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Rebellious Performances:  
An Examination of the Gender Roles of Clytemnestra and Electra

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## Abstract

This thesis seeks to create an understanding of the mythological characters of Clytemnestra and Electra as they were portrayed by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. By examining these plays in conjunction with the historical setting in which they were written and performed, this discussion shows how these two female characters play masculine roles in order to achieve their desires. These fictional women reveal how the real-life women of Classical Athens, were always caught in a double bind due to the patriarchal society in which they lived. This thesis examines the plays of these playwrights in their original Greek in order to examine how these women play masculine roles through their actions as well as the very words they use. This discussion ends with an examination of these female characters in relation to the male character Orestes which shows how these women are ultimately unsuccessful in their attempts to achieve their desires because they are, in the end, women.

From the haunting song of the seductive sirens to the killing glare of Medusa and from the terrifying features of the chimera to the deadly riddles of the Sphinx, the feminine often appears in Greek mythology as perilous and evil. In the literature and myths of the Greeks from the earliest poems of the archaic period to the sophisticated dramas of Classical Athens, there emerges a pervasive fear of women. In his article, “Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens,” John Gould argues that “women figure, with a quite extraordinary prominence, in Greek myth, but the roles that they play are shot through with implications of antagonism and ambivalence” (55). This marked antipathy toward women surfaces in the work of one of the earliest Greek oral poets, Hesiod, who is dated approximately between 750 and 650 BC and is credited with writing *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. These two works are mostly religious in nature, spanning topics from the birth of the first gods to farming techniques. Pertinent to this discussion is his account of the creation of Pandora, the first woman. The language Hesiod uses to describe this woman is filled with strong words of hostility. In *Works and Days* he uses the following words to describe the woman, Pandora, as she was created by the gods: “κακόν” ‘evil’<sup>1</sup> (58); having “κύνεόν τε νόον καὶ ἐπίκλοπον ἦθος...ψεύδεά θ’ αἰμυλίους τε λόγους” ‘a shameless mind and thieving nature...lying and wily words’ (68, 79); “πῆμ” ‘misery’ (83); and “δόλον αἰπὺν ἀμήχανον” ‘an irresistible sheer snare’ (84). A more monstrous and malicious being is hard to imagine. Furthermore, Hesiod recounts that Pandora had with her a jar, and when she opened it, “ἔσκέδασ’: ἀνθρώποισι δ’ ἐμήσατο κήδεα λυγρά” ‘She scattered sorrow because she intended mischief for men’ (96). According to early Greek religious thought, then, women originally came into being as evil creatures, full of lies and deception, a bane to man’s existence. In *Theogony*, Hesiod then goes on to explain that all women who are descended from Pandora carry the same evils:

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<sup>1</sup> All the following translations are my own.

ἐκ τῆς γὰρ γένος ἐστὶ γυναικῶν θηλυτεράων,  
 τῆς γὰρ ὀλώϊόν ἐστι γένος καὶ φύλα γυναικῶν,  
 πῆμα μέγ' αἰ θνητοῖσι μετ' ἀνδράσι ναιετάουσιν  
 οὐλομένης πενίης οὐ σύμφοροι, ἀλλὰ κόροιο. (591-594)

For from her is the race of women,  
 from her is the destructive race and tribe of women  
 who live among mortal men for their great misery,  
 not companions in hateful poverty but in plenty.

According to Hesiod, women are dangerous and “ὀλώϊόν” ‘destructive’ (592), living only for their own benefit and helping only when times are good. A woman’s sole goal is to bring misery and pain to men. That is, in fact, the reason Zeus created her<sup>2</sup>. Zeus intended, from her creation, that woman would disrupt and destroy man’s ordered society. Though Hesiod might be an extreme case of a misogynist, other Greek literature also seems to project the same concerns and fears of women. This fear appears noticeably in the many of the evil creatures of Greek myth who are characterized as feminine—Scylla, the snaky Echidna, and the Harpies, just to name a few. This fear is then further fleshed out in the human female characters of many Greek dramas—the child-killing Medea, the husband-killing Clytemnestra, and the mother-killing Electra. While these latter females appeared previously in Greek myth, the Greek playwrights further explored their characters and displayed their malevolence in greater depth<sup>3</sup>. As can be seen from myths and drama, this fear as it surfaced in Classical Athens is an articulation of the male concern that women are a threat to their patriarchal society and have the potential to disrupt and destroy their world.

This thesis will examine the characters of Clytemnestra and Electra in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, Sophocles’ *Electra*, and Euripides’ *Electra*, especially investigating how Clytemnestra and Electra reject their feminine roles for masculine ones. During this discussion, it is important

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<sup>2</sup> Woman was the punishment for man in return for man’s theft of fire.

to keep in mind the ideal rather than the practical. Many scholars are hesitant when looking at the dramas of Classical Athens because they fear, rightly so, that the masculine perspective is a prejudiced one. Laura McClure argues in her book, *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama*, that “[b]ecause adult male citizens were the exclusive possessors of political power in the classical polis, fifth-century Athenian drama, produced by men and for men, may be regarded in the words of Case, ‘as allies in the project of suppressing real women and replacing them with masks of patriarchal production’” (5). In other words, because the drama that has been preserved from Classical Athens was mainly written by men and colored by their privileged perspective, it becomes difficult to imagine what women’s practical lives were truly like. This discussion, on the other hand, is not concerned with the practical. Rather, it will be important to keep in mind what the average Athenian man would ideally have expected of a woman.

Undoubtedly the playwrights would have written these plays with those expectations in mind.

Furthermore, the audience<sup>4</sup> would have viewed<sup>5</sup> these plays with those same prejudices.

As a result, the disruptive behavior of Clytemnestra and Electra would have stood out clearly to both the writer and the audience member. In these plays, these women disrupt the male-ordered society when they engage in both their feminine and masculine roles. Obviously when they take on masculine roles, these women are rejecting the behavior pressed upon them by society in favor of masculine behavior which allows for both freedom and power. However, when they enact their female roles, these women are the deceptive monsters first personified by Pandora.

The only accepted option for these women is to play the part of the ideal Athenian woman who

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<sup>3</sup> A staggering number of the representations of females and the feminine throughout Greek literature echo this fear of a monstrous and deceptive woman.

<sup>4</sup> There is much debate as to whether the audiences at the plays’ performances were all male or made up of a mixture of the sexes. Either way, though, everyone in the audience would have been aware of these expectations concerning women’s behavior.

<sup>5</sup> The context in which these plays were performed and viewed will be described later on in this introduction.

submits to male authority, remains cloistered in the *oikos*<sup>6</sup>, and is silent. However, Clytemnestra and Electra instead reject this role and choose to play masculine roles as well as duplicitous female roles in order to find freedom to accomplish their desires to gain power.

While it is crucial to keep in mind this ideal woman, the practical woman of Athens is also helpful. Evidence for how women practically might have lived in Classical Athens is found primarily in the laws of the time. Gould examines the legal position of women in Classical Athens, explaining that “throughout her life [a woman] was in the legal control of a male *kyrios* who represented her in law” (43). The male *kyrios* began as a father, brother, or paternal grandfather, and then once a woman married, her husband assumed this responsibility (43). A major responsibility of the *kyrios* was to control the woman’s dowry either as a guardian or a husband. Therefore, according to law, a woman was a “perpetual minor” (43). Furthermore, a woman was denied many rights which were granted to men. One of these rights, which surfaces in these plays, is the right to free speech. A woman in Classical Athens did not have the right to exercise free speech in the assemblies, which was a hallmark of being a citizen. Neither did she have the right to vote, to serve on juries, or to own property. Gould explains that the law “defines the woman as incapable of a self-determined act, as almost in law an un-person” (44). In legal terms, everything a woman did was dictated to her by a man who stood in power over her.

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that men and women existed in very separate spheres: the *oikos* and the *polis*, or the domestic sphere and the political sphere. Josine Blok argues in her article, “Toward a Choreography of Women’s Speech in Classical Athens,” that “the separation of the sexes ranked highest. It was sustained by a special and conceptual distinction between public and private spheres” (115). Gould explains that “the orators provide us with more than enough to satisfy the most skeptical that such separation of male and female

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<sup>6</sup> The *oikos* is the domestic sphere, which will be examined later.

areas of life was normal” (47). These “orators” Gould refers to are men like Demosthenes and Lysias whose speeches were famous in the public sphere of Athens. From the speeches of these men, it is reasonable to believe that the men of Athens interacted primarily in the public sphere while the women of Athens were expected to operate chiefly in the private sphere which was characterized and symbolized by the hearth<sup>7</sup>. Again the issue of ideal versus practical arises. It does not make sense to say that women never left the house for fear of interacting with men. In his article, “Seclusion, Separation, and the Status of Women in Classical Athens,” David Cohen is most concerned with distinguishing between the seclusion and separation of Athenian women. He argues that these women were more separated than secluded: “A considerable body of evidence indicates that Athenian women participated in a wide range of activities which regularly took them out of their houses. These included working in the fields..., selling produce in the market..., acting as a nurse or midwife..., and many other economic activities” (8). Again, though, for this discussion, men would ideally have liked their women to stay in the *oikos*, away from the eyes of other men.

However, it does seem to have been acceptable for women to engage in certain public events. While women were not active in the political realm, they played very important roles in many religious rituals and festivals. Some of these included the rituals of the Adonia or the festival of the Thesmophoria (Gould 51). The religious role of women was actually very important in Classical Athens for through their participation in religious activities, they helped ensure the health of the polis. Women were also essential to Athenian society in terms of creating Athenian citizens through childbirth. A law was established in 451 BC which created the requirement for citizenship that both parents be Athenian citizens (Osborne 4). Therefore, not only were women crucial to the religious health of Athens, but they also played a key role in

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<sup>7</sup> See the discussion of the hearth on page 27-28.

creating more citizens to run the political realm of the polis. Clearly then, women were essential for the propagation of the family and the continuation of the religious health of Athens.

In addition to being constrained to the *oikos*, the speech of the ideal woman was also constrained, and she was completely under the control of her husband or male relatives. Blok sums up the position of women in Classical Athens by explaining that “women should not be seen, nor should they speak or be spoken of” (97). The ideal woman, then, was allowed to speak and interact only within a small, private area. McClure examines how this ideal was then incorporated into Greek literature. She notes that “both Athenian and non-Athenian literary texts universally praise female silence and verbal submission while equating women’s talk with promiscuity and adultery” (20). In literature, the speech of a woman was equated either with virtue or sexual indiscrimination<sup>8</sup>. The ideal woman, then, stands in stark contrast to the transgressive women who were depicted in the dramas of Classical Athens.

Keeping in mind the practical and ideal representations of women in Athenian society, this thesis will explore Clytemnestra and Electra and the ways in which they disrupt the male-ordered society by playing both masculine roles and rebellious feminine roles which are far from the ideal expected by Athenian men. The most apparent way in which these women play these gender roles is through language. Both Clytemnestra and Electra use masculine language and are recognized in masculine terms by the other characters in the plays. The so-called feminine language of deception also plays a major part in these plays. Deceit and lies, as they first appear in Pandora, are aspects of the problematic woman feared by the men of Classical Athens. McClure discusses deceptive speech, arguing that “Attic drama more commonly depicts women’s speech, even when it takes a ritual form, as disruptive and subversive of social stability” (6). This phenomenon occurs in these plays as Clytemnestra and Electra consistently

use words deceptively and persuasively in order to achieve their goals. Because language is so crucial to this analysis, this thesis will study these plays in their original Greek in order to evaluate every aspect of the words. As a result, the translations that appear in this thesis are my own. Since ancient Greek is such a rich language, most words carry multiple layers of meaning which poses a tricky problem for translators who must choose between readability and literality. Consequently, many prefer to make their translations as readable as possible to give the reader a better sense of their performance as plays. However, this method usually ignores some of the more complex meanings. By using my own translations of these texts, I hope to address the richness and multiplicity of the Greek language and attend to every nuance of the words.

As this thesis will examine the roles Clytemnestra and Electra play, it is important not to forget how exactly their roles were played when the dramas were performed. As Mark Damen explains in “Actor and Character in Greek Tragedy,” “Greek tragedies were originally composed for performance at the City Dionysia, an Athenian festival that hosted at the lowest estimate ten thousand spectators. Prizes were given to the best playwright and actor at the festival each year” (317). This festival was both a religious occasion as well as a civic gathering, celebrating the great city of Athens. Furthermore, Damen notes that “[a]ll actors wore masks and body-length costumes hiding their personal features except height and voice” (317). This aspect of Greek drama is important because all of these actors were men. Froma Zeitlin observes in her book *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* that because there were no female actors, the men “impersonate” women (343). This creates a convoluted effect in the characters of Clytemnestra and Electra wherein a man is playing a female role who, in fact, is trying to play a masculine role. Though this strange irony will not figure prominently in this discussion, it is interesting to be aware of this quirk in Greek drama. Many of these Greek

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<sup>8</sup> This idea will be examined later as it plays a part in Clytemnestra’s speech.

dramas, and the ones which will be examined in this discussion, were actually mythical stories originally set in Archaic Greece. For this reason, it is important to note that the Athenians of the Archaic period did not have the same expectations and customs relating to gender roles that were operating in the Classical Period in Athens. Regardless of this fact, playwrights transposed contemporary issues onto the well-known historical and mythological stories in order to comment on the society of Classical Athens.

Looking at the language in these plays and keeping in mind the complex issues surrounding the feminine in Greek mythology and thought, this thesis will first examine Clytemnestra's cunning in switching between gender roles to achieve her goals. It will then explore Electra's paradoxical character as she endeavors to be the ideal Athenian woman, but ends up disrupting society in order to take revenge on her mother. Finally, this thesis will place Orestes alongside these two women to show how such a disordering of society cannot last, resulting instead in the downfall of these women who seized power to achieve their ends.

### ***Clytemnestra: The Outspoken Woman of Power***

Clytemnestra is the epitome of the monstrous woman. Her story first appears in Homer's *Odyssey* only to be retold time and time again in Greek literature. Her brutal slaughter of her husband on the day of his homecoming from Troy is ripe for dramatic reinvention. In her article, "Woman, Tyrant, Mother, Murderess: An Exploration of the Mythic Character of Clytemnestra in All Her Forms," Rachel M. E. Wolfe argues that Clytemnestra "was, in fact, adopted as a sort of universal model of the 'bad woman' in Greek society. Artists imagined and re-imagined her, shaped and molded her character, desires, and motives, and urged outside observers to perceive

her in particular ways” (692). Aeschylus in his *Oresteia* trilogy examines her story and gives life to her character. In *Agamemnon*, the first play of the trilogy, Clytemnestra switches between playing a masculine and feminine role. Her masculine role, which is most clearly seen in the language she uses and the actual murder at the end of the play, allows her to gain the power needed to take revenge on her husband. However, she also has no qualms about playing a subservient feminine role in order to accomplish this. Her feminine role is revealed by the language she uses which is the language the men of Classical Athens would have expected of women: deceptive and duplicitous. McClure comments on Clytemnestra’s double role, arguing that “Clytemnestra plays the part of a faithful wife before the male chorus, the messenger, and ultimately her husband, but abandons this disguise once she has successfully carried out her plan” (McClure 27). Clytemnestra artfully switches between playing a persuasive masculine role and a seemingly subservient feminine one. She manages to shape her language to every particular situation in order to place herself at an advantage. However, as McClure points out, she abandons this meek disguise once she has successfully murdered her husband. With his death, Clytemnestra’s true heart is revealed, which will be examined further at the end of this section. By playing both masculine and feminine roles, Clytemnestra disrupts the balance of the male-centered society. She does this by acting contrary to men’s expectations of how an ideal woman should act. Yet even when she plays the female role which is expected of her, she also disrupts society through her deception and duplicity. Yet such female duplicity, as Pandora exemplifies, would not have been very surprising behavior to the men of Athens. In this way, Clytemnestra cannot win. From the beginning, by virtue of her sex, she is mistrusted and suspected. Therefore, Clytemnestra’s duplicity and murderous act would not have been contrary

to men's expectations at all. Therefore, no matter what she does, either by playing a masculine role or a feminine role, Clytemnestra upsets the patriarchal society.

From the beginning of Aeschylus' play, Clytemnestra's transgressive role playing is noted. In the very first scene, the watchman comments on Clytemnestra's masculine role. He explains how Clytemnestra ordered him to watch the signal fires which would notify Argos of Agamemnon's victory at Troy and impending return:

ὥδε γὰρ κρατεῖ  
 γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον ἐλπίζον κέαρ. (*Agamemnon* 10-11)

For thus she rules  
 a woman with an expectant, man-counseling heart.

Even the watchman, a minor character, can see that Clytemnestra plays a double role of a male and a female. He describes her as “ἀνδρόβουλον” (11), a word which comes from the two Greek words “ἀνδρός” ‘man’ and “βούλομαι” ‘to counsel.’ Interestingly, these words describe Clytemnestra in terms of male speech. ‘To counsel’ carries for Athenian men the connotation of free speech which denoted citizenship. As McClure explains, “to be a citizen meant to participate actively in the speech of the city, whether in the courts, the Council, the Assembly, or the agora” (8). In other words, speech and citizenship were inextricably linked in Classical Athens.

However this right to free speech was reserved only for male citizens; the women of Athens were excluded. It is noteworthy, then, that although Clytemnestra is a woman, she is recognized as engaging in free speech. Not only that, but she is also a woman who counsels men and is in power over them. This verbal quality gives her power that she would not have if she were behaving as a submissive Athenian woman. Instead, by playing this masculine role, Clytemnestra gains access to the power that comes with free speech which would only have been open to men.

However, in the same description, the watchman also recognizes Clytemnestra's feminine role when he refers to her passion and hope. The watchman says that she is "ἐλπίζω" 'expectant' (*Agamemnon* 12). This word "ἐλπίζω" chiefly means 'to hope,' which in Greek thought is a nebulous emotion, not founded in logic. This illogical feeling is something the men of Athens would expect to see in a woman who, in their minds, is not driven by logic but rather by emotion. Simon Goldhill notes in *Language, Sexuality, Narrative: The Oresteia* that Aeschylus underscores this illogical feeling, by leaving the verb, "ἐλπίζω," without a direct object (10). Clytemnestra, then, hopes in the most irrational terms, not even knowing the thing for which she hopes. For the men of Classical Athens, this illogical quality was expected of women. In fact, the chorus, made up of the male elders of Argos, actually does accuse Clytemnestra of unfounded hopes as will be shown later. Therefore, from the play's beginning, Clytemnestra plays both a powerful masculine role as well as a so-called emotional female one.

As the play goes on, not only does the watchman recognize Clytemnestra's masculine role, but so do the men of the chorus. They come to her wanting to know the story behind the watch fires:

ἦκω σεβίζων σόν, Κλυταιμίστρα, κράτος:  
 δίκη γάρ ἐστι φωτὸς ἀρχηγοῦ τίειν  
 γυναῖκ' ἐρημωθέντος ἄρσενος θρόνου. (*Agamemnon* 258-260)

I came because I honor your power, Clytemnestra.  
 For it is just to respect the wife of the male ruler  
 when the throne has been deprived of a man.

The chorus recognizes Clytemnestra's power as the ruler of Argos even though they remain aware of her true sex by referring to her as "γυναῖκ'" 'wife' (261). However, by describing her rule in negative terms, they reveal that they are not exactly happy with her rule in Agamemnon's absence. They say that without a male ruler, the throne has been "ἐρημωθέντος" 'stripped bare,

desolated, bereaved, deprived' (260). Such strongly negative words show that they believe a man should be in power and not a woman. Because this is not so, the chorus must watch their patriarchal society crumble and wish for things to return to normal. In spite of the chorus' distaste, Clytemnestra has readily stepped into the position of power vacated by her husband. As was said before, Clytemnestra's power is contingent on her use of language. McClure argues that "her control of public discursive practices contingent upon her possession of masculine *kratos*<sup>9</sup> reflects a profound inversion of gender roles" (74). In Agamemnon's absence, Clytemnestra is able to reject her feminine role in favor of a masculine one. McClure examines several plays, including Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, in which the wife seizes power during her husband's absence. She explains that "[t]he freedom entailed by the absence of men leads to verbal transgression: in all these plays, the women show an unusual rhetorical proficiency normally associated with men and the tangible sign of their power in the polis" (7). In other words, as Clytemnestra steps into a masculine role, she solidifies this act through her speech as well as her choice of listeners. Rather than speaking with other women, as would have been proper for an Athenian woman, she speaks almost exclusively with men. McClure notes that her major audience is the male chorus with whom she speaks for the majority of the play (72). Other than the chorus, Clytemnestra speaks with a male messenger and her husband. Such open speech with non-kin men was not proper behavior for a woman in Classical Athens. Cohen cites several instances in Greek literature in which the authors argue that women should only speak with men who were her relatives by blood and marriage: "Not only ought women to remain within, but they must also guard themselves from contact with any men who pass by or call for their husbands" (6). Cohen goes on to cite the somewhat questionable example from one of Lysias' speeches which "emphasizes the honor of women who had led such orderly lives that 'they are ashamed to be seen even by

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<sup>9</sup> power

their kinsmen' (3, 6)" (6). While this claim made by Lysias' defendant is almost obviously an overstatement meant to underline the honor of his female relatives, it does show how the men of Athens would ideally have wanted their women to act. By constantly interacting with men not only outside the *oikos*, but also with men who are not related to her, Clytemnestra does not engage in a submissive feminine role. Instead, she plays a masculine role, acting as if she is a man who has every right to speak with whomever she wishes. Clytemnestra's masculine role, then, began when her husband left for Troy, leaving her in charge of the city of Argos.

The first instance of Clytemnestra's speech is her explanation of the signal fires. She had ordered that signal fires be placed in a relay system from Troy to Argos to be lit once Agamemnon had conquered Troy. In this way, she would be notified of his impending return, and she would be able to prepare secretly for his murder. By setting up these signal fires, Clytemnestra used her power and displayed great intelligence and even militant strategy in keeping with her masculine role. However, the men of the chorus question her when she announces her husband's victory in Troy. They seem to want to rejoice but have trouble believing her news. This, as will be seen, is because she is a woman and a woman's word is untrustworthy. The chorus, upon hearing Clytemnestra's news, makes her repeat herself as if what she had said was unintelligible: "πῶς φήεις; πέφευγε τοῦπος ἐξ ἀπιστίας." 'What are you saying? The meaning of your words has fled because they are unbelievable' (*Agamemnon* 268). From the start, the chorus cannot believe Clytemnestra's words. She acquiesces to their request and repeats herself, but they still refuse to accept her words. Instead they say, "τί γὰρ τὸ πιστόν; ἔστι τῶνδὲ σοι τέκμαρ;" 'What is it that is credible? Do you have proof of these things?' (272). Clytemnestra's word alone is not enough to convince these men. Their call for proof, as will be discussed later, reveals the difference, in the minds of the chorus, between trustworthy men and

irrational women. When Clytemnestra explains her system of signal fires, they accuse her of believing in unreal dreams and rumors: “πότερα δ’ ὄνείρων φάσματ’ ἐπιθῆ σέβεις;... ἀλλ’ ἦ σ’ ἐπιάνέν τις ἄπτερος φάτις;” ‘Do you honor the persuasive apparition of dreams?...But surely are you excited by some unconfirmed rumor?’ (274, 276). Though Clytemnestra had shown great foresight in erecting her chain of signal fires, the chorus thinks she has placed her trust in unreliable places. Instead of seeing her intelligence, which would have been acceptable in a man, the chorus only sees her sex and the preconceived notions which go along with it. Before, the chorus assured her that they accepted her power over them when she stepped into the powerful masculine role vacated by her husband. Yet as is seen by the chorus’ disbelief in Clytemnestra’s words, they cannot help but see past her masculine mask to the untrustworthy woman behind it.

Goldhill theorizes that the chorus’ lack of trust stems from the play between the sign and the idea it signifies. As Goldhill proposes: “It would appear that the chorus is rejecting Clytemnestra’s attitude because of some (female) quality of her approach to the message—a connection between the exchange of signs and female (as opposed to male) qualities” (40). Goldhill examines the argument between Clytemnestra and the chorus, explaining that the chorus discounts Clytemnestra’s words because she relies on signs rather than on *logos*. In other words, the men of the chorus do not believe Clytemnestra because they do not believe her interpretation of the signal fires. They do not believe that the fires signify Agamemnon’s victory and impending return. They place much more trust in spoken word than in a visible symbol or sign, believing that words are less prone to wrong interpretation. For Goldhill, these two types of signs, the word and the visible symbol, point to the differences between women and men and credibility of each. The chorus’ disbelief echoes the watchman’s words when he called Clytemnestra “ἐλπίζον” ‘expectant’ (*Agamemnon* 12). Because women were viewed as illogical

creatures in Classical Greece, easily stirred by whim or emotion, the chorus sees Clytemnestra the same way. They see a woman who will interpret questionable signs as sound proof.

Finally fed up with the chorus' accusing queries, Clytemnestra angrily exclaims, “*παιδὸς νέας ὡς κάρτ' ἐμωμήσω φρένας*” ‘You greatly criticize my reason as if I were a young child’ (*Agamemnon* 277). While “*παιδὸς*” literally means ‘child,’ it can also be read to mean ‘foolish.’ Clytemnestra understands that the chorus can only see her as a woman with no more wit than a child, unable to make sound arguments like a man. In response to this slight on her intelligence, she launches into a speech proving both her claims and the validity of her reason. McClure notes that “[t]he beacon speech, in turn, represents a type of masculine demonstration, an inartificial proof characteristic of the law courts, brought in to corroborate her testimony” (74).

Clytemnestra uses these signal fires as proof that her husband took Troy:

τέκμαρ τοιοῦτον σύμβολόν τέ σοι λέγω  
ἀνδρὸς παραγγείλαντος ἐκ Τροίας ἐμοί. (*Agamemnon* 315-316)

I tell you that such a proof and token  
transmits the message of my husband from Troy to me.

In citing the “*τέκμαρ*” and “*σύμβολόν*,” the ‘proofs’ and ‘tokens’ (315), Clytemnestra moves into her masculine role, and uses the masculine speech of the judicial sphere. McClure says that “her speeches introduce several terms and motifs inappropriate to women that effectively combine to convince the male chorus” (74). These terms include words pertaining to victory and defeat in war and words of proof and tokens as mentioned above (74). Furthermore, Clytemnestra’s speech is somewhat triumphant and gloating. She seems proud that she, a woman, thought to set up this relay system when no one else did. This pride is reminiscent of masculine heroic language which lauds one’s own deeds of glory and cunning. However, McClure notes that she finishes off her speech by slipping back into her feminine role (75).

Clytemnestra says, “τοιαῦτά τοι γυναικὸς ἐξ ἐμοῦ κλύεις” ‘Indeed you hear such things from me a woman’ (*Agamemnon* 348). This is a rather strange choice for her to make. Even though during her speech, Clytemnestra immerses herself in her masculine role, she chooses to remove her masculine mask and remind the men of the chorus that she is still a woman. Perhaps Clytemnestra is trying to make the point that she, though a woman, is still capable of making important and useful decisions which are usually only prescribed to men. In other words, perhaps Clytemnestra wants to be recognized in her fullness as a woman, but as a woman who is able to reason well<sup>10</sup>. McClure, on the other hand, claims that she undercuts her argument and switches back into her feminine role in order to gain “sympathy” from the chorus (75). Perhaps she fears that if she plays her masculine role too strongly, the chorus will rebel against her power and put her back in her place. Ultimately though, her strategy seems to work because the chorus is very complimentary after she has explained the proof of her signal fires. Because she used the persuasive power of masculine words, Clytemnestra was able to change the minds of the chorus. This type of persuasion as it was found in the Athenian law courts is a hallmark of the male role and the political sphere. The chorus seems to recognize this when they tell her, “γύναι, κατ’ ἄνδρα σὸφρον’ εὐφρόνως λέγεις” ‘Woman, you speak reasonably according to man’s prudence (*Agamemnon* 351). The chorus—while recognizing her sex when they address her as “γύναι” ‘woman’—still compliment her and join with the watchman in describing her in male terms. They finally recognize not only her intelligence and “εὐφρόνως” ‘reasonableness,’ but also her place in their male society. However, at the same time the chorus cannot forget her sex, the fact that she is a “γύναι” ‘woman.’ It is for this reason, then, that the chorus wavers between trust and disbelief. They cannot reconcile Clytemnestra’s masculine actions with her sex, or the strange combination of masculine and feminine roles which she embodies.

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<sup>10</sup> Without “reason” carrying purely male connotations.

As a result, only a few lines after praising her manly wisdom, the chorus once again questions her words because, in the end, they cannot ignore that she is a woman. They refuse to accept her signal fires alone as the only proof of Agamemnon's victory and start to question her when no other proof, especially verbal proof, comes. They say that she is foolish to put her hope in signal fires, and instead of recognizing her in a masculine role, they again place her in a feminine one:

τίς ὧδε παιδνός ἢ φρενῶν κεκομμένος,  
 φλογὸς παραγγέλμασιν  
 νέοις πυρωθέντα καρδίαν ἔπειτ'  
 ἀλλαγᾶ λόγου καμεῖν;—  
 ἐν γυναικὸς αἰχμᾷ πρέπει  
 πρὸ τοῦ φανέντος χάριν ξυναινέσαι.— (479-484)

Who is so childish or has been so stricken in mind,  
 having been inflamed in heart  
 by a fire-transmitted message,  
 then to be distressed at a change of story?—  
 It is just like the spirit of a woman  
 to join in giving thanks before the revealing of truth.—

Even though only a few lines earlier the chorus accepted Clytemnestra's proof and complimented her on her masculine reason, they now distrust her. They echo the insult Clytemnestra earlier accused them of making by calling her "παιδνός" 'childish' (480). They again are cognizant of her sex and criticize her on the basis of being a woman who is "πιθανός" 'easy to persuade' and full of "γυναικογῆρυτον κλέος" 'women's gossip' (486,488). As Goldhill would argue, Clytemnestra's proofs are not enough. Instead the chorus needs words from a man to back up her claims (39). In the eyes of the male chorus, Clytemnestra is no better than a mindless, hysterical, gossipy woman because she is convinced by visible signs alone.

However, when a messenger comes and corroborates Clytemnestra's claim, she is vindicated and boastful. She says, "ἀνωλόλυξα μὲν πάλαι χαρᾶς ὕπο" 'I cried out with joy long

ago' (*Agamemnon* 587). She gloats to the chorus that she believed the truth before they did.

However, she again makes sure that everyone listening is aware of her sex as a woman. She repeats the insults that the chorus made against her:

καί τίς μ' ἐνίπτων εἶπε, 'φρυκτωρῶν δία  
 πεισθεῖσα Τροίαν νῦν πεπορθῆσθαι δοκεῖς;  
 ἧ̃ κάρτα πρὸς γυναικὸς αἴρεσθαι κέαρ.'  
 λόγοις τοιούτοις πλαγκτὸς οὔσ' ἐφαινόμην. (590-593)

And some reproaching me said, "On account of fire signals  
 you seem to be persuaded that Troy now has been destroyed?  
 In truth it is just like a woman to choose with her heart."  
 With such words I appeared to be wandering in my mind.

Clytemnestra boasts that her visible proofs were just as trustworthy as the words of a messenger. In fact, they were even quicker to declare the truth. As was said before, Clytemnestra makes sure to point out her sex—"γυναικὸς" 'woman' (592)—and thereby the qualities associated with it: easily persuaded, ruled by emotions, witless. However, it is interesting when Clytemnestra recounts these insults that she does not directly say who made them. Rather she says "τίς" 'someone' said these things (590). It is as if she is trying to prove that she is above the pettiness of the chorus by not directly naming them. Clytemnestra boasts that her feminine reasoning, which was once lauded by the men of the chorus as man's wisdom, was credible after all. She again resumes her feminine role by saying "ὅμως δ' ἔθιον, καὶ γυναικείῳ νόμῳ" 'But nevertheless I continued offering sacrifices even as is the women's custom' (594). In this, Clytemnestra shows how she oversteps her role as a woman because she ignores the men of the community when they tell her that there is no real proof for Agamemnon's return, and she decides to continue with her sacrifices. Even in her feminine role, Clytemnestra upsets the stability of society.

Clytemnestra continues in her feminine role by sending a message to Agamemnon. She claims to have remained a faithful wife while he has been away at war:

γυναῖκα πιστὴν δ' ἐν δόμοις εὖροι μολῶν  
οἷαν περ οὖν ἔλειπε, δωμάτων κύνα  
ἐσθλὴν ἐκείνῳ, πολεμίαν τοῖς δύσφροσιν,  
καὶ τᾶλλ' ὁμοίαν πάντα, σημαντήριον  
οὐδὲν διαφθείρασαν ἐν μήκει χρόνου.  
οὐδ' οἶδα τέρψιν οὐδ' ἐπίβογον φάτιν  
ἄλλου πρὸς ἀνδρὸς μᾶλλον ἢ χαλκοῦ βαφάς. (606-612)

When he has come let him discover that the wife in his home is faithful  
certainly of such a sort as when he left,  
a good watchdog hostile to his enemies,  
and unchanged in all other respects  
never having broken a seal in this long time.  
I do not know the delight of another man nor blaming rumors  
more than I know how to guild with bronze.

When Clytemnestra says these things, those present know that she is lying through her teeth because she has, in fact, been unfaithful to Agamemnon by engaging in an affair with Aegisthus. However, the Greeks would have seen this scene as very believable. They would have viewed Clytemnestra as finally acting like a true woman because of her deception. McClure argues that “whenever Aeschylus shows [Clytemnestra] performing the part of an obedient and loyal wife in this way, he also implies that she acts duplicitously” (76). Furthermore, it is interesting that Clytemnestra actually says what the chorus has been so afraid to say. She herself brings up the subject of her adultery: “οὐδ' οἶδα τέρψιν οὐδ' ἐπίβογον φάτιν” ‘I do not know the delight of another man’ (*Agamemnon* 612). While the chorus has hinted several times at Clytemnestra’s adultery, they never actually spoke clearly of it (*Agamemnon* 548, 550, 615-616). Though Clytemnestra brings this subject up only to reject its possibility, she still shows more daring in her speech than the men of the chorus do. She is not afraid to speak while the men are, and this freedom of speech again points to her sense of comfort in playing a masculine role. Furthermore,

as Helene Foley notes in her book, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*: “She flouts the norms of shame by announcing her virtue to the city, not privately to her husband” (209). Even when playing her female role as a supposedly faithful wife, Clytemnestra still tries to subvert the patriarchal system. She ignores the expected propriety of women’s behavior in terms of public and private speech and speaks out with great boldness.

Though Clytemnestra’s boldness and persuasive speech has served her well before, it is displayed in its awesome power in the scene of Agamemnon’s return. In this scene, Clytemnestra forces Agamemnon to enter the palace by walking on rich tapestries laid out on the ground. Agamemnon, afraid of incurring the gods’ wrath<sup>11</sup>, does not want to do this, but Clytemnestra again uses her sharp wit and even sharper tongue to persuade him. Agamemnon grumbles against her free use of language in saying, “οὔτοι γυναικός ἐστιν ἰμείρειν μάχης” ‘Indeed it is not for a woman to yearn for a fight’ (*Agamemnon* 940). Agamemnon expects Clytemnestra, as a woman and as his wife, to give way meekly and quietly to his will. Instead she uses masculine powers of persuasion to force him to do her will. She orders him imperiously, “πιθοῦ: κράτος μέντοι πάρες γ’ ἐκὼν ἐμοῖ” ‘Obey me. Willingly yield your authority to me’ (943). Agamemnon finally gives in to her orders and walks to his death over the tapestries.

While Clytemnestra’s persuasive power is displayed in the tapestry scene, her heroic language is portrayed in the scene after Agamemnon’s murder. In this scene, she again switches back and forth between masculine and feminine roles. First she acknowledges her duplicity in all of her previous words to the chorus: “πολλῶν πάροιθεν καιρίως εἰρημένων/ τάναντί’ εἰπεῖν οὐκ ἐπαισχυνθήσομαι” ‘Having said much to suit the moment before, I will not be ashamed to say the opposite’ (1372-1373). Clytemnestra acknowledges that she has behaved as a transgressive

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<sup>11</sup> He argues that the needless destruction of wealth through treading on the tapestries will draw down “φθόρος” ‘envy’ of the gods on him (*Agamemnon* 921).

woman by using deception. However, she was also playing a masculine role when that deception was done in such a cunning way. Clytemnestra then relives the moment of the murder. She does so through strangely sexually charged language:

βάλλει μ' ἔρεμνῃ ψακάδι φοινίας δρόσου,  
χαίρουσαν οὐδὲν ἥσσον ἢ διοσδότῳ  
γάνει σπορητὸς κάλυκος ἐν λοχεύμασιν. (1390-1392)

He hit me with dark drops of bloody dew,  
while I rejoiced no less than  
the corn rejoices in the gladness given by Zeus at its birth.

In Greek thought, the image of rain coming from the sky was a sexual one, evoking a picture of the male sky god, Uranus, raining on the female earth goddess, Gaia. With this rain, Gaia receives the seed of Uranus. Clytemnestra's words, then, are strongly reminiscent of this religious idea. However, this sexual act is disturbingly perverted as Clytemnestra glories in the touch of Agamemnon's blood rather than his semen. In this instance, then, Clytemnestra is speaking from her feminine role. Not only is she portrayed as deceptive, but also sexually insatiable. These words would have seemed fitting for a woman to say because of the idea, stemming from Pandora, that women were sexually promiscuous and insatiable. Therefore with this reference to a warped sexual act, Clytemnestra plays her feminine role.

However, Clytemnestra's language is still in keeping with masculine language as well. As she glories over his body, she uses heroic language which a victorious warrior might have used over his fallen foe:

οὗτός ἐστιν Ἀγαμέμνων, ἐμὸς  
πόσις, νεκρὸς δέ, τῆσδε δεξιᾶς χερὸς  
ἔργον, δικαίας τέκτονος. (1404-1406)

This is Agamemnon, my  
husband, but a corpse, the deed of this my right hand,  
a righteous craftsman.

Clytemnestra wants everyone to know that she did the deed with her own hands. She boasts over Agamemnon's death with all the arrogance of a victor in battle who laughs at his fallen enemies. The chorus, predictably, is shocked. Yet instead of being alarmed at Clytemnestra's deed, they instead are outraged at her speech. They exclaim, "θαυμάζομέν σου γλῶσσαν, ὡς θρασύστομος, / ἥτις τοιόνδ' ἐπ' ἀνδρὶ κομπάζεις λόγον" 'We wonder at your tongue, as being insolent, / that you brag over your husband such a speech' (1399-1400). It is her speech, spoken by a woman, which most astonishes the chorus. Clytemnestra rebukes them for their amazement. She is angry that they see her as a "γυναικὸς ὡς ἀφράσμονος" 'woman without sense' (1401). Clytemnestra clearly possessed plenty of sense and cunning in order to rationally and methodically bring about her husband's death. Foley argues that the chorus' reaction is disbelief because of Clytemnestra's sex. She further argues that Clytemnestra wants the chorus to judge her in the same way they would have judged a man. Instead, the men of the chorus "visualize her as a mad irrational housewife who has killed her husband. In their view, the heroic king Agamemnon has not only been killed unjustly but has been killed *by a woman*" (203). Clytemnestra has accomplished a masculine deed, the murder of a man, by playing a masculine role. Foley argues that Clytemnestra wants to be viewed as a man who overthrows a king and takes the throne. She wants to be seen as having acted with rational, masculine motives and not feminine hysterical ones. Clytemnestra accomplished her revenge by seizing masculine power, but now she wants to keep that power and become the ruler of Argos. However, as Goldhill argues, her sex still does matter: "Clytemnestra, too, in her adultery and the killing of her husband and the threat to kill her son, breaks the basic bonds of the ordering of culture" (17). Even though Clytemnestra was able to play her masculine role with cunning and skill, society was still destabilized because—in the society of Classical Athens—a woman simply cannot be in power and exercise such power

over others. This issue will be examined in depth at the end of this thesis. However, for now, it is enough to note that Clytemnestra successfully carries out her revenge by means of masculine actions and intends to remain in a position of power.

Clytemnestra's masculine role is emphasized even more once Aegisthus arrives on the scene. Aegisthus is characterized as a pompous fool who takes sole credit for Agamemnon's death. He obtusely boasts, “κάγὼ δίκαιος τοῦδε τοῦ φόνου ῥαφεύς” ‘And I am the just planner of his murder’ (*Agamemnon* 1604). As this is only the first time Aegisthus appears on stage, it is very clear that Clytemnestra, not Aegisthus, was the mastermind of the murder. Irritated by his ridiculous show of self-importance and false claim, the chorus insults him by calling him the worst thing they can think of: “γύναι” ‘woman’ (1625). Even though they use the female sex as an insult against Aegisthus, the chorus does acknowledge that the one who accomplished the deed was in fact a woman. However, this only goes to lower Aegisthus even further in their minds:

τί δὴ τὸν ἄνδρα τόνδ’ ἀπὸ ψυχῆς κακῆς  
οὐκ αὐτὸς ἠνάριζες, ἀλλὰ νιν γυνή  
χώρας μίασμα καὶ θεῶν ἐγχωρίων  
ἔκτειν’; (1643-1646)

Why out of your evil heart  
did you yourself not slay this man, but a woman  
killed him, a defilement for her gods and her country?

The chorus juxtaposes Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, and Clytemnestra clearly comes out on top. They claim that because Aegisthus is a man, he should have been the one to commit the murder. This comparison shows that Clytemnestra plays a stronger masculine role than Aegisthus, who actually is a man. However, once Aegisthus comes on stage, Clytemnestra again assumes a feminine role, begging him to refrain from hurting the chorus out of anger. She says, “ὧδ’ ἔχει λόγος γυναικός, εἴ τις ἀξιοῖ μαθεῖν” ‘These words are a woman's words, if anyone

thinks it worthy to learn from them' (1661). She again falls into that self-debasing feminine role to please Aegisthus and the chorus. However, she ends the play clearly still in control of Argos and all the men around her. She succeeds in convincing Aegisthus to not kill the chorus members and leads him away saying, “ἐγὼ / καὶ σὺ θήσομεν κρατοῦντε τῶνδε δωματίων καλῶς” ‘I / and you will establish order in this house being powerful’ (1672-1673). Here, Clytemnestra says “ἐγὼ” ‘I’ first and then “σὺ” ‘you’ second. Even though Aegisthus would like to think that he is in control, it is Clytemnestra who will be the true ruler of Argos after Agamemnon’s death.

Though Clytemnestra originally intended to gain power in order to take revenge on her husband for past wrongs, power itself seems to become her end goal. By the play’s conclusion, it seems that Clytemnestra simply wishes to be recognized as powerful. In this light, her search for revenge morphs into a search for power. Clytemnestra’s original motivation for killing Agamemnon is revenge for her daughter’s death at his hands which is the first reason she gives to the chorus after the murder. She rages that he sacrificed their daughter, Iphigenia, in order to get his ships to Troy and that her death went unpunished:

οὐ τοῦτον ἐκ γῆς τῆσδε χρῆν σ’ ἀνδρηλατεῖν,  
μιασμάτων ἄποιν’; ἐπήκοος δ’ ἐμῶν  
ἔργων δικαστῆς τραχὺς εἶ. (1419-1421).

Shouldn’t you have banished him from this land,  
as ransom for his defilement? But you are eager  
to be a harsh judge of my actions.

Clytemnestra realized that no one would avenge the death of her daughter, as was the job of a close male relative. She then decided to take that job upon herself<sup>12</sup> even though such revenge would probably have been viewed as in the male realm. Clytemnestra then berates the men of the chorus for their unfairness in judging her murder and not her husband’s murder of their daughter. At the start then, it would seem that Clytemnestra’s murder of her husband is somewhat noble

and also excusable. At the same time, she does not murder her husband out of a selfish desire to avenge personal wrongs but to rightly avenge her daughter's death.

Yet the next reason Clytemnestra gives for Agamemnon's murder is a step closer to gaining power for herself. She argues that Agamemnon was unfaithful to her and points to the dead body of his concubine, Cassandra: “Χρυσηίδων μείλιγμα τῶν ὑπ’ Ἰλίῳ” ‘a darling of the Chryseises of Troy’ (1439)<sup>13</sup>. Clytemnestra does have some right to be angry with Agamemnon's infidelity. Even though a husband's infidelity was usually excusable in Classical Athens, it did place the lawful wife a precarious position. If the husband's concubine conceived children, they might have the potential to interfere with the inheritance of the lawful heirs<sup>14</sup>. In this way, Clytemnestra fears for the position of her own children as Agamemnon's heirs. However, another of Clytemnestra's motivations for murder is wrapped up in this accusation of her husband's infidelity: her own adultery. Clytemnestra took a lover, Aegisthus, in Agamemnon's absence. It is hypocritical then for Clytemnestra to assert the following, in the same breath while accusing Agamemnon of his infidelity:

οὐ μοι φόβου μέλαθρον ἐλπὶς ἐμπατεῖ,  
ἕως ἂν αἴθρη πῦρ ἐφ’ ἐστίας ἐμῆς  
Αἴγισθος. (1434-1436)

My hope does not walk the hall of fear  
as long as Aegisthus lights the fire on my hearth.

With these words, Clytemnestra explains that her loyalty and her love have transferred from Agamemnon to Aegisthus. Goldhill is interested in the words Clytemnestra uses to describe both men: “[she] terms Agamemnon, more specifically in his socially defined role as ‘husband’,

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<sup>12</sup> Electra too takes on this masculine role of revenge against kin-murderers which will be examined later.

<sup>13</sup> Chryseis was another of the concubines Agamemnon took while at Troy.

<sup>14</sup> *Women in Classical Athens* gives two examples of men who allegedly adopted the children of their mistresses as legal heirs because they preferred their mistresses to their wives (Fantham 73). In this way, a wife's standing, along with her children, could be compromised by a relationship between the husband and a concubine or mistress.

‘spouse’, πόσις—rather than the more sexually charged ἀνὴρ. Is there a suggestion that she is unwilling to name Agamemnon πόσις because of her ἀνὴρ, Aegisthus?” (55)<sup>15</sup>. Goldhill points out that there is a clear difference throughout the play with the words Clytemnestra uses to refer to these two men. This is important because of how she views extramarital relationships.

Goldhill argues that “Clytemnestra after professing her love for Aegisthus again, offers the relationship between Agamemnon and his lovers as an example of unacceptable sexuality” (92).

Here one can assume that Clytemnestra is worried about the issues of heirs and inheritance.

However, this judgment Clytemnestra makes is opposite the judgment Athenian society would make, for in Athens, men were allowed to take lovers outside of marriage, but women were not.

According to the laws of Athenian society, if Agamemnon had remained alive after his return,

Clytemnestra would have had to face punishment for her infidelity, while it was perfectly

acceptable for him to return home and welcome a concubine into his home. Therefore, her

murder of Agamemnon is as much an act of self-protection as it is an act of revenge against

Agamemnon for his wrongs against her. Yet by killing Agamemnon, Clytemnestra not only

saves herself, but she also gains the freedom to keep her lover and reject her husband. In this

way, Clytemnestra’s murder is done for more than just revenge; it is done to ensure that she has

the power to live as she wants with whomever she wants.

Furthermore, in these lines, Clytemnestra says that Aegisthus now lights the fire on her

“ἔστιας” ‘hearth’ (*Agamemnon* 1435). The “hearth” in Classical Athens was a very important

location in an Athenian’s life as: “the home of the average Greek of antiquity was in the first

place a hearth, around which was built a house. The domestic space was organized around a

hearth” (Paris 167). This hearth was not only an important physical location, but also a central

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<sup>15</sup> “ἀνὴρ” is a word which means ‘man’ or ‘husband’ but also carries more sexual connotations than the word “πόσις” ‘husband.’

concept in the Greek mindset. The hearth “was the heart of the home, the place of intimacy for the group or family, a shelter from tumult” (168). The hearth symbolized peace and unity within the family. As a result, if the fire of the hearth went out “in the home or in a city of ancient Greece, the significance was tragic, and there were complex rituals for relighting it” (168). When Clytemnestra claims, then, that her lover, Aegisthus, and not her husband, Agamemnon, lights the fire on her hearth, she severely upsets the sanctity of her family’s hearth. She has let the fire go out on Agamemnon’s hearth and has even abandoned that hearth for another. Here, Clytemnestra flaunts her feelings for Aegisthus just before condemning Agamemnon for his concubines. Yet while Clytemnestra seizes the freedom to be with the man she wants, she also places herself under his power. This is again seen in her use of the word “ἑστίας” ‘hearth,’ for not only is the hearth tied to familial unity and peace, it also connotes the domestic sphere which was seen as the province of women (*Agamemnon* 1436). While Clytemnestra manages to remove Agamemnon’s power from her hearth, she also places herself under another man’s power. She initially makes it very clear that she intends to continue ruling Argos after Agamemnon’s death. As was mentioned previously, she tells Aegisthus, “ἐγὼ / καὶ σὺ θήσομεν κρατοῦντε τῶνδε δωμάτων καλῶς” ‘I / and you will establish order in this house being powerful’ (1673). Clytemnestra relishes the thought of continuing to rule Argos just as she had in Agamemnon’s absence. However, her rule is not an individual one. Instead, Clytemnestra must contend with a new man, Aegisthus, for the power of Argos.

By playing a masculine role and a rebellious feminine role, Clytemnestra is able to seize and power in order to bring about her husband’s death and then to also hold onto power as a ruler of Argos. However, like any usurper, she must then confront those who would rebel against her rule. In this case, such rebellion comes from within her own family.

***Electra: The Imperfect Patriarchal Woman***

Now this discussion will turn to the character of Electra, Clytemnestra's daughter, who comes alive in the plays of Sophocles and Euripides, both titled *Electra*. Electra's character is also examined in Aeschylus' play *Libation Bearers*, yet this play and the rest of Aeschylus' trilogy are meant to examine the character of Orestes, Electra's brother, more closely than Electra herself. Because the later plays of Sophocles and Euripides make Electra their focus, this section will draw on Electra's character from these two plays. Though in specific details she is portrayed differently in each play, Electra's goal is the same. In contrast to Clytemnestra's defiance, Electra aims to uphold and restore the patriarchal order which perished along with Agamemnon, her father. As a result, Electra primarily seeks to avenge her father's death at Clytemnestra's hands. In this sense, she is behaving as the ideal woman because of her supreme loyalty to the murdered male leader of Argos. However, Electra's means of returning balance to society are a refutation of the female behavioral expectations of that society. While she acts with the aims of the patriarchy in mind, she abandons the submissive female role for both a masculine and transgressive female one through her language and actions.

Because Electra's main goal for revenge is to uphold the patriarchal society of her murdered father, her character is marked by displays of excessive mourning for her dead father.

From the moment she steps on stage in Sophocles' play, Electra makes her sorrow public:

ἀλλ' οὐ μὲν δὴ  
 λήξω θρήνων στυγερῶν τε γόων,  
 ἔστ' ἂν παμφεγγεῖς ἄστρον  
 ῥιπᾶς, λεύσσω δὲ τόδ' ἡμαρ, (103-106)

But I swear

I will not abate my hateful laments and wailing,  
 as long as I look on the flight of radiant stars,  
 as long as I look on this day,

In Greek society, mourning was mostly recognized as the province of women. McClure explains that “[t]hroughout the Greek tradition, ritual lament, while not exclusively feminine, remained the province and prerogative of women, in whom it was believed there was an innate affinity for weeping and sorrowful songs” (40). In Sophocles’ play, Electra takes this tradition very seriously when she essentially swears not to stop mourning while she lives and looks on the light of day. She says that she lives a life consumed by “θρήνων στυγεράων τε γόων” ‘hateful laments and wailing’ (Sophocles 104). As a result, her life is concerned most unhealthily with death. Electra also laments at uncommon length and with great fervor in Euripides’ play:

οἷς ἀεὶ τὸ κατ’ ἡμᾶρ  
 διέπομαι, κατὰ μὲν φίλαν  
 ὄνυχι τεμνομένα δέραν  
 χέρα τε κρᾶτ’ ἐπὶ κούριμον  
 τιθεμένα θανάτω σῶ. (145-149)

In which [laments] continually day by day  
 I am engaged, on account of my loved ones  
 cutting my neck with my nails  
 and hitting my shorn head with my hands  
 because of your death.

The strength of Electra’s anguish is fierce in this play as is seen when she inflicts bodily harm on herself in the attempt to articulate her profound grief. Furthermore, she mourns in a most public and apparent way, “ἀεὶ κατ’ ἡμᾶρ” ‘continually day by day’ (145). By mourning loudly every single day, Electra makes sure that everyone can hear her grief. In Sophocles’ play, this unnatural mourning is noticed by both the women of the chorus and Electra’s sister, Chrysothemis, who urge her to stop mourning and return to her normal life. The chorus fears that her mourning harms her much more than it helps:

ἀλλ' ἀπὸ τῶν μετρίων ἐπ' ἀμήχανον  
 ἄλγος ἀεὶ στενάχουσα διόλλυσαι,  
 ἐν οἷς ἀνάλυσίς ἐστιν οὐδεμία κακῶν.  
 τί μοι τῶν δυσφόρων ἐφίει; (Sophocles 140-143)

But from moderation to extraordinary pain  
 You are destroyed by always lamenting,  
 in which there is no loosing from evils.  
 Tell me why you desire this suffering?

Not only does the chorus see that her mourning is destroying her, but they also see that she is actively pursuing such pain. Electra does her female duty of mourning for her lost kin and through this loyalty to her male relative, she is the ideal Athenian woman. She is so loyal to the patriarchy, in fact, that she literally wastes away in its absence.

However, she also plays a transgressive female role as a result of the extremity of her mourning. In Classical Athens, mourning was one of the opportunities allowed for women to exercise public speech. However, the Athenian government realized that allowing such unrestrained freedom of speech for women had consequences, so it was decided to restrict public mourning. McClure explains that “[i]n the fifth century, female lamentation is construed as a source of danger and disorder liable to undermine the stable, masculine community of the polis... [ritual lamentation] can function as a form of social protest, and as a spur to revenge” (40-41). As a result, legislation was passed reforming funeral displays which “resulted in a reduced role for women in death rituals” (45). Only certain women were allowed to engage in mourning, that is, the kin of the deceased, and “women could no longer lacerate themselves or wail (χωχύειν) or accompany the funeral procession” (45). In addition to mourning excessively by tearing at her skin and wailing, Electra mourns with women not related to her, thereby rebelling against Athenian laws. Foley notes this, explaining that “[t]he women of the chorus are significantly called *politides*, female citizens (1227); when Electra stirs them to lament, she

violates contemporary Athenian strictures against women lamenting with non-kin” (151).

Through her mourning, Electra is resisting the ruling government that has been set over her<sup>16</sup>, however unjust and corrupt that government might be. It makes sense, then, that the society of Classical Athens was afraid of what women could accomplish by being allowed some form of public speech. In this way, Electra is not behaving as a quiet, submissive woman. Instead she rebels against the rulers of the city and calls for revenge on her father’s murderers<sup>17</sup>. As Sophocles’ play develops, it becomes clear that Electra’s mourning does foreshadow and spur her on to murder her mother. Yet Electra’s resistance is extremely paradoxical. She rebels against the current social order—which is controlled principally by a woman—in favor of a past traditional patriarchal rule. As a result, though Electra plays a subversive feminine role by resisting the authority that has been placed over her, she also acts as a loyal woman devoted to the rightful patriarchy.

Another major reason for Electra’s mourning, besides her grief at her father’s death, is her desire to marry and resume her position in society as belonging to the ruling family of Argos. Electra laments not only her father’s death, but her lack of a husband:

ἄτις ἄνευ τεκέων κατατάκομαι,  
 ἄς φίλος οὔτις ἀνήρ ὑπερίσταται,  
 ἀλλ’ ἀπερεί τις ἔποικος ἀναξία  
 οἰκονομῶ θαλάμους πατρός, (Sophocles 187-190)

I who pine away without children,  
 while no dear husband protects me,  
 but even as some unworthy foreigner  
 I am a housekeeper of the chambers of my father,

As a result of her mother’s treachery and the fall of the ordered, patriarchal society, Electra is not able to live the quiet, ordered life she desires. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus have prevented her from

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<sup>16</sup> Clytemnestra and Aegisthus’ rule

marrying, presumably out of the fear that she will bear children who will eventually avenge Agamemnon's death. Electra's wish for a husband's protection again lines up with a patriarchal system. The expected behavior of Athenian women was to marry, place themselves under their husband's authority, and bear children. Therefore even though Electra desires to marry, she ends up playing a transgressive female role as a result of her unnaturally lengthened unmarried status, and, more importantly, her unnaturally lengthened virginity. In his article, "Gender and Transgression in Sophocles' *Electra*," Graham Wheeler explains the significance of Electra's virginity, when he discusses how the Greeks were wary of female virgins: "Electra's very status as a *παρθένος* [virgin] renders her unsettling. The Greeks constructed women as liminal, half-'natural' beings, and virgins—liminal females—predictably sited themselves towards the wild/'natural' side of the *limen*" (380). A female virgin, in Greek thought, was something of a wild, uncontrollable animal, as yet untamed by any man. This fear harkens back to the worries which surfaced surrounding the first woman, Pandora. In *Theogony*, Hesiod calls Pandora "ἀμήχανον ἀνθρώποισιν" 'irresistible for men' (589). Pandora's beauty is dangerous to man because he can be overcome by it, rather than control it. Therefore, a man must do what he can to assert control over a woman which is symbolized by the loss of a female's virginity. Yet not only is Pandora irresistible, but she is also insatiable. Zeitlin explains how Pandora "is later likened to a fire that consumes and withers man by her appetites for both food and sex" (56). A woman's sexuality, then, can consume a man if it is not controlled. The Greek fear of a woman's virginity makes sense, then, because such a woman holds sexual power over a man. Electra, Wheeler notes, is especially frightening in Sophocles' play because her virginity has been prolonged beyond what is natural; she should have been married long before, but was hindered by

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<sup>17</sup> Electra views both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra as her father's murderers even though Clytemnestra was the one who actually killed him.

Aegisthus' order (380). Wheeler then explains that “ancient physicians linked *παρθενία* [virginity] with mental instability, suicidal tendencies and hallucinations in a pseudo-biology which helped buttress the dominant ideology of patriarchal patriliney” (381). In remaining unmarried and a virgin, Electra is something of a wildcard: untamed and even mentally unstable. Euripides, on the other hand, in his play, decides to portray Electra as married, but nevertheless decides to keep her virgin status. In this play, Aegisthus marries her off to a peasant in order to debase her and impress upon her how low she has fallen in status with the death of her father. He further seems to think that any children she might conceive with a peasant will be too weak to challenge his rule. Ironically though, Aegisthus portrays an incredibly honorable peasant as Electra's husband. Electra tells Orestes, “οὐπόποτ' εὐνής τῆς ἐμῆς ἔτλη θιγεῖν ‘Never has he ventured to touch me in my bed’ (Euripides 255). In this play Electra is married, as was proper for a woman of her age, but by remaining a virgin within that marriage, her transgressive role shines even more. Moreover, not only does Electra retain her virginity despite being married, but she also holds the power in her marriage. By not taking advantage of her as would have been completely justifiable to the Greeks, her husband instead respects her wishes and leaves her untouched<sup>18</sup>. He sways to Electra's wishes rather than the other way around, and she retains an irresistible sexual power over him. In this way, Electra plays the masculine role, the role of power, while her husband plays the submissive female role. Electra's position is again strangely paradoxical as her prolonged virginity allows her to play both a transgressive female role as well as a masculine role while still desiring to have the regular marriage of the ideal Athenian woman.

While Electra yearns to play the submissive role of an Athenian wife, there is also a part of her that desires power. In Sophocles' play, she is bitter toward Clytemnestra and Aegisthus

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<sup>18</sup> By retaining her virginity, Electra's marriage to the peasant is null, and she is later married off to Pylades, making a proper alliance for her family (see page 55).

not only because they murdered her father but also because they force her to debase herself like an “ἀναξία” ‘unworthy’ foreigner and servant and serve them (Sophocles 189). Electra’s discontentment with her low status also appears in Euripides’ play when she tells Clytemnestra that she is no better than a slave because of her current situation. She does this in a sarcastic way, including herself with her mother’s slaves:

οὔκουν ἐγὼ — δούλη γὰρ ἐκβεβλημένη  
 δόμων πατρῶων δυστυχεῖς οἰκῶ δόμους —  
 μήτηρ, λάβωμαι μακαρίας τῆς σῆς χερός; (Euripides 1004-1006)

Certainly I—I live as a slave  
 in this unlucky house having been cast out of my father’s house—  
 mother, may I take your hand which is blessed?

Electra’s anger is clear. She resents her mother for essentially demoting her to the position of a “δούλη” ‘slave’ (1004) and for causing her to lose her high position in “δόμων πατρῶων” ‘her father’s house’ (1005). As a result, not only does Electra want to avenge her father’s death, but she also desires to regain her position and status—such as they were—that she enjoyed under her father’s reign. However, Electra still does not seem to know what she wants. She desires to be married and in doing so, place herself under a man’s authority, but at the same time she seems to want to hold power and control over her own life. These two desires conflict because one echoes the desires of the patriarchy while one is in defiance to patriarchal aims. Electra exhibits this desire to regain her status in society in Euripides’s play as well. As was said before, Aegisthus had married her off to a peasant, and Electra laments this change in her status. She complains of her clothes, “πίνω θ’ ὄσφ βέβριθ” ‘heavy with great filth’ while “μήτηρ δ’ ἐμὴ Φρυγίοισιν ἐν σκυλεύμασιν / θρόνῳ κάθηται” ‘my mother is seated on her throne in the spoils of Troy’ (Euripides 305, 314-315). Electra clearly wishes to regain her power and status in society, and is

not content to remain a peasant. Her desires in both Sophocles' and Euripides' plays are decidedly masculine desires.

In addition to her desire for status and a return to normal, Electra strongly wants to see her father avenged. As her mourning shows in Sophocles' play, she is very mindful of his murder and believes that through mourning him she is showing that she has not forgotten the crime:

εἰ γὰρ ὁ μὲν θανὼν γᾶ τε καὶ οὐδὲν ὄν  
 κείσεται τάλας,  
 οἱ δὲ μὴ πάλιν  
 δώσουσ' ἀντιφόνους δίκας,  
 ἔρροι τ' ἂν αἰδῶς  
 ἀπάντων τ' εὐσέβεια θνατῶν. (Sophocles 245-250).

For if the one who died is to lie wretched  
 being earth and nothingness,  
 but the ones who killed him are not  
 to pay back the just penalty in return for their slaughter,  
 then shame and respect for the law  
 will disappear from mortals.

Electra is very conscious of the need for vengeance in return for her father's death and refuses to stop mourning and forget the crime. She strongly desires that her mother and Aegisthus pay the price for their dishonorable murder. Not only does Electra desire this revenge, she also sees it as the only logical result of their murder. This can be seen in the very grammar she uses when she says the words, ἔρροι ἂν" 'must disappear' (249). In his commentary, J.H. Kells explains that here the word "ἂν"<sup>19</sup> combined with the optative<sup>20</sup> form of the verb "ἔρρω" 'to disappear,' conveys the "logical" sense of ἂν (97). This grammar form means that if the first part of the phrase is true—in this case, if Agamemnon's murders are left unpunished—then it logically follows that a certain event will happen. In other words, if Clytemnestra and Aegisthus get away with their crime, then shame and respect for the law will disappear among all men. While this

<sup>19</sup> The word, "ἂν" remains untranslated, conveying a sense or flavor for the sentence.

<sup>20</sup> The optative is one of the four grammatical moods in ancient Greek. It usually denotes a wish or hope.

statement may seem like an exaggeration, it actually makes sense in the culture of Ancient Greece. The desire for vengeance derives from the great sense of honor and duty present in Classical Athens. It was the duty of the family members of the person murdered to exact vengeance on the person who had done the murdering. In this way, the person murdered was not only avenged, but, as Electra would see it, such revenge prevented the breakdown of an orderly society. In her article, “Vengeance and Pollution in Classical Athens,” Margaret Visser explains this:

Every man owed total allegiance to his family, and all of his kinsmen were affronted by any dishonor done to him; they needed to have the opportunity of demanding satisfaction for the loss of one of their own... Vengeance automatically followed the smirching of honor; it required equality of damage done, and “blood must have blood.” (194)

Visser explains how important family was in Classical Athens. Because family was so important, every action had to be taken to ensure family members were respected and honored, even to the point of seeking the death of others. However as this quotation makes clear, the duty of vengeance was on the male kin, not the female kin. Therefore, Electra’s acute awareness of this duty shows how she plays a masculine role. She is not content to allow men to uphold her family’s honor. Rather, she sees herself inhabiting a masculine position where her father’s honor rests in her hands<sup>21</sup>.

As can be seen in Sophocles’ play, Electra’s sense of duty to the patriarchy is exacerbated by her frustration with Orestes’ absence<sup>22</sup>. She angrily exclaims, “μέλλων γὰρ αἰεὶ δρᾶν τι τὰς

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<sup>21</sup> Such honor also extends to the need for family members to ensure a proper burial. This is true for Antigone in Sophocles’ *Antigone*. Antigone feels that she must give her brother, Polynices, the honor of a proper burial, even though it has been outlawed by the city’s ruler, Creon. Like Electra, Antigone has the highest loyalty to what she considers to be the patriarchy, though like Electra, she plays a rebellious role in order to satisfy that loyalty.

<sup>22</sup> After Agamemnon’s murder, Electra sent Orestes away, who was a baby at the time, out of fear that Aegisthus and Clytemnestra would kill him before he reached the age to avenge his father’s murder.

οὔσας τέ μου / καὶ τὰς ἀπούσας ἐλπίδας διέφθορον” ‘Being always about to do something with respect to my present hopes<sup>23</sup> / and he has destroyed my absent<sup>24</sup> hopes’ (Sophocles 305-306).

Electra is beginning to fear that Orestes will not come to her as she hopes. She even begins to question whether he will actually avenge their father. Her bitterness is clear when she comments on Orestes’ language and actions: “φησὶν γε: φάσκων δ’ οὐδὲν ὧν λέγει ποιεῖ” ‘At any rate he declares he will come. But even though he says it he does nothing of the things he has said’ (319). Electra’s frustration with Orestes’ apparent lack of respect for his murdered father clearly resonates in her words. She does not think that he is being a good son because he has not appeared to enact vengeance on his father’s killers. Unlike her brother, Electra is more than willing to match actions to words. As a result, she steps into a masculine role, taking the responsibility for this vengeance and hints that her actions will be shocking while she attempts this revenge. She explains this to the chorus:

ἐν οὔν τοιούτοις οὔτε σωφρονεῖν, φίλοι,  
οὔτ’ εὐσεβεῖν πάρεστιν: ἀλλ’ ἐν τοι κακοῖς  
πολλή ‘στ’ ἀνάγκη κάπιτηδεύειν κακά. (Sophocles 307-309)

Therefore, friends, things being such as they are it is not possible to be temperate or to act piously. But when one is suffering evil there is great necessity to pursue evil.

Electra admits that she has decided to take on a traditionally masculine role and take things into her own hands. She will pursue what she knows is not a woman’s prerogative and avenge her father’s death. As a result, Electra knows that she is forsaking her quest to be an ideal Athenian woman and cannot claim the feminine virtue of “σωφροσύνη<sup>25</sup>” ‘temperance.’ The word, “σωφροσύνη” is a typical description of what the average Athenian woman was expected to aspire to. Foley calls “σωφροσύνη” the “quintessential female virtue,” and defines it as “self-

<sup>23</sup> Her present hope is that Orestes will come to her.

<sup>24</sup> Her absent hope is that he will kill Agamemnon’s murderers.

control, chastity, discretion” (150). Such words do not describe a woman who “ἀπιτηδεύει κακά” ‘pursues evil.’ In fact, as Foley suggests, “[s]*ophrosune* is in this speech no longer a matter of female discretion, self-control, and obedience to her guardians, but of an active piety, courage, and even self-respect” (151). The speech Foley refers to is when Electra accuses Chrysothemis of not being that self-controlled, chaste, and discrete woman: “τῆς σῆς δ’ οὐκ ἐρῶ τιμῆς τυχεῖν, / οὐδ’ ἄν σύ, σώφρων γ’ οὔσα” ‘I will not desire the honor paid to you, nor would you if you were temperate’ (364-365). Foley claims that at this point, Electra is actually arguing for a different definition of this word: “Clearly, Electra’s position has pushed her beyond the boundaries of the submissiveness normally expected of females to the point that she comes close to defining female virtue as entailing independent thought and activity rather than obedience” (151). Electra’s words and her rejection of the traditional definition of “σωφροσύνη” show that she has rejected her obedient feminine role for a clearly rebellious feminine role if not for a fully masculine one. She upsets typical ideas of how women should act, thereby upsetting the ordered society in which women know their place.

Electra’s rebellious role is further seen when she is placed next to her sister Chrysothemis. Like the chorus, Chrysothemis counsels Electra to curb her mourning. In Sophocles’ play she tells Electra “μὴ δοκεῖν μὲν δρᾶν τι, πημαίνειν δὲ μή” ‘to not seem to be doing anything, and to not do any mischief’ (336). Chrysothemis, in comparison to Electra, plays a more acceptable female role. She explains that, “εἰ δ’ ἐλευθέραν με δεῖ / ζῆν, τῶν κρατούντων ἐστὶ πάντ’ ἀκουστέα” ‘If it is necessary for me to live in peace, / I must listen in all things to the ones in power’ (339-340). Chrysothemis submits meekly to the ones in power over her rather than trying to control her situation as Electra does. As a result, Electra becomes angry with her sister and accuses her of supporting her father’s killers. However, Chrysothemis ignores her and

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<sup>25</sup> When transliterated, σωφροσύνη is *sophrosune*.

brings a warning concerning Electra's unrestrained speech. She tells her sister that because Electra has been so vocal in her anger and lamentation, her mother's killers are going to try to silence her:

μέλλουσι γάρ σ', εἰ τῶνδε μὴ λήξεις γόων,  
 ἔνταῦθα πέμψειν ἔνθα μὴ ποθ' ἡλίου  
 φέγγος προσόψει, (Sophocles 379-381)

For they intend for you, if you do not cease this grieving,  
 they will send you thither where you will not  
 see the light of the sun.

While this plot shows Chrysothemis' willingness to submit to authority, it also shows the power of Electra's words and how they are a threat to the current rulers. By speaking out and refusing to be silent, Electra gains much power. Rachel Kitzinger argues in her article "Why Mourning Becomes Electra" that "[Electra] makes a case for the necessity of her speech, and she simultaneously demonstrates its power as an expression of grief that in itself condemns the injustice that rules her world" (307). Electra's speech disrupts those in power over her, and by speaking such words, she shows how powerful she is in her masculine role. She is so powerful, in fact, that she is threatened with death.

Rejecting Chrysothemis' counsel of temperance, Electra's next action is to fully step into her masculine role. A messenger comes and gives her the news that Orestes is dead. Electra does not know that this statement is false and is a ruse orchestrated by Orestes himself. However, the point is that she believes it is true and decides to take a radical step. She proposes to her sister that they should avenge their father's death:

νῦν δ' ἡνίκ' οὐκέτ' ἔστιν, εἰς σὲ δὴ βλέπω,  
 ὅπως τὸν αὐτόχειρα πατρός φόνου  
 ξὺν τῇδ' ἀδελφῇ μὴ κατοκνήσεις κτανεῖν  
 Αἴγισθον. (Sophocles 954-957)

But now that [Orestes] is no more, I look to you,

that you will not shrink from killing  
with your own hand together with your sister  
the murderer of our father, Aegisthus.

Chrysothemis, in accordance with her character is terrified and shocked that Electra would suggest such a transgressive act. For Chrysothemis, it is the role of a man to worry about vengeance and the role of a woman to submit to those in authority. Furthermore, she knows that a woman's actions relate to the issue of pollution. Visser explains that "the purity of a family resides typically with the women of the household whose men are expected to defend it" (194). Electra should not be the one to avenge her father's death because she is a woman. If she avenges his death, she oversteps her bounds as a woman as well as possibly pollutes the family. However, she ignores the fact that it is the duty of men to defend women's honor, not the duty of women to defend men's. She furthermore continues in this masculine role by using terms typical of heroic language and tries to tempt Chrysothemis with visions of glory:

λόγων γε μὴν εὐκλειαν οὐχ ὀρέσῃ ὄσσην  
σαυτῆ τε κάμοι προσβαλεῖς πεισθεῖς ἔμοι; (973-974)

...  
τώδ' ἔνθ' ἐορταῖς ἔν τε πανδήμῳ πόλει  
τιμᾶν ἅπαντας οὐνεκ' ἀνδρείας χρεῶν.  
τοιαῦτά τοι νῶ πᾶς τις ἐξερεῖ βροτῶν,  
ζώσαιν θανούσαιν θ' ὅστε μὴ κλιπεῖν κλέος. (982-985)

Do you not see how much fame of words  
you will procure for yourself and for me by obeying me?

...  
At the festivals and at any gathering of the city's population  
It will be necessary for all to honor us on account of our manly courage.  
Such things I say will be said by every single man,  
in living and in dying our glory will not fade.

Electra paints a picture of future glory for Chrysothemis with the words "λόγων...εὐκλειαν" 'heroic reputation' (973); "ἀνδρείας" 'manly courage' (983); "κλέος" 'glory' (985). Such words would not have been out of place in the mouths of heroes like Achilles or Odysseus. Foley

argues that “Electra also expects a recognition normally accorded to male heroes” (160). It is clear then that Electra plays a masculine role when she uses these words of masculine heroism.

However, in addition to glory, Electra wants freedom. She tells Chrysothemis that if they kill their mother, “ἔπειτα δ’, ὥσπερ ἐξέφυς, ἐλευθέρα / καλεῖ τὸ λοιπὸν” ‘Afterwards, just as when you were born, / you will be called free for the rest of your life’ (Sophocles 970-971). Electra desires greatly to be freed from her present misery. She no longer wants to serve as a slave in her father’s house, but she wants to be “ἐλευθέρα” ‘free.’ She sees that by behaving as a meekly submitting woman she will never achieve these ends. Instead she realizes that she must enact a masculine role in order to achieve both her revenge and her freedom. However, the freedom Electra seeks is not really freedom at all. She tells Chrysothemis that once they succeed, “γάμων ἐπαξίων / τεύξει” ‘you will obtain a worthy marriage’ (971-972). Electra’s end goal is to eventually get married. Despite going about achieving this goal in a highly rebellious way, Electra desires, in the end, only to live under a stable patriarchal rule. She plays the part of man to be able eventually to play the part of a woman who is not in control of her life.

Chrysothemis’ arguments quell neither Electra’s mourning nor her fury, and as a result Chrysothemis fades out of the play, leaving the stage open for the confrontation between Electra and Clytemnestra. When they finally meet, both women speak in a manner reminiscent of the law courts. This begins when Electra requests permission to speak: “ἀλλ’ ἦν ἐφῆς μοι, τοῦ τεθνηκότος θ’ ὑπερ / λέξαιμ’ ἂν ὀρθῶς τῆς κασιγνήτης θ’ ὁμοῦ” ‘But if you will allow me, on behalf of my dead father and sister alike / I should like to speak correctly’ (Sophocles 554-555). This language bears resemblance to the freedom of speech which was granted to only Athenian men. However, that Electra and Clytemnestra are using this language shows how both of them play masculine parts. Furthermore, Electra even references the legal system of Athens when she

says, “ὄρα τιθεῖσα τόνδε τὸν νόμον βροτοῖς / μὴ πῆμα σαυτῆ καὶ μετάγνοιαν τιθῆς” ‘See that when you lay down such a law for men / you do not lay down misery and remorse for yourself’ (580-581). Electra tells Clytemnestra not to invent laws that justify her actions. It is important to note that a woman is being accused of making laws, which is an event that would never occur in a stable patriarchal society. Through such political talk, Electra and Clytemnestra show that they are both playing masculine roles: Clytemnestra reorders society how she sees fit and Electra rebels against that society.

Electra also exchanges words with her mother in Euripides’ play just before bringing her inside to her death. The speech between these two women highlights their awareness of their masculine roles. Clytemnestra gives a speech defending herself and then grants Electra permission to give an answer. She says, “λέγ’, εἴ τι χρήζεις, κἀντίθεος παρρησία, / ὅπως τέθνηκε σὸς πατὴρ οὐκ ἐνδίκως” ‘Speak if you want to say something, answer back with freedom of speech<sup>26</sup> / how your father died unjustly’ (Euripides 1049-1050). Before giving her rebuttal, Electra says, “μέμνησο, μῆτερ, οὓς ἔλεξας ὑστάτους / λόγους, διδοῦσα πρὸς σέ μοι παρρησίαν” ‘Remember, mother, the last words you said, / giving me the right to speak freely’ (1055-1056). As Judith Mossman notes in her article, “Women’s Speech in Greek Tragedy: the Case of Electra and Clytemnestra in Euripides’ *Electra*,” “Clytemnestra offers her, and she lays claim to *parrhesia* (1049, 1056). This as we have seen is the freedom of speech associated with a healthy (male) political system and specifically with democracy as opposed to tyranny” (381). As was seen in the very first description of Clytemnestra in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra and now Electra take part in “παρρησία” ‘free speech.’ By laying claim to this masculine right, Clytemnestra and Electra both act like Athenian citizen men. However, Mossman further notes

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<sup>26</sup> This word “παρρησία” ‘freedom of speech,’ is transliterated as *parrhesia*.

that the women do not “speak of *parrhesia* in front of a man” (381). There is also a sense, therefore, that their masculine roles can only carry them so far on the road to power<sup>27</sup>.

The stage is now set for Electra to carry out her revenge against her mother. In Sophocles’ play, even though Electra is willing to enact revenge on her mother all by herself, Orestes eventually reveals himself to her, and they act together. Though Orestes is decisive and acts immediately in this play, Clytemnestra’s death scene is a strange one. As in all Greek tragedy, the murder does not happen on but off-stage. As a result, Clytemnestra’s last words are shouted from off-stage while Electra remains on-stage. Though Orestes is the one who does the actual killing, his voice is not heard in this scene. Instead, Electra and Clytemnestra exchange lines, clearly showing their dominant personalities:

**Κλυταιμνήστρα.** ὦ τέκνον τέκνον,  
οἴκτιρε τὴν τεκοῦσαν.  
**Ἥλέκτρα.** ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐκ σέθεν  
ᾠκτίρεθ’ οὗτος οὐδ’ ὁ γεννήσας πατήρ.  
**Χορός.** ὦ πόλις, ὦ γενεὰ τάλαινα, νῦν σοι  
μοῖρα καθαμερία φθίνει φθίνει.  
**Κλυταιμνήστρα.** ὦμοι πέπληγμαί.  
**Ἥλέκτρα.** παῖσον, εἰ σθένεις, διπλῆν.  
**Κλυταιμνήστρα.** ὦμοι μάλ’ αὔθις.  
**Ἥλέκτρα.** εἰ γὰρ Αἰγίσθω θ’ ὁμοῦ. (Sophocles 1411-1418)

CLYTEMNESTRA. My child, my child,  
take pity on the one who brought you into the world!  
ELECTRA. But you did not  
pity him nor for the father who begot him.  
CHORUS. Oh city, oh wretched family,  
now your daily fate perishes—it perishes.  
CLYTEMNESTRA. Oh me, I am struck!  
ELECTRA. Strike her a second time, if you have the strength!  
CLYTEMNESTRA. Struck again!  
ELECTRA. If only Aegisthus was struck likewise.

The force of Electra’s character comes out clearly in these words. Not only does she give orders to her brother, a man, but she is shown to be bloodthirsty and merciless. She takes no pity on her

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<sup>27</sup> This issue will be examined further in the following section.

mother and does not appear satisfied with her death alone, but she wishes for Aegisthus' death as well. She stands in stark contrast to Orestes who needs to be encouraged to strike again and carry out the deed. Because Orestes does not speak during the murder scene, it is clear that Electra is the one in control, even though she is a woman.

In Euripides' play, Electra's masculine role is even more pronounced than it is in Sophocles' play when she is placed next to Orestes. Throughout this play, Orestes suffers from indecision, and he constantly asks Electra what to do. This first occurs when he speaks with her while disguised as a stranger to Argos. He asks, "τί δῆτ' Ὀρέστης πρὸς τόδ', Ἄργος ἦν μόλις;" 'What is it necessary for Orestes to do in this, if he comes to Argos?' (Euripides 274). Rather than coming up with a plan of his own to avenge his father's honor, Orestes wants Electra to tell him what to do. Electra is surprised by this question. She sees this as an insult to Orestes because, in her mind, Orestes is so honorable that he would not hesitate to act. She replies, "ἦπου τόδ'; αἰσχρὸν γ' εἶπας: οὐ γὰρ νῦν ἀκμή;" 'Do you ask this? You speak shamefully. For is now not the critical time to act?' (275). However Electra's reply still is not good enough for Orestes. He must know exactly what actions to take: "ἐλθὼν δὲ δὴ πῶς φονέας ἂν κτάνοι πατρός;" 'But when he comes, how should he kill the slayers of his father?' (276). Orestes comes across as weak and indecisive when he cannot even come up with his own plan to accomplish his revenge. It is even more striking that he asks these questions of Electra, a woman who supposedly should not concern herself with masculine revenge. Orestes goes against this typical Greek idea when he asks Electra, "ἦ καὶ μετ' αὐτοῦ μητέρ' ἂν τλαίης κτανεῖν;" 'Is it also the case that you would dare with him to kill your mother?' (278). Here Orestes shows that he is afraid to act on his own, a very un-masculine sentiment. Instead of showing courage and honor, he asks his sister, a woman, to help him take the revenge which is the duty of a male relative. Yet Electra shows that

she clearly is the most daring of the two when she immediately rejoins, “ταὐτῷ γε πελέκει τῷ πατὴρ ἀπόλετο.” ‘Yes, with the same axe that killed my father’ (279). She further acts in her masculine role by showing that her whole life is concerned with repaying the wrong done to her father: “θάνομι μητρὸς αἷμι’ ἐπισφάξασ’ ἐμῆς” ‘May I die once I have shed my mother’s blood’ (281). Again, Electra’s bloodlust comes through and, her vengeful manner contrasts sharply with Orestes’ vacillation. Electra is so consumed with her need for vengeance that she has even picked out the murder weapon.

Electra’s courage and masculine role is shown most clearly in contrast with Orestes when they finally set about achieving the murders. Once Orestes finally reveals himself to Electra, they set about planning their revenge. Orestes is charged with killing Aegisthus before they are to kill Clytemnestra, and he again shows his indecisiveness when he cannot come up with his own plan for Aegisthus’ death. He tells the old pedagogue, the man who saved him from death at Clytemnestra’s hands, “εἶέν: σὸ δὴ τοῦνθένδε βούλευσον, γέρον” ‘Well said. You must plan from here, old man’ (Euripides 618). Orestes relies wholly upon the old man to accomplish his revenge. Electra, on the other hand, has a plan ready. When Orestes asks how to kill both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, Electra interjects: “ἐγὼ φόνον γε μητρὸς ἐξαρτύσομαι” ‘I myself will make ready the murder of my mother’ (647). She further expounds a plan to lure her mother to her death at Electra’s lowly cottage. Electra’s readiness to kill her mother and her ability to come up with a plan shows her intelligence and deviousness. She clearly plays a stronger masculine role than Orestes. Furthermore, in the killings themselves, Electra shows herself to have more courage than Orestes. Orestes accomplishes the murder of Aegisthus in a surprisingly spineless manner. A messenger runs ahead of Orestes to the cottage and tells the story of Aegisthus’ death to Electra and the old man:

τοῦ δὲ νεύοντος κάτω  
 ὄνυχας ἐπ' ἄκρους σταῖς κασίγνητος σέθεν  
 ἐς σφονδύλους ἔπαισε, νωτιαῖα δὲ  
 ἔρρηξεν ἄρθρα: (839-842)

While [Aegisthus] was bending down  
 your brother stood on his tiptoes  
 and struck his back,  
 and he shattered the joints of the spinal cord.

Orestes kills Aegisthus in a decidedly cowardly way. He chooses to strike him from behind rather than to stand and face him. This murder would not have been a murder done by any of the heroes of Greek mythology such as Achilles, Hector, or Ajax. Orestes' cowardice and Electra's courage are again seen when Orestes is confronted with murdering his mother. After the murder, which again occurs off-stage, he recounts the deed to the chorus:

βοᾶν δ' ἔλασκε τάνδε, πρὸς γένυν ἐμᾶν  
 τιθεῖσα χεῖρα: Τέκος ἐμόν, λιταίνω:  
 παρήδων τ' ἐξ ἐμᾶν  
 ἐκρίμαθ', ὥστε χέρας ἐμὰς λιπεῖν βέλος. (1214-1217)

But she screamed these things while crying as she  
 held my jaw with her hand "My child, I beg you!"  
 while she hung from my chin,  
 so that I dropped the sword from my hands.

Orestes is so shaken by his mother's piteous entreaty that he does not have the strength to carry out the deed even though it is his duty to avenge his father's death. Electra, however, has no such hesitations. With her encouragement, Orestes rouses himself to cover his eyes and place the sword at his mother's throat. Electra says, "ἐγὼ δ' ἐπεγκέλευσά σοι / ξίφους τ' ἐφηψάμαν ἅμα" 'And I ordered you to do it / And I grasped the sword at the same time' (1224-1225). In light of Electra's bloodthirsty words and Orestes' hesitation, one might wonder who was guiding the sword and pushing the hardest. The chorus seems to place the responsibility on Electra for the deed when they say, "δεινὰ δ' εἰργάσω, / φίλα, κασίγνητον οὐ θέλοντα" 'You did terrible things

to your dear unwilling brother' (1204-1205). For the chorus, then, Electra was the one in control of the murder even though she is the woman. She is responsible for the murder even though the responsibility should be on the male relative. In this way, then, she is the one in the masculine role. Mossman comments on the siblings' account of the murder which again highlights Orestes' cowardice and even femininity in comparison to Electra: "Orestes always utters first and Electra follows..., in each case more briefly than her brother. Given that lamentation is often seen as the province of women, this is striking" (383). In this instance, it seems that Orestes plays the feminine role of mourning while Electra is more self-contained, thereby playing a masculine role.

Throughout the plays of both Sophocles and Euripides, Electra displays the desire to live as an ideal Athenian woman under the patriarchal rule. However, her rebellious wailing as well as her bloodthirsty actions reveal that she plays a transgressive female role as well as an heroic masculine one. Her actions are also colored by her desire to attain a high place in society and power over her own life. Like Clytemnestra, Electra cannot remain free to do as she wishes, unharmed by her rebellious actions. The aftermath of hers and Clytemnestra's actions will now be examined in this final section.

### *Orestes: The Return to Stability*

While at first glance it would appear that through their rebellious actions, Clytemnestra and Electra succeed in gaining power, it quickly becomes clear that society cannot remain stable while they maintain such control. Society only returns to stability when Orestes regains his birthright as the ruler of Argos with the death of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. While

Clytemnestra and Electra are able to convincingly play masculine roles and seize power, society does not accept them because these women are, in the end, women. Society can only stabilize itself by reverting back to its traditional patriarchal form. This final stabilization is seen when the downfall of Clytemnestra and the departure of Electra are compared with the triumph of Orestes.

While Clytemnestra and Electra are able to gain power most notably through their speech, their sex works to undermine this. The hallmarks of Clytemnestra's and Electra's speeches are their powers of persuasion, and Clytemnestra especially is noted for her persuasive power. On several occasions, which have already been detailed, her persuasiveness is even described as masculine. Electra also holds persuasive power to such an extent that her life is even threatened by Aegisthus. He fears that Electra holds great power by her continued mourning and that her displays will foment a rebellion against his rule. However, this persuasive power of Clytemnestra and Electra is, in a way, corrupted by their sex. When speaking of the verbal genres of women's speech in Classical Athens, McClure describes what she calls "seductive persuasion" (62). She explains how persuasion differs between men and women:

[Seductive persuasion] refers more generally to literary representations of women's deceptive use of persuasion as a means of gaining power over men, normally in a domestic and erotic context. In contrast to the masculine *peithō*, which promotes the city and civic values, this type of persuasion, as an embodiment of *dolos*, "verbal cunning," threatens to undermine social stability. (62)

It would seem then that to the Greek mind, there is some difference between seductive persuasion and political persuasion. Political persuasion carries more positive connotations of civic welfare as opposed to seductive persuasion which denotes dishonest trickery. However, McClure goes on to explain that

The Athenians did not really distinguish between sexual and political persuasion, however, and in fact continually conflated the two forms, although they did associate erotic and deceitful persuasion mainly with women and with womanish men, and considered more direct forms of political persuasion the province of “real” men and the polis. (62)

It would seem then that there are no concrete qualities which differ between these two types of persuasion. In other words, persuasion is persuasion. Instead, the only difference arises as a result of the sex of the person speaking. This is the classic double standard. Men and women perform the same action, but are viewed differently on account of their sex. When women try to persuade people, they are seen as promiscuous while when men persuade, they are merely making logical arguments. In Euripides’ play, Clytemnestra actually references this hypocrisy when she says,

ὅταν δ’ ὑπόντος τοῦδ’ ἄμαρτάνη πόσις  
 τᾶνδον παρώσας λέκτρα, μιμεῖσθαι θέλει  
 γυνὴ τὸν ἄνδρα χᾶτερον κτᾶσθαι φίλον.  
 κᾶπειτ’ ἐν ἡμῖν ὁ ψόγος λαμπρύνεται,  
 οἱ δ’ αἴτιοι τῶνδ’ οὐ κλύουσ’ ἄνδρες κακῶς. (1036-1040)

But this is granted, that whenever a husband should err  
 rejecting his bed at home, the wife wishes to imitate him  
 and procure for herself another lover.  
 And afterwards the blemish shines brightly in us,  
 but the men, who are the cause of this, are not spoken of badly.

While Clytemnestra is referring to the double standard as it relates to fidelity and sexuality, the same can be said for persuasive language. When a man uses persuasion, it is seen as political savvy, but when a woman is persuasive, it means she is wrongly trying to seduce someone. In this way, the patriarchy asserts itself and eliminates the chance for Clytemnestra and Electra to gain stable power through persuasive words.

Their ultimate downfall becomes most clear when Clytemnestra and Electra are compared to Orestes. In this examination, it is telling that Clytemnestra and Electra come to rather bad ends while Orestes manages to regain and solidify his power. This is, of course, due to the fact that he is actually a man, rather than just playing the role of a man. While the events surrounding the women's downfalls differ in each of Aeschylus', Sophocles', and Euripides' versions, their downfalls still occur while Orestes' triumph is secured.

In each of the playwrights' versions, Clytemnestra succeeds in gaining power and in ruling Argos—for a time. As was explained earlier, in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, it is clear that even though on the surface she shares power with Aegisthus, Clytemnestra is the one in control. She tells him in the final line of the play, “ἐγὼ / καὶ σὺ θήσομεν κρατοῦντε τῶνδε δωματίων καλῶς” ‘I / and you ruling this house, will put things right’ (1672-1673). While Clytemnestra says these words to pacify Aegisthus and make him think that he is in control, it is clear that she does not think so. Not only does she include herself in the power structure by saying “ἐγὼ” ‘I’, but she also places herself before Aegisthus in that power struggle by saying “ἐγὼ” ‘I’ before “σὺ” ‘you.’ It is bold enough for a woman to consider herself as a co-ruler of a country, but to place herself before a man in power is even more audacious. It is clear then that Clytemnestra initially manages to achieve her rebellious desires of murdering her husband and seizing power. This becomes even clearer in *Libation Bearers*, the next play of Aeschylus' trilogy, where it is Clytemnestra, not Aegisthus, who presents herself in response to Orestes' inquiry for “τοῖσι κυρίοισι δωματίων” ‘the ones ruling in the household’ (*Libation* 658). In this way, Clytemnestra controls of the matters of the house rather than Aegisthus. At the same time, though, there is still the sense of confusion between Clytemnestra's and Aegisthus' power. There seems to be some sort of struggle between who truly holds the power of Argos. In the *Electra* of Euripides, Electra

reports of Clytemnestra: “μήτηρ δ’ ἐμὴ Φρυγίοισιν ἐν σκυλεύμασιν / θρόνῳ κάθηται” ‘But my mother is seated on her throne in the spoils of Troy’ (315-316). Despite the possible struggle over power between Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, Clytemnestra clearly profits from her daring and rules Argos in wealth and splendor.

However, all good things cannot last, and it quickly becomes apparent that society will not allow Clytemnestra’s rule to last for very long. In *Libation Bearers*, the first hint that all is not well with Clytemnestra’s rule reveals itself with the news that she is haunted by terrible dreams. The chorus tells Orestes that “τεκεῖν δράκοντ’ ἔδοξεν” ‘she dreamed she gave birth to a serpent’ and “αὐτὴ προσέσχε μάζον ἐν τῶνείρατι” ‘she gave it her breast in her dream’ (527, 531). Thereupon she did not escape unharmed, but while suckling, the serpent “γάλακτι θρόμβον αἵματος σπάσαι” ‘drew in milk and clotted blood’ (533). While Clytemnestra is in a position of power, there are signs that her control will come to an end. Not only that, but her rule will end in favor of a man. This unsettling dream is correctly interpreted by Orestes to foreshadow Clytemnestra’s death at his hands. Orestes is the serpent, which usually symbolizes a deceitful trickster, to whom Clytemnestra gave birth, and who will eventually turn on her. Sophocles presents Clytemnestra’s dream in a different way in *Electra*. Chrysothemis, Clytemnestra’s daughter reports:

λόγος τις αὐτήν ἐστιν εἰσιδεῖν πατρὸς  
 τοῦ σοῦ τε κάμοῦ δευτέραν ὀμιλίαν  
 ἐλθόντος ἐς φῶς: εἶτα τόνδ’ ἐφέστιον  
 πῆξαι λαβόντα σκῆπτρον οὐφόρει ποτὲ  
 αὐτός, τανῦν δ’ Αἴγισθος: ἐκ δὲ τοῦδ’ ἄνω  
 βλαστεῖν βρύοντα θαλλόν, ᾧ κατάσκιον  
 πᾶσαν γενέσθαι τὴν Μυκηναίων χθόνα. (Sophocles 417-423)

The story is that she saw the father  
 of you and me and had intercourse with him a second time  
 he having come into the light<sup>28</sup>. Then taking the scepter that once was his

<sup>28</sup> He came back to life.

he fixed it in the earth, the scepter he no longer carries,  
 but now Aegisthus carries it. From this  
 upwards bursting a young shoot grew which came to shade  
 all the land of the Mycenaeans.

Sophocles' form of the dream places even more emphasis on authority than does Aeschylus'.

First, a "σκῆπτρον" 'scepter' is mentioned, signifying a ruler (421). However, this scepter, which was once held by Agamemnon, is held, not by Clytemnestra, but by Aegisthus. Unlike in Aeschylus' version, Sophocles shows Aegisthus in power. Yet this dream came to Clytemnestra, not Aegisthus. This dream warns Clytemnestra of her downfall, not of Aegisthus' downfall.

Perhaps the scepter in Aegisthus' hands shows that Clytemnestra's downfall has already begun.

This dream then goes on to further signify power through the tree "ὃ κατάσκιον / πᾶσαν γενέσθαι τὴν Μυκηναίων γῆονα" 'which came to shade all the land of the Mycenaeans' (424).

This, again, is a reference to ruling and power. However, this time it is Orestes who will unseat Clytemnestra's power. One of the most striking things about this version of the dream is its

sexual nature. Clytemnestra not only sees Agamemnon alive again, but she has "ὀμίλιαν" 'intercourse' with him (418). Clytemnestra's connection with strange sexual appetites has been seen already in Aeschylus' murder scene when Clytemnestra likens Agamemnon's blood, which splatters on her, to semen. Kells, in his commentary, touches on this sexual aspect of

Clytemnestra's dream: "What more terrible for the guilty woman than to dream that she had intercourse with the man she had murdered" (112). Clytemnestra again reveals her sexual nature with this dream. Kells goes on to argue that this is a clearly sexual reference, for "[t]he scepter is the symbol not merely of sovereignty, but also of the potency of Agamemnon. The branch which springs from it is Orestes the offspring of the intercourse of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon"

(113). The sexual aspect of this dream serves to further highlight the necessity for

Clytemnestra's downfall. Just like the Pandora myth of old, Clytemnestra is sexually unstable

and thereby unbalanced, not fit to rule a city. As can be seen in Aeschylus' and Sophocles' plays, even before she loses power, Clytemnestra's sleep is unsettled and ominous. Her dreams foretell of an imminent threat to her rule.

Not only can Clytemnestra not control her dreams, she also cannot control the words of the people who disagree with her rule. Euripides' *Electra* reveals Clytemnestra's unwillingness to go out in public because of the people's censure. The tutor explains that Clytemnestra did not accompany Aegisthus to his sacrifice because "ψόγον τρέμουσα δημοτῶν ἐλείπετο" 'quivering in fear of the people she stayed behind' (Euripides 643). Orestes agrees, saying "ζυνηχ': ὕποπτος οὔσα γινώσκει πόλει." 'I understand; she knows that she is viewed with suspicion by the city' (644). Though Clytemnestra sits in wealth and power on the throne of Argos, she chooses not to go out of the palace for fear of the people's rebuke for the murder of her husband. This fear shows how unstable her rule truly is. The people view Clytemnestra's ascension to power as unjust and, as a result of their discontentment, an upset of her rule seems inevitable. For this reason, Clytemnestra chooses to remain inside, cloistered in the *oikos* like a submitting woman, leaving the ruling of Argos to Aegisthus, in an attempt to not upset the delicate balance between the unhappy people and her possibly illegitimate rule. To live in such uncertainty seems like a rather limited freedom and exercise of power indeed.

Clytemnestra's downfall is completed with her death at the hands of Electra and Orestes. Not only is she removed from power by being murdered by her own children, but she also is dishonored in her death because she lacks kin-avengers. When her ghost appears at the beginning of Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, she bitterly wails of her lack of a champion from her own kin:

παθοῦσα δ' οὔτω δεινὰ πρὸς τῶν φιλτάτων,  
οὔδεις ὑπέρ μου δαιμόνων μηνίεται,  
κατασφαγείσης πρὸς χερῶν μητροκτόνων. (100-102)

Although I have suffered terribly under the agency of my closest kin,  
no good spirit is angry on my behalf,  
that I was slaughtered by the hand of a matricide.

Clytemnestra has no children willing to avenge her death at the hands of her son while her husband had two willing children to avenge his death. Instead she must rely on the most grotesque of champions: the Furies, known as the Underworld goddesses who are shunned by the Olympian deities. These goddesses are described in detail by the Pythian priestess at the beginning of *Eumenides*:

ρέγκουσι δ' οὐ πλατοῖσι φυσιάμασιν:  
ἐκ δ' ὀμμάτων λείβουσι δυσφιλή λίβα:  
καὶ κόσμος οὔτε πρὸς θεῶν ἀγάλματα  
φέρειν δίκαιος οὔτ' ἐς ἀνθρώπων στέγας. (53-56)

They snore with blowing breaths and are unapproachable;  
hateful tears seep from their eyes;  
and their dark clothing is not right for either the glory of the gods  
nor for the dwellings of men.

Yet in the end even the help of the Furies is not enough to avenge Clytemnestra's death. Their desire to avenge Clytemnestra's death by killing Orestes is denied by the goddess, Athena and the first court of the Areopagus which will be examined in detail later in this section. To sum up, Clytemnestra's power is taken by the patriarchy in both life and death. Her power is stripped from her with her death, and she remains in the grave unavenged while her murderer returns home in triumph and glory.

Electra's case, and her downfall, is somewhat different from Clytemnestra's case. Electra spends a long time, steeped in bitterness and hate, trying to avenge her father's death and punish her mother. Her pronounced goal is to reestablish the patriarchy, yet once she achieves that goal, it seems that she is still unsatisfied. She articulates these hopes in Sophocles' play when she speaks of the glory she and Chrysothemis could achieve by killing their father's murderer.

Electra speaks to her of “λόγων...εὐκλειαν” ‘heroic reputation; “ἀνδρείας” ‘manly courage’; and “κλέος” ‘glory’ (Sophocles 973, 983, 985). While Electra desires a marriage, she also hopes for something more glorious. Yet with her mother’s death, she once again takes away any chance of her own freedom. All her bright dreams of glory and honor disappear in the face of the returning patriarchy.

In Sophocles’ play, once Orestes reveals himself, Electra begins fading out of the picture. Foley notes that her power, especially of speech, quickly begins to fall flat:

Once deceived by the pedagogue<sup>29</sup>, her activities become increasingly futile or detached from reality. Clytemnestra no longer fears Electra, and hence she cannot “kill her with language” for her crime; Chrysothemis will not share her heroic plan; Electra fruitlessly laments a brother who is not dead; and Orestes, despite his initial sympathy, sees his sister’s words as uncontrolled and inopportune emotional outbursts that endanger the successful execution of the revenge. (167)

Electra’s speech is slowly silenced by Orestes and the return of the patriarchy. In this play, she is painted as an overemotional, unbalanced woman while Orestes is the cold, calculating man who eventually carries out the revenge. Foley argues that “Sophocles’ concluding scene reluctantly includes the female; she still plays a traditional role in fomenting and celebrating revenge, but on strictly masculine terms” (168). Electra’s power is slowly replaced by masculine power as society works to re-stabilize itself first by returning women to their rightful domain of silence. This is again made clear in Euripides’ play when Castor and Pollux, Clytemnestra’s dead brothers appear above the stage in *deus ex machine*, the space on the Greek stage normally reserved for deities. Their orders to Orestes and Electra, then, carry divine authority and are

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<sup>29</sup>The old teacher to whom Electra entrusted baby Orestes.

expected to be carried out. Castor tells Orestes<sup>30</sup>, “Πυλάδῃ μὲν Ἥλέκτραν δὸς ἄλοχον ἐς δόμους” ‘Give Electra to Pylades as a wife to take to his home’ (Euripides 1249). Pylades’ home, however, is not in Argos, but in Phocis. With this command, Electra finally achieves what she was constantly longing for: an honorable marriage. However, once she gets this marriage, she realizes that she has truly lost her freedom and begins to complain of her new lot in life: “καὶ τίνας ἄλλαι στοναχαὶ μείζους / ἢ γῆς πατρίας ὄρον ἐκλείπειν;” ‘And what other thing is of greater lament / than to pass over the boundary of your father’s land?’ (1314-1315). Electra receives a marriage at the price of her beloved homeland. After fighting so hard to regain her status in her father’s home, Electra is forced to leave for good<sup>31</sup>. It seems that she has found a way to continue mourning. Furthermore, this forced removal is something of an insult to her. Instead of being punished for the matricide like Orestes and fleeing from the vengeful Furies, Electra is simply pushed out of the picture. Because she is not being punished alongside Orestes, it is as if she did not play a part in the murder. Instead of being recognized for her part in avenging her father’s death, she is pushed back into the role of a submitting wife and is told that she should be grateful for such a role. Castor and Pollux say of her:

“πόσις ἔστ’ αὐτῇ καὶ δόμος: οὐχ ἧδ’  
οἰκτρὰ πέπονθεν, πλὴν ὅτι λείπει  
πόλιν Ἀργείων. (1311-1313)

She has a husband and a home. She does not  
in this suffer pitiably, except that she must leave  
the city of the Argives.

Electra is summarily dismissed, and the focus of the play shifts to Orestes and his impending battle with the Furies. Electra might as well not have played a role in the death of her mother.

<sup>30</sup> Orestes, being Electra’s last remaining male relative is her legal *kyrios*.

<sup>31</sup> While marriage to strangers and relocation was common for women, scholars have argued that such marriages were becoming less typical: “Among the upper classes at least, marriage patterns in Athens became increasingly

She is instead shipped off as a bride without a choice, ironically forced to play the role that she so longed for after her father's death. Yet now it seems that Electra finally sees such a role as her ultimate downfall. She realizes that by fighting for the patriarchy she was fighting for her own defeat.

While Clytemnestra and Electra find that their moment of glory quickly fades, Orestes is greatly rewarded. Aeschylus' *Eumenides* chronicles Orestes' harrowing race from Argos to Athens, closely pursued by the terrifying goddesses known as the Furies. However, in the end he is absolved of all guilt by the first law court at Athens, the court of the Areopagus. After both Orestes and the vengeful Furies present their cases to the judge, the goddess Athena, she declares Orestes not guilty. Her reasoning for this decision is somewhat contrived, though it is relevant to this discussion because of its patriarchal overtones. She claims that her judgment is in response to the argument Apollo made saying that the mother is not a true parent of the child. Apollo boldly claims, "τίκτει δ' ὁ θρόσκων, ἢ δ' ἄπερ ξένῳ ξένη / ἔσωσεν ἔρνος" 'The one who mounts brings life into the world but the woman is a stranger keeping alive a stranger' (*Eumenides* 660-661). Apollo introduces the argument that life comes through the father only. Consequently, he claims that because the father is the true parent, he deserves the undying loyalty of his children while the mother is no more than a stranger, a vehicle for nurturing the life the man gives. With this claim, Apollo argues that Orestes should be declared innocent because he was carrying out his duty to his true parent. His killing of Clytemnestra was not the killing of a mother, but of a mere stranger. Athena buys into this argument saying,

ψῆφον δ' Ὀρέστη τήνδ' ἐγὼ προσθήσομαι.  
 μήτηρ γὰρ οὔτις ἐστὶν ἢ μ' ἐγείνατο,  
 τὸ δ' ἄρσεν αἰνῶ πάντα, πλὴν γάμου τυχεῖν,  
 ἅπαντι θυμῷ, κάρτα δ' εἰμὶ τοῦ πατρός. (735-738)

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endogamous, and husbands may not always have been complete strangers to their wives, or the move to a new household such a radical tradition" (Fantham 70).

I will cast my vote for Orestes.  
 For I was born of no mother,  
 I approve the male in every respect, except in obtaining marriage,  
 and with all my heart, for I am truly of my father.

Athena believes Apollo not only because of his reasoning but also because of her birth. In Greek mythology, Athena was the daughter of Metis and Zeus. However, Zeus received an oracle warning him that if he were to have a male child with Metis, the boy would grow to be stronger than him. Out of fear of this prophecy, Zeus swallowed Metis, and he gave birth to Athena instead—from his head. As a result of her strange birth, in Greek mythology she always carries a strong tie of loyalty to Zeus, which Aeschylus presents in all its power in this trial scene. Ignoring the fact that Metis originally was pregnant with her, Athena says she was born of no mother and buys into Apollo's argument. Athena's loyalty to her father alone underscores the patriarchal power which Clytemnestra and Electra, to some extent, were battling throughout the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Athena's profession of loyalty only to the male shows that society is irrevocably under the control of men. In such a male-centered society, females such as Clytemnestra and Electra have no chance to hold any power of their own.

After agreeing with Apollo's contrived argument, Athena tells the jurors to cast their votes. She says, “ψῆφον δ' Ὀρέστη τήνδ' ἐγὼ προσθήσομαι” ‘I will cast my vote for Orestes’ (735). When the votes are counted, they are evenly split between Orestes and the Furies. In this way, Athena's vote was crucial to guaranteeing Orestes' freedom. Just as the divine figures of Castor and Pollux upheld patriarchal values to Electra's detriment, so too does Athena's judgment favor the power of the male over Clytemnestra's desire for vengeance. In response to this decision, Orestes gratefully cries,

ὦ Παλλάς, ὦ σώσασα τοὺς ἐμοὺς δόμους.  
 γαίης πατρώας ἐστερημένον σύ τοι

κατόκισιάς με: (755-757)

Pallas Athena, you have saved my house.  
I was deprived of my father's land and you  
have restored it to me.

Not only does this trial absolve Orestes of his guilt and save him from death at the hands of the Furies, it also places him back on the throne of Argos. He returns home in triumph, once again in control of his native land. As can be seen from Orestes' trial and triumph, being a man in a patriarchal society is the only way to keep power. While Clytemnestra and Electra were able to impersonate men for a time, eventually society restabilized, resulting in Clytemnestra's death and disgrace and Electra's removal. Only when these women returned to their rightful places in society and the men raised to power could life return to normal.

### ***Conclusion***

As can be seen in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and Euripides' *Electra*, Clytemnestra and Electra each play masculine roles in order to achieve their desires. Clytemnestra uses cunning language and masculine language of the law courts in order to bend the other characters in the play to her will. As a result, she is able to murder her husband for the purpose of revenge as well as for the purpose of gaining in power. Electra, on the other hand, uses heroic masculine speech in order to help her brother Orestes murder their mother. Her motivation for this murder is opposite to that of her mother's: she wants to see the patriarchy regain its power. Yet at the same time, it seems that Electra wishes to gain glory and freedom, which she cannot have if the patriarchy rules in the end. However, by comparing these women to Orestes, it becomes clear that simply playing a masculine role is not enough for a woman to

achieve her desires. Instead, a person must actually be a man in order for society to accept his rule. Society becomes disrupted after Clytemnestra murders her husband and continues in a state of distraction until she is finally deposed and murdered. Even though Electra helps to bring about that deposition and murder, she cannot remain in a position of power and freedom. Instead she is married off and placed under male rule in the form of marriage.

The reinventions of these ancient myths by the playwrights of Classical Athens show that the fear of powerful women was just as strong in Classical Greece as it was in Archaic Greece. No powerful woman was allowed to stay in power. Instead, society rebels against a woman who steps out of her rightful place under the authority of men. This fear of women is accomplished just as well in these plays as it is in the ancient epics. Instead of portraying women as terrifying female monsters (though the Furies could arguably be included in this category), they are rebellious murderesses, just as in need of being destroyed and eradicated as the monsters of old.

However, from the start, it is clear that these women are fighting a losing battle. Due to the expectations placed upon them by the men of Athens, these women are already condemned as deceptive liars and dangerous companions. As a result of such fearful expectations, the place of women in Classical Athens becomes fluid and unstable. Furthermore, even weak men, like Orestes—in contrast to strong women like Clytemnestra and Electra—are seen as stable and worthy of honor. The plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides all illustrate this impossible position in which women are placed and expected to act. Whether women act in their proscribed feminine roles or endeavor to play masculine roles, they have already been judged and found guilty.

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