon for not acting like one, Clytemnestra loses her place in society, which in turn leads to her ultimate demise, both literally and figuratively, in the sense that she even loses the trial that was to bring her justice posthumously. Rather than vindicate her actions, the trial publicly condemns them, and her, to Hades.

The Argive society generally sees women as weak in both mind and body, something that Clytemnestra receives with seething, and barely restrained, resentment. That the chorus in The Agamemnon does not believe her words bothers her greatly. Her biting sarcasm is clear when she gives the words, attributed to “some sniggering person”: “Bonfires! And great Troy destroyed? / You credit that? / How like a woman’s hysterical credulity!” (51). It is not clear if there was some such person that said such a thing to her, but there is no doubt that it is what she heard, at least, and it makes her angry. She continues: “They made me out a wandering fool; / But even so I went on with my sacrifice. / And soon in every part, in every corner of the town, / Everyone – just like a woman, ha! - / Hymned and shouted out his paeans of gratitude” (51). The obvious conclusion is that Clytemnestra does not think the general populace gives her enough credit because she’s a woman. The less obvious implication is that this tension has existed long enough for Clytemnestra to build resentment towards it, and could very well have existed before Agamemnon even left for the war. Clytemnestra simply does not accept what role she is forced into on account of being a woman. She laments to Agamemnon that “a woman sits at home, / Torn from her man - / Desolate, / The prey of every frightening report” (61). Clytemnestra is not one to sit idly by and let her man do all the work.

One might discount her words since she is speaking to Agamemnon, and everything she says to Agamemnon is intended to deceive him and to later allow her to kill him, but she holds this same account later when Orestes basically has his sword against her throat. When Orestes accuses her of sitting at home while his father toiled, she replies, "Child, a woman suffers when a husband goes" (145). Orestes, however, is not convinced, for a man's toiling is worth more to him than a woman's suffering. Women are to be looked down upon because they sit at home and don't take action.

And yet women are also to be looked down upon for taking action. Clytemnestra isn't what her society perceives women to be; she eventually comes to be abhorred by the very reason that she does not act how a woman should. While there are instances in which Clytemnestra is praised for being man-like, these are few and far between. For example, the Chorus of The Agamemnon comment to her that her words are "spoken, Lady, like a sound and solid man" (43). The other characters are far more likely to try to push her back into her rightful place. Agamemnon, at one point, chides her, saying, "This lust for battle hardly suits a woman" (63). While Clytemnestra allows herself to be pushed, it is only so long as she must keep her deception going. Once Agamemnon is dead, she no longer has any need. When the Chorus cries at her in outrage over the murder of her husband, she shakes them off with man-like confidence: "You challenge me like any silly woman. / It does not make me nervous in the least. / You know it" (85). While she claims that Aegisthus is her shield, she does not hide behind him, but takes full command of her actions. The Chorus does not frighten her. Her people do not frighten her. She becomes a tyrant, the new leader ruling by force of presence. Cilissa even refers to her as "that domineering woman" (137) years after the murder, as the new queen has certainly had ample time to assert her power. The same traits that might be looked upon as being heroic and kingly in a man only serve to alienate Clytemnestra from her people and her servants.

The trial in The Eumenides is the culmination of the struggle between Clytemnestra and the rest of her society; her society condemns her, even if her actions are justified in light of the law, because she is a woman. If the Furies are to be believed – and they are too simple-minded to be anything but plain in their wording – Clytemnestra has done less wrong in killing Agamemnon, according to the Old Law, than Orestes has done in killing her: "Such a killing does not count as blood of kin" (168). Killing your mother does. If killing kin is a larger taboo than plain murder, then the legality of the issue goes like this: Agamemnon killed Iphigenia, his daughter and his own kin, and thus deserved to be punished. Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon, fulfilling the punishment, and since Agamemnon was not her kin, was more justified in her actions than

Agamemnon. Orestes was less justified in killing Clytemnestra because she was his kin. The only reason Orestes should have any leniency shown to him is because his actions were commanded by Apollo. And yet there is no mercy for Clytemnestra in the underworld, for she laments, "Oh, I tell you, in their eyes – most heinously - / I am the one to blame" (163). And there is no validation for her during the trial, either. Apollo's case seems to revolve around the fact that the mighty hero, Agamemnon, was slain by a lowly woman: "A great man was murdered here, / divinely rich in sceptered rule, / and murdered by a woman" (185). He even goes so far as to strip Clytemnestra of any blood ties to her own children: "The mother is not parent of her so-called child / but only nurse of the new-sown seed" (186). As proof, he points to Athena: "There can be fatherhood without a mother" (186). The only way for the trial to be won is to strip Clytemnestra, and all women in the process, of their legal and god-given rights. Only then can Orestes be said to have committed less of a sin than his mother.

While it is fairly easy to say that the Argive society is a strongly patriarchal one, and therefore sexist, it is far less simple to guess what Aeschylus himself would have wanted his audience to think was proper. There is no one character that can be said to speak for Aeschylus, even (or perhaps especially) not the various Chorus. What we can look into, however, is the trial itself. Orestes did not actually win the trial so much as he was acquitted by default, as Athena explains to the Furies: "You were not beaten; the votes were only even; / all fell fair and no disgrace to you." (192). There it can be said the society was split on the decision. More interestingly, however, is that Athena holds the vote that turns the scales in favor of Orestes. Athena, although a woman, is depicted rather more like a man in this play. This can be seen when she boldly proclaims, "No mother ever gave me birth: / I am unreservedly for male in everything / save marrying one" (190). She then explains her vote: "I cannot find it in me to prefer / the fate of a wife who slew her man: / the master of the house" (190). With her explanation, she proclaims her favor for men over women, for men are the masters and the women should not dare to usurp their masters. How puzzling it is to hear this from a goddess who is so "unreservedly for male in everything," to condemn another woman for being so man-like! This ending becomes problematic when viewed in such a light, for in it Aeschylus uses a woman (if that be what Athena is in this play) to undermine the credibility of the entire gender. The world that Aeschylus portrays is one that is surely "for male in everything" as well, for justice only seems to apply in this society to men, not women, since Clytemnestra will never be avenged in the way her husband was.

Work Cited

Aeschylus. The Orestes Plays of Aeschylus. Trans. Paul Roche. New York: Meridian, 1996.