

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Husbands and Wives

“Sex segregation, carried to as great an extreme as was true of 5th Century Athens, is an expensive social pattern. It interferes with many natural rhythms and responses and is enormously inconvenient in daily life. It tends to breed fear and mistrust between the sexes, which leads to the subordination and derogation of one or the other.”¹

The ‘intractable’ warfare² between husbands and wives in tragedy is an ongoing battle within the cold war waged between men and women in ancient Athenian society. This war is documented in Athenian mythology and is nowhere better expressed than in the dynamic of tragedy. The visual and literary arts of 5th century Athens are the mouthpieces for the fomentation of hostility and ambivalence amongst the sexes as men struggle to establish and then ensure the continuation of patriarchal dominance.

The purpose of this study is to examine the hostilities and ambivalences within the marital relationships portrayed in four tragedies: *Agamemnon*, *Medea*, *The Women of Trachis* and *Ajax*. This has necessitated a close reading of the original texts and commentaries as well as a close reading of comparative translations of the texts.

In order to understand the conflict within these marital relationships, one has to understand the ambivalent attitude toward women in 5th century Athens. I have chosen to examine this attitude as it is reflected in Athenian Mythology based on two assumptions: first, that the dynamics of interpersonal relationships portrayed in mythology and literature tend to mirror the modal patterns of cultures and second, the experiences of these modal patterns are the inspiration from which a culture draws its mythmaking.

I also wish to examine whether this portrayal of hostilities and ambivalences is connected to the nature and function of Greek tragedy. My primary aim is not seek to infer historical or social realities from the plots or characters in Drama, although social conflicts are often mirrored through the art of *mimesis*. Nor do I wish to propose that tragedy served as a vehicle to promote social change, for there is no evidence to suggest that the conflicts portrayed between the sexes motivated mass socio-psychological reform.

My search has also prompted the question of whether there was an awareness of the risks of the dire imbalance prevailing within the social order of Athenian society: an imbalance created by such a ferocious suppression and derogation of half the members of that society. In addition there is also the question of whether this

¹ P. Slater, *The Glory of Hera—Greek Mythology and the Greek Family*, Princeton U.P., New Jersey, 1992, p. 448.

² B. Simon, *Tragic Drama and the Family—Psychoanalytic Studies from Aeschylus to Beckett*, Yale U.P., New Haven, 1988, p. 4.

imbalance was redressed by the production of and through communal participation in tragedy in its function as a ritualistic mechanism for cathartic relief.

It is a question of whether tragedy provided a process for the de-structuring of familial and social order first, and then sought and promoted a process of psychological restructuring and re-integration. If so, then it may have occurred through the empathetic workings of *Catharsis* or purgation of negative emotions or feelings of guilt. The cathartic effects of tragedy were most likely designed for men and not women. If so, then as a collective therapeutic action it may have confirmed the male dominated order of society and may have reaffirmed the Athenian perception of a dualistic reality in the form of irreconcilable opposites: theatre versus life and female versus male. Tragedies were written by men and performed by men and this may lead us to expect all symptoms, signs and symbols of male and female conflict to be the products of the masculine psyche.

Layout and Structure

The layout of my dissertation is as follows (the first three chapters are essentially introductory in the sense that they 'set the scene' for an examination of marital dysfunctions in Greek Tragedy):

Chapter II "The Tragic World" examines the recurring themes in Greek Tragedy and establishes a mythical framework for the content of the dramas. I explore the institution of the ο κοῖτ / house and how its disintegration and re-integration are a focal point of dramatic action. Next I give a brief overview of Athenian marital practice and conventions to outline the inherent problems and tensions within this institution.

Chapter III, "The Nature of Greek Tragedy" examines the context of the production of tragedy within the religious framework of the festival of the Greater Dionysia so as to establish a theory of the nature and function of Greek tragedy. The purpose of the second focus is to see whether there are connections between the workings of Greek tragedy and the thematic material it portrays.

Chapter IV "The Problem of Women—The Threat of Mutability" explains the polarisation of Greek thought as it relates to their worldview in general and to women in particular. I then reveal how the concept of women as a mutable force became threatening for the Greek male and patriarchal order. I discuss how the category of 'women' became split into two categories, one positive and one negative. The negative elements, which were inherent in all women, were the ones that came under male restriction, repression and control.

Chapter V, "Athenian Mythology" discusses how Athenian Mythology champions male values and reflects the patriarchal orientation of Athenian Society. I explore the negation and suppression of 'threatening' female qualities in this mythology as expressed in the metamorphoses of the Olympian goddesses. I reveal how female deities underwent a process of 'splitting' which saw them dissected, amputated and ultimately 'de-feminised'.

The next four chapters focus on the tragedies I have chosen. Each tragedy contains different aspects of marital tensions and dysfunctions. And each tragedy

portrays women as either an actual or potential destabilising force within the family structure. Chapter VI, “Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*” deals with conscious and pre-meditated murderous aggression towards the husband by the wife. Vengeance is taken by the wife in an attempt to release the ο κοj from the pollution of bloodguilt. Chapter VII, “Euripides’ *Medea*” deals with conscious pre-meditated aggression towards the husband through his sons on the part of the wife. Vengeance is taken by the wife in response to her betrayal by the husband and subsequent disintegration of her family unit. Chapter VIII, “Sophocles’ *The Women of Trachis*” deals with unconscious aggression towards the husband on the part of the wife. In an attempt to win back her husband’s love in the face of his infidelity, the wife destroys her husband and then herself. Chapter IX, “Sophocles’ *Ajax*” shows how potential aggression towards the husband on the part of the wife is averted by the establishment of a proper familial structure and by her incorporation into this structure as a legitimate wife of the ο κοj.

In Chapter X I conclude that the production of tragedy served to reaffirm the status quo of male dominated order. This allowed the male element of society to purge their feelings of guilt at their continued suppression of the female element in their society by revealing the dangers inherent to their society if they did not.

Recent Literature

My topic of research has required me to read widely regarding Athenian social life as well as the worship of Dionysus in order to attain a broad and accurate (as far as this is possible) understanding of the socio-historical context of my field. A supplementary reading list is supplied containing those works that were consulted for this purpose but not directly used.

The most important works that have contributed greatly to this field in recent years and to which I owe much of my inspiration, I wish to acknowledge here. These works all cover different areas of the same topic—“The Problem of Women”.

The first is Philip Slater’s book *The Glory of Hera—Greek Mythology and the Greek Family* which is a psycho-analytical approach to understanding the Greek family unit. The second, Eva Keuls’ *The Reign of the Phallus—Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, is a more general study of the prevailing attitudes to women in 5th Century Athens as revealed by the visual arts in particular. Synnøve Des Bouvrie’s book, *Women in Greek Tragedy—an Anthropological Approach* focuses on tragedy and the workings of tragedy. I also wish to acknowledge Kirk Ormand’s book *Exchange and the Maiden—Marriage in Sophoclean Tragedy* for it’s approach to the **Ajax** in particular as well as Bennet Simon’s *Tragic Drama and the Family – Psychoanalytic Studies from Aeschylus to Beckett*.

Note to Reader

For ease of reading and identification all primary sources are in Bold and Italics. All quotes from the four tragedies are taken from the Complete Greek Tragedy Series edited by Richmond Lattimore and David Grene unless otherwise specified. I have used Italics for the quotation of all primary sources and Italics as well as quotation marks for quotations from books. On the two occasions that I have

used Bold and Italics for a quotation it is where I have quoted from Roberto Calasso's *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, an essentially creative approach to Greek mythology in novel form.

CHAPTER II

THE TRAGIC WORLD

The Mythical Reality—Recurring Themes

“With regard to tragedy few things can be said with certainty. One of these is that it reveals a virtually insatiable appetite for tales of madness, disaster and heinous crime arising out of intense conflict. Another is that most of this conflict took place within sexual and familial relationships, rather than between the individual and society or between man and the Gods.”¹

Tragedy drew on mythology for inspiration and content. Playwrights who sought to impinge upon the occurrences of recent history were severely censured: Phrynichus, an older contemporary of Aeschylus, wrote several plays that dealt with the Persian invasion of Greece. When one of these plays described the capture of Miletus by the Persians in 494 B.C., the audience was so traumatised, they fined him a thousand drachmas and banned the play from further production². Greek theatregoers wanted a mythical reality not an enactment of recent horrors, or ‘real life’ explorations. The kind of emotional trauma they would have experienced with Phrynichus’ play was not contained within myth: the horrors, the deeds of violence were not displaced by times long passed or projected onto pre-moulded characters, but rather too fresh in their memories. Popular mythical themes were the stories of the house of Atreus or the house of Thebes. There is no doubt a link between social history and mythology in that myths seek to allegorise social transition and patterns of thought. In this sense *The Oresteia* can be read as a politico-religious allegory, a version of the transition from Chthonic to Olympian religion that established patriarchal social order over a spiritual and animist worldview dominated by the Great Mother Goddess.

“Athenian audiences had not experienced these ancient conflicts and transitions, but they currently lived amid sexual rancour, and could each remember the emotional wrench of leaving the power sphere of the mother and moving into a male-dominated outside world”³

The ο κοj: Disintegration and Re-integration

Conflict between the sexes is the most prevalent recurring theme in Greek tragedy. Of the extant plays only one—*Philoctetes*—has no female character. The dualistic conception of Athenian society is reflected in the agonistic flavour of Greek drama.

The most important recurring symbol is the household or ο κοj, a symbol for male versus female dominance and all the ambiguities that are expressed by the

¹ E. C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus—Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, California U.P. Berkeley, 1993, p. 330.

² Herodotus 6. 21.

³ P. Slater, *The Glory of Hera—Greek Mythology and the Greek Family*, Princeton U.P., New Jersey, 1992, p. 163.

conflict. In so far as the *oikos* is posed in opposition to the *polis* / city, the *oikos* remains the domain of the female in her role as mother and wife. It is within the *oikos* that women have influence and can manifest their power. As legal non-entities, excluded from political life, deprived of education, women were confined to the *oikos* except on the occasions of funerals and certain religious festivals⁴. Obviously confinement became less easy to enforce lower down on the socio-economic ladder but for the middle and upper classes, this was strictly adhered to. Private houses had no windows looking into the street and in their very design mirrored the practice of sex segregation. They were divided into men's, women's, and slaves' quarters with separate entrances⁵. Wives controlled the finances for household management⁶, oversaw the running of the slaves and brought up the children. Athenian men spent most of their time outside of the *oikos* participating in the daily life of the *polis*. As all political assemblies, legal procedures, sporting activities and most religious festivals were conducted outdoors or in unroofed structures, the outdoors was conceived as 'male' space.

Yet the *oikos* was the property of the male and his male descendants. It symbolised paternal heredity, of sons inheriting wealth from their fathers, inheriting the role of ultimate authority within the familial structure. In Greek tragedy the house is often a metaphor for the city state or kingdom, and the head of house, the ruler of that kingdom, like Oedipus for example, or Agamemnon, or Pentheus. In these instances the *oikos* functions as a microcosm of a greater social whole, representing its order, structure and stability. Thus when the *oikos* is destabilised, damaged or violated, so is the social order.

The *oikos* embodied the institution of marriage, the most frail of all social institutions of 5th Century Athens. Dysfunctional marriages are rife in mythology and tragedy. This is because the mythic or literal reality is shaped by the modal familial experiences of members within a given society. A brief look at 5th century familial structure and marital practices will put this recurrent theme in perspective.

Greek Marriage – Dangerous Exchange

*When we are young, in our father's house, I think we live the sweetest life of all; for ignorance ever brings us up delightfully. But when we have reached a mature age and know more, we are driven out of doors and sold, away from the gods of our fathers and our parents, some to foreigners, some to barbarians, some to strange houses, others to such as deserve reproach. And in such a lot, after a single night has united us, we have to acquiesce and think that it is well. (Sophocles, Fragment 524, from **Tereus**⁷)*

⁴ Of all the studies I have read on the position of women in ancient Athens and their lives in general, one of the most clarifying is Hendrik Versnel's article "Wife and Helpmate—Women of Ancient Athens in Anthropological Perspective" in Josine Blok & Peter Mason (eds) *Sexual Symmetry—Studies in Ancient Society* J.C. Gieben. Amsterdam, 1987, pp. 59-86.

⁵ E. C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus—Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, California U.P. Berkeley, 1993, pp. 93-97.

⁶ Xenophon *Oeconomicus* iii 15; Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 493-494.

⁷ P. Slater, *The Glory of Hera—Greek Mythology and the Greek Family*, Princeton U.P., New Jersey, 1992, p. 27.

The exchange of women between households was inescapable. 'Motherless' sons were a mythological occurrence only, reflecting a latent wish in the Greek male psyche to be able to produce children autonomously, as Jason articulates in the *Medea*:

*It would have been better far for men
To have got their children in some other way, and women
Not to have existed. Then life would have been good.*
(573-575)

*"Behind this is the more subtle fear of male dependency on women, the dependency of the boy on the mother, and the need of the adult man to prop up his own masculine vulnerabilities by having a wife who will bear sons"*⁸

Every house had to give its daughters out in marriage and receive other daughters for its sons to marry. Women were thus the most transitory and mobile of the family structure: as daughters they were but temporary residents in the household of their birth; as wives they were outsiders entering an established family, a new order of male dominance to which they had to adjust.

Marriage for a young girl meant a traumatic and sudden change in life. Her marriage contract was arranged between her father and the groom many years in advance while the two remained complete strangers to one another. The procedure took place when she was barely out of childhood sometimes still pre-pubescent, round about the age of 14⁹. Greek men, by contrast, married round about the age of 30¹⁰. As a husband and father the Greek male spent little time at home, his days occupied by participation in city life, his evenings at *symposia* – parties where he could entertain himself amongst his peers and seek sexual relations with *hetaerae* or adolescent boys, according to his preference. It is not surprising that this bond was the most tenuous in the family. The dichotomies which defined it, ensured conflict and mistrust: the one party is a child, the other an adult; one is educated, the other kept in ignorance; in the male, sexual expression is encouraged, in the female it is condemned.

Dysfunctions resulting from such relationships seep into the mother-son relationship like an insidious poison, rendering it equally dysfunctional if not more so¹¹. Children were reared in the women's quarters and thus experienced an essentially female oriented world during their crucial formative years. At the age of six or seven, male children were transferred from the realm of the mother to the care and instruction of the father. They were removed from the women's quarters to begin life as young men. This separation must have been traumatic alike for the

⁸ B. Simon, *Tragic Drama and the Family—Psychoanalytic Studies from Aeschylus to Beckett*, Yale U.P., New Haven, 1988, p. 83.

⁹ For the details of Greek marriage procedures see L. Bruit Zaidman & P. Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, Athenaeum U.K. 1994, pp. 68-72.

¹⁰ Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 695-699.

¹¹ See P. Slater, *The Glory of Hera—Greek Mythology and the Greek Family*, Princeton U.P., New Jersey, 1992, for the most in-depth exploration of the ancient Greek mother-son relationship in mythology and tragedy.

mother and son and detrimental to their relationship. A young boy transposed from a world in which his mother was the sole provider of love and attention, the ultimate authority, he now begins his education under a new authority. He learns of his exalted position within the social hierarchy and at the same time of the inferiority of the female sex. He experiences freedom of movement between \circ $\kappa\omicron j$ and $p\tilde{o}l i j$ and begins to develop highly narcissistic modes of behaviour.

A woman is of value only because of her ability to bear sons. As the daughter of a household she grows up knowing that her time with her parents will be short because she is a bargaining commodity for her father. As a mother she knows that her time with her son is even shorter and that the bond between them will be inverted and corrupted once he is removed from her care. Her husband is a stranger, a shadowy figure who is rarely present and constantly unfaithful, while she is forced to be present and constantly faithful. The predominantly subconscious focus of her frustrations, sense of injustice and hostility, in the absence of her husband, would be none other than her sons.

Much of Greek tragedy therefore, has to do with marriage: in the plays *Iphigenia at Aulis* or *Antigone*, for example, deaths of the bride occur before the marriage can take place. These are inverted marriages, reflecting the myth of Persephone and her union with the god of the underworld¹². There are themes of fear on the part of the bride towards marriage, best shown in Deianeira; themes of resistance on the part of the bride towards marriage as exhibited by the Danaïds; the concept of brides who have lesser status than their 'legal' counterparts—spear-won brides, the spoils of victory – like Tecmessa, Cassandra, Creusa and Iole; marriages damaged by infidelity like that of Deianeira and Heracles or Medea and Jason; and marriages destroyed by bloodshed such as Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's.

Athenian 5th century drama lays bare a level of collective awareness of potential danger in forbidding opposite principles to mingle and interact. This awareness and its exploration are limited to those contained areas of religious ritual where procedures are adhered to and maximum control practiced.

¹² E. C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus—Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, California U.P. Berkeley, 1993, discusses this concept in Chapter 5 "Brides of Death in More Ways than One."

CHAPTER III

THE NATURE OF GREEK TRAGEDY

“At the height of their political and military power the Athenian Greeks created tragedy, allowing it to overshadow all other forms of literature, and they watched it for days on end during several annual festivals. A like mania for theatre cannot be found amongst any other culture”¹

The Ritual Setting of Tragedy

The ritual setting of Tragedy and the mythological world it portrayed belies our very modern assumption that the plays of the Ancient Greeks should be approached in the same way we, as literary critics and theatre goers, approach drama. While it does mean that this mythological and tragic world would obviously reflect attitudes and institutions of contemporary life—the plays having been written by contemporary Athenians—I propose that the primary concern of Greek drama was not unity of action, psychological realism or social commentary, but emotional release and affirmation of social order.

Since the time of Shakespeare and before, the function of theatre in the Western world has been chiefly to entertain. We may be able to categorise the dramatic portfolio of Western drama under such titles as Protest Theatre, Kitchen Sink Drama, Theatre of the Absurd, Theatre of Realism, Political Theatre and so on. We have an abundance of theatrical genres: tragedies, comedies, mystery plays, thrillers, pantomimes, musicals, operas and operettas. But in order to understand the theatre of the Ancient Greeks and more specifically to Tragic Drama of 5th Century Athens, we have to separate ourselves from our experiences and understanding of the kind of dramatic performances mentioned above.

We have 18 complete Tragedies surviving in addition to fragments, which span the period between 490 and 406 BC. The performance of Tragedy occurred as part of Athens’ most important festival of the year – The Greater or City Dionysia – from the 10th to the 14th of the month of *Elaphebolion* (our March). The Rural Dionysia occurred in the month of *Poseideion* and the Lenaia in *Gamelion* (our January). All three of these festivals were in honour of Dionysus and the productions formed a part of the rituals of Dionysiac cult². The performance, production and attendance of the tragedies, comedies and Satyr plays during these festivals were part of the worship of the god. Thus to view tragedy merely as a literary genre or a form of entertainment is to confine it’s function in too narrow a concept.

Dionysus had his forum in the sacred enclosure of the *Theatre Dionysus*. It was in this space that the people of Athens as audience, actors, chorus or musicians, experienced the god. As god of the theatre he embodies the concept of ‘the other’,

¹ E. C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus—Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, California U.P. Berkeley, 1993, p. 330.

² For a detailed discussion of the processes of these festivals see L. Bruit Zaidman & P. Schmitt Pantel, *Religion in the Ancient Greek City*, Chapter 10 “The Festival System: the Athenian Case” Athenaeum U.K. 1994, p. 19 and S. Goldhill, “The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology,” *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 107 (1987), pp. 58-76.

the foreign import³ who disrupts the order of things who rejoices in reversal, transgression and the loosening of boundaries. As a form of Dionysus worship we would expect the theatre to contain the features of Dionysiac cult⁴. His worship was always conducted on a communal level and involved collective participation. This participation resulted in the emotional synchronisation of his participants⁵. As the Thesmophoria was a festival of liberation for women, the Dionysia brought liberation to men.

The issue of women's attendance at the Dionysia has always been a bone of scholarly contention⁶. Whether they were allowed to be present or not, they would have at best been a marginalized audience, more likely than not separated from the men and occupying second rate seats. For Tragedy was not written for women, it was written for men, by men, performed by men, interpreted by men and for the experience of men. The Dionysia saw thousands of men sitting for three days enmeshed in the world of this dangerous god. In this sacred aura, controlled and contained, they experienced their world turned upside down, inverted by the importation of chaos.

The entire festival was, in a sense, a process of feminisation and celebrated Dionysus in all his transsexual power. The protagonists were required to present themselves in the forms of women and monsters, hero's and gods by means of costume and mask. This process of preparation for entrance to Dionysus' world is brilliantly explored in Euripides' *Bacchae* where the god, in disguise himself, aids in Pentheus' own transformation:

Pentheus: Lead on with all speed; I grudge you any delay.

Dionysus: Then clothe your limbs with linen robes.

Pentheus: What is this, then? Am I to stop being a man and join the ranks of women?

Dionysus: Yes, for fear they kill you if you are sighted there as a man.

Pentheus: Another good reply! How clever you are, and have been all along!

Dionysus: It is Dionysus who gave us these accomplishments.

Pentheus: How, then, shall we put your good advice into practice?

Dionysus: I shall go inside the palace with you and dress you myself.

Pentheus: In what dress? Really a female one? But I am ashamed!

Dionysus: You are no longer keen to watch the Maenads?

Pentheus: What kind of costume do you propose to dress me in?

Dionysus: First, from your head I shall hang down long tresses.

Pentheus: And the next feature of my adornment?

³ Dionysus has his origins in Thrace and before that Crete. See J.E. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, 1907 and *Themis—A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, Merlin pp., London, 1989.

⁴ For more on Dionysiac cult practices see Vernant J.P. (translation Raffan J), *Myth and Thought Among the Greeks*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1983; Vernant J.P. (translation Lloyd J.), *Myth and Society in Ancient Greece*, Humanities P., New Jersey, 1981; Versnel H.S, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion* Volume I, Brill, Leiden, 1992.

⁵ S. Des Bouvrie, *Women in Greek Tragedy—An Anthropological Approach*, Norwegian U.P. Oslo, 1992, p. 83.

⁶ See E. C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus—Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, California U.P. Berkeley, 1993, pp. 330 & 332; Aristophanes *The Peace* 964-967; *The Frogs* 1050.

*Dionysus: Skirts down to the feet; and on your head will be a snood.
(820-833)*⁷

Kirk's commentary on this section aptly reflects those feelings that must have gone through each male member of the audience as he became more and more deeply engrossed in Dionysus' world.

*"Pentheus' shame at the idea of accepting female disguise appears to be diminished as each article of equipment is mentioned; he seems fascinated by them – perhaps because they will make him a bacchant as much as because they will make him a woman."*⁸

The experience of the Theatre was predominantly an emotional one. This approach has been little discussed by modern scholars perhaps because emotions in western culture are more the territory of quicksand than safe and solid ground. The best source for understanding how the 5th Century Athenians themselves viewed the nature and function of drama would naturally be Aristotle and his poetics. His experience and expectations of 5th Century Athenian tragic theatre are of course more authentic than ours and all that is needed is a brief summary to sharpen our focus. His definition of tragedy is as follows:

*Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions*⁹.

Aristotle then talks of 'pleasure' experienced on the part of the participants when emotions are evoked:

And since the pleasure which the poet should afford is that which comes from pity and fear through imitation, it is evident that this quality must be impressed upon the incidents.

Let us then determine what are the circumstances which strike us as terrible or pitiful.

*Actions capable of this effect must happen between persons who are either friends or enemies or indifferent to one another. If an enemy kills an enemy, there is nothing to excite pity either in the act or the intention – except so far as the suffering in itself is pitiful. So again with indifferent persons. But when the tragic incident occurs between those who are near or dear to one another – if, for example, a brother kills, or intends to kill, a brother, a son his father, a mother her son, a son his mother, or any other deed of the kind is done – these are the situations to be looked for by the poet.*¹⁰

⁷ Kirk G.S. (translation & commentary), *The Bacchae of Euripides*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, 1979.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

⁹ Aristotle, (Butcher translation), *Poetics* V.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, XIV 3-5.

The empathetic pity and fear (ἄλεοι and φόβοι) are defined as those reflex emotions that are evoked when confronting such events. We see from the above passage that the relationship required by the protagonists on stage is a relationship between φίλοι (loosely—those that are bound to one another by kinship). The destruction, damage or deterioration of such relationships is calculated to evoke the strongest and most appropriate emotional response from participants. By implication these reflex emotions are triggered not by violence to human beings but by violence committed against those relationships that are seen as sacred and bound by φίλοι. In order for catharsis / emotional release to take place the participants had to be actively / emotionally affected, not passively / intellectually.

According to Synnøve Des Bouvrie, Greek tragedy was a discourse, not between playwright and individual but between playwright and protagonists (audience and cast) as a collective unit. There is thus less of a distinction between actor and audience as well as a concomitant blurring of intentions. Her hypothesis for the development of a theory of tragedy is that the focal aim of drama is not to educate the audience, nor to provide socio-political commentary or provide a forum for philosophical questioning, but to affect and afflict the senses and emotions of all participants¹¹.

Over a period of three full days, the participants function as a collective entity. Their senses, emotions and imaginations, laid bare to the power of empathy and catharsis, are exploited. These tragic workings were successful because they took place in an encapsulation of ritual religion.

The Three Phase Process of Ritual

In the first phase, an act or experience of segregation or separation occurs whereby the participants are removed from the normal sphere of existence. In this case the participants have entered the sacred aura of Dionysus. This was invoked by sound, prayer, collective anticipation or even the ingestion of a hallucinogenic substance¹².

The second phase constitutes a liminal act (an act which crosses a boundary) or a liminal set of experiences. This is the time of the actual drama in process where the world is suspended in favour of another one – a Dionysian one. During this time *sacra* are communicated, as in the case of the Eleusinian Mysteries. It is here that mythical reality is portrayed. Myths contain the seeds of the transgressions of a culture and the mechanisms for the transcendence of that culture. The liminal experience for the participant in the Dionysia was one of reversal, where boundaries were broken, taboos explored and where the fear of and subsequent

¹¹ S. Des Bouvrie, *Women in Greek Tragedy—An Anthropological Approach*, Norwegian U.P. Oslo, 1992, p. 64.

¹² For details of Greek Religious and Mystic practices see Eisler, R., *The Chalice and the Blade*, Pandora, London 1993; Kerényi, C., *Eleusis—Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*, Bollingen Series LXV 4, Pantheon, New York, 1967; J. E. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, 1907; Wasson G.R., Hofmann A., Ruck C.A.P., *The Road to Eleusis—Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978; Jung, C.G., & Kerényi, C., *The Science of Mythology—Essays on the Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1979.

repression of the female element in the Athenian society could burst forth and demand confrontation.

As it was the propensity of Dionysus to inflict madness and abolish boundaries, social values, deep-seated psychoses could be brought out into the light and safety of a sacred and protected space. These could then be projected onto characters and stories protectively removed from real life in the “cotton wool” covering of myth.

The final phase sees a reintegration of participants into their everyday world. The results of the ritual process could be twofold depending on the purpose of the ritual: for the participant in the Dionysia there would be achieved in all likelihood, a re-affirmation of the *status quo*. In the case of the Mysteries, a degree of revelation would have been received by the initiate so as to aid in the re-alignment of thought, and attitude and in the correcting of behaviour within the framework of newly acquired knowledge or contact with an aspect of the divine.

CHAPTER IV

THE PROBLEM OF WOMEN – THE THREAT OF MUTABILITY

Ancient Greeks lived in a dualistic world wherein irreconcilable opposites were delicately poised in uneasy counterbalance. This was the impetus behind myth-making; this defined their culture and society. This system of polarity has its roots in the differences inherent in the physiological make-up of men and women¹. Women's bodies are mutable in that they are reproductive, and thus mysterious and held in awe. For most of her life a women's body is involved in the processes of generation either in the form of menstruation, ovulation, pregnancy or nursing.

The generative process has ever been personified in the Great Mother Goddess figure of the chthonic era. She was nature personified, her sphere of influence that of all living and dying things. Culture, or the process of civilisation was diametrically opposite to Nature in Greek thought. Thus it follows that nature as a female force, embodied the principles of chaos and generation and those wild and savage things that could not be tamed. Culture is defined as a male force and embodied those concepts of social order, civilisation and necessity for control. The 4th century BC saw the crystallisation of this polarity of thinking in the Pythagorean system. This system conceptualised the universe in ten underlying principles organised in pairs of opposites, and it articulated the eternal opposition between male and female²:

Limit	Unlimited
Odd	Even
One	Plurality
Right	Left
Male	Female
Rest	Motion
Straight	Crooked
Light	Darkness
Good	Evil
Square	Oblong

Taken at face value this system of sexual polarity is simplistic. The male / female principle of opposites needs to be further analysed. Men and women share many similarities despite their physiological differences: they share cultural identity, participate in the same society and only in unification can they ensure the continuation of that society. These similarities form the basis for the third defining category that serves to mediate between the stark opposites of male and female. Tyrrell terms this category of mediation as the 'feminine' which he sees as denoting those aspects of female that are similar to male and therefore of value or 'good'³.

¹ W. B. Tyrrell, *Amazons: A Study in Athenian Mythmaking*, John Hopkins U.P., Baltimore, 1991 introduction, pp. i-xxi.

² Katz M.A., 'Daughters of Demeter' in *Becoming Visible: Women in European History*, Briden-thal, Stuart & Wiener (eds), Houghton, Mifflin & Co., Boston, 1998, p. 25.

³ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

To understand Athenian mythology this third category is vital in order to avoid the oversimplified impression that blatant misogyny was the overriding attitude of 5th Century Athenian men towards their women. The categories of 'female' and 'feminine' mirrored the role of women in society: the role of giving birth (a function of nature, of generative mystery) and the role of rearing children (a civilising process by means of social conditioning and education). Women are defined by these functions and are seen to contain both the negative and positive physical and mental elements associated with each sphere of activity. When a woman produces a male child, she reflects those elements of positive physicality. A son ensures the continuation of the *oikos* and the paternal bloodline. Penelope, the wife of Odysseus is a shining example of those 'feminine' positive qualities. She also embodies those positive mental elements in her loyalty, faithfulness and devotion to her husband.

Those negative physical elements exist in uncontrolled sexual behaviour, the act of infidelity, and those violent emotions that cannot be tempered. Clytemnestra is perhaps the best example of these 'female' elements. Negative mental elements are recognised in women who display *andros* or 'manly boldness', who act on their own behalf, who speak in public, who cross those borders of restriction both physically and in behavioural terms. What we, in our modern society would regard as independence, is viewed as transgressive here. If women act for their own purposes without male guidance or control they are seen as potentially dangerous and destructive to the social and familial order, that is, to those spheres which are defined as 'male'. The institution of patriarchal marriage served to minimise this potential for danger, "...the bestiality of women's condition is civilised by marriage."⁴

Ambiguity on the part of men towards women is the result of this concept of women as a combination of 'female' and 'feminine'. This ambiguity is explored in Athenian mythology, religious practice and tragedy. In Athenian mythology the mutability of women is an overriding concern, a constant danger. Her boundaries are pliant, porous constantly giving way to deformation. Her power to control her metamorphoses is inadequate while her will to do so is lacking. As witnessed by female physiology, she swells, she shrinks, she leaks, she is penetrated, she suffers metamorphoses and regularly loses her form to monstrosity⁵. Io is turned into a heifer, Kallisto into a bear, while Medusa exhibits a head full of writhing snakes, and Scylla dogs that bark from her waist. The Sirens and the Sphinx are part woman, part beast. Daphne transforms herself into laurel. The *Graiai* make themselves repellent by sharing one human form amongst them, passing an eye and a tooth back and forth as needed. The Hydra is possessed of self-generating heads in the event of attempted decapitation. In Greek mythology monsters are generally female – abominations of shape and form.

At the same time, women of myth are notorious adaptors of the forms and boundaries of others. They repeatedly open containers they are told not to open, like Pandora, or they destroy something placed in a container for their keeping, like Althea. As safe-containers themselves they prove highly unreliable: Zeus re-

⁴ Ibid., p. xii.

⁵ Halperin, D.M., Winkler, J.J. & Zeitlin, F.I., *Before Sexuality—Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, Princeton U.P., New Jersey, 1990.

moves the foetal Dionysus from Semele's womb and takes over the function of gestation; Apollo rescues Asklepios from Koronis for the same purpose.

The most terrifying aspect of women in myth is their propensity to wreak disaster on the male form. Scylla reduces her father to impotency by removing his vital purple lock of hair, Agave tears off her son's head with her bare hands, Medea pulls the plug on Talos, Cybele castrates Attis with an axe, while Gaia gives her son a sickle to perform the same operation on his father⁶.

Women in myth also have a tendency to deny male boundaries by destroying them through engulfment and envelopment. In this way Clytemnestra destroys Agamemnon, encircling him in a shapeless sheet, a "deadly abundance of rich robes"⁷; Deianeira destroys Heracles with a poisoned garment that "enfolded him around his limbs"⁸ which dissolves his flesh in agonising slowness. Very often these crimes are committed out of love: they are crimes of passion, outbursts of emotion that are uncontrolled. Thus we will witness the archetypal goddess of sexual love, Aphrodite, relegated to a trivialised, diminished seat of power in the Olympian hierarchy.

*"Greek men ascribe to the female in general a tendency to 'let herself go' in emotion or appetite, a tendency encouraged by her wet nature and by the liquid property or liquefying nature of emotions and appetites themselves."*⁹

These assumptions about women are reflected not only in mythology, but also in the philosophies of Plato and Aristotle, the Athenian legislature, the literary genre of poetry and drama, religious ritual and social convention. Because 'women cannot or will not maintain their own boundaries', and are 'constantly threatening the boundaries of others': early on in Athenian Greek society Solon instituted laws to control this. His laws restricted the walks, feasts, trousseaux, mourning, food, drink and sexual activity of women. Later an institution was created with *gunaikonōmoi* /special magistrates appointed to 'supervise' women and maintaining their decency or *eũkosm...*a.

The Solonic laws are just one such set of restrictions of a complex array of restrictions on the movements, gestures, and activities of women, on the parameters and garments within which they lived. If a woman has no self-imposed limits then these must be imposed. Her movements are bounded by architectural space, her body by elaborate and cumbersome clothing, her hair by concealing headgear, her privacy by attendants.

⁶ See R. Graves, *The Greek Myths* Volumes I & II, Penguin, U.K., 1955.

⁷ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 1383.

⁸ Sophocles, *The Women of Trachis*, 767-768.

⁹ Halperin, D.M., Winkler, J.J. & Zeitlin, F.I., *Before Sexuality—Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, Princeton U.P., New Jersey, 1990.

CHAPTER V

ATHENIAN MYTHOLOGY

The Reign of Athena

Zeus was sitting on a stool. He stared into the distance. A breeze twitched his beard, which was streaked with gray. Something was going on inside his head, bringing on drunken weariness ... Now Zeus felt the crown of his skull being scraped by Athena's sharp javelin. Everything about the little girl was sharp: her eyes, her mind – now living in the mind of her father – the point of her helmet. Every female concavity was hidden away, like the reverse side of her shield ... He heard a desperately shrill scream inside his head, like the sound of a Triennia trumpet. And all at once he realised he wasn't alone: with silent steps the other gods had converged on him from all directions. He saw Hera and Hebe, Demeter and Persephone sitting on their baskets, Dionysus lying on a panther skin, thyrsus in hand. And to his other side, Poseidon, Aphrodite, Eros, Apollo, Artemis, Hermes, and the three Moirai, the last apparently confabulating together. All of them were looking at him, but not so as to meet his eyes. They were looking at a point slightly above. Athena had appeared in the crack in his skull, her weapons sparkling, while Nike fluttered around her with a crown in her hand.

Now he could see her too: she had climbed down to the ground and was walking away from her father. Turning her head in silent greeting, she was the only one who looked him in the eyes. Was it his daughter he saw, or his own image gazing back at him? Then Zeus turned to look at the other gods. From the solemn expressions on their faces, it was clear that a new era had begun on Olympus.¹

¹ R. Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, Jonathan Cope., London, 1993, pp. 226-227.

Transition

“What was not so predictable in the new national mythology was the overriding phallocratic element ... no mythology so teems with tales of male supremacy as does the Attic. Athenian mythological phallicism takes various forms. There are the countless stories of the clubbing, stabbing and strangling to death of sundry animals and monsters of fantasy; second, there are the manifold tales of rape, a theme in which no other mythology has been as rich as the Attic ... A third category of typically Athenian motifs consists of tales of goddesses who could not or would not bear children, and of stories of male motherhood, in which offspring are born from parts of the male anatomy or directly from the male semen.”²

Patriarchal consciousness is divisive in character. The polarity of thought described earlier is depicted mythologically in the estrangement of the Twin Gods Apollo and Dionysus and the assumption of power by Apollo over Dionysus. This pattern is ultimately expressed as ethical monotheism whereby the highest value is vested in a one and only supreme god. He is King, Judge, Creator, Preserver of world and existence, and the Originator of morality, ethics, law, order and justice. By the time of the 5th Century, Zeus has gathered these various powers and areas of domain, gradually extending his presence throughout all aspects of religion as far as he is able. The Olympian religious and mythological *status quo* is the result of the transformation, metamorphosis and subsequent incorporation of various chthonic deities into a male dominated structure.

This process of incorporation was by no means bloodless. Those ‘female’ goddesses were in many ways de-feminised in order for incorporation to succeed. There were also those aspects of female polarity, which defied incorporation and underwent instead a process of mutilation and suppression. These aspects are the ones most closely associated with Dionysian rule and it is these, which were gradually demonised, rejected and repressed. The Dionysian figure of an earlier gynolatric age is made into the scapegoat, eventually taking on the figure of Satan in the Christian era.

While those aspects of the female lose their expression in all but religious institutions, those of the feminine remain: women must be good, nurturing, industrious, and useful but most importantly submissive to male order. Aggressive death and destruction are now no longer accepted as inevitable aspects of life, thus making sacrifice as voluntary self-offering no longer possible³. Aggressive violence is to be channelled so as not to inundate the community. This is done in various ways: first by identifying the right sacrificial victim. Their slaying must be justified and taboos were fixed to govern the proper killing of chosen victims. This victim must be beyond the communal bonds whether by virtue of having broken its taboos, or of being barbarian or ‘other’, such as a prisoner of war. Animals were then substituted and eventually ethical rationalisation became paramount and the victim was charged with the evil to be averted. Under the ruler of divine and benevolent

² E. C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus—Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, California U.P., Berkeley, 1993, p. 34.

³ See E. C. Whitmont, *The Return of the Goddess*, Arkana, Penguin, London, 1987, p. 57 ff. and J. Campbell, *Occidental Mythology—The Masks of God III*, Arkana, Penguin, London, 1987, p. 324 ff. for a discussion of human sacrifice.

gods this victim now carried the stigma of wrongdoing, and as punishment he was often expelled or cast out of the community. No longer did he impersonate the divine deliverer and renewer, by becoming one with the god through the sharing of a sacrificial destiny.

The concept of at-one-ment takes on a new shade of meaning, that of penitence. Taboos, ostracism, shame and riddance, psychological splitting and repression of an unacceptable content from the conscious self-image, are all methods of dealing with the threat of evil by avoidance. They are escapes, unconscious admissions of subjective inadequacy in the face of the threatening temptation of the outlawed urge. Yet what is expelled or repressed from individual consciousness reappears in projection upon another person, group or figure and is explored in the contained environment of religious ritual and ritualised performance as in the Greek Theatre. In the case of 5th century Athens this group was women, or more specifically that part of their nature, which was 'female'.

And so 5th century Athens celebrated an Olympian order, which had long dis-empowered the Chthonic Mother Goddess by a process of division and diminishment. It is Virgin Goddesses now, not Mother Goddesses who are empowered. It is to these goddesses (Hestia, Athena, Artemis and the Eumenides) who are entrusted beyond all others with care of the young, who preside over birth, marriage, the laws of the city of Athens and its institutions, most importantly the family structure of the Athenian *oikos*. In the Olympian order, virginity guaranteed independence. It symbolised the integrity of borders. These virgin figures were given power by Zeus. They underwent a process of de-sexualisation and de-feminisation in order to make them immune to those now trivialised and diminished powers of Aphrodite.

The Parthenon

The Parthenon stood on the acropolis visible to all those who visited the great city of Athens. It was constructed c. 450 under Pericles. This ambitious project was a celebration in sculpture and architecture of the military and cultural triumphs of Athens at the height of her imperial power. In the images and stories adorning this temple we find an expression of collective Athenian identity. The Parthenon was dedicated to Athena *Parthenos* the virgin goddess and patron deity of the city and her famous statue was housed inside. The charter myths of Athens were chosen to decorate the pediments and metopes of the temple. On the western metope, the one first visible on approach was depicted the 'Amazonomachia—the Battle of the Greeks and Amazons. This battle was the one most often depicted on Athenian monuments. The myth of the amazons embodies the reversal of the Greek cultural ideal – whereas in Greek culture it was the boys who became warriors and then fathers while the girls became wives and mothers of sons, here the Amazons are the ones who go to war and refuse to be the mothers of sons, keeping their boy children merely for the sake of procreation, while they cherished their daughters. The Amazon myth explains why marriage is necessary – it prevents such a dire reversal of order from occurring⁴. Eva Keuls sees the 'Amazonomachia' as the most notable example in Athenian mythology of the characteris-

⁴ W. B. Tyrrell, *Amazons: A Study in Athenian Mythmaking*, John Hopkins U.P., Baltimore, 1991, introduction, pp. i-xxi.

tic theme of killing or subduing rebellious women. The ubiquity of this myth is proof alone of the constant need amongst Athenians to remind themselves of the dangers inherent in 'untamed' women.

*"Whenever an Athenian turned his eyes, he was likely to encounter the effigy of one of his mythological ancestors, stabbing or clubbing an Amazon to death."*⁵

On the three remaining sides, the battles represented are those between the Gods and Titans, the Greeks and the Trojans and the Lapiths and Centaurs. This places the Amazons in the same category as the monster opponents of Olympian sovereignty (the Titans), the traditional enemies of the Greeks (the Trojans) and the half-men half-beasts (the Centaurs) who, in a drunken brawl attempted mass rape of newly wedded brides.

The Birth of Athena is depicted on the East Pediment and will be discussed later in this chapter. Let us turn briefly to the statue of Athena. Athena's image constructed entirely out of gold and ivory was doubtless the most monolithic image of anti-female representation; a sexless figure, her breasts and genital area were totally covered. She wore the *aegis*, a double cover over her breasts, which bore Medusa's snake-ridden head⁶. Her helmet displayed yet another female monster of Greek mythology—the Sphinx—while on her shield another 'Amazonomach...a raged. Under Athena's feet lurked the woman who brought all evil into the world—Pandora⁷. Pandora is made sublimely beautiful but with a 'dog-like' mind and thievish character. She is made to punish mankind for disobedience; she is the cousin of the Christian Eve.

I now wish to examine the Olympian family, by selecting a few of the prominent deities and demonstrating the effects of the processes, which I have been discussing.

Zeus

*"The portrayal of Zeus attempts to deny fear of the adult female by creating an image of a dominant, sexually potent male who is made chief of the gods. This image undergoes considerable erosion, however, as the very same doubts for which it was to provide quiescence re-emerge to alter it. Zeus repeatedly exhibits his fear and inadequacy toward maternal goddesses, as if the kinds of difficulties, which the Greek male encountered in his sexual life, puzzled not only the will but the imagination. Even in fantasy he could not devise a satisfactory mode of interaction with a mature woman"*⁸.

⁵ E. C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus—Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, California U.P. Berkeley, 1993, p. 34

⁶ Ibid., p. 39; P. Slater, *The Glory of Hera—Greek Mythology and the Greek Family*, Chapter 1, for a discussion of the symbolism of Medusa's head and the male fear of the *vagina dentata*, Princeton U.P., New Jersey, 1992.

⁷ For the most misogynistic version of Pandora, see Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 60-69.

⁸ P. Slater, *The Glory of Hera—Greek Mythology and the Greek Family*, Princeton U.P., New Jersey, 1992, pp. 135.

Zeus is a sexual athlete and he rules his Olympian 'family' with a breathtaking sexual double standard. His extra-marital exploits represent the sexual dominance of the Male over the Great Earth Mother goddesses such as Hera, Leto, and Demeter. To overcome the terror these figures were assumed to inspire, he armed himself with powerful desire and sexual aggressiveness. Philip Slater points out the significance of the epithet of Zeus as *Lord of Hera*, "as if his shaky marital dominance was his major achievement"⁹.

Zeus thus constitutes an explicit denial or reversal of the feeling of helplessness, inadequacy, impotence and terror aroused in the Greek male by maternal ambivalence. This is best illustrated in the tale of his seduction of Rhea, his own mother. In order to conquer her, he is obliged to assume her serpent form and use her method of entanglement.

*"It is an imitation on some level and concerns not only the abandonment of the infantile attachment to the mother but also the working through of male envy and fear of the female reproductive apparatus – this is achieved here through the incorporation of female attributes and represents an acquisition rather than an exchange of organs."*¹⁰

Perhaps the most dysfunctional marriage of all mythology is that of Zeus and his wife Hera. His relationship with her is certainly not suggestive of comfortable patriarchal dominance but rather that of a silent war. His sexual promiscuity itself reflects insecurity of status, while the many myths that tell of potential or actual challenges to the power of Zeus also reflect the prevalence of masculine self-doubt in Greek culture. These challenges to Zeus' power represent the perceived threat of the procreative powers of the Mother – the fear that in her anger she will bear and foster powerful creatures and set them against the existing ruler. This is illustrated in the Uranus-Cronos-Zeus myth, as well as the war between Olympians and Titans, and Zeus' struggle with Typhon. It is Hera who leads the gods in revolt against Zeus and for her temporary victory over him he punishes her by hanging her by the wrists with anvils on her ankles. From then on he maintains a shaky dominance over her with the threat of brute force.

Apollo

The myths surrounding Apollo attempt to divest him of all suggestion of maternal connections. He is the personification of anti-matriarchy, the epitome of the sky-god, a crusader against Earth deities¹¹. With regard to the stories surrounding his birth, there is evidence of attempts to deny and escape his earthly origin and sever himself from maternal bonds. So eager was he to escape his mother's clutches that he left the womb after seven months. He was born on Delos, a barren and rocky island in the sea, a place of 'not earth', as disassociated as possible from the fecundity of the Earth Mother. As an infant, the divine child was not suckled by his natural mother, but fed nectar and ambrosia by Themis, a surrogate mother. Like all divine children he reached manhood within a matter of days,

⁹ Ibid., p. 129.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 130.

¹¹ J.E. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, 1907, p. 139.

bursting from the confinement of his swaddling clothes, he sought liberation from the protective bonds of his mother.

One of his most famous deeds was his slaying of the serpent-dragon Python. This mythological deed has many significant consequences and meanings. On the one hand it tells of the transition from the chthonic matriarchal religion to the new patriarchal male-dominated religion of the Olympian deities. In this light it is reminiscent of Zeus' battle with the monster Typhon. In the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*, Typhon is the offspring of Hera and was reared by the serpent Python. Both myths represent the same theme – Father or Son, the archetypal representatives of the new male dominant order, encounter and do battle with the raw force of primordial powers, symbols of the suppressed and chaotic side of the feminine principle. Neither of the two gods are outrightly successful – Apollo incorporated many of the aspects of the oracular religion over which the Python had presided. Although the site of Delphi had a new ruler, Apollo did not annihilate the old rituals but learned the art of prophecy and divination from the Pythiae, the presiding goddesses, unbeknown to Zeus¹². He thus assumed the name of another goddess Phoebe, and kept on the clairvoyant priestesses as servants.

Slater regards this as Apollo's most telling expression of misogyny: not only does he shun the aspects of the archetypal 'Good Mother' represented by Leto, Themis and Mother Earth, but his killing of Python can be seen as conquering the 'Bad Mother' aspects, represented by Hera the Archetypal 'wicked stepmother' in this story who sent Python to kill the young god¹³.

Apollo is also famous for his role as divine protector of Orestes and the divine sanctifier of his crime of matricide. In *The Eumenides*, Apollo's aversion to the feminine principle is most clearly seen by his speech minimising the role of women in procreation quoted later on in this paper.

On first examination one would say that this radiant sky god, the champion of patriarchy has successfully avoided being tarnished with traces of Chthonic or 'feminine' elements. But on a closer examination, the tales of his birth contain many contradictions. The *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (92-95) tells us that even though he was only in the womb for seven months, he showed reluctance to leave it. Leto suffered nine days in labour and during her labour she was surrounded by all the most important goddesses except for Hera. The delay is attributed to Hera, Leto's bitter enemy (being yet another conquest of Zeus), who kept Eileithia the goddess of childbirth from aiding her. In another attempt to prevent the birth of the god, Hera lays a curse on Leto saying she could only give birth where the sun never shone and then sends Python to kill her. Poseidon hides the desperate mother, shielding her from the light of day by drawing the waters of the sea over the island¹⁴. In this version Apollo is thus born underwater – an analogy for remaining in the womb – *and* is surrounded by women. It is also contradictory how, as the Homeric hymn tells us, at the moment of birth Leto suddenly clutches a palm tree and kneels on the soft meadow "... *while the earth laughed for joy be-*

¹² Hesiod, *Homeric Hymn to Hermes*, 550.

¹³ For more on the 'Bad Mother / Good Mother' conflict see P. Slater, *The Glory of Hera—Greek Mythology and the Greek Family*, Princeton U.P., New Jersey, 1992, (Chapter 1).

¹⁴ *Hyginus Fabulae*, 140.

*neath*¹⁵. Here we have a birth which is at once premature, yet delayed, the place of birth is a barren island yet it has palm trees and soft meadows, he is not nursed but is surrounded by nurses, he is under water yet “*leaps forth into light*” at the moment of his birth, he is free of maternal bonds yet only breaks free of his swaddling bands once he is fed.

Despite his heroic deeds of masculine conquest, Apollo is always depicted as effeminate in nature and appearance. Often he is portrayed as a youth on the brink of manhood, in art he is seen as a slim boy devoid of the heavy masculine frame that characterised such Gods as Zeus and Poseidon for example. In Callimachus we find that he is perpetually in this state of adolescence for the “*down of manhood can never appear on his girlish cheeks*”¹⁶ and according to Apollonius Rhodius, his “locks can never be shorn in initiation into manhood”¹⁷. He is also notable for his homosexual love affairs with youthful mortals who are replicas of himself in appearance while his sexual conquests of females are generally unsuccessful unlike those of his father¹⁸.

Athena

Athena is the most artificial and ‘plasticised’ product of the new Olympian order she is the most successful ‘de-feminisation’ experiment to leap literally out of the male mind. As the autonomous creation of the new Sky God, she denies all maternal links while embodying those benign principles of female power – those feminine qualities that exist non-threateningly within male order. She is not born of the earth—the element from where all life comes—she is born of mind. She is intellect and reason personified; she is the story of Athens in all her imperial glory. The early form of her name Ἀθήνη is purely adjectival. She is the Athenian one, the Athenian patron goddess of Athens. Mythologist Jane Harrison sees her as the embodiment of Athenian political history itself: Athena’s contention with Poseidon can be interpreted as the struggle between the old aristocracy exemplified by the old sea god, and the rising democracy in which the figure of the ancient κῶρη / maiden is revived and, according to some, mutilated in the process¹⁹.

The fair maid of Athens is devoid of the mutable and fluid phases of femininity; instead she is frozen in the first phase of boyish virginity, a sexless being whose nature falls curiously between that of man and woman. She is laden with epithets and attributes, charged with intended significance but she remains in that Olympian limbo of manufactured unreality.

The only connections left to her chthonic origins as a matriarchal Snake Goddess are the terrifying aegis on her shield and her association with snakes.

¹⁵ Ibid., 117-118.

¹⁶ Callimachus, ii, 103-104.

¹⁷ Apollonius Rhodius, *The Voyage of the Argo*, ii, 701 ff.

¹⁸ His failure to seduce Daphne, his rape of Creusa and Cassandra’s rejection of him are but a few examples.

¹⁹ J.E. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, 1907, pp. 301-302.

Artemis

The process of re-invention has not worked quite as well on Artemis as it did for Athena. Her figure resists an eradication of her chthonic heritage, for it is too great, too old and too mysterious²⁰. Of all the Greek goddesses she received the bloodiest sacrifices. As a personification of the savageness of nature, she evokes the most primitive fear of dependence on forces that are beyond the control of human beings, whose law they can therefore violate, without knowing it. Propitiation of the goddess may then appease her revenge upon their transgressions in ignorance. The best example of this in literature appears in *Agamemnon* when the king accidentally kills a stag in a sacred grove of Artemis and in retribution the goddess demands the sacrifice of Iphigenia or she will continue to prevent the Greek warships from sailing for Troy. She is the only goddess who demands the shedding of human blood in sacrifice, recalling an ancient past where human sacrifice was a necessary part of human life.

As the goddess who presides over childbirth, her chthonic role is revealed and alludes to the fact that her connection with the generative powers of the female was once far stronger. During the Olympian era she remains a virgin and her role as mother is suppressed and reduced to that of a surrogate or foster mother. She is not unlike Athena, inviolate, pure and remote whose appearance most closely resembles a young adolescent athlete of undeterminable sex. Like her twin brother Apollo, her Olympian form has become 'androgenised' while her maternal skills are downplayed in favour of the more masculine ones of hunting and archery.

Jane Harrison is enlightening on the subject of this brother and sister pair:

“Artemis as Mother had a male god or son as subordinate consort, just as Aphrodite had Adonis. When patriarchy ousted matriarchy, the relationship between the pair is first spiritualised as we find in Artemis and Hippolytus; next the pair are conceived of in the barren relationship of sister and brother. Finally the female figure dwindles altogether and the male-consort emerges as merely son of his father or utterer of his father's will”²¹.

Aphrodite

The Classical and Hellenistic depictions of Aphrodite are of a deity whose formidable nature and sphere of influence has been trivialised and greatly reduced.

“We should perhaps remember that in our culture the divinity of Aphrodite has been so long sacrificed to what Erich Neumann describes as the patriarchal sexualisation of the feminine that we have probably forgotten who she is. In the Orphic myth of her birth we can regain the lost idea that love belongs to the original nature of things, for Aphrodite is born of

²⁰ See A. Baring & J. Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess—Evolution of an Image*, Arkana Penguin, London, 1993, p. 329 ff. for a full discussion of the chthonic heritage of Artemis.

²¹ J.E. Harrison, *Themis—A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion*, Merlin P., London, 1989, p. 502.

the moment when Heaven is separated from Earth, and Creation, arrested till then by the weight of Heaven, is suddenly set free."²²

This version depicts the goddess of Love (as she is most commonly known to us today) as the child of the dawning of the universe. She is the figure who, in the likeness of the original Great Goddess, reunites the separate forms of her creation. According to Hesiod she is the one who springs out of the intermingling sea foam and sperm of her father's genitals as they fall into the ocean after being severed by his younger son Kronos. While this does place her birth in the pre-Olympian age, it is not so early that it does not contain signs of the Greek male's distrust and fear of maternal power. For like Athena, she is born of no mother, and as Athena will symbolise the supremacy of intellect and reason, Aphrodite's area of reign will be reduced to sexuality, more specifically to those elements of female sexuality that were perceived as threatening to male order.

*"Her birth from genitals is obviously connected with her sexual-sensuous functions and contrasts Athena's. Both of these appearances of emergences (rather than literal births) symbolise genetically the intimate relation of each goddess with her father and, by extension, with males generally. By one type of definition you are what you come from. Both, thus, are strongly identified with their father, and each, in her way, symbolises the denial of the mother."*²³

The generous carnal affections of Aphrodite, her lack of virginity and lack of anxieties or ambivalence about sexuality make her unique among the goddesses of Olympus. Thus is she denied a position of power and influence and becomes increasingly sidelined. Her sexuality is overwhelmingly aggressive and jars with the veneer of morality imposed on the female deities that constitute the pantheon. Sexual aggression is reserved for the Greek male, exemplified by the astonishing number of Zeus' sexual encounters that served to incorporate the entire pantheon of divinities within his superior genealogy.

Aphrodite is never raped or assaulted by any of the gods, for as Friedrich points out, she is so powerful sexually that this would be a contradiction in terms. She has her own sexual encounters in which she is the seducer when a handsome mortal such as Adonis catches her eye. She is the only image of a degree of relative sexual equality, both loved and loving, she plays an active role that contradicts the sexual double standard that operates in the Homeric epics and Greek tragedy. She is often abstracted into the threatening power of sexual love that can overwhelm and possess those who fall prey to it. In this way she is similar to Dionysus – both divinities have the ability to take possession of a person's reason and transport them into the irrational. These dangers are expressed in various relationships in the Homeric epics where Aphrodite's powers have influence: as the seducer of Anchises, she inspires first passion and then mortal fear when her true identity is revealed; Odysseus finds himself enthralled with the sea nymph Calypso and then imprisoned against his will; Circe's first designs on Odysseus are to unman him but then she treats him as a lover; Paris discovers that Aphrodite's

²² A. Baring & J. Cashford, *The Myth of the Goddess—Evolution of an Image*, Arkana Penguin, London, 1993, p. 352.

²³ P. Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite*, Chicago U.P., Chicago, 1978.

favours have disastrous consequences for himself and his people; while Penelope's suitors, all encouraged to love and pursue her, end up slaughtered *en masse*. In tragedy the power of Aphrodite is most clearly recognised by Euripides in *Hippolytus*, where the consequence of rejecting her powers is a violent death.

Of the major goddesses of Olympus, Aphrodite together with Demeter is the most motherly. She displays love for children²⁴ and in many local cults she is worshipped not only as the patroness of the arts of love but also as a cherisher of children²⁵.

A brief overview of the qualities of motherhood displayed in Olympian goddesses is enough to convince that strong pathological elements are present in the mythical expression of this sacred institution. Hera, for example, is the patroness of mothers and is the mother herself of Eileithia the goddess of childbirth. She is not depicted as loving her children and tends to spawn either monsters (Typhon) or cripples (Hephaestus). Her horror at having produced this deformed god caused her to hurl the newborn child into the sea where he is rescued by Thetis²⁶. Hera is more famous for her mistreatment of her children²⁷ and her virulent hatred and pathological pursuit of her stepchildren (Heracles and Dionysus being the most obvious example). Those mortals whom she does protect – Achilles, Agamemnon and Jason of the Argonauts – seem to meet with decidedly disastrous ends: Achilles and Agamemnon are both destroyed at the prime of their lives, while Jason dies a ruined man with no children to immortalise his glorious name and heroic deeds.²⁸

Athena's motherly displays extend to the role of foster mother and no further, while Artemis never plays with children or shows signs of maternal affection for them even though she is officially one of the patronesses of childbirth. The maternal aspect of Aphrodite needs to be qualified for she does not have any legitimate children by her husband Hephaestus and thus to an extent the illegitimacy of her motherhood does weaken her image as a mother as does her symbolic denial of the mother in the Hesiodic version of her birth. All four goddesses discussed are, in some way, linked to the institution of motherhood but in every case the role is corrupted by negative values and thus expresses a degree of ambivalence. The only goddess in whom the role of mother is still powerful, is Demeter. She is the goddess who has suffered least under the Olympian new order: her supreme maternal powers have resisted the attack of dissolution.

Dionysus

Summoned by the women of Argos as a bull rising from the sea, Dionysus, of all the gods, is the one who feels most supremely

²⁴ She arranges for the upbringing of Aeneas and saves him from Diomedes; She falls in love with Adonis as a mother and is stricken with grief over his loss to Persephone.

²⁵ See E. C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus—Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, California U.P. Berkeley, 1993; P. Friedrich, *The Meaning of Aphrodite*, Chicago U.P., Chicago, 1978.

²⁶ Thetis is one of the variants of Aphrodite and is the most powerful symbol of maternal love in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

²⁷ See P. Slater, *The Glory of Hera* Chapter 1, *Greek Mythology and the Greek Family*, Princeton U.P., New Jersey, 1992, (Chapter 1), p. 204 ff.; *Iliad* V 385 ff., 840 ff., XXI 400 ff.

²⁸ For a detailed analysis of her relationship with Jason see P. Slater, *The Glory of Hera—Greek Mythology and the Greek Family*, Princeton U.P., New Jersey, 1992, pp. 205 ff.

at ease with women. His enemies used to say that he revealed the religious mysteries and initiations so as to seduce other men's women. If the Charites make him a gift, it will be a peplos a woman's tunic. Dionysus doesn't descend on women like a predator, clutch them to his chest, then suddenly let go and disappear. He is constantly in the process of seducing them, because their life forces come together in him. The juice of the vine is his, and likewise the many juices of life. "Sovereign of all that is moist," Dionysus himself is liquid, a stream that surrounds us ... Dionysus is not a useful god who helps weave or knot things together but a god who loosens and unties. The weavers are his enemies. Yet there comes a moment when the weavers will abandon their looms to dash off after him into the mountains. Dionysus is the river we hear flowing by in the distance, an incessant booming from far away; then one day it rises and floods everything, as if the normal above-water state of things, the sober delimitation of our existence, were but a brief parenthesis overwhelmed in an instant.²⁹

There is a mystery surrounding this god that has remained unresolved to this day. Dionysus is intangible and defies definition preferring to mutate constantly even as one tries to define him in thought. He is *Bacchos*, *Baccheus*, *Iachos*, *Bassoreus*, *Bromios*, *Euios*, *Sabazios*, *Zagreus*, *Thyoneus*, *Lenaios*, *Eleuthereus* to name a few of his many titles which denote his multiple personas. All of the Greek divinities were in part amalgamations of local deities, but in the case of Dionysus the process of amalgamation seems less complete. Very little effort seems to have been made to consolidate the image of the god into a rational Olympian deity. By the classical era the god has been transformed visually from a bearded phallic god to a youthful effeminate god—all phallic elements removed and transposed onto the Satyr and Sileni figures, which are depicted as part of his rowdy entourage.

During this time the ritual and religion of Dionysus becomes increasingly important for women in the form of the Thesmophoria and seems to provide a necessary emotional release or catharsis for the women of the community. In Bacchic ritual, the *kylix* or sacred basket was filled with fruit and a sacred phallus to represent fertility. Sometimes this phallus was replaced with a figure of a child³⁰. There is evidence to suggest that the representation of the child in the ritual harks back to the dark days of human sacrifice. In this particular ritual the child would symbolise the infant Dionysus, dismembered and devoured by the Titans at the instigation of Hera. Slater is persuasive in his argument that in Dionysus worship the major emphasis was on the dysfunctional elements of the mother-son dynamic and the resultant murderous impulses of the mother towards her male child³¹.

²⁹ R. Calasso, *The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony*, Jonathan Cope, London, 1993, p. 45.

³⁰ See P. Slater, *The Glory of Hera—Greek Mythology and the Greek Family*, Princeton U.P., New Jersey, 1992, p. 214 ff. for the theory of the disembodied phallus; E. C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus—Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, California U.P., Berkeley, 1993, Chapter 3 "The Phallus and the Box".

³¹ P. Slater, *The Glory of Hera—Greek Mythology and the Greek Family*, Princeton U.P., New Jersey, 1992, p. 223; The dismembering of Pentheus by his mother Agave in Euripides, *The Bacchae*.

Carl Kerényi sees Dionysus as a second Zeus, but unlike his father, he is a Zeus of women³². The full experience of Dionysus in the form of ritual and worship was an exclusively female one – men were forbidden to partake in his mysteries (only in the Greater, Lesser and Rural Dionysia). It is not surprising that Dionysus became the most important divinity for women during the Classical and Hellenistic periods given the masculine orientation of Olympian state religion. His femininity, evident in his hermaphroditic body, can be interpreted as the result of an emasculation process on the part of the women who worshipped him reflecting a deep-seated antagonism towards male dominance. He has so many forms and appearances that he lends himself towards mutability: he is the divine child of Zeus and Persephone, he is the King of the Underworld and consort of Persephone³³, he is the phallic fertility god. He is trans-sexual, mutable and intoxicating, the bestower of altered states of consciousness upon his worshippers. He is the god of the Greek Theatre—that sacred time wherein all these are made manifest.

Conclusion

In order to cope with the threat of 'female' existence, male consciousness has resorted to various methods to protect itself. A gynolatric phase of consciousness was not one in which women ruled, but one in which the cycles of birth and death were inseparable and eternal. Together they became the Great Round ruled by the Great Mother. Androlatric consciousness loses the understanding of the connection between these cycles. Out of this loss comes the fear of mortality, of death and the unknown. Patriarchal consciousness, in a bid for control, has split the figure of the Great Mother Goddess: what is to be feared, what cannot be controlled, and what is savage, is projected onto those 'bad' goddesses. The aspects of motherhood and mature feminine sexuality fall into this category and thus these aspects were further negated and made terrifying in the figures of monsters, or in tales of Hera's persecutions of her stepchildren, for example. The power of the mother goddess and her son-lover Dionysus is relegated to the mysteries, and operates subliminally in the subconscious workings of the community. Goddesses who are deemed 'good' are stripped of their femininity, sexuality and maturity. Having arisen from and made manifest by the male psyche they reveal an altered benevolence in which the masculine element finds comfort.

³² C. Kerényi, *The Gods of the Greeks*, Thames & Hudson, New York, 1951. p. 251.

³³ See C. Kerényi, *Eleusis – Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*, Bollingen Series LXV 4, Pantheon, New York, 1967; C.G. Jung & C. Kerényi, *Science of Mythology—Essays on the Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1985.

CHAPTER VI

AESCHYLUS' AGAMEMNON

“The Athenian preoccupation with legendary tales of wives murdering their husbands was nothing short of obsessive. Clytemnestra always remained the most prominent single exponent of this motif, whereas her son and killer, Orestes in drama, embodied a tragic conflict of motivations...[she] was the symbol of violent female revolt against male authority.”¹

Clytemnestra has gained the reputation of the Anti-Wife, the ultimate symbol of female uprising against male domination. In the context of Greek drama, I would argue that she is a victim of a badly damaged family unit. During the course of the trilogy: *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides*, this damage escalates into a struggle between male and female power. The trilogy represents marriage as a fundamental structure of male order, one that Clytemnestra destroys. Yet the structure she breaks by murdering her husband was hardly without corruption – it was riddled with the pollution of child murder, a pollution that was set in motion by the male line of Agamemnon’s family.

The re-invention of the Oresteia myth cycle was a favourite of Greek dramatists. In the Homeric version, Aegisthus is the one who murders Agamemnon, while Orestes is not the infant son and matricide of later versions but the exiled pretender who arrives to claim his throne. Moreover, Homer never says that Orestes killed Clytemnestra, but produces her corpse as soon as he has assassinated Aegisthus.² In all the dramatic versions we have surviving,³ matricidal revenge has become the central theme, and there are elements of mother-son ambivalence from the strained marital relationship to Orestes’ misogyny and madness. Our Athenian playwrights all portray the Oresteia cycle with the same fundamental concern – the slaying of the mother by her son in revenge for the killing of the father. The prominence of Electra is also a 5th century innovation, for in the earliest version of the myth, she plays no part.

Thus Aeschylus chooses to begin his trilogy with the crime of Clytemnestra. He chooses a version of the myth that portrays the Queen as the agent of destruction, a woman who crosses the boundaries of familial and social structures, who leaves the confines of her house and takes action. Her behaviour is transgressive, she is depicted as masculine in heart and deed and thus her killing is divinely sanctioned. She is the visible centrepiece of the *Agamemnon* and the invisible centrepiece of the whole trilogy. The male-order that is destroyed is resurrected in the final play of the trilogy, *The Eumenides*, by minimising the importance of a woman’s role in conception and gestation:

¹ E. C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus—Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, California U.P., Berkeley, 1993 .p. 338.

² *The Odyssey*, III, 303 ff.; IV, 524 ff.; XI, 405 ff.

³ Aeschylus, *Oresteia*; Sophocles, *Electra*; Euripides, *Electra* and *Orestes*.

*Apollo: I will tell you, and I will answer correctly. Watch
The mother is no parent of that which is called
her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed
that grows. The parent is he who mounts. A stranger she
preserves a stranger's seed, if no god interfere.
I will show you proof of what I have explained. There can
be a father without any mother. There she stands,
the living witness, daughter of Olympian Zeus,
she who was never fostered in the dark of the womb
yet such a child as no goddess could bring to birth.
(657-667)*

*Athena: It is my task to render final judgement here.
This is a ballot for Orestes I shall cast.
There is no mother anywhere who gave me birth,
and, but for marriage, I am always for the male
with all my heart and strongly on my father's side.*

*So, in a case where the wife has killed her husband, lord
of the house, her death shall not mean most to me...
(Eumenides 734-740)*

While the whole trilogy portrays the uniquely female functions of pregnancy, birth and nursing violent, unnatural and traumatic images⁴, I have limited my textual exploration to an examination of the **Agamemnon**, since it is this play alone in which both the husband and wife are alive.

Aeschylus' drama, telling of the homecoming of Agamemnon after the Trojan War, epitomises the theme of angry women killing men.

The ο κοj Corrupted – Human Sacrifice & Infidelity

*At home there waits like a lurking serpent
Biding its time, a rage unreconciled,
A watcher devious and passionate to slake
In blood, resentment for a murdered child
(154-157 translation mine)*

At the start, the Watchman gives us his version how things stand in the House of Atreus. His is the version we, as audience are meant to accept: he is the first to speak and the first to give us information – in the position of watchman it is also his job to watch and report. We learn that the House of Atreus is in an unnatural state of affairs – a woman is ruling in the king's absence, a woman with the heart of man:

*... to such end a lady's
male strength of heart in its high confidence ordains.
(9-10)*

⁴ See **Agamemnon** 108 ff., 120 ff.; **The Libation Bearers** 527-550.

The Watchman hints that more is amiss in the house of Atreus than he has explained. But he is unwilling to articulate further and states quite plainly:

*... The rest
I leave to silence; for an ox stands huge upon
my tongue. The house itself, could it take voice, might speak
aloud and plain. I speak to those who understand,
but if they fail, I have forgotten everything.
(34-38)*

The audience, familiar with the myth, would know that Clytemnestra has taken a lover, none other than her husband's cousin Aegisthus descended from the enemy house of Thyestes.

The chorus' ensuing song describes the circumstances surrounding the expedition of the Greeks against Troy. We are thus reminded of the abomination of Iphigenia's sacrifice, and the murder that shadowed the Argive fleet's departure:

*Their cry of war went shrill from the heart,
as eagles stricken in agony
for young perished, high from the nest
eddy and circle
to bend and sweep of the wing's stroke,
lost far below
the fledgelings, the nest and the tendance.
(48-54)*

Though couched in metaphor, the loss of children and the resultant destruction of the home "nest" is clearly meant.

Next comes the theme of Helen's adultery and the crime against the sacred institution of guest friendship, an institution of *fil...a*:

*So drives Zeus the great guest god
the Atreidae against Alexander:
for one woman's promiscuous sake
the struggling masses, legs tired,
knees grinding in dust,
spears broken in the onset. (60-65)*

Clytemnestra enters without speaking while the chorus continue their song elaborating upon the terrible deeds that have cast their dense and ominous shadow over their royal house -The sacrifice of Iphigenia:

220 *But when necessity's yoke was put upon him
he changed, and from the heart the breath came bitter
and sacrilegious, utterly infidel,
to warp a will now to be stopped at nothing.
The sickening in men's minds, tough,
reckless in fresh cruelty brings daring. He endured then
225 to sacrifice his daughter*

*to stay the strength of war waged for a woman,
first offering for the ship's sake.*

230 *Her supplications and her cries of father
were nothing, nor the child's lamentation
to kings passioned for battle.
The father prayed, called to his men to lift her
with strength of hand swept in her robes aloft
and prone above the altar, as you might lift
a goat for sacrifice, with guards*

235 *against the lips' sweet edge, to check
the curse cried on the house of Atreus
by force of bit and speech drowned in strength.*

240 *Pouring then to the ground her saffron mantle
she struck the sacrificers with
the eyes' arrows of pity ...*

The detail of Agamemnon's killing of his daughter is not spared. The description, bringing the terrible event back from the past into the atmosphere of victorious homecoming, casts a pall over all celebrations of victory. It is also set up as the murder that will drive the forthcoming murder that in its turn will spawn the next one.

The Tapestry Scene

"The tapestry scene", as it has come to be called is surely one of the most tension-ridden scenes to take place between a husband and wife in all of Greek Tragedy. It is the only time they are seen on stage together. Violently estranged from one another this exchange takes place against a family backdrop fraught with internal violence, revenge and infidelity. The extent to which this relationship has been damaged is all too clear in the dialogue, rigid with propriety and protocol.

The husband and wife avoid speaking to one another directly for as long as possible: He addresses the gods first (811-828) revealing that he is arrogant and self righteous with regard to the siege of Troy. He speaks of the Greek victory as *his* victory:

*they [the gods] have worked with me to bring
me home; they helped me in the vengeance I have wrought
on Priam's city.*
(812-814)

He sees the war as a joint accomplishment between himself and the gods, launching into a lengthy speech on the divine sanction of the ruination of Troy (814-828). As he continues his inflated justification, if he himself shows no awareness of how imbalanced this retribution seems, the audience cannot fail to wonder how a single woman's complicit abduction can justify the deaths of thousands of innocent people and the brutal destruction of a city:

*For all this we must thank the gods with grace of much
high praise and memory, we who fenced within our toils
of wrath the city; and, because one woman strayed,
the beast of Argos broke them, ...*
(821-824)

Once again we are reminded of the consequences of female transgression – Helen, by acting independently of male order, causes familial disintegration by abandoning her husband for another man. The magnitude of this transgression is reflected in its result: the Trojan War that lasts a decade!

Although he fails to mention the heroic efforts of his compatriots, he does make mention of his friend Odysseus (841-843). This reference cannot fail to remind the audience of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, for it was Odysseus who escorted her to Aulis under the pretext of her marriage to Achilles ⁵.

The insensitivity displayed by Agamemnon in the above passages reveals a brutish and arrogant nature lurking beneath this noble and kingly presence. Just as he finds no fault with his martial activities and indeed, overplays his part in the siege of Troy by his use of the first person singular, neither does he question the familial blood staining his hands, the blood of his own daughter. A return to the place he left ten years ago would surely bring back the memory of his daughter and the sacrifice he made for just such a victory he now boasts of. His return would also put him in mind of the condition of his marriage as he left it. A less narcissistic man would have 'trodden' a little more carefully after a ten-year absence especially since he was not returning to a woman famous for her 'Penelope-like' qualities. It is pertinent to remember here that Clytemnestra was the twin sister to Helen of Troy. These 'terrible twins' hatched from Leda's egg during her transformation into a swan. She assumed this form to avoid (unsuccessfully) the sexual advances of Zeus. Clytemnestra's ancestry is thus dangerous enough without her connections to her equally destructive sister.

Aeschylus has set his audience up so as not to sympathise with this returning king. Within this play Agamemnon's crimes are given as the reason for why he must die. One of these crimes is a crime against the family: his murder of his own daughter. His adultery with Cassandra would not have been construed as a crime due to the sexual double standard operational in Greek society. The second is of course his *hubris* / sacrilegious arrogance in walking across the tapestries, and it echoes his arrogance with regard to the slaughter of Trojans.⁶

When Agamemnon moves to enter the house, Clytemnestra blocks his entrance. But instead of addressing him, she addresses the Argive elders relating the torments of a woman left behind while her husband is at war far away, and she is plagued by rumours of his fall in battle:

⁵ Described by Euripides in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, the audience knew their myths and would have doubtless been aware of the implication.

⁶ Agamemnon's *hubris* though, does not damage the family structure – it damages the relationship between the individual and the gods.

855 *Grave gentlemen of Argolis assembled here,
I take no shame to speak aloud before you all
the love I bear my husband. In the lapse of time
modesty fades; it is human.
What I tell you now*

860 *I learned not from another; this is my own sad life
all the long years this man was gone at Ilium.
It is evil and a thing of terror when a wife
sits in the house forlorn with no man by, and hears
rumours that like a fever die to break again,*

865 *and men come in with news of fear, and on their heels
another messenger, with worse news to cry aloud.*

She gives her excuse for Orestes' absence, a subtle reminder of her other child Iphigenia, who is absent:

*Because such tales broke out forever on my rest,
many a time they cut me down and freed my throat
from the noose overslung where I had caught it fast.
And therefore is your son, in whom my love and yours
are sealed and pledged, not here to stand with us today,
Orestes.
(877-879)*

She talks of herself as a woman reduced to a nervous and frail creature, incapable of looking after her son, suicidal because of the uncertainty of whether her husband was dead or alive:

865 *It is evil and a thing of terror when a wife
sits in the house forlorn with no man by, and hears
rumors that like a fever die to break again,
and men come in with news of fear, and on their heels
another messenger, with worse news to cry aloud
here in this house. Had Agamemnon taken all
the wounds the tale whereof was carried home to me
he had been cut full of gashes like a fishing net.
If he had died each time that rumor told his death,*

870 *he must have been some triple-bodied Geryon
back from the dead with threefold cloak of earth upon
his body, and killed once for every shape assumed.*

Agamemnon doesn't question this depiction, while the audience knows it to be false. The image of the fishing net, the gashes and the monster that changes shape prefigure Agamemnon's actual murder and what Clytemnestra becomes. Clytemnestra's language is eerie in its prescience: it is she who will cut him full of gashes while he thrashes helplessly caught in her hand woven sheet. It is also she who will be revealed as monstrous, a perversion of feminine form. Agamemnon, however, is happy with the concept of a weak and feeble wife, it bolsters his image of the pillar of stability come home to set his kingdom and his house to rights:

845 *Now in the business of the city and the gods
we must ordain full conclave of all citizens
and take our counsel. We shall see what element
is strong, and plan that it shall keep its virtue still.
But that which must be healed – we must use medicine,
or burn, or amputate, with kind intention, take*
850 *all means at hand that might beat down corruption's pain.*

The dramatic irony here is that while Agamemnon waxes lyrical with self praise and inflated plans, Clytemnestra is the one who 'uses the medicine' on the corrupt element. While her husband vocalises, she has been plotting action, she takes the male role in the seeking out of pollution. Yet as a woman taking the male role, she crosses the boundary and causes the total disintegration of her house as well as the sanction of her own murder.

When she does turn to Agamemnon it is to lavish him with enough praise to induce him to commit Ūbri j and walk on the tapestries (895-913):

895 *I hail this man, the watchdog of the fold and hall;
the stay that keeps the ship alive; the post to grip
ground ward the towering roof; a father's single child;
land seen by sailors after all their hope was gone;
splendour of daybreak shining from the night of storm;*
900 *the running spring a parched wayfarer strays upon.
Oh it is sweet to escape from all necessity!*

*Such is my greeting to him, that he well deserves.
Let none bear malice; for the harm that went before
I took, and it was great.*

905 *Now, my beloved one,
step from your chariot; yet let not your foot, my lord,
sacker of Ilium, touch the earth. My maidens there!
Why this delay? Your task has been appointed you,
to strew the ground before his feet with tapestries.*
910 *Let there spring up into the house he never hoped
to see, where Justice leads him in, a crimson path.*

*In all things else, my heart's unsleeping care shall act
with the gods' aid to set aright what fate ordained.*

Clytemnestra's welcoming words are reminiscent of her speech in 585-612:

585 *I raised my cry of joy, and it was long ago
when the first beacon flare of message came by night
to speak of capture and of Ilium's overthrow.
But there was one who laughed at me, who said: "You trust
in beacons so, and you believe that Troy has fallen?"*
590 *How like a woman, for the heart to lift so light."
Men spoke like that; they thought I wandered in my wits;
yet I made sacrifice, and in the womanish strain*

voice after voice caught up the cry along the city
 to echo in the temples of the gods and bless
 595 and still the flagrant flame that melts the sacrifice.

600 ... But now, how best to speed my preparation to
 receive my honoured lord come home again – what else
 is light more sweet for woman to behold than this,
 to spread the gates before her husband home from war
 605 and saved by God's hand? – take this message to the king:
 Come, and with speed, back to the city that longs for him,
 and may he find a wife within his house as true
 as on the day he left her, watchdog of the house
 610 gentle to him alone, fierce to his enemies,
 and such a woman in all her ways as this, who has
 not broken the seal upon her in the length of days.
 With no man else have I known delight, nor any shame
 of evil speech, more than I know how to temper bronze.

Chilling in its dissimulation, Clytemnestra draws a picture of an archetypal 'good wife'. She cloaks herself in the guise of Penelope, her ultimate counterpart. She has made the appropriate sacrifices (594), she has remained 'within his house' in the woman's quarters—*may he find a wife indoors, as faithful as on the day he left her* (606). Clytemnestra's disdain for the persona she has described is felt by the audience with a certain admixture of increasing discomfort: they were aware not only of the outcome of the tale, but of the degree of untruth in her words. Had Agamemnon been less obsessed with the glory of his own homecoming, he too might have detected her irony, her disdain and what can only have been seething hatred filtering through her words of hollow protocol.

But he can only be flattered by her praise, and makes small protest against the honours she would heap upon him. He knows such actions are not for mortals, they are dangerous:

*... Such state becomes the gods, and none beside.
 I am a mortal, a man; I cannot trample upon
 these tinted splendours without fear thrown in my path
 (922-924)*

Yet just as the sacrifice of Iphigenia was dangerous and heavy with the threat of pollution, Agamemnon cannot resist. His protestations are weak, his piety tinged with the same lust for glory which drove him to sacrifice his daughter. Clytemnestra is about to achieve her final act of reversal—that of turning her husband into a 'womanish victim', passive and effeminate. Agamemnon himself hints at this possibility as he cautions her a few lines earlier:

*- do not try in woman's ways to make
 me delicate ... (919)*

The tapestries spread before him are the product of women's hands, possibly even those of Clytemnestra herself. Woven items of quality and beauty illustrate the contribution of wealth to the household on the part of the women. Another woven

item, the product of women's hands, will bind him to facilitate his murder, the bath-sheet will swaddle him like a helpless infant while his wife stabs him with a knife – a man's weapon.

The treading or kicking of untouchable things is established in the trilogy as a motif for the corruption brought on by excessive wealth and the impiety it induces⁷. Thus Agamemnon's passage is a recreation of the moment when he kills Iphigenia – the woven items strewn in front of him recall the chorus' vision of the folds of Iphigenia's dress falling around him as he lifts her up over the altar (231-247). It is the impiety of excess which connects the treading of the tapestries with the sacrifice at Aulis when,

*his ranged pastures swarmed with the deep fleece of flocks,
he slaughtered like a victim his own child.*
(1416-1417)

"It is Iphigenia's blood Agamemnon now treads, calling it forth from the ground with his own blood".⁸

Oblivious as Agamemnon is to the undercurrents of destruction in this scene, his words reveal discomfort at some of the more obvious signs of reversal in operation here: we have already seen how he baulks at the idea of being 'delicate', sometimes translated as 'womanish'. Just before he articulates this, he expresses concern at Clytemnestra's public address in his very first words to her personally:

915 *Daughter of Leda, you who kept my house for me,
there is one way your welcome matched my absence well.
You strained it to great length. Yet properly to praise
me thus belongs by right to other lips, not yours.*

It is not fitting for a woman to be outdoors and speaking in public. Her welcome, (*And all this* he says in 918), referring to the lavish tapestries strewn at his feet, is fraught with the dire signs of reversal. In the persuasion of Agamemnon that follows, he becomes the passive victim and falls prey to the process of reversal his wife has set in motion. Initially he vows he will not give in;

My will is mine. I shall not make it soft for you. (932)

His concern for his wife's behaviour still bothers him:

Surely this lust for conflict is not womanlike? (940)

but three lines later, he is yielding with unbridled eagerness:

945 *Since you must have it – here, let someone with **all speed**
take off these sandals, slaves for my feet to tread upon.
And as I crush these garments stained from the rich sea*

⁷ *Agamemnon*, 369-384; 750-781; *The Libation Bearers*, 639-645.

⁸ W. B. Tyrrell, *Amazons: A Study in Athenian Mythmaking*, John Hopkins U.P., Baltimore, 1984, p. 97.

let no god's eyes of hatred strike me from afar.
(emphasis mine)

Clytemnestra – ‘Smouldering Mother of Death’

Clytemnestra's inhuman ancestry has been hinted at when Agamemnon addresses her as *Daughter of Leda* (914). She now begins to take on those monstrous aspects she ascribed to her husband (the triple-bodied Geryon (870)). More and more of her primitive 'female' powers are exposed, now that Agamemnon is her sacrificial victim and the 'struggle' is over. It is Cassandra who 'sees' Clytemnestra as those Athenian males in the audience must have seen her, when in her prophetic frenzy she gasps out her vision of the house of Atreus:

1220 *Look there, see what is hovering above the house,
so small and young, imaged as in the shadow of dreams.
Like children almost, killed by those most dear to them,
and their hands filled with their own flesh, as food to eat.
I see them holding out the inward parts, the vitals,
oh pitiful, that meat their father tasted of ...*

1225 *I tell you: there is one that plots vengeance for this,
the strengthless lion rolling in his master's bed,
who keeps, ah me, the house against his lord's return;
king of the ships, who tore up Ilium by the roots,
what does he know of this accursed bitch, who licks
his hand, who fawns on him with lifted ears, who like
a secret death shall strike the coward's stroke, nor fail?*

1230 *No, this daring when the female shall strike down
the male. What can I call her and be right? What beast
of loathing? Viper double-fanged, or Scylla witch
holed in the rocks and bane of men that range the sea;*

1235 *smoldering mother of death to smoke relentless hate
on those most dear. How she stood up and howled aloud
and unashamed, as at the breaking point of battle,
in feigned gladness for his salvation from the sea!*

True to Cassandra's vision, the murders transfigure Clytemnestra. She emerges from the house triumphant and exhilarated, covered in blood like the corrupted image of an ancient fertility goddess exulting in human sacrifice⁹:

*Each of his dying breaths
spouted jets of gore bubbling from his breast.
And the rain of blood falling black,
showering on me, I could almost feel
that dew – not sweeter is celestial rain
to fields of corn, when the green sheath bursts with grain
(1388-1392 translation mine)*

⁹ See F.I. Zeitlin, "The Motif of the Corrupted Sacrifice in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*", *Transactions & Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Volume 96, 1965, pp. 463-508 and "Post-script to Sacrificial Imagery in the *Oresteia*", *Transactions & Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Volume 97, 1966, pp. 645-653.

The σ $\kappa\omicron$ j Destroyed

Both husband and wife act in the interests of the σ $\kappa\omicron$ j (albeit different aspects of it), and both try to preserve it and/or heal its rifts. In so doing each action only serves to damage the σ $\kappa\omicron$ j further until a full breakdown of order occurs, and of which the madness of Orestes is its dramatic expression. Clytemnestra and Agamemnon operate from divided worlds; their harmful actions and mutual distrust are evidence of the damage sex segregation can wreak as a breeder of antagonism.

Agamemnon is 'forced' to choose to sacrifice his daughter or to relinquish his leadership of the Trojan expedition, an offensive to be undertaken for the satisfaction of Menelaus' honour. Menelaus is his brother and thus can expect Agamemnon to take up his cause. In choosing to lead the war expedition to Troy, Agamemnon is preserving the honours of his house – to abstain from warfare is shameful, a shame which would be compounded by the fact that he is not only leader of the war host but waging war for his brother's personal honour. Withdrawing himself from the war would be to place at risk not only his manhood and personal honour, but also his kingship and would furthermore cast him unworthy to continue the male line of his house and its illustrious name. What condemns him more than anything is the speed with which he makes his choice and the feeling one gets that he completes his sacrifice a little too ruthlessly, too willingly. This seems to be his \imath mart...a / tragic flaw or fatal weakness; this makes him complicit and guilty (217-224).

In order to preserve his house Agamemnon starts to destroy his own family. His wife has different plans for what must now be done to preserve her diminished house. The killing of a daughter is not a deed that must go unpunished. Child murder is already an integral part of the family history of Agamemnon and the house of Atreus¹⁰, not to punish this one would be to condone such an act of atrocity. Clytemnestra seeks to end the circle of atrocities that drive her household, yet she only wreaks more violence by killing her husband, and paves the way for her own murder the way Agamemnon paved the way for his. Both parties are also guilty of infidelity and the breaking of the marital bond. Clytemnestra is criticised heavily for this, while no one even questions the appearance of Agamemnon's concubine Cassandra.

The two main protagonists of the Agamemnon are set up as equals, rather in the same way Medea and Jason are. There is no hint of the subservience and fear present in Deianeira and Tecmessa. In the case of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra both parties are guilty of crimes: Agamemnon has the blood of his own daughter on his hands. His deed was done in treachery and deceit¹¹ and he has committed adultery and has returned with the view to introducing his concubine into the house (in Clytemnestra's eyes a concubine destabilises the σ $\kappa\omicron$ j). Clytemnestra

¹⁰ The banquet given by Atreus in honour of his brother Thyestes in the guise of a peace offering, saw Thyestes' own children served up as the main dish, one which Thyestes unknowingly consumed until it was revealed to him what he had done.

¹¹ Both Clytemnestra and Iphigenia were led to believe that she was to be married to the hero Achilles and thus her mother was convinced to bring her in a wedding procession to Aulis, the place of her marriage with death.

has also committed adultery and taken a lover, she is guilty of the murder of her husband. Her deed was done in treachery and deceit¹². Both of the crimes are at once murders and sacrifices¹³; both are instrumental in the breakdown of familial structure.

Clytemnestra Condemned

Yet *The Oresteia* in its resolution does not find the two equal in guilt – Clytemnestra's murder is sanctioned, considered just retribution for her murder of her husband, while Orestes is released from his blood-guilt of matricide.

In Greek society the killing of one's father, the crime of patricide, was regarded as one of the most heinous deeds and was punishable by death. So was the killing of a husband. The crime of infanticide with regard to female children was less serious than that of adultery on the part of the wife. The practice of exposure especially of female children was not uncommon and the decision to expose an infant rested with the father.

For a modern audience/ reader and for women who attended the performances, the productions of the *Agamemnon* and *Iphigenia at Aulis* would create a different emotional response to that of the 5th Century Athenian male. The bond between a mother and child is and always has been the strongest of all relationships between sentient beings, no matter how these are defined by prevailing attitudes of any society.

Given the fact that most marriages (certainly all of the upper class ones) were arranged, together with the considerable age gap between married couples and potential for mutual alienation and distrust, the marital bond was the most tenuous and problematic within the family structure. Clytemnestra's retaliation for the murder of her child¹⁴ doesn't even begin to compensate (if compensation is ever possible) for the damage, pain and sense of loss caused by her husband's cruel deception in the sacrificing of her child. This of course is a modern response and very possibly a projected response on the part of what females there were in a theatre audience.

In the *Agamemnon* the dangers of role reversal are abundantly clear: Clytemnestra has been ruling for ten years, she has taken over the man's role, she has not confined herself to the women's quarters, and she appears frequently out of doors. Without the proper confinement and male guidance she has hatched an unspeakable plot. The house is no longer the symbol of family; it is the chamber of murder. The dangers of entering a woman's sphere are also played out in fantastic proportions: Agamemnon is persuaded to enter the place where he once held authority, but he enters, never to return, the victim of an inglorious death at the hands of a woman.

¹² The Tapestry Scene.

¹³ See F.I. Zeitlin, "The Motif of the Corrupted Sacrifice in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*", *Transactions & Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Volume 96, 1965, pp. 463-508. 1965.

¹⁴ Being a female child she would have enjoyed a far closer relationship with Iphigenia than with Orestes who would have long since been removed from her care and sphere of influence.

CHAPTER VII

EURIPIDES' *MEDEA*

The Woman without a Home

In the *Medea* of Euripides the relationship between husband and wife is the most vocalised and the strife most overt. It is starkly emotional. Euripides chose to present this tale, usually so very steeped in mythology and dark magic, with a very intense focus on the relationship between husband and wife. The play focuses relentlessly on the emotional workings of *Medea* in relation to all other protagonists and draws the audience into the inner dialogues of this complex and powerful woman.

Medea has strong emotions and strong passions and thus we can expect her to be the destabilising force in the play. It is these powerful emotions that motivate and characterise her every action. They are what bring her to *Iolchis*, a foreign land where she finds herself alone and betrayed by her husband. The play witnesses how *Medea's* love for *Jason* transforms itself into an unspeakable rage and inveterate hatred; how in the form of an obsession for vengeance she brings ruin down upon her husband.

As we have seen, there is always a problematic relationship between the public and private spheres in tragedy, articulated by the contrast of *o koj* and *pòlij*, indoors and outdoors. The technical limits of the tragic stage will always reflect the greater display of reversal prevalent during the *Dionysia*. It is in the departure of women from their domain to make public pronouncements that social order is under threat. In the *Medea*, the destabilising of the feminine principle has begun before it starts: *Medea* has no *o koj*; she has no domain, nothing to contain her. Not only that, she is without blood ties and without fatherland. Her only bond is that of her marriage with *Jason* which already shows signs of disintegration.

She is the opposite of *Deianeira* in the way she openly expresses her emotions. However, like *Deianeira*, her betrayal by her husband results in tragedy and destruction. The nurse's speech provides us with our first glimpse of how strongly *Medea* is swayed by her heart (6-11):

*... For then my mistress Medea
Would not have sailed for the towers of the land of Iolcus,
Her heart on fire with passionate love for Jason;
Nor would she have persuaded the daughters of Pelias
To kill their father, and now be living here
In Corinth with her husband and children.*

Her love for *Jason* leads her to murder her own father and brother, transforming it into a bitter and, we must expect, destructive hatred.

Her situation is related by the nurse in 16-45:

*But now there's hatred everywhere, Love is diseased.
For, deserting his own children and my mistress,*

Jason has taken a royal wife to his bed
 The daughter of the ruler of this land, Creon.
 20 And poor Medea is slighted, and cries aloud on the
 Vows they made to each other, the right hands clasped
 In eternal promise. She calls upon the gods to witness
 What sort of return Jason has made to her love.
 She lies without food and gives herself up to suffering,
 25 Wasting away every moment of the day in tears.
 So it has gone since she knew herself slighted by him.
 Not stirring an eye, not moving her face from the ground,
 No more than either rock or surging sea water
 She listens when she is given friendly advice.
 30 Except that sometimes she twists back her white neck and
 Moans to herself, calling out on her father's name,
 And to her land, and her home betrayed when she came
 away with
 A man who is now determined to dishonour her.
 Poor creature, she has discovered by her sufferings
 35 What it means to one not to have lost one's own country.
 She has turned from the children and does not like to see
 them.
 I am afraid she may think of some dreadful thing,
 For her heart is violent. She will never put up with
 The treatment she is getting. I know and fear her
 40 Lest she may sharpen a sword and thrust to the heart,
 Stealing into the palace where the bed is made,
 Or even kill the king and the new-wedded groom,
 And thus bring a greater misfortune on herself.
 She's a strange woman. I know it won't be easy
 45 To make an enemy of her and come off best.
 But here the children come. They have finished playing.
 They have no thought at all of their mother's trouble.
 Indeed it is not usual for the young to grieve.

Our picture is that of a desperate woman who has sacrificed everything for her husband. Like Deianeira, she is a stranger in a strange land, she is totally dependent on her husband and she is confronted with his infidelity in the form of a secret marriage to another woman. Medea's emotions are not suppressed like Deianeira's. They do not need to struggle to the surface in the oblique forms of night terrors, nervousness or insomnia. They are destroying her. Consuming her with grief and self-punishment. She cannot eat or even bear the sight of her own children.

Medea's very existence, security and social position depend on Jason and in this she is in similar straits to Deianeira. Because of her, he is a hero. Because of her he is alive and because of her love for him she severed every other familial tie and all contact with her past life (30-32). Unlike Deianeira, Medea had a choice in love. She was no battle prize or sparkling trophy sitting passively on the sideline. She made her choice and sacrificed all she had. Her present situation is far more unendurable than that of her gentler counterpart.

The nurse's prologue outlines not only Medea's emotional state but it announces the troubled state of the marriage. In both plays the facts of marital disharmony are made apparent from the outset. The fact that it is the nurse who criticises Jason first and not Medea herself persuades the audience or reader that this is a general perception and not a biased one based on an emotional reaction on Medea's part. Her first comment on their marriage is in the form of a compliment to Medea (14-15):

*This is indeed the greatest salvation of all –
For the wife not to stand apart from her husband.*

This statement enforces the traditions and socially accepted way of things between husband and wife. Being an older woman and the voice of reason and explanation, the nurse's is the voice of morality and old values by which standard the audience is able to judge Jason's behaviour. Thus we can safely believe her when she says in 26 that Jason has treated his wife unjustly and that she is thereby dishonoured (20).

The Marriage of Jason and Medea

The nurse tells us that the marriage between Jason and Medea was oath-bound and that the bond has been broken by Jason's disregard for the oaths he swore. The swearing of oaths did not form part of Athenian marriage protocol. Oaths were associated with men and their commitment to public and political life. A marriage was a contract between the groom and the father of the bride or guardian. A woman was not considered responsible enough to act on her own behalf. Here the marriage is represented as a marriage of equals with both parties acting on their own behalf. The play explores how this bond is defined and understood by the two protagonists. Both of them have the idea that a form of exchange is operational within their marriage: Medea saves his life and makes him a hero:

*I saved your life, and every Greek knows I saved it,
Who was a shipmate of yours aboard the Argo,
When you were sent to control the bulls that breathed fire
And yoke them, and when you would sow that deadly field.
480 Also that snake, who encircled with his many folds
The Golden Fleece and guarded it and never slept,
I killed, and so gave you the safety of the light.
And I myself betrayed my father and my home,
And came with you to Pelias' land of Iolcus.
485 And then, showing more willingness to help than wisdom,
I killed him, Pelias, with a most dreadful death
At his own daughter's hands, and took away your fear.
This is how I behaved to you, you wretched man,
And you forsook me, took another bride to bed,
490 Though you had children; for, if that had not been
You would have had an excuse for another wedding.
Faith in your word has gone. Indeed, I cannot tell
Whether you think the gods whose names you swore by
then
Have ceased to rule and that new standards are set up,*

495

*Since you must know you have broken your word to me.
O my right hand, and the knees which you often clasped
In supplication, how senselessly I am treated
By this bad man, and how my hopes have missed their
mark!
(476-498)*

Jason feels that what he has given her outweighs what she did to save him. He refutes the important role Medea played in creating his heroic figure whose fame was renowned in the Greek world for the capturing of the Golden Fleece. The myth was well known and thus we might assume the audience themselves to have given an audible gasp of indignation when Jason attributes his past success to Aphrodite and refuses to recognise his wife's part in his exploits. He is patronising and brutal in his ingratitude. His perception of their marriage and her aid is completely different to hers. He sees himself as her saviour, rescuing her from an uncivilised land populated by barbarians. Generously exposing her to the unparalleled civilised heights of Greek society and law:

535

*In so far as you helped me, you did well enough.
But on this question of saving me, I can prove
You have certainly got from me more than you gave.
Firstly, instead of living among barbarians,
You inhabit a Greek land and understand our ways,
How to live by law instead of the sweet will of force.
And all the Greeks considered you a clever woman.*

540

*You were honoured for it; while, if you were living at
The ends of the earth, nobody would have heard of you.
(533-541).*

In an archetypal battle between the sexes, Jason and Medea's fight contains all the stereotypical recurring issues between men and women through the ages. They are as real now as they must have seemed then. The male is preoccupied with social position and reputation (542-544):

*For my part, rather than stores of gold in my house
Or power to sing even sweeter songs than Orpheus,
I'd choose the fate that made me a distinguished man.*

*What luckier chance could I have come across than this,
An exile to marry the daughter of the king?
(552-553).*

The female is concerned with emotions and relationships. Jason's best attempt to understand the emotional rationale of his wife is to put her anguish down to his sexual infidelity 556:

And

*It was not – the point that seems to upset you – that I
Grew tired of your bed and felt the need of a new bride;*

*... Do you think this a bad plan?
You wouldn't if the love question hadn't upset you.*

570 *But you women have got into such a state of mind
That, if your life at night is good, you think you have
Everything; but if in that quarter things go wrong,
You will consider your best and truest interests
Most hateful.
(567-573)*

He cannot understand the complexities of emotional ties or the hurt and feelings of rejection and abandonment he has so callously caused. They are simply beyond his comprehension, existing only in the over simplified and base forms of sexual jealousy.

A further criticism of Jason comes when the children's tutor (paidagwōj) reports rumours of the imminent banishment of the children and their mother to the nurse. The nurse is astonished that Jason will consent to this in respect of his children. As the voice of morality and tradition she expresses the importance of paternal bonds and their superiority over those between husband and wife (74-75):

*And will Jason put up with it that his children
Should suffer so, though he's no friend to their mother?*

ka^ taàt' 'Iɸswn pa<daj ʔxanšxetai
pɸscontaj, e,, ka^ mhtr^ diafor|n æcei;

Jason is criticised for abandoning his children. He is not only condemned by outsiders as a bad husband but also as a bad father. From the tutor's reply in 76-77, Jason is painted as the cold-hearted opportunistic man that he reveals himself to be later in the play :

*Old ties give place to new ones. As for Jason, he
No longer has a feeling for this house of ours*

palai| kainîn le...petai khdeumɸtwn,
koÛk æst' ʔke<noj to<sde dêmasin f...loj.

In the face of greater social status and reward, he is prepared to turn his back on his "barbarian" family. His callousness regarding such an important institution as that of the Greek family is commented on by both servants.

By contrast, Medea invokes the blood relationship of parent and child. She says she could understand his need to marry Glauke if she had failed to provide him with children (490-491) for this would ensure the continuation of the o koj. The existence of children in her view (and that of Tecmessa) should solidify the bond between husband and wife.

Medea's rebel nature is articulated early on in the very crucial speech of the nurse. The nurse provides us with the very key to her nature:

She will never put up with being made to suffer such Wrongs.

and 44-45:

For I know that it will not be easy to make an enemy of her and win.

We have for a heroine a woman of heroic temperament, one who will wreak revenge upon those who slight her honour.

The Dangers of Equality in Marriage—Women Transacting for Themselves

Like all women in tragedy Medea is precipitated into the male environment. Her desire for openness and confession brings her out of the confines of her house. She has crossed the boundary of the female arena by seeking to speak publicly and thus all her actions from this point are fraught with danger. Like Deianeira, her desire is to gain a sympathetic ear from the Corinthian women. She has not hidden her emotions or suppressed her feelings—she is lucid and self-analytical (perhaps more so than any other heroine of tragedy) in presenting her circumstances 214-229:

215 *Women of Corinth, I have come outside to you
Lest you should be indignant with me; for I know
That many people are overproud, some when alone,
And others when in company. And those who live
Quietly as I do, get a bad reputation.
For a just judgement is not evident in the eyes*
220 *When a man at first sight hates another, before
Learning his character, being in no way injured;
And a foreigner especially must adapt himself.
I'd not approve of even a fellow-countryman
Who by pride and want of manners offends his neighbors*
225 *But on me this thing has fallen so unexpectedly,
It has broken my heart. I am finished. I let go
All my life's joy. My friends, I only want to die.
It was everything to me to think well of one man,
And he, my own husband, has turned out wholly vile.*

She describes a marriage transacted in blatant contradiction to standard practice. She represents women as playing an active part in the marriage process in that they 'buy their husbands with their dowries' (232-233). There is no father of the bride to negotiate the dowry and make the contract, in her marriage process then, she acted like a man and entered into a 'marriage of equals'. It has also been pointed out that Medea's language echoes that of a male citizen here as her words of oath born contracts are not reflective of a female but of a male citizen¹. Her proclivity to transact in a male manner is epitomised in her dealings with king Aegeus. His arrangement with Medea is contracted by oath in the same way she contracted her marriage with Jason. Here we have a woman, doubly dangerous

¹ A. Powell. *Euripides, Women and Sexuality*, Routledge, New York, 1990, p. 19, 292 ff.

because she is foreign and without a house, acting independently for her own interest.

“Instead of a relationship based on an absolute and irrevocable difference of status, and a change in status which is usually also permanent; marriage has become a contract based on exchange and reciprocity between equals”²

Medea’s disconnection with her house and her subsequent transactions out of its doors have served to weaken her connection with her ‘natural’ concerns: her family. This weakening is irreversible for she ends up killing her own children and thus devastating her husband. Her transactions invite danger – her bargain with Creon enables her to carry out her murder of him and his daughter, and while she has no plans to double-cross Aegeus, she fails to tell him that she will be arriving under his protection with the pollution of blood guilt on her hands.

She confesses that Jason’s forthcoming marriage to Glauke has destroyed her (225), that he was all-important to her and his betrayal has made her want to end her life (226-228). Moreover, the very length and detail of this speech gives credence to the fact that Euripides intended her words to have some effect. After its deliverance no one can be in any doubt that marriage is the most important issue in this play 230-251:

*Of all things which are living and can form a judgement
We women are the most unfortunate creatures.
Firstly, with an excess of wealth it is required
For us to buy a husband and take for our bodies
A master; for not to take one is even worse.
235 And now the question is serious whether we take
A good or bad one; for there is no easy escape
For a woman, nor can she say no to her marriage.
She arrives among new modes of behaviour and manners,
And needs prophetic power, unless she has learned at home,
240 How best to manage him who shares the bed with her.
And if we work out all this well and carefully,
And the husband lives with us and lightly bears his yoke,
Then life is enviable. If not, I’d rather die.
A man, when he’s tired of the company in his home,
245 Goes out of the house and puts an end to his boredom
And turns to a friend or companion of his own age.
But we are forced to keep our eyes on one alone.
What they say of us is that we have a peaceful time
Living at home, while they do the fighting in war.
250 How wrong they are! I would very much rather stand
Three times in the front of battle than bear one child.*

Medea’s speech combines aspects of social reality and aspects of social reversal. This husband is to become a master / *despōthn* of her body / *sēmatoj*, which has the connotation of slavery and which is described as an even worse trauma in 234. As she points out, divorce does not bring a good name to a woman and a

² Ibid., p. 20.

woman cannot refuse a husband ³. She speaks further on the difficulty of adapting to a new house and way of life in 238-40. The “yoke” imagery conjures up the relation between men and their beasts of burden (242). Thus a wife is one who is not a free individual but confined under the “yoke”, that is the walls of her house or more correctly, the women’s quarters, as well as to her prescribed duties, while the man is free (245). The connections made between wives, slaves and domestic animals are highly evocative. At last, the almost inevitable factor of infidelity comes into the equation and the double standard that seemed to operate in Greek marriages, where there is one law for the husband and quite another for the wife⁴ (247).

As she comes to the end of her speech, her desire for revenge becomes apparent 260-63:

*If I can find the means or devise any scheme
To pay my husband back for what he has done to me –
Him and his father-in-law and the girl who married him -*

Here we are reminded of Deianeira who also swore the chorus to secrecy regarding her plans – the difference being that Medea is prepared to own and accept responsibility for her feelings and actions of vengeance (263-66):

*... For in other ways a woman
Is full of fear, defenceless, dreads the sight of cold
Steel; but, when once she is wronged in the matter of love
No other soul can hold so many thoughts of blood.*

Like Deianeira she has the support of the chorus and by 364, after her bargain with Creon, she is a changed woman. Her plots of vengeance together with her sound sense of injustice are transforming this ruined and desperate woman into a formidable force. What Deianeira suppressed, Medea has allowed to possess her.

In 446 and following, we experience our first of several encounters concerning the estranged husband and wife:

*This is not the first occasion that I have noticed
How hopeless it is to deal with a stubborn temper.
For, with reasonable submission to our ruler’s will,
You might have lived in this land and kept your home.
450 As it is you are going to be exiled for your loose speaking.
Not that I mind myself. You are free to continue
Telling everyone that Jason is a worthless man.
But as to your talk about the king, consider
Yourself most lucky that exile is your punishment.
455 I, for my part, have always tried to calm down
The anger of the king, and wished you to remain.
But you will not give up your folly, continually*

³ See L. Cohn-Haft, “Divorce in Classical Athens”, *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 115, 1995, pp. 1-14.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3 and p. 10; D. Cohen, *Law, Sexuality and Society: The Enforcement of Morals in Classical Athens*, Athenaeum, U.K., 1994, (Chapter 5).

*Speaking ill of him, and so you are going to be banished.
All the same, and in spite of your conduct, I'll not desert
My friends, but have come to make some provision for you,
So that you and the children may not be penniless
Or in need of anything in exile. Certainly
Exile brings many troubles with it. And even
If you hate me, I cannot think badly of you.*

His words brim with condescension and insincerity. Jason chastises his wife for her 'loose speaking' conveniently blaming her for all that has befallen her. It is interesting to note that his first assumption is that she is upset because of her banishment and not because of his betrayal of her love or the breaking of their marriage vows⁵. He deals with her in the manner in which an exasperated parent might deal with an irresponsible child. He promises nothing more than financial assistance to her and the children and displays not the slightest hint of true emotion at the prospect of never seeing his family again. The best he can do is utter a platitude of unnecessary wisdom in 462.

In these first words, Jason reveals what a coward he is in refusing to deal with the deeper issues of betrayal or his wife's pain. Throughout the play we see that he is never able to confront these emotional issues. He never refers in any way to the feelings he had or used to have for her except in the most lukewarm of terms, as in 459 where he uses the term *ἐ...λοι* (dear ones) where she is not addressed personally but is lumped together with her children under the general term given to family and close friends.

Medea's answering words are by contrast, direct, honest and confrontational. She tells him plainly that he is a coward and that his words reflect his unmanliness (465-66):

*O coward in every way – that is what I call you,
With bitterest reproach for your lack of manliness,
You have come, you, my worst enemy, have come to me!
It is not an example of overconfidence
Or of boldness thus to look your friends in the face,
470 Friends you have injured – no, it is the worst of all
Human diseases, shamelessness. But you did well
To come, for I can speak ill of you and lighten
My heart, and you will suffer while you are listening.*

Next she brings up his marriage to Glauke—a marriage, she points out, she might have reconciled herself to, if she had been barren (490-91).

A comment like this in the midst of such a speech suggests that Medea is not shrieking hysterically at him, in an out-of-control, blindly emotional frenzy. It shows she is capable of rational thought and moreover of accepting the conven-

⁵ There is no mention of his marriage or his abandoning of Medea in this first exchange (446-464).

tions of the time. For it was common and accepted grounds for divorce should a woman prove barren after a few years of marriage ⁶.

Jason's worst crime in the eyes of his wife is that of the breaking of what we must assume was his oath of marriage to her (referred to in 495)—one that he took more than once according to her words:

*Faith in your word has gone. Indeed, I cannot tell
Whether you think the gods whose names you swore by
then
Have ceased to rule and that new standards are set up,
Since you must know you have broken your word to me.
O my right hand, and the knees you so often clasped
In supplication, ...*

495

Breaking one's oath in the ancient world was a serious offence and was regarded as *ῥσῆβεια*—one of the gravest and most severely punishable offences in Greek society⁷. The confrontation between the two of them is bitter and recriminatory, as is reiterated by the chorus in 520-21. We can clearly see how far the relationship has deteriorated:

*Chorus: It is a strange form of anger, difficult to cure,
When two friends turn upon each other in hatred.*

Another attestation to Jason's cowardice and unwillingness to confront was the way in which he went about securing for himself a new and more socially acceptable wife (586-7):

*If you were not a coward, you would not have married
Behind my back, but discussed it with me first.*

He married Glauke behind Medea's back never bothering to discuss either his professed reasons for doing so, or the obvious advantages he saw in such a union, for them all (559-565):

*But – this was the main reason – that we might live well,
And not be short of anything. I know that all
A man's friends leave him stone-cold if he becomes poor.
Also that I might bring my children up worthily
Of my position, and, by producing more of them
To be brothers of yours, we would draw the families
Together and all be happy. You need no children.*

560

565

His secrecy belies these protestations here, and it is obvious that his whole rationale for his marriage has been a lie. This view is supported by the chorus who

⁶ L. Cohn-Haft, "Divorce in Classical Athens", *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 115, 1995, p. 10.

⁷ See E.R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational*, California U.P., California, 1963, and H. Versnel, *Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion*, Volume 1, Brill, Leiden, 1992. See also J.D. Mikalson, *Honour Thy Gods—Popular Religion in Greek Tragedy*, North Carolina U.P., North Carolina, 1991, p. 80 ff. Euripides took great care to show how seriously Medea held the taking and breaking of an oath: 20-21; 161; 169-170; 495; 510; and 735-756.

condemn him outright after accusing him of lying in not so many words. Their imputations in 576-578 are quite clear:

*Jason, though you have made this speech of yours look well,
Still I think, even though others do not agree,
You have betrayed your wife and are acting badly.*

Medea's Deception

The Medea that Jason can relate to and understand is the calm, rational and self-deprecatory woman in 869-894:

870 *Jason, I beg you to be forgiving toward me
For what I said. It is natural for you to bear with
My temper, since we have had much love together.
I have talked with myself about this and I have
Reproached myself. "Fool" I said, "why am I so mad?
Why am I set against those who have planned wisely?*

875 *Why make myself an enemy of the authorities
And of my husband, who does the best thing for me
By marrying royalty and having children who
Will be as brothers to my own? What is wrong with me?
Let me give up anger, for the gods are kind to me.*

880 *Have I not children, and do I not know that we
In exile from our country must be short of friends?"
When I considered this I saw that I had shown
Great lack of sense, and that my anger was foolish.*

885 *Now I agree with you. I think that you are wise
In having this other wife as well as me, and I
Was mad. I should have helped you in these plans of yours,
Have joined in the wedding, stood by the marriage bed,
Have taken pleasure in attendance on your bride.*

890 *But we women are what we are – perhaps a little
Worthless; and you men must not be like us in this,
Nor be foolish in return when we are foolish.
Now, I give in, and admit that then I was wrong.
I have come to a better understanding now.*

Here is a soft and emotional Medea devoid of frightening displays of anger or grief. Jason's relief is palpable. Here is a woman who is as a woman should be. Appealing to him for protection and aid and full of apology for such unseemly behaviour (889-892). Jason's response to his wife's sudden change of tack reveals how little he knows his own wife, for he swallows her act with the same gullibility Agamemnon shows towards Clytemnestra in the tapestry scene. His ego plumped, he pours out clichéd words of wisdom (908-910):

*I approve of what you say. And I cannot blame you
Even for what you said before. It is natural
For a woman to be wild with her husband when he
Goes in for secret love.*

He continues with an outrageous patronisation in 911-13:

*... But now your mind has turned
To better reasoning. In the end you have come to
The right decision, like the clever woman you are.*

The irony is that although Jason calls her clever, he has no true idea of just how clever a woman she really is. As an audience we witness the following interchange as one would a brightly coloured lure swirling over a trout pool. The ease with which Jason is caught is almost worthy of our pity. His foolish pride swells as she says in 952-53:

*She shall be happy not in one way, but in a hundred,
Having so fine a man as you to share her bed.*

Medea approaches her revenge consciously and head-on. There is much we know about the breakdown of their marriage, unlike the marriage between Deianeira and Heracles where we have to infer much from Deianeira's veiled speeches. The verbal exchanges between Jason and Medea are longer and more explicit than between any other husband and wife in Greek tragedy. We witness first hand the bickering and bitterness to which this relationship has devolved⁸.

I shall not dwell on the issue of infanticide only in so far as it is motivated by Medea's desire to punish her husband. First I feel it important to point out here that some critics like Page, in an attempt to explain such an outrageous action, have used the excuse of Medea's foreign status⁹. Medea is not presented as a barbarian woman to whom neither audiences nor characters in the play could relate (most notably, the women of Corinth). Her foreign status is only emphasised to highlight and explore her vulnerability and her isolation¹⁰. Her lack of civilian status is neither an invitation to question her morality nor an invitation to explain away her shocking decision to kill her own children. The killing of her children is a new motif added by the playwright. It serves to highlight the terrors of female revenge, of latent destructive instincts towards the family especially in the figure of the husband, for it is by destroying his progeny that one will injure a Greek male the most severely.

Euripides does not raise the issue of the legality of the relationship between Jason and Medea. There is no hint that their union is not legal or recognised, thus minimising the severity of Jason's betrayal as a husband and not merely as a consort¹¹. We, and indeed the citizens of Corinth in the form of the chorus, are correct in seeing their marriage as legal and binding and their children as part of Jason's future bloodline.

There is a curious reversal in this play of virtues and temperaments between the male and female protagonists, namely, Jason and Medea. Medea's nature is akin to that of the heroic ideal—strong in passions, living on the premise of “help your

⁸ See also 587-626.

⁹ D. Page (ed. & commentary), *Euripides Medea*, Oxford U.P., Oxford, 1971 p. xiv; xviii-xix.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 180-181.

friends and harm your enemies". Jason is accused of two of the most humiliating sins within the heroic spectrum: cowardice/*ἠνάνδρ...α* and oath breaking. Medea's reason for killing her children is consistent within the framework of the heroic temperament, her condition of reversal—she does it to hurt Jason. Her obsession with harming her enemies is apparent throughout the play¹². She knows that by killing her children she will hurt Jason as deeply as he can be hurt. In removing not only his future wife but also his children, Jason is rendered helpless in the continuation of his ancestry, his bloodline, his name and in short—his honour and status in society.

Medea never gloats over the killing of her children the way she relishes the report of Glauke's hideous death. In the final scene with Jason she is triumphant, icy and coldly powerful in her victory over him (1386-88):

But as for you, as is right, you will die ignoble and in ignoble Circumstances struck on the head with a piece of timber from the Argos having known the bitter end of my love.

Hers is the voice that speaks with authority about the events of the play, and with prophecy about their future. With the exception of the standard choral finale of five lines, there is no explanation of events or an attempt to elevate them to the realm of the divine. The action remains on the level of human emotion, of human tragedy, of a husband and wife.

Our last vision of Medea is airborne in a chariot drawn by dragons, mythical beasts of a bygone era. She has spurned all forms of architectural and social containment; she is the ultimate expression of the 'dangerous female unbounded'. The threat of destabilisation present at the beginning of the play has been carried out. Medea is no longer fully human: a monstrous nature has overtaken her. Witnessed by the dragons, she is thus reminiscent of the monster Cassandra describes in Clytemnestra before her own murder at the queen's hands.

What we have witnessed is another marriage in ruins, caused by another woman acting in her own interest, embracing male values, and breaking the confines put upon her by society.

¹² See lines 375-409; and 1046-1060.

CHAPTER VIII

SOPHOCLES' *THE WOMEN OF TRACHIS*

Deianeira—The Agonising Fear of Marriage

In Sophocles' heroine Deianeira, we find themes of marital anxiety: the apprehension of the new bride at the prospect of isolation and separation, the loss of the bloom of youth and subsequent infidelity on the part of the husband, and a suppressed antagonism towards the figure of the husband.

The Greek word $\tau\rho\mu\eta$ is first used to describe her position as a bride who is bereft of her natal family and home while not yet integrated into the new house of her husband. Later Deianeira uses this same word to refer to herself before she prepares her marriage bed for her death. As she prepares to die, she invokes her bed of marriage and $\nu\mu\phi\epsilon\alpha$, she loosens her clothing – a macabre replica of her honeymoon night – and drives a sword into her body: "... the negative tendency in the rite of passage has emerged as a reality, the actual isolated death of Deianeira".¹

Deianeira's fears of marriage appear almost the instant she opens her mouth (7-8):

*I conceived an agonising fear of marriage.
No other Aetolian woman ever felt such fear ...*

Her fear, by her own admission, exceeded that of normal girls of her age. To an extent this has to do with the nature of her suitor Achelous—she is terrorised, not by his divinity, but by his awesome and primitive transformations (9-17):

10 *For my suitor was the river Acheloüs,
Who used to come to ask my father for my hand,
Taking three forms – first, clearly a bull, and then
A serpent with shimmering coils, then a man's body
But a bull's face, and from his clump of beard
Whole torrents of water splashed like a fountain.*
15 *I had to think this suitor would be my husband
And in my unhappiness I constantly prayed for death
Before I should ever come to his marriage bed.*

Her fear is palpably demonstrated by her prayers for death in order to prevent this unnatural marriage (15-17). Her joy at the sight of Heracles was not due to her feelings of romantic love for this new prospective suitor (as many readers hitherto have thus interpreted it), but at the prospect of being delivered from the clutches of Achelous. It is more a case of the "lesser of two evils" her joy stemming from relief rather than anything else. In 21 (*he won the contest / and set me free.*) she speaks of deliverance, but then immediately goes on to express doubt on whether the outcome of the battle was indeed so fortuitous:

¹ R. Seaford, "The Tragic Wedding", *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 107, 1987, p. 119.

25 ... Zeus of the contests
 made the end good – if it has been good.
 Chosen partner for the bed of Heracles,
 I nurse fear after fear, always worrying
 over him. I have a constant relay of troubles;
 30 some each night dispels – each night brings others on.
 We have had children now, whom he sees at times,
 like a farmer working an outlying field,
 who sees it only when he sows and when he reaps.

Lines 28 and following show that she is still beset with fear, emphasised most clearly in the text by the repetition of $\epsilon\tilde{\omicron}boj \dots \epsilon\tilde{\omicron}bon$. The use of the word $\eta\tilde{\upsilon}\chi$ suggests a constant suffering from nervous insomnia. She also voices her dissatisfaction with his role as father, though, it is important to note, not, with his role as husband (30-33).

Deianeira's feelings for this imposing hero, as we shall see, are complex. On close examination they never reveal a deep-seated emotional love.

Deianeira presents herself as an exile, a lonely woman bewildered and fearful as to the whereabouts of her husband. She is fearful of the fulfilment of the $\delta\acute{\sigma}\lambda\tau\omicron\nu$ / tablet he gave her². The anxiety over Heracles' whereabouts and well being is linked with Deianeira's own feelings of insecurity and well being as well as that of her family (40-48):

 ... but no one seems to know
 where Heracles himself can be. I only know
 he's gone and left with me a sharp pain for him.
 I am almost sure that he is in some trouble.
 It has not been a short time – first a year,
 45 by now still more, and there has been no word of him.
 Yes, this tablet he left behind makes me think
 it must surely be some terrible trouble. Often
 I pray the Gods I do not have it for my own sorrow.

She cannot separate her emotions from him and his plight. Whether out of duty or psychological dependence on him ever since her transferral from the care of her father to her husband, she is unable to see herself as an independent being (82-85):

 ... Surely, then,
 you will go to help him, since we are only safe
 if he can save himself. His ruin is ours.

Deianeira's nurse and the chorus both bear witness to her pitiable state (49-51):

Nurse: Deianeira, my mistress, many times before
 I have watched as you wept and sobbed, bewailing
 your absent Heracles, and I said nothing.

² The dramatic irony here being that her fears are very real.

*Chorus : With longing in her heart for him, I learn
that Deianeira, over whom men fought,
like some unhappy bird,
never lays to bed her longing,
her eyes tearless, but
nurses fear that well remembers her husband's
journey, worn upon her troubled
husbandless bed, miserable,
with expectation of misfortune.
(103-111)*

The chorus call her “miserable”/ «q1ion in 105 surely evoking the very similar sounding word «q1on “trophy” especially with the proximity of the fight mentioned in 104 (an insight into how she and later, Iole, are perceived). Her pivotal speech occurs in 140-152, where she defies anyone to understand her plight who has not suffered to be a wife and mother. She speaks of the transition from maidenhood to wife as a trauma, the tender plant metaphor being especially potent (142-151):

*You are here, I suppose, because you have heard
of my suffering. May you never learn
by your own suffering how my heart is torn.
You do not know now. So the young thing
grows in her own place; the heat of the sun-god
does not confound her, nor does the rain, nor any wind.
Pleasantly she enjoys an untroubled life
until the time she is no longer called a maiden
but woman, and takes her share of worry in the night,
fearful for her husband or for her children. Then,
by looking at her own experience, she comes
to understand the troubles with which I am weighed down.*

Her sleepless nights are spoken of once more as being caused by her terror of being widowed of the “noblest of men” p£ntwn ¢r...stou:

*... I leap up from pleasant sleep in fright,
my friends, terrified to think that I may have to live
deprived of the one man who is the finest of all.*

The vocabulary used to express Deianeira’s suffering is limited and repetitive—a technique which is highly successful in conveying a certain relentlessness of concentrated and unadulterated negative emotion. Sophocles, in the face of a vast choice of terms and words purposefully limits himself to the repetition of fõboj in its various forms as well as the forms of p£scw / to suffer, and tarbšw / terrify (cf. 143; 150 and 175). By doing so he runs no risk of diluting our understanding of her suffering with a vast array of terms and metaphors.

Interestingly she calls her husband by that epithet which others have given him. It is not one reflecting personal feeling; it is as if she believes it because that is what she hears.

Deianeira and Iole – Wretched Trophies of War

With the chorus implying Deianeira is a “trophy”, we are subtly prepared for her identification with Iole in the eyes of poet, audience and chorus alike. Iole, as we are lead to discover, is Heracles’ latest trophy. In due course we learn that the true cause of the war waged by the so-called “noblest of men” was nothing nobler than Heracles’ lust³ (351–361):

Messenger: *I myself heard this man say – and many men
 were present who can bear me out – that for the sake
 of this girl Heracles destroyed Eurytus
 and his high-towered Oechalia; and, of the Gods, it was
355 Love alone who bewitched him into this violence –
 not his laborious service in Lydia for Omphale,
 nor the fact that Iphitus was hurled to his death –
 it was Love, whom he brushes aside in this new version.
 But the truth is that when he could not persuade the father
360 to give the child to him for his secret bed,
 he fabricated a petty complaint, an excuse ...*

Deianeira’s identification begins at 242 when she questions the identity and history of the captive women brought before her:

*And by the gods, who are they, and who is their master?
They are pitiable, if their misfortune does not deceive me.*

Her identification is further intensified in 298-302:

300 *For a terrible sense of pity came over me,
 my friends, when I saw these ill-fated women
 wandering homeless, fatherless, in a foreign land.
 Before they were, perhaps, the daughters of free men,
 but now they shall have to pass their lives as slaves.*

In the light of this powerful identification, her inability to express anger at Iole’s appearance and consequent threat to her own position as wife is plausible⁴. The process of identification is one of the keys to unlocking the doors of the cathartic experience for the audience. Here we have a double process of identification in progress: Deianeira identifies with Iole and is thus filled with compassion for her,

³ The use of the word *æρωj* conveys the sense of lust and uncontrollable sexual desire rather than our bland multi-purpose word ‘love’.

⁴ For a detailed examination of Deianeira’s inability to express negative emotions see M. Scott, “The Character of Deianeira in Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*: 2. Where is the Anger?”, *Acta Classica*, 40, 1997, pp. 33-47.

while the audience identifies with Deianeira. Deianeira is still the 'good' wife here and therefore a fitting model for identification, worthy of compassion⁵.

The 'Good' Wife Must Prevail

We see in Deianeira a woman clinging to the last traces of a persona she has tried to create: that of the good, meek wife. A pitiable creature split off from the anger and outrage to which she should have given vent. She responds to Heracles as a good wife should. Mechanically she goes through the motions of expressing concern for his safety and happiness at the news of his imminent return. These mechanical emotions are blanketed in a dutiful respect. They are controlled and sit in constant opposition to the uncontrollable emotions that will soon be responsible for the disintegration of her persona, namely fear and suppressed anger and resentment. That her responses cannot be taken at face value is markedly clear by her words in 293-295:

*Yes, I should have every right to rejoice
when I hear the news of my husband's great success.
Surely my joy must keep pace with his good fortune.*⁶

There is a sense of questioning here which is lost in this English translation. The sentence has more weight than a rhetorical question. She has just been told that Heracles' safe return is imminent and her first responses to these "joyous tidings" are steeped in tones of suspicion and mistrust almost as if she was determined that the news was false. This is why she interrogates the messenger mercilessly (184 –192):

Deianeira: What did you say, old man? What are you telling me?

*Messenger: Soon there shall come to your halls that most enviable man,
your husband, appearing in his conquering might.*

Deianeira: Who told you this? Some townsman or a stranger?

Messenger: This is what Lichas the herald proclaims to many ...

Deianeira: Why is he not here himself if all is well?

This reaction is curiously unemotive for someone who has been gripped by fear at the prospect of death. Only in 200 does she give vent to a formulaic expression of joy. Yet, from her use of the first person plural exhorting the women to join her in her celebration, it lacks a personal tone and forbids us to interpret these words as revealing her personal emotions:

*O Zeus, master of the unharvested meadow of Oeta,
though it has been long, you have given **us** joy.
Cry out, O you women who are within the house*

⁵ The ability to move an audience to fear alternating to compassion was what, for Aristotle, constituted a successful tragedy Aristotle, *Poetics* XIV.

⁶ In the Greek, the question form is undeniable.

*and you who are without – now that the un hoped-for
sunshine
of this news has risen high, we pluck its gladness.
(200-204 emphasis mine)*

It is reduced to a response governed by protocol and good wifely conduct. It is her fixation with the 'good wife' persona that Deianeira is obsessed by, to the point of the repression of all emotional responses and reactions not concomitant with those of a good wife⁷. Equally curious is her first question to Lichas on his return (233):

*O kindest of men, tell me first what I want first
to hear: shall I have Heracles alive?*

This question is of course loaded with dramatic irony. It also reveals Deianeira's pessimistic and suspicious nature. These constant and groundless questions regarding her husband's whereabouts and wellbeing seem to indicate something even darker and deeply repressed within the complex mind of Deianeira:

236 *Where? In a Greek or in a foreign land? Tell me.*

...
Is he fulfilling a vow or obeying an oracle?

244 *Was it against this city, then, that he was gone
an unforeseeable time, days beyond number?*

We know she is unable to express negative emotions with the exception of fear that almost defines her very existence. Deianeira has informed the women of Trachis of all her traumatic experiences from her last days as a virgin, to her existence as a lonely virtually single parent, and an exile plagued by neuroses. At no time does she overtly express resentment of her husband, who is really to blame for all her sufferings, not even when the identity and prospective role of Iole is revealed. Mary Scott examines the psychological process of "turning a blind eye" and has related it to Deianeira, with regard to the destruction of Heracles⁸. I cannot help but read these remarks in the context of an unconscious, suppressed death wish on her husband. They prefigure his eventual destruction at her meticulous, albeit unconscious hands.

Her depth of feeling for the plight of Iole reveals just how sensitive she is and just how fresh the memories of her own traumatic experiences are (242; 298-302). Even when the truth about Iole is revealed and Heracles' lust is exposed as the reason for the war against Oechalia, Deianeira does not get angry. Instead we are witness to the struggle raging within her as she is tossed between raw emotional responses and correct ones. Her first reaction is a panic stricken incredulity in 385:

*What shall I do? I must ask you, for the story
which has now come out leaves me utterly stunned.*

⁷ M. Scott, "The Character of Deianeira in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*: 2. Where is the Anger?", *Acta Classica* 40, 1997, pp. 35-36.

⁸ Ibid. pp. 33-34 and also, "The Character of Deianeira in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*: 1. Her attitude to her Marriage", *Acta Classica* 38, 1995, pp. 17-27.

Jebb translates ἄκρηπληγμῶσιν as bewilderment, but I am inclined to take it in the light of its more literal meaning: that of being driven out of one's senses, struck with fear and sudden shock. This is the moment of *perip̄steia*: the shock of sudden truth from which time on it becomes increasingly difficult to cling on to her carefully crafted persona. She literally does not know what to do, as she herself admits. Her psyche is beginning to struggle with the raw and natural responses of jealousy, resentment and rage which are imprisoned beneath responses proper to that of the mild mannered woman she thinks she should be. Her speech beginning in 438 is the most revealing of how she perceives herself:

440 *... you will find that I am not a spiteful woman
nor one who does not know how it is with man—
we cannot always enjoy constant happiness.
How foolish one would be to climb into the ring
with Love and try to trade blows with him, like a boxer.
For he rules even the Gods as he pleases, and
he rules me – why not another woman like me?*

445 *You see that I would be altogether mad
to blame my husband, because he suffers from this sickness,
and she has done no harm to me. No, it is
inconceivable. If you have learned to lie from him,
then you are not learning honest lessons. If you school
yourself in this fashion, you succeed only
in seeming dishonest when you are trying to be decent.
Tell me the whole truth. To gain the reputation
of a liar is utter dishonour for a free man.
You cannot think that I will not hear. There are
many men to whom you have spoken, and they will tell me.
(Deianeira pauses, but Lichas remains silent.)
are you afraid of hurting me? You are wrong.
The only thing that could hurt would be not to know.
Where is the danger in knowing? One man and many
Women.
Heracles has had other women before.*

460 *Never yet has one of them earned insults
from me, or spiteful talk, nor will **she**, even
if she is utterly absorbed in her passion,
for I pitied her deeply when I saw her because
her own beauty has destroyed her life, and, against her will,
this unfortunate girl has sacked and enslaved the land
of her fathers.*

465

The choral ode that follows upon this (498-530) enforces the link between Deianeira and Iole, for they sing of her, (Deianeira) as the fair bride and prize of long ago (503-516):

505 *But for our lady's hand
who were the two valiant contenders in courtship?
Who were they who came out to struggle in bouts that were
all blows and dust?*

510 *One was a strong river with the looks of a high-borned
four-footed bull,
Acheloüs from Oeniadae; the other
came from the Thebes of Bacchus,
shaking his back-sprung bow, his spears and club
- the sons of Zeus. They came
together then in the middle, desiring
515 her bed. Alone, in the middle with them, their referee,
Cypris, goddess of love's bed.*

...

525 *But the tender girl with the lovely
eyes sat far from them on a hillside,
waiting for the one who would be her husband.
So the struggle raged, as I have told it;
but the bride over whom they fought
awaited the end pitifully.
And then she was gone from her mother,
530 Like a calf that is lost.*

The parallels with Iole's plight described by the messenger and Lichas are obvious.

The Surfacing of Jealous Rage – The Deadly Charm of Love

Deianeira next appears in order to tell the chorus secretly of her plans. She has stolen from the house in 533:

*I have come out to you, unobserved. I want
to tell you the work my hands have done, but also to have
your sympathy as I cry out for all I suffer.*

There is a dual purpose in her coming—to reveal her plans and to divulge her true reactions to Iole as her husband's mistress. The clandestine atmosphere encourages us to read deeper into her ensuing words. On some level her plans and her reactions to Iole and to Heracles must be linked both on a conscious and unconscious level (535-553):

535 *For here I have taken on a girl – no,
I can think no longer – a married woman, as
as a ship's master takes on cargo, goods that outrage my
heart.
So now the two of us lie under one sheet
waiting for his embrace. This is the gift my brave
540 and faithful Heracles sends home to his dear wife
to compensate for his long absence! And yet, when he
is sick as he so often is with this same sickness,
I am incapable of anger. But to live
in the same house with her, to share the same marriage,*

545 *that is something else. What woman could stand that?
For I see her youth is coming to full bloom
while mine is fading. The eyes of men love to pluck
the blossoms; from the faded flowers they turn away.
And this is why I am afraid that he may*
550 *be called my husband but be the younger woman's man.
But no sensible woman, as I've said before,
should let herself give way to rage. I shall tell you,
dear friends, the solution I have to bring myself relief.*

On first reading we are confronted with a desperate woman in the unenviable situation of having to tolerate the arrival of a younger, more beautiful replacement who is to live in her house and share her bed (539-40). This new mistress has come to destroy her peace (538). She has described this most galling of situations but what follows this, is not what we would expect: in place of the expression of anger which should follow her subtle articulation of resentment (540-542), she states quite plainly that she is not angry with her husband, because she simply does not know how to be angry. It is these lines that bring us closest to any expression of anger against Heracles on the part of Deianeira and it is this, her inability or unwillingness to recognise her own negative unseemly feelings towards her husband that constitute Deianeira's own *mart...*

As Deianeira proposes to act in her own interests, she becomes dangerous and begins to exhibit modes of behaviour that are fitting only for men. The processes of role reversal are now overtly in motion. These negative emotions have long been suppressed but are stirred into action as she changes from her previously passive role in her marriage into the role of the pursuant. She will not wait for her husband any longer; she will prepare a gift (echoing the traditional marriage gifts to a bride) and send it out into the world of men, to her husband. Deianeira also declares her longing / *ῥῶσις* before Heracles has declared his and thus assuming the more active male role in sexual desire⁹. She embodies the elements of the negative model of female sexuality in marriage and therefore we should not be surprised at the verbal and visual similarities to Aeschylus' Clytemnestra:

Heracles: *that the false-faced daughter of Oeneus has fastened
upon my shoulders, a woven, encircling net
of the Furies, by which I am utterly destroyed.*
(1050-1052)

Her psyche balks at the idea of sharing her husband (545)—*what woman could stand that?* Here we see the impossible duality. She admits that her situation is unendurable and yet she seems resigned to endure it, although aware that Iole threatens the very position and role she has worked so hard to maintain. The signs of jealousy are obvious. Deianeira contrasts the youth of Iole with her own fading beauty and fearfully imagines Heracles as her “*man*” while she remains his wife in name only (550-1). She goes on to say, “...*anger is not becoming to a woman of insight*” (552-3) and follows immediately with her alternative course of action. This course of action is, in her mind, an act of love, but it turns out to be only a substitute for blatant and manifest aggression (555-558):

⁹ See H.P. Foley, "The Female Intruder Reconsidered", *Classical Philology* 77, 1982, pp. 79-80.

*I have had hidden in a copper urn
for many years the gift of a centaur, long ago.
While I was still a child, I took it from the wounds
of the hairy-chested Nessus as he was dying.*

In the same breath that she disowns this most natural of emotions, Deianeira proceeds to tell of her plan. She calls it a “painful remedy” (554)¹⁰. Of course these words, loaded with Sophoclean irony, seem to presage the pain in store for Heracles. It has been argued most convincingly by Scott that the pain she is referring to is none other than her own. It stems from her efforts to conceal from her conscious self the true nature of the love charm she is about to send. We know just how long she has had the charm in her possession and she carefully explains to us that it comes from one of the most traumatic periods of her young life: the result of an attempted rape! (565):

*... When I was halfway across
his hands touched me lustfully.*

Having been the hapless battle prize in a contest between two ‘men’ of questionable sensitivity of character, she is torn from her parents’ protecting love and whisked away in the arms of the victor. On her journey to her new and strange home she falls victim to Nessus who attempts to rape her while ferrying her across a raging river. Although she is spared this horror by her heroic husband (who neatly puts an Hydra-poisoned arrow through the unwelcome rival), she is still convinced by her dying paramour to gather the blood from the wound and store it as a love charm in the event she should ever need it to bind her husband to her once again (572-577):

*Nessus: if you take in your hands this blood, clotted in
my wounds, wherever it is black with the bile
of the Hydra, the monstrous serpent of Lerna, in which
he dipped his arrows, you will have a charm over
the heart of Heracles, so he will never look
at another woman and love her more than you.*

It is obvious, and indeed it is meant to be so, that her naiveté is excessive. Later on she herself questions her own folly in believing such a tale from the mouth of one whose intentions were far from benign (707).

For why indeed should he give her a present when her husband has just taken his life? Why should the poisoned blood, of all things, be especially effective? As she narrates her story of the history of this dubious charm, she does it slowly and in detail as if she was reliving the events that occurred so many years ago. This would be the time when we would expect her perhaps to question the validity of the promise the centaur made, and to take cognisance of the evil omens lurking in that exchange.

¹⁰ See M. Scott, “The Character of Deianeira in Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*: 2. Where is the Anger?”, *Acta Classica* 40, 1997, p. 41 on this phrase.

Curiously enough, after telling of the robe she has so lovingly woven for her husband and how she has anointed it with the charm, Deianeira utters the strangest thing:

*May I never have any thought or knowledge
of daring deeds of evil,—as I abhor women who attempt
them! (582-3)*

There is more than dramatic irony at work here. This is her conscious mind verbalising its battle against suppressed negative emotions. Their resultant actions threaten to come to the surface of her seemingly virtuous mind. It is clear that there is a conflict raging, just a few lines later she doubts herself and wonders whether she should desist from her possibly rash action (586-7):

*... well, the move is made, unless you think
I am acting rashly. If so, I shall stop.*

Although the chorus encourage her to continue with her original plan, she insists on secrecy. This surely betrays awareness on some level of the true purpose of the robe 596:

*But only let my secret be kept safe with you! For as long as
you do shameful deeds in secrecy, you will never fall into
shame.¹¹*

(Translation mine)

A statement such as this is highly problematical if one continues to believe in Deianeira's innocence. Kamerbeek finds it hard to believe that these are Sophocles' words and argues for a change here¹². Her careful instructions to Lichas are suspicious in themselves because of the strict precautions that accompany her gift of the robe (604-609)¹³:

*When you give it to him, you must tell him that it
should touch the skin of no man before it touches his,
nor should he let the light of the sun look upon it,
nor any holy inclosure, nor the gleam from a hearth,
until he stands, conspicuous before all ...*

Only once the gift is out of her hands and safely on its way to destroy Heracles does Deianeira let her fears out: a sign of her suppressed emotions breaking through her now fragile persona of the good and virtuous wife. She expresses her fear to the chorus that she may have gone too far in 663-665:

*O my friends, I am afraid! Can it be
I have gone too far in all I have just done?*

¹¹ Ibid. 596-97, p. 45.

¹² Sophocles (Kamerbeek J.C. ed.), *Sophocles: Trachiniae*, Brill, Leiden, 1970, p. 138.

¹³ See M. Scott, "The Character of Deianeira in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*: 2. Where is the Anger?", *Acta Classica* 40, 1997, p. 42 for more on her instructions and precautions to Lichas.

She articulates this vague fear by revealing that she may have done a great evil although it was with the best of intentions. The chorus are quick to connect this fear with her gift (668 *Surely you do not mean your gift to Heracles?*) and she confirms this and reveals what has happened to the piece of wool she had used to smear the charm on the robe:

675 *Something has happened which, if I tell you, my friends,
will seem a marvel such as you never thought to hear.
Just now, when I anointed the robe I sent to be
my husband's vestment, I used a tuft of fleecy white wool.
This piece has disappeared, devoured by nothing in
the house but destroyed by itself, eaten away
and crumbled completely to dust. I want to tell you this
in detail, so you may know the whole story.
(672-679).*

Her tone indicates a desire to confess; yet she is not aware of having committed any crime. Her guilt begins to surface as she, only now, once the deed is done, allows herself to question the veracity of Nessus' words after repeating the story of the charm and the circumstances of its acquisition (707-718):

710 *From what possible motive, in return for what,
could the dying beast have shown me kindness, when he
was dying because of me? No, he beguiled me,
only to destroy the man who shot him. But I
have come to understand now when it is too late.
I alone, unless my fears are fanciful,
I, his unhappy wife, shall destroy him.
715 I know that arrow which struck Nessus injured even
Chiron, who was a god, and all animals,
whatever it touches, it kills. This same poison which seeped,
black and bloody, from the wounds of Nessus, how can
it fail to kill Heracles too?*

Deianeira's Suicide – The Silent Voice of Guilt

Soon enough her fears are realised by Hyllus' report, and on confirmation of these, Deianeira says nothing but enters her house mantled in the silence of the condemned (813- 4):

*Chorus: Why dost thou depart in silence? Knowest thou not
that such silence pleads for thine accuser?*
(Translation Jebb)

Deianeira's suicide is no surprise. Had she not said that she could not abide women who do vile deeds (583)? Deianeira could never live with the violent outcome of her anger and hatred against her husband. The murder of her husband, whether intentional or not, stands in direct conflict with her perception of herself as the patient, tolerant and understanding wife to whom the expression of anger was anathema.

When Hyllus tells his version of Heracles' donning of the garment and his ensuing torments, he accuses his mother outright of planning this event :

810 *Mother, this is what you have planned and done to my father,
and you are caught. For this, justice who punishes and the fury will requite you. If it is right for a son, I curse you, and it is right, since you have given me the right by killing the best of all men on earth, such as you shall never see again.*

Here, the word *bouleúsasa* is used specifically in legal terms of "planning a crime"¹⁴. In Jebb's translation of 810 he accuses his mother of taking the law into her own hands¹⁵ presumably because she did not wait until Heracles had returned home before deciding on the right action.

Hyllus' accusation begs the question: why would he, knowing his mother's meek and mild character, immediately assume that she had intentionally guilefully murdered her husband? He must have been at least vaguely aware of his mother's suppressed frustration and unhappiness, which would then preclude the need to ask why or postulate on motive.

The chorus' next words are curious and almost contradictory as they try to fathom what has happened (841-845):

*She, poor woman, knew nothing of this [referring to the deadliness of Nessus' poison]
but, seeing great injury for her home from a new marriage swiftly approaching, applied her remedy ...*

This seems to be an unconscious justification of Deianeira's actions; the chorus seem to be deliberating here, almost apportioning the blame.

They remind themselves (and the audience) that the remedy was applied by her own hand, although she is now regretting heeding the advice of Nessus (846-849):

But what came from another's will, a fatal meeting, truly, lost, she laments, truly, she weeps a pale, foaming flood of tears.

The last words in this verse are ambiguous (850-851):

*as Fate advances it reveals
whether a great catastrophe is caused by guile.
(translation mine)*

¹⁴ Sophocles (Jebb R.C.), *Trachiniae*, Cambridge U.P., Cambridge, 1908, p. 121, n. 807.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

Here we cannot be sure to whom the guile belongs. Is it the guile of Nessus, the guile of Deianeira or are they both referred to in one? In 789-794 when Hyllus gives his account of his father's agony, he is careful to state that only after the violence of the pain had abated and Heracles was calmer and more lucid did he proceed to curse his marriage. Heracles' angry words for Deianeira, both here and following, are not merely the ramblings of someone in terrible pain, they reveal many things about Heracles' own attitude to his marriage:

When he gave up at last, after throwing himself miserably again and again to the earth, crying and groaning again and again, damning the mismatching in your wretched bed, the whole marriage that he had won from Oeneus, only to befoul his life ...

Deianeira's reaction to the news of her husband's fatal condition is in itself revealing. The nurse tells her eye witness account of the suicide (899-931)¹⁶:

900 *Yes, it was terrible. You will learn everything and bear me witness. When she went into the house, alone, and saw her son in the courtyard, arranging a cushioned bed*
to take with him as he went back to meet his father, she hid herself where no one might look at her and groaned, falling against the altars, that now they would be
905 *deserted; and whenever she touched some household thing she used to use before, the poor creature would weep. Here and there, from room to room, she kept turning, and if she saw some servant of the household who was dear to her, she would look at her sadly and weep,*
910 *and she would call out loud to her fate and to her house that would have no children any more.*

One may postulate that it is at this point that the full implications of what she has done come home to her. She finally experiences the full breakthrough the $\phi\text{nagn}\grave{\epsilon}\text{risi}\text{j}$, of her suppressed feelings of rage, helplessness and the unvoiced need for vengeance on her husband for causing such anguish and trauma in her life, for ruining her blissful youth and finally destroying the illusion of her image as a good wife who loved her husband for his nobility of character and deeds. Suddenly, once the revelations have impacted themselves on her mind, she reacts violently. Determined not to confront her new side she rushes into her bedchamber and begins the preparations for her death. Here she becomes calmer and proceeds in an almost ritualistic way (912-931):

¹⁶ This 'eyewitness' account technique allows the playwright more control over the audience's interpretation of the events through his chosen witness than simply representing the scene and leaving it more open to interpretation on the part of the audience and possibly other characters in the play. Sophocles does this here so that we might not be confused about Deianeira's actions: we are to acknowledge the initial breakthrough or $\phi\text{nagn}\grave{\epsilon}\text{risi}\text{j}$ followed by her careful and mechanical suicide.

915 *Then she stops all this, and suddenly I see her
 rushing into the bedchamber of Heracles,
 and secretly, from the shadows, I keep watch
 over her. I see the woman casting sheets
 and spreading them upon the bed of Heracles.
 Then, as soon as she had finished, she leapt up
 and sat there in the middle of her marriage bed,
 and, bursting into torrents of hot tears, she said:*
 920 *“O my bed, O my bridal chamber, farewell
 now forever, for never again will you take me
 to lie as a wife between these sheets of yours.”
 She says nothing more, but with a violent sweep
 of her arm unfastens her gown where a pin
 925 *of beaten gold lies above her breast. She had
 uncovered her whole side and her left arm.*
 ...
 930 *we see that she has cut her side to the liver
 and the seat of life with a double-bladed sword.**

Deianeira’s death is a manly one and thus is a final act of reversal¹⁷:

Chorus: How could any woman bring her hands to this? (898)

A more feminine method of suicide was that of hanging like Jocasta or Antigone. Deianeira chooses the double-bladed sword, a manly weapon of war, and she chooses the suicide of a Homeric hero like Ajax. The nurse’s description is reminiscent of the battle scenes from the Iliad – *The grim steel cut her* or as Nicole Loreaux has translated it, *groaning steel that slices the flesh* (887). The physiological discrepancy in the description 926-930 is problematic¹⁸ unless one follows Loreaux’ insightful interpretation: In exploring her left flank the wife of Heracles laid bare the female side. It is a textual ruse, a contradiction deliberately presented to emphasise that a woman’s death, even if contrived in the most manly way, does not escape the laws of her sex ... Deianeira did indeed die from a blow to the liver *and* on her left, as a woman in love who wanted *in extremis* to assume the values of the martial world”.¹⁹

Her choice of location symbolically articulates her revenge. Her anger at her husband and herself as well as her disappointment in her failure to be the only thing she had striven to be: an exemplary wife. It was with a marriage that her misery began and it is with her marriage that it ends by her own hand. She is finally in control of her unhappiness; she is no longer its victim. In her final words there is no address to her husband, no utterances of forgiveness or recrimination. She never once, not now and not on first hearing the news of her husband’s fatal agony, expresses concern for him in any way.

¹⁷ N. Loreaux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, Harvard U.P., Cambridge Mass., 1987, pp. 55-56.

¹⁸ Why would Sophocles put her liver in the wrong place? How could Deianeira strike herself in the left side and in her liver?

¹⁹ N. Loreaux, *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*, Harvard U.P., Cambridge Mass., 1987, pp. 55-56.

The words that Heracles speaks in reaction to his very imminent death condemn him for the narcissistic and childish brute that he is. First and foremost he is concerned with the unavoidable fact of his inglorious and ignominious death at the hands of a woman (1062-1063)²⁰:

*A woman, a female, in no way like a man,
she alone without even a sword has brought me down.*

This sentiment is liberally peppered with curses, threats and regrets²¹:

- 1065 *Oh my son ... do not pay more respect to the name of
mother.
Bring her from the house with your own hands and put
her in my hands, that woman who bore you, that I may
know
clearly whether it pains you more to see **my** body
mutilated or **hers** when it is justly tortured.*
- 1070 *Come, my child, dare to do this. Pity me,
for I seem pitiful to many others, crying
and sobbing like a girl, and no one could ever say
that he had seen this man act like that before.
Always without a groan I followed my painful course.*
- 1075 *Now in my misery I am discovered a woman.*

His rage against his wife is not only distressing in its violence but also reveals an infantile preoccupation, even in the extremes of death, with revenge and one-upmanship as he calls out to his son in 1037-1040:

*... strike me in the breast, heal the pain
with which your godless mother has made me rage. Oh
to see her fallen, felled by this death she deals me!*

Whereas Deianeira dies like a man, her husband dies like a woman, *crying and sobbing like a girl*. It is this which enflames his rage to the point of hysteria (1125-1126):

*Damn you! How dare you speak of her again, the mother
who is a father's murderer – and in my hearing?*

In all his raging he presumes two things: one, that Deianeira murdered him and two, that it was on purpose. He also never asks why. In the absence of any wild questions hurled at the heavens for his untimely end we must accept that he had assumed that Deianeira wished to kill him. He never claims that his behaviour has been exemplary towards her or that he is innocent. His guilt is revealed in his silence as Deianeira's is revealed in hers.

²⁰ P. Holt, "The End of the *Trachiniai* and the Fate of Herakles", *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 1989.

²¹ See 996-998; 1108-1111; 1037-1040; 1066-1069.

Heracles' last wish reveals his attitude toward women as items of possession and exchange. His insistence that Hyllus, his son, take Iole as his wife is rooted in obsession:

*No other man but you must ever
have her who has lain with me at my side. You,
my son, must engage yourself to her bed.*
(1225-1227)

Iole must be passed down the male line, a valuable commodity for the propagation of the male bloodline.

At an interpersonal level ***The Women of Trachis*** contains all the dysfunctions that contribute towards the ancient Athenian marital relationship: the husband's neglect, the wife's jealousy, the lack of communication, the pervasive sex antagonism. Deianeira's fear and hatred of men is matched by Heracles' feelings about women. Although he collects a number of them, he lives with none voluntarily, and destroys those he does not give away.

CHAPTER IX

SOPHOCLES' *AJAX*

The Legal Issues

Unlike Clytemnestra, Medea and Deianeira, Tecmessa is not legally married; she is a concubine of war and has probably lived with Ajax as such for at least the last five years of the siege of Troy. The issue of status and legitimacy is central in this play. Against this epic and mythical background, Sophocles deals with the issues of birthright and legitimacy and how parentage and the family unit relate to social status. Athenian ideology regarding these issues is portrayed and justified with the result that social status comes to be directly linked to the model of the family.

Tecmessa's status combines her suitability as a candidate for legitimate marriage with elements that are not seemly for legitimate wives. The concept of 'spear-won' brides is linked to the concept of abduction and rape. The allusion to marriage by violence is present in *The Women of Trachis* in both Deianeira and Iole and in the figure of Cassandra in *Agamemnon*. Marriage by abduction rules out the dangerous display of sexual desire in the bride (best illustrated by the figure of Medea and Phaedra). It ensures the purity and sexual innocence of the bride, which was the most highly prized quality for the Greek male. The existence of female desire threatens social order: it sows the seeds of infidelity that disrupt the guarantee of legitimate paternity. "The resistance of the bride paradoxically guarantees her status while at the same time the act of abduction always defines the woman as an object of transaction, but suspects her of being the dangerous subject who might try to sneak into a foreign \omicron koj¹".

While Tecmessa is spear-won, she also emphasises her intimacy with Ajax, her loyalty to him and her desire for him to confer legitimate marital status upon her. She is too vocal in her desires.

A woman is always caught in a double behavioural bind: if she is 'abducted' (in 5th Century Athenian terms – married against her will) there is the possibility that her fear and resentment will translate itself sooner or later into active loathing and she will be prompted to act on these emotions; if she displays desire for marriage, she is seen as potentially unfaithful, in that she is active in her pursuit of marital union and thus assuming the male role.

The Greek audience knew their mythology and would, of course, have been aware that Ajax, their eponymous hero, hailed from Salamis originally. Sophocles wishes his audience to remember him as one of the eponymous heroes of the 10 tribes in Athens post-Kleisthenes. Our playwright is also quick to link his hero to Athens in terms of birth and heritage:

*Mariners who serve with Ajax,
Our prince of the old and kingly line*

¹ K. Ormand, *Exchange and the Maiden – Marriage in Sophoclean Tragedy*, U.P Texas, Austin, 1999, p. 31.

Sprung from the Athenian earth.
(201-202)

Tecmessa enters, and upon entering, she establishes that Ajax is a direct descendent of the Erechthids the autochthonous race from whom all true Athenian citizens descend. The people of Salamis became the beneficiaries of full Athenian heritage as late as the 6th century, yet here, Ajax' maritime companions provide the specific Athenian context for the issues concerning Ajax' relationship to Tecmessa, her status and the status of their son Eurysakes.

Tecmessa and the Chorus—A Persuasion of Intimacy

As we have seen, Ajax' lineage is established by Tecmessa and he is addressed by the chorus of mariners, his comrades, as "son of Telemon" (134) upon their entrance onto the stage. Tecmessa's status is also instantly established by the chorus as they respond to her opening words of concern:

*Tell us, daughter of Phrygian Teleutas;
For the valiant Ajax loves you,
And honours his spear-won bride-
Being near him, perhaps you have knowledge and can
speak.*
(208-213)

The word the chorus use, which is translated here as "love", is *στῆργω* a word seldom used to describe conjugal or sexual love. It does refer to "the love of things"² which I am inclined to interpret here for how Ajax feels towards her. The very next line lends credence to this interpretation: the chorus reveal Tecmessa's status as a "spear-won" bride, thus designating her as a possession, fought for and valuable.

We know at the outset that Tecmessa is Phrygian, thus foreign, and that she is 'spear-won', and thus not a legitimate wife. That Tecmessa is sensitive to this is revealed in her opening words to the chorus when she allies herself with them:

*We who care for him and his father's far-off home
Have cause indeed for grief.*
(204-205)

I am in agreement with Kirk Ormand in his penetrating study of Tecmessa, that these lines illustrate Tecmessa's conscious desire to legitimise her position by establishing what is 'right' behaviour for a wife. Her concern is portrayed as a wife's concern – it is not just for Ajax but for "*his father's far off home*". As a wife and as a new bride, the house of her husband and his *ο κοῖ* become hers. She also refers to Ajax in 206 as *our man* thereby also allying herself with those who follow him.

² Greek-English Lexicon, 9th ed., Liddell, H.G. & Scott, R., Clarendon P., Oxford, 1889, *ad loc.*

The chorus have wasted no time in pointing out she is the *spear-won bride* / *lšcoj douriflwton* of Ajax. The common meaning for *lšcoj* is *bedmate*³ and when combined with the epithet 'spear-won' it implies concubine status rather than wife status. Their appeal to her for information is based on her "*closeness*" to him (213), revealing that they do acknowledge the intimacy between the two of them if not legitimacy. It is this "*closeness*" which Tecmessa uses to gain in the eyes of the chorus and audience, a sense of legitimacy in their intimacy, which will ultimately secure a future for her and her son. Again in 216, she stresses her right to be concerned, to participate in this male dominated military environment, outside of *pōlij* and *o koj*. It is interesting that she does not feel she can use the first person singular and call him "my", not while her position is still so tenuous. Her best chance at this point is alliance.

Ajax' potential ruin is the collective ruin of his comrades as well as Tecmessa, Eurysakes and Teucer, the half-brother of Ajax. The chorus vocalise this in 251-54:

*Such are the threats that the sons of Atreus, two in power
Stir toward us. I am in dread to share
With him the blows and hurt of the killing stone:
For an awful thing to be near is the doom that holds him.*

Tecmessa includes herself in Ajax' fate soon after in 269:

We are ill no longer now, but merely ruined.

Paradoxically Tecmessa, despite her low 'legitimate' status, enjoys considerable status as a dramatic protagonist, at least in the first half of the play. The chorus address her by name and with the epithet '*honoured*' (331). We have seen both Medea and Clytemnestra castigated for speaking in public, and we have seen the results of their actions as they take matters into their own hands. We can therefore expect potential danger here as well. Tecmessa's impropriety in speaking, in coming forward, is mirrored in her unstable status. From what we have already witnessed in the preceding three tragedies, Tecmessa is either going to cause damage or she shall have to be contained before that is allowed to occur.

The chorus turn to her to find out what has occurred and the nature of Ajax' madness. Sophocles uses Tecmessa as the dramatic device for describing important events that give impetus to the action of the drama. This is the standard role for a messenger or herald. In doing so Sophocles is empowering this female character: she controls the way in which we interpret events and she controls the amount of information that is given out and how it is given. We see therefore, what Tecmessa wants us to see. As the only human witness to what has occurred, and the most intimate one, this is the time when she can shape our impression of her relationship with Ajax. Here, wittingly and unwittingly she reveals the dynamic of their relationship – and it is from her that our first impressions are drawn. She acknowledges the chorus' worthiness to hear her story: *Indeed, you are partners and shall hear it all* (283). Moreover, she appeals to them to go to him and comfort him, as *He is noble, and may listen to his friends* (330)—inadvertently revealing that he will not listen to her.

³ Ibid. , *ad loc.*

Ajax and Tecmessa: What We are Told versus What We See

The first interchange between Ajax and Tecmessa is reported by Tecmessa. We are privy to a scene which passed between them at the onset of his madness – it is she who speaks first, boldly questioning her *husband* and objecting to him going out at such a late hour:

*... I objected,
And said, "Ajax, what are you doing? Why
Do you stir? No messenger has summoned you:
... Why the whole army now's
asleep!"
(288 –292)*

Her defiance, unsurprisingly, is brief for he responds – to use her words – in a well-worn phrase:

*"Woman, it is becoming to women to keep silent."
(Translation mine 294)*

A reprimand that no wife can counter.

Ajax' remark forecasts his treatment of his spear-won bride. The discrepancy between how Tecmessa portrays her position in Ajax' life and how he interacts with her becomes abundantly clear. Our 'hero's' first words, once his madness has passed, are for his son in 339:

Boy! Where is my son?

He then calls for his brother and, finally, at the sight of his comrades in arms he hails them as his only friends:

*Ah!
Loved mariners, my only friends,
Still faithful in the old proved way ...
(348-350)*

For him, Tecmessa does not figure as a part of his close circle and so far his only acknowledgement of her has been his reported command to her to hold her tongue. Her desperate entreaty in 368-369 at his outpourings of dejection and shame are met with a savage reaction:

*Tecmessa: Ajax, my lord and master,
I beg you not to say such things.*

*Ajax: Go away! Take yourself out of my sight!
(370)*

So brutal is his outburst that it shocks the chorus into urging him to show some gentility and temperance:

In God's name, be more gentle and more temperate.
(371)

From Ajax this is not even acknowledged. So seemingly insignificant is this woman, that he is barely stopped in his lamenting for his cruel treatment at the hands of the gods. He is obsessed with the loss of his honour (τιμή in Homeric terms), vengeance on his enemies and the disgrace his downfall shall wreak upon his house. It is important to understand that here his house constitutes neither Tecmessa nor their son – it is the house of his father Telemon, it is the concept of patriarchal ancestors, of lineage, status and reputation:

*What countenance can I show my father Telemon?
How will he ever stand the sight of me ...*
(463-464)

And 470-472:

*... I must find some better way entirely -
An enterprise which will prove to my old father
That the son of his loins is not by breed a weakling.*

Up until his first appearance on the stage Tecmessa leads us to believe that her relationship with the hero is characterised by a special closeness. Up until 346 it is she who controls how we are to see things: she tells her story before Ajax does and so we lean to her point of view. As the play reveals how things really stand between them, how are we the audience to account for her blatantly contradictory claims of intimacy? It becomes clearer when we fully understand how much is at stake for her. It is almost as if she is anxious to gain credibility and support for her plight from the chorus and of course the audience, *before* Ajax appears on the stage with his self-absorption and brutality towards her. She knows it is Ajax' attachment to his son and his recognition of him as his descendent that will secure her own future.

Her next response meets with no acknowledgement at all of her having spoken; Ajax appeals to Zeus to aid him in his plans for murderous revenge followed by his own death. This prompts Tecmessa to claim that her life is meaningless unless her husband lives (392-393):

*When you pray that prayer, why, pray for my death too;
Why should I live when once my lord is dead?*

Here Tecmessa is once again emphasising the closeness of their relationship by avowing her life to be worth nothing if he should die. Ajax, however, continues as if she has not spoken and once again we are reminded of his earlier views on women and silence. Whereas Tecmessa presents her future, including her death, as bound to that of her husband, Ajax seeks no other companion in death but death itself. Again in 410-411 she speaks words of pity, sharing his pain and his anguish. Again her words fall on heedless ears:

What wretchedness, to hear a brave man speak

Such words as once he would not deign to use!

The dramatic impact of this interaction or, should I say non-interaction is powerful – we watch the character who bore such dramatic responsibility shrink to a silenced figure increasingly ignored and invisible. Before Tecmessa becomes just the mute woman of whom Ajax would no doubt have approved, she must secure a future for herself and her son – either as a legitimate wife or widow.

A Status Inferior: Tecmessa, Eurysakes and Teucer

Pericles introduced his new citizenship laws in 451/50 B.C. The ramifications of these laws resonate in Tecmessa's concerns for her future (a future which is indelibly linked with her status) and that of her son. An Athenian audience, whose lives these laws were changing, would have had a far more poignant grasp of her situation and her struggle for 'legitimacy' in the eyes of the protagonists than we do. Tecmessa and her son Eurysakes are Sophocles' chosen ones to explore the delicate issue of the redefinition of full citizens.

In the Archaic age, the term $\nu\omicron\lambda\omicron\iota$ was used to define a child born of a man and a woman who was not his recognised or legitimate wife. This woman was often of inferior social status in that she was a slave or concubine, or a foreign woman captured in war and thus 'spear-won'. Any child of hers inherited this inferior social status and as a result occupied a marginalized and lesser position within the greater entity of the household. These $\nu\omicron\lambda\omicron\iota$ did not enjoy full familial rights and deferred to the fully legitimate children of the head of the household and his lawful wife. The status of $\nu\omicron\lambda\omicron\iota$ is explored in the character of Teucer, Ajax' half brother⁴. In 1013 Teucer applies this term to himself imagining the verbal scourge on his head from his father should he survive the war and not his brother:

*What reproach will he spare me?
Bastard and gotten by the war-spear, coward ...*

The right of $\nu\omicron\lambda\omicron\iota$ to inherit was restricted under Solon. Inheritance was only possible it seems, if there were no legitimate children / $\gamma\eta\nu\sigma\iota\omicron\iota$. Pericles decreed that only people whose mother and father were full Athenian citizens could be called a citizen and thus enjoy the rights full citizenship offered in terms of participation in all the functions of the $\rho\omicron\lambda\iota\varsigma$. He thus legalised what had previously been defined in purely social terms, "His law established a legitimacy requirement for the Polis itself"⁵. In the light of this redefinition, the positions of Teucer, Tecmessa and Eurysakes were a sensitive issue of which the audience would have been all too cognisant. Parental citizenship thus took precedence over wealth and nobility, and reduced the cosmopolitan demographics of the city. It meant that intermarriage between an Athenian and someone from another Greek city meant jeopardising social and legal status of their offspring⁶.

⁴ See K. Ormand, *Exchange and the Maiden – Marriage in Sophoclean Tragedy*, U.P Texas, Austin, 1999, pp. 105-110.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁶ For an in-depth study of citizenship in 5th Century Athens see Boegehold, A.L. & Scafuro, A.C. (eds), *Athenian Identity and Civic Ideology*, John Hopkins U.P., Baltimore, 1994.

Here, Ajax is the son of Telemon and his legitimate wife whereas Teucer's mother was Hesione, Telemon's *spear-won* bride. Hesione's status in Telemon's household thus marks Teucer socially inferior. His awareness of his delicate position within his father's household is clear from his words in 1012–1020 when he refers to his father:

*... What reproach will he spare me?
'Bastard' and 'gotten by the war-spear, coward,
Nerveless deserter' and 'abandoner' –
Of you, dear Ajax! Or perhaps suggest
I did it out of treachery, so that I
Might get your house and kingship by your death.
These will be that harsh old man's reproaches
... In the end I'll be
Cast into exile and denied my country,
A slave in his account and not a freeman.*

Later on in 1260-1263, Agamemnon's insult to him reviles his parentage:

*Think of your slave's birth; bring someone else,
A freeman, here to plead your case before me.
I'm disinclined to hear more words from you,
Being not much versed in your barbarian speech.*

Teucer's position and that of his mother is analogous to that of Eurysakes and Tecmessa. Both Teucer and Tecmessa have ambiguous status. Both however, are born of noble blood on both sides. In Archaic terms their nobility would accord them the highest social status but in 5th century Athens, they would be sidelined and vulnerable.

Both these characters are given a great deal of prominence and both display the admirable Homeric virtues of loyalty, courage and respect for the dead. In their prominence they seem to speak for the playwright in questioning specific forms of marriage and the impact these new citizenship laws would have on such marriages. Whereas Teucer's situation articulates the concept of the $\pi\acute{o}\rho\omicron\jmath$, Tecmessa's is reflective of the highly unstable position of being a 'barbarian' wife with a child who will be termed a 'bastard' because of her foreignness.

Tecmessa—Walking the Line between Slavery and Silence

Tecmessa's position in the Argive camp is entirely dependent on her relationship with Ajax. Her awareness of the precariousness of her situation is articulated in 496:

*For this is certain: the day you die
And by your death desert me, that same day
Will see me outraged too, forcibly dragged
By the Greeks, together with your boy, to lead a slave's life.*

513-516

*...—what a wretchedness
You by your death will deal to him and me!*

*And I no longer have anywhere to look for help,
If not to you.*

It has been traditional for scholars to see Tecmessa as a loving wife whose only motive is to prevent her husband from destroying himself. From a deeper examination of the text and the situation Sophocles—ever the subtle playwright and master of complexity of character—presents to us, I will show that Tecmessa in fact has less reason to feel any genuine love for Ajax than he has for her. Tecmessa is given a voice and with the force of her words, she has but half the play to achieve some form of recognition from the man who captured her and reduced her from a freeborn noblewoman to a concubine of war, as a legitimate wife who bore him a legitimate son. We have already been made aware that we are not to take Tecmessa's word on the intimacy she has claimed so far to have existed between herself and Ajax: we have been witness to their interaction and have found no trace of the kindness to which she refers to in 808:

*... I can see now
That I have been beguiled of his intent
And exiled from his kindness which I knew.
(806-808)*

There is little textual evidence that shows that Ajax views their relationship in the same light. In fact one is hard pressed to find any evidence of emotion on his part. When he addresses her he is obnoxious and rude and it seems, from his preoccupation with seeing his son, that he only interacts with Tecmessa because she is the mother of his child and she has care of him. If Ajax “sees” Tecmessa at all, it is as the mother of his child (a role to which we know the Greeks did not assign much weight) and not as a wife or a partner. As Ormand points out, “...he specifically denies her the intimacy she claims”⁷ when he goes out to his men and confides in them. When Ajax is first revealed in 346, Ajax not only acknowledges them, he does so with relief and strong emotion. They are his only salvation as we have seen from 349-351 and 356-361.

It is the chorus alone, who affirm Tecmessa's claim that Ajax holds her in special affection although this has been qualified by their use of the word *στέργω* and by what comes after:

*For the valiant Ajax loves you,
And honours his spear-won bride ...
(211-212)*

Ajax “loves” her as a spear-won prize as valuable property just as Briseis was to Achilles or Cassandra to Agamemnon in the *Iliad*.

Tecmessa uses the term *δοῦλη* in 489 to refer to herself – a female slave. Her speech of 485–524 is the most revealing and crucial for extracting the more social issues at play here. Tecmessa delineates her situation not in the grips of high “female” emotionality but in a rational manner that reveals structural brilliance and forethought. In this speech her only goal is to change her status in the eyes of the

⁷ Ibid., p. 114.

man she would call her husband but whom so far has behaved true to the form of a master to a slave concubine. She first declares her loyalty to him as well as the fact that she was freeborn and noble prior to her capture. These qualities are all highly desirable in a legitimate wife. She also supplicates him in terms suitable for a wife in 492-494:

*... And I supplicate you by Zeus of the domestic hearth
And by your (marriage) bed, in which you have had inter-
course with me.
(Translation Ormand)*

That she is acutely aware of her status in the eyes of others is revealed during this speech in 495-504:

495 *Don't give me up to hear the harsh speech
Of your enemies and bow to it, their bondslave.
For this is certain: the day you die
And by your death desert me, that same day
Will see me outraged too, forcibly dragged*
500 *By the Greeks, together with your boy, to lead a slave's life.
And then some one of the lord class,
With a lashing word, will make his hateful comment:
"There she is, Ajax' woman;
He was the greatest man in the whole army.
How enviable her life was then, and now how slavish!"*

The Greek word *ἄνδρα* / *bedmate* is used here not *wife* in 503 (Moore translates as *woman*) leaving no room for ambiguity of interpretation. Tecmessa knows too well how she is seen by others and how she is bound by their vision. Her concluding words in 520-524 see Tecmessa redefining the classification of noble birth by bestowing nobility on those whose deeds are noble and not upon those whose circumstances demand it, that is, not by those circumstances of war and enslavement and presumably those of birth, and law.

*... A man ought to remember
If he has experience any gentle thing.
Kindness it is that brings forth kindness always.
But when a man forgets good done to him
And the recollection of it slips away,
How shall I any longer call him noble?*

During her speech, Tecmessa defines Ajax' role in her life: Ajax is her captor and the destroyer of her fatherland and her family. It is because of him she is *φιλ...*

*...I no longer have anywhere to look for help
If not to you. My country was destroyed
Utterly by your spear, and another fate
Brought down my mother and my father too,
To dwell in death with Hades. Then what fatherland
Shall I ever have but you?
(515-519)*

Tecmessa is cagey about the exact way her parents died. As Ajax is the destroyer of her fatherland, and she his captive spear-bride it is not too much of a leap in logic to lay the blame of Tecmessa's parents' deaths at his feet as well. Ajax is first her enemy, then her captor, now her sole protector and husband. A certain degree of trauma is the expected experience of a new bride as she makes the transfer (both emotional and physical) from her family unit to that of a virtual stranger. This is never hinted at in Tecmessa and yet we know just how traumatic, chaotic and violent this transfer must have been for her. Her "wedding" was accompanied by no ceremony. There was no sanction of family or household gods—in fact there was no wedding. Yet she assures Ajax that she is loyal. She claims therefore to have transferred allegiances, both emotional and physical, successfully without bitterness or hidden hostility as in the case of Deianeira.

From a psychoanalytical perspective one has a strong case for repressed aggression and hostility on the part of Tecmessa towards her new master. Yet Tecmessa unlike Deianeira commits no violent or destructive act, and therefore it is much harder to extract. But Tecmessa unlike Deianeira is not acting from the same position of legitimacy and security – because of the dire straits she finds herself in, she has perhaps been compelled to bury what anger or trauma that may still linger, and re-create her position as loyal wife with a royal son to rear. What evidence remains of Tecmessa's trauma is latent in her speech of supplication to him. She cannot bring herself to name Ajax as the murderer of her parents. This passage seems reflective of someone who is attempting to displace or split in the psychological sense, from a memory that does not sit comfortably with the way they have reshaped their world.

Jebb explains the ἄλλῃ μορᾷ as Sophocles not wishing to represent Tecmessa as living with the man who had slain her parents, and therefore following or inventing a legend which ascribes their deaths to a different agency. There has been found nothing pre-Sophocles concerning the death of Tecmessa's parents and I feel that the playwright is too great an artist to leave discrepancies where he does not wish them. Had her parents been slain by any other than Ajax, she would most certainly have mentioned it. She cannot be seen to harbour any resentment towards the man who is now her "fatherland" so as not to jeopardise her case of loyalty towards him. Her overriding goal is to see her position and that of her son secured. Unlike Deianeira, she displays a conscious resilience and strategic cunning. She has every reason to hate her 'husband' and, moreover, Sophocles has taken care to draw Ajax as self-absorbed and 'anachronistic' (in the sense that he still embodies the Homeric code of helping friends – harming enemies, and puts his honour before all else). Let us not forget the episode that put events in motion: his sulking over not being awarded the armour of Achilles!

Ajax – The Obsession with Bloodline

Ajax expresses no concern over the fate of his spear-won bride or their son, not even when their perils have been spelled out for him in 485-525. Like Medea Tecmessa is forced 'outside' into the public and male dominated arena to seek support. It is worth noting that Ajax' callous treatment of her may be due to the fact that she is not his legitimate wife and he does not see her as such. He has made it clear that she does not form part of his οἶκος and he does not see her as

playing a part in the further rearing of the boy he always refers to as 'his son' and never 'our son':

Then bring me my son so I may see him.
(530 translation mine)

Ajax' words 545-581 reveal that he does indeed care about his son although they bear no evidence that he cares for Tecmessa. The only reference to her in his entire speech is in 559 where he merely sees her as gaining a vicarious joy and pleasure in Eurysakes' childhood. This is in fact the only indication that Tecmessa will even be present in her son's future, for according to Ajax' outline of the boy's future, Tecmessa plays no active role. Ajax' prime concern is that his son grow to reflect his father 550-551:

My Boy, have better luck than your father had.
Be like him in all else ...

And 556-557:

Then you must show your father's enemies
What sort of man you are, and what man's son.

Moreover, Ajax entrusts the boy's nurturing and future care to Teucer as if the child was already orphaned. As is clear from 562-563, Teucer's duties encompass all areas of child rearing:

I leave you a strong warden at the door,
Teucer. He will protect and rear you up.

It is in the Greek that one finds the true emphasis in the use of the word $\tau\rho\phi\epsilon\iota$ —a word often associated with breast-feeding a child by its mother. Whereas Tecmessa has up to this point been the one in charge of her son, it now seems she will have little to do with his future life. For Ajax goes on to tell the chorus, still ignoring Tecmessa, that Teucer is to take Eurysakes to Eriboea where he will live with his grandparents and eventually take care of them in their old age (567-572). Clearly the mother's role in his son's life is of minimal importance or will cease to be so once he has reached the crucial age of 6 or 7. According to our understanding of Greek family structure this is the age when the male child leaves the women's quarters of the house and transfers to the men's thereby making the transition into the male dominated sphere. Ajax thus incorporates Eurysakes into his paternal lineage, while Tecmessa has no claim on the family bloodline; as a spear-prize she is still no more than an object.

Thus she is still driven to question his actions, to speak out. She may have secured a future for her son, but hers at this point still looks bleak. Her desperation gives rise to another harsh interchange between the two of them (586-595):

Tecmessa: *Ajax, my lord, what is your mind bent upon?*

Ajax: *Don't probe and question! It becomes you to submit.*

Tecmessa: *How my heart falters! Ajax by your child*
And by the gods I beg you, don't be our betrayer!

Ajax: *You're growing tedious. Don't you know by now
That I owe the gods no service anymore?*

Tecmessa: *What impious words!*

Ajax: *Reprove those who hear you.*

Tecmessa: *And will you not relent?*

Ajax: *You've said too much already.*

Tecmessa: *My lord, it is my fear that speaks!*

Ajax (to the servants):
Shut the doors at once!

Tecmessa: *In the gods' name, soften!*

Ajax: *You have a foolish thought
If you think at this late date to school my nature.*

We have it from the mouth of Ajax himself that Tecmessa has no effect on him thus blatantly contradicting her claim at the beginning of the play. While Ajax goes indoors, Tecmessa remains without to ponder this her most vulnerable moment in the whole play where she is utterly alone in her plight. This also marks the turning point of Tecmessa's status, as now it begins to take a turn for the better once Ajax re-emerges from his tent to give what has become known as his 'deception' speech. Early on in this speech Ajax, for the first time, acknowledges Tecmessa as a wife in his use of the word *c»ran* / widowed:

*My speech is womanish for this woman's sake;
And pity touches me for wife and child,
Widowed and lost amongst my enemies.
(652-654)*

His use of this term also urges us to take his use of the word *gun»* here to mean 'wife' as it often does, instead of just 'woman'. Ajax has admitted that he feels pity for Tecmessa and Eurysakes and that it was Tecmessa who has caused this change. Now it is difficult to take Ajax' words at face value here after all the bulk of his speech is a lie. If this 'about turn' with regard to his nuclear family is genuine here it is likely to have been prompted by a desire to ensure the legality of Eurysakes' position as his legitimate heir – something which leaving Tecmessa as an abandoned concubine of war would not have done. To condemn Tecmessa to her own fate while entrusting the boy to Teucer would still have laid the boy open to insults of illegitimacy. Only by recognising Tecmessa as a wife, would Eurysakes be considered *gn»sioj by o koj* and society alike. Ajax has already bequeathed his famous shield to his son, thereby designating him heir (574-576). Later, when in 684-686 Ajax is giving Tecmessa very 'wifely' instructions, he uses the term *gun»* again bidding her to go inside (to the realm of the wife) and to pray to the

gods. These words mark the beginning of her transformation of status: before his only words to her were harsh and brutal; he now recognises her position as wife and bids her perform the functions of the wife, those being remaining inside and conducting prayers. Tecmessa's position is much improved but it is still vulnerable while Ajax lives – for although Ajax now seems to want his son as his legitimate heir and thus has adjusted his attitude to Tecmessa, there is always the possibility that he will form a legitimate marriage once he has returned home thereby displacing Tecmessa and her son.

Only in Ajax' death does Tecmessa's position become unassailable; only once he has died and she is seen and named his bride and widow does Tecmessa cease to have a voice. Yet at this point of the play, she has only had the first intimations of recognition from the man she calls her husband; she has had nothing from the chorus and thus she is still at pains to involve herself in the action. When she re-enters in it is in response to the arrival of the messenger bearing more grim news (788-793):

*Tecmessa: I have only just found respite from that other
Siege of calamities. What new alarm is this?*

*Chorus: Listen to the message this man has brought.
It concerns Ajax, and it sounds grim.*

Tecmessa: Alas, what is your message? Not that we're ruined?

*Messenger: As to your own case, I can't say. But if Ajax
Has left his tent, there is not much hope for him.*

What is revealed in this exchange is that the messenger (and therefore most probably the others of the Argive camp) does not see Ajax and Tecmessa as a unit. Tecmessa, in defiance of this, positions herself as the most important person for the messenger to speak to. When she hears of the danger Ajax may be in, she waits for no one to give orders, but rallies the chorus herself and takes charge of the situation bidding Teucer be called and search parties be formed. Nor does she shy away from the action:

*Alas, friend, stand between me and my doom!
Hurry, some of you, and bring Teucer quickly;
The rest divide – let one group search the eastward
And one the westward bendings of the shore,
To trace his dangerous path. I can see now
That I have been beguiled of his intent
And exiled from his kindness which I knew.
But oh! My child, what shall I do? Not stay,
But join the search as far as my strength supports me.
Come, let's be at the work! No time to linger,
If we aim to save a man that's bent on death.
(803-812)*

As we would expect, it is she who finds the body, and manipulates the situation to her advantage; it is she who reveals Ajax' body, who tells of the manner of his

death and who takes control of the corpse. Now for the first time, with her husband's body at her feet, the chorus address her as 'bride' *nÚmfh* in 894-895:

*It is she, I see her now, the poor spear-won bride,
Tecmessa. She is lost in lamentation.*

She still is described as 'spear-won' *dour...lhpton* but instead of 'bed-mate' she is called a 'bride'. A few lines later in 903 she is called a 'wretched wife' *ð tala...frwn gÚnai*.⁸

The Accession And Silence Of Tecmessa

We witness Tecmessa transform from the bedmate of Ajax and one who rears his illegitimate / *nðqoj* son to the widowed mother of his one and only legitimate heir. The chorus continue to use terms that convey a sense of legitimacy on Tecmessa and yet from their words in 939-941, they seem to question the extent of her grief while validating her right to do so:

*I do not disbelieve you woman (wife)
Even as you cry out doubly in your grief,
Having been deprived so recently of one so close.
(Translation mine)*

Strange words indeed! It is almost as if they are questioning the sincerity of Tecmessa's display of grief. Neither Jebb nor Hogan⁹ find cause for concern in the curious double negative of 940, but Ormand is prompted to ask, "Does it have reason to disbelieve her? If not, why does the idea suggest itself to the chorus, and does it emphasize her (perhaps) overstated mourning¹⁰."

Tecmessa remains focused enough to ensure her status and that of her son now that Ajax is dead. She does this by throwing herself wholeheartedly into the role of dutiful wife. I am not convinced of the depth of her emotions toward a man who has been the source of so much trauma in her life. The emotions she might have for Ajax would be complex and troubled, fraught with suppressed hostility and resentment. She is similar to Deianeira in her suppression of these negative emotions. Sophocles has left us with nothing more substantial than a hologram of Tecmessa's real feelings. Her situation does not allow for her to express them. Quite the opposite, for in order for her to prove her worthiness as a legitimate wife she has to display those feelings of loyalty and conjugal love.

On finding Ajax' body she moves in sudden desperation to cover it with her cloak. I am tempted to surmise that it is as if the sight of him threatens to bring those long suppressed hostilities to the fore – an experience she cannot afford. Instead

⁸ Ibid., p. 118. Ormand discusses Athenian marriage terminology: before marriage a girl is termed a *parqšnoj* or a *kòrh* and after her marriage she becomes a *gun»*. See also Ormand's explanation for his reading of *gun»* as 'wife' instead of the more neutral 'woman' p. 117; and notes 24 & 48 to chapter 5.

⁹ J.C. Hogan, *A Commentary on the Plays of Sophocles*, Southern Illinois U.P., Carbondale, 1991.

¹⁰ K. Ormand, *Exchange and the Maiden – Marriage in Sophoclean Tragedy*, U.P Texas, Austin, 1999, p. 119.

her words re-affirm her intimate bond with the man:

*Chorus: Let me see him
Rugged and ill-starred Ajax, where he lies.*

*Tecmessa: You must not see him! I will cover him
With this enfolding garment from all sight.*

(she removes her own mantle, which should be a large rectangular piece of cloth, and covers him)

*Surely no one who loved him could endure
To see the foam at this nostrils and the spout
Of darkening blood from the wound his own hand made.*

It is she and she alone who sees his body. Refusing even those who love him the sight of him in death, she binds her husband to him with a control she never had while he lived. In death he is hers: his death shroud, her mantle covers him, binds him and separates him from others. Tecmessa responds to the chorus' hint that her grief may be excessive (d...j).

By asserting her right to grieve¹¹ she insinuates her status as a member of Ajax' immediate family. She describes her feelings in terms of what she knows and feels as opposed to what the chorus merely 'conjecture':

*You may **conjecture** that; [my grief is excessive]
I **know** and **feel** it all too certainly. (Emphasis mine)
(942-943)*

Once she has her husband's dead body under her control Tecmessa establishes her legitimacy, grieving as a wife with the chorus in support. She is now a grieving widow, the last words that she speaks in the play crystallise this image of her in our minds and in our sight:

*For them [Ajax' enemies] there is no Ajax; mine is gone
But not the grief and loss he leaves to me.
(972-973)*

Teucer is the next one to validate Tecmessa's new status or rather that Ajax' death has made her a part of the family¹². The only words he addresses to her are in the form of an order – that being to fetch her son:

*Go quickly, then,
Quickly, and bring him here. Some enemy else
May snatch him, as one would a lion-whelp*

¹¹ 5th Century Athenian Law restricted displays of funerary grief to members of the immediate family only. See S.B. Pomeroy, "Women's Identity and the Family in the Classical Polis", Chapter 7 in, R. Hawley & B. Levick, *Women in Antiquity: New Assessments*, Routledge, London, 1995.

¹² See K. Ormand, *Exchange and the Maiden – Marriage in Sophoclean Tragedy*, U.P Texas, Austin, 1999, pp. 118-119 for his interpretation of this passage.

Torn from its mother.
(984-987)

When she returns with her son, Teucer announces her return, calling her the 'wife' of Ajax:

*Here, just in time for that, his wife and child
Are coming, to perform with kindred touch
The service due his pitiable body*
(1168-1170)

Next she takes part in the offering of a lock of hair alongside her son and the new male guardian under whose protection she now falls:

*Come, little one, kneel down, as suppliants do,
Grasp your father, the creator of your life.
Hold in your hands this lock of mine*
(cuts it, and puts it in the boy's hand.)

and hers,
(cuts it, etc)

And this, a third, your own.

This funerary ritual confirms Tecmessa as widow of Ajax. Teucer articulates the new family structure to Agamemnon in 1306-1309:

*Listen to this:
If you should venture to cast Ajax out,
You must cast out the three of us as well,
Together in one heap with him*

Tecmessa is now the recognised wife of the deceased, the widow of Ajax and mother to his son and heir, Eurysakes.

In accordance with Athenian law the guardianship of her child and herself has been passed on to the brother of her husband. She is now the embodiment of feminine decency; she is silent. The silence of Tecmessa has long puzzled scholars of tragedy: why does Tecmessa remain on stage if she is not to speak? Did the playwright get casual at the end and simply forget to remove a character who is plainly no longer of use in the drama? Sophocles was ever the subtlest and most careful of dramatists. His choosing to keep Tecmessa both on the stage and silent was a conscious and skilled piece of theatre. Her presence unsettles in its widow garb, its muteness at times louder than the bickering which ensues between the male protagonists in their fight over the burial of Agamemnon's body. Tecmessa takes no part in this fight – yet shouldn't she, as a devoted wife, care that his corpse receives the proper burial rites? Maybe she does not care, for she has achieved what she so desperately needed. She can now take refuge behind Ajax' stern and telling injunction to her right at the beginning

"Woman, it is becoming to women to keep silent."

She can also avoid further forced emotional display and mask her indifference with legitimate and praiseworthy feminine silence.

CHAPTER X

CONCLUSION

The plot ought to be so constructed that even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt with pity at what takes place...¹

“Tragedy is always the clash of two powers – necessity without, freedom within”²

“The nature of Greek tragedy, then, is seen as a ‘motor’ generating emotional turbulence and establishing in the audience the basic values of its culture. It did not direct itself to the intellect in order that the spectator might reflect upon its message, but it affected the imagination and emotions of the audience, thus performing its hidden persuasion.”³

Greek tragedy was part of a seasonal ritual that allowed for the annual re-acquaintance and acknowledgement of the powers of Dionysus. Tragedy operated on several levels simultaneously: a symbolic level, a dramatic level, but primarily on an emotional and imaginative one⁴. While we should not view tragedy as an historical mirror of social life, we can however gain insights into the institutions, mores, cultural values and collective psyche of 5th Century Athens society. Tragedy depicts a world inverted. Those institutions that are the most fundamental are the ones threatened, in particular the house / ο κοῖα as the seat of masculine status and authority. The public sphere is more predictable and governed by rules of war, strength and collective masculine strategy and co-operation.

Thus tragedy arises from the diametrically opposed forces of ‘necessity’ and ‘freedom’ as they manifest through the operation of the emotional and psychological drives of men and women. We see that it is the ever-present potential for women to act freely and therefore unpredictably when emotionally roused which poses the greatest threat to the patriarchal order. The bond of φίλος is the sacrosanct cornerstone of society. Whether it is a blood or marriage tie, it underpins the rights of the male as overriding and inviolate and yokes women as vital chattels in the ο κοῖα. The chattel hierarchy is affected by citizenship, land of origin or spoils of war. The status of male children is therefore more flexible and can be used as a weapon in the conflict between husbands and wives. Hence it is the status of the ο κοῖα where the wife rules in a limited way, which as mentioned above, becomes the focus of attack, manipulation or destruction as the case may be.

In the *Medea*, the values that are inverted are those of oath making and oath-breaking and the continuity of the male descent line. In the *Agamemnon* and *The Women of Trachis* it is the inviolability of the patriarch. In the *Ajax* the

¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, XIX quoted in *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*.

² W.L. Courtney, “Tragedy” quoted in *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary Volume II* Oxford U.P., New York, 1971, *ad loc*.

³ S. Des Bouvrie, *Women in Greek Tragedy – An Anthropological Approach*, Norwegian U.P. Oslo, 1992, p. 317.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

potential threat is manipulated by the heroine to her advantage by establishing a correct family structure.

Motifs of suppressed destructive urges on the part of women towards men were common: Agave in the *Bacchae*; Iphigenia in *Iphigenia at Aulis*; Deianeira in *The Women of Trachis*. Expressed destructive urges on the part of women towards men were equally so: The Lemnian Women in the *Eumenides*; the Danaïds in *The Suppliants*; Clytemnestra in the *Agamemnon*.

There is a conspicuous lack of male violence against females as a central plot until the end of the 5th Century after the Peloponnesian War. Very often it is the male whose act of violence against the $\sigma \kappa \omicron \jmath$ is the first cause of destabilisation causing emotional harm to the women. These violations, however, are not the instruments of destruction; they are prompts for feminine retaliation and most often come in the form of infidelity – a permissible legal double standard in Athenian code of conduct – as in the case of Medea and Jason, Deianeira and Heracles. In the case of Agamemnon his murder of Iphigenia is within the legal framework where a father has authority over the lives of his children.

None of those tragedies that have, as their central motif, the issue of rape, have survived, but we know from the fragments and titles of lost plays that the stories of Procne and Philomela, Antiope, Semele, Europa and Alkmene were used. The theme of rape is a sub-theme in *The Women of Trachis*, *Ion* and *The Trojan Women*.

“There is no stranger spectacle that we can reconstruct from public life in ancient Athens than these day-long gatherings of men in the theatre. In life, men had reduced their women to shadowy creatures, cut off from most forms of social intercourse, their numbers thinned by childbirth, their health undermined by disregard for their medical and nutritional needs. On the stage, these men impersonated, out of the dimly remembered ancestral past, powerful, fearsome women, driven by superhuman passions: A Clytemnestra exulting over the slain bodies of her husband and Cassandra; an Antigone braving death in her defiance of the law; an Agave coming onstage brandishing the severed head of her son on a stick – all impersonated by men. Murder, incest, rape, cannibalism, all the horrors of the mythological past were trotted out to view, as men munched their fruit, the ancient equivalent of popcorn.”⁵

What an apt description of events giving rise to that “*thrill of horror*”. We may conclude that the overt and overriding ‘patriarchality’ of the society could not erase in the collective unconscious the awe and unease caused by deep-seated awareness of the irresistible forces controlled by the Great Earth Mother, to whom a direct link has remained in the form of the oracular tradition. The role of the oracles was the ‘Achilles heel’ of masculine self-assurance, a constant reminder of their dependence upon that closer psychic link with the invisible world that remained an essential source of revelation and guidance. Hence the necessity to maintain masculine authority and prerogative—so as to be seen to be in con-

⁵ E. C. Keuls, *The Reign of the Phallus-Sexual Politics in Ancient Athens*, California U.P. Berkeley, 1993, p. 332.

trol. What the Dionysia laid bare for “*horror*” and “*pity*” was the unpredictable outcome when the unplumbed depths of the feminine psyche were given free expression. Freedom being something taken for oneself, cannot be bestowed. A woman acting as a free agent takes initiatives that are capable of robbing a man of his role, reputation, status and his very life. It is male power that establishes order within a society such as 5th century Athens and which prescribes male behaviour. Female initiative when driven by emotion can only bring about chaos and destruction.

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