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## Performing Femininity: Gender in Ancient Greek Myth

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**Performing Femininity:**  
*Gender in Ancient Greek Myth*

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Language and Literature  
Of Bard College

By  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2016

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## Introduction

### *Investigating Greek Femininity Through Ancient Voices and Social Theory*

My investigation of ancient Greek gender and femininity draws on both ancient voices and contemporary social theorists. These works come together to create a lens that can then be applied to my feminist interpretations of the Greek narratives. This analysis is valuable not only in that it produces a theory of its own on femininity, deviance, and ancient gender roles but also as it addresses the questions of gender that guide this investigation. These questions, more specifically, deal with the performance of femininity and social constructions of deviance: Are subversive performances of gender present within the realm of ancient Greek narrative? Is resistance to male power possible? If so, what are the consequences for challenging hegemonic masculinity<sup>1</sup> and androcentric social order? Within the context of ancient Greek myth and drama, is the dissolution of gender possible? In the ostensibly misogynistic and oppressive ancient Greek society, what opens up the opportunity for a collapse of male power? Could mythological circumstances allow for a social breakdown such as this? This investigation looks to grapple with these questions and potentially grasp an answer within the ancient voices of Homer and the Greek tragedians, Aeschylus and Euripides.

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<sup>1</sup> “Hegemonic masculinity’ is a phrase I will use several times throughout this study. R. W. Connell first uses this term in 1987 in the segment titled, “Gender and Power - Society, the Person and Sexual Politics.” Connell coins this phrase and describes it as such: femininity and masculinity center “on a single structural fact, the global dominance of men over women” (Connell, 1987. 183). Because of this, “‘Hegemonic masculinity’ is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women. Connell further defines the term: “In the concept of hegemonic masculinity, ‘hegemony’ means ... a social ascendancy achieved in a play of social forces that extends beyond contests of brute power into the organization of private life and cultural processes” (Connell, 1987. 184). In turn, Connell’s theory describes ideologies, cultural practices, and aspects of daily life that not only come about through unconscious complicity but also cumulate in a widespread hierarchical system of social order that perpetuates the subordination of individuals and groups based on stratifications in race, class, and gender.

This study is broken into five chapters. Chapters one and two look to outline the frameworks that I will later use to analyze and discuss the ancient Greek works. Chapter one will introduce the collective work of Elaine Fantham, Helene Foley, Natalie Kampen, Sarah Pomeroy, and H. A. Shapiro, *Women in the Classical World*. This remarkable text articulates the various roles and portrayals of women coming out of the ancient Greek world. This particular text plays two critical roles within the whole of my investigation. It not only communicates valuable background information on the history of Greek women but it also serves as a foundational grounding point to guide my survey of femininity and address my focal gender questions.

In chapter two, I will turn to contemporary feminist theory in order to engage in a discussion of gender, femininity, and deviance from the perspective of social theorists. I outline each theorist's work in such a way that explains his or her social framework while also positing how it will be relevant within the later discussion of Greek narrative. Judith Butler's work, *Gender Trouble*, and her theory on performative gender are central to my investigation. Butler's work guides my approach by helping to outline aspects of society that impact gender performances and perpetuate systems of oppression. I move from Butler's theory to outline several other theorists including: Monique Wittig, Luce Irigaray, Sherry Ortner, Ute Frevert, and Edwin Schur. I have pulled together this particular group of theorists as each framework grapples with a respective aspect of society. The social theories piece together to create a perspective that considers language, 'nature / culture', emotion and behavior, and deviance. This theoretical perspective is vital to my later exploration of the ancient Greek dramas. Likewise, this collective perspective grapples with the overarching concept of femininity and directly engages with questions of deviance and forms of gender resistance.

The theories discussed in the first two chapters of this study will carry through to the remaining body of work. Chapter three begins my discussion of ancient femininity by turning to Homer's epic, the *Odyssey*. Homer's work serves as an archaic example within this investigation of femininity. Chapter four will turn to the 5<sup>th</sup> century Greek playwright, Aeschylus and his tragic trilogy, the *Oresteia* while chapter five will provide a final analysis of the two tragedies produced by Euripides: the *Medea* and the *Bacchae*. I will begin each chapter with my feminist interpretation of the ancient work in the form of a short summary. I will then provide a close reading of each text through the lens of feminist theory and the historical accounts discussed in the Fantham text. Drawing on the theories discussed in chapters one and two will allow me not only to give insight into the gendered interactions at play within each work but also to discuss the significance of femininity, deviance, and resistance to prescribed notions of gender. Lastly, at the end of each chapter, I will summarize my conclusions and attempt to answer the question of whether or not *gender trouble*<sup>2</sup> plays a significant role within the bulk of these ancient Greek works. I will also emphasize what each text communicates in respect to gender and consider if, in the context of these works, there is room for the deconstruction of the ancient gender spheres.

Euripides' dramas manifest gender differently than that expressed through the work of Homer or Aeschylus. Because of this, it is also necessary for chapter five, in particular, to include a brief discussion of the historical background pertaining to the Euripidean tragedies. These differences can be better understood and explained when taken into account alongside the social and political changes occurring around 431 BCE in the city of Athens. Euripides uses his two tragedies to articulate a disruption and complete breakdown of the boundaries of gender, the city-state, and social order as a whole.

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<sup>2</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

This last section differs in that Medea's transgression from her feminine character is not subsequently reordered back within the constricting male order. I will, however, posit that her actions come with significant consequences and unavoidable self-destruction. The *Bacchae* also appears as a radically different piece of evidence in that as the city of Thebes crumbles to destruction, so too do the deeply rooted, foundational institutions within it. Through my interpretation, the *Bacchae* suggests that the ancient constructions of gender may only be deconstructed when the entirety of the city-state and its respective institutions are destroyed as well. The conclusion of my investigation will discuss the significance of this 'breakdown' in the context of not only a larger scope but also my argument regarding forms of deviance, resistance, and *gender trouble*.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.



## Chapter 1: The Conventional Role Of Women In Ancient Greece

The book written by Elaine Fantham, Helene Foley, Natalie Kampen, Sarah Pomeroy, and H. A. Shapiro, *Women in the Classical World*, provides a useful background and extensive review of the various roles of women in the ancient Greek world. The text is a collective piece of work from the consensus of five scholars and their respective fields of study. The basic tenants of this work serve to locate the questions my investigation will ask, as the five authors utilize well-known works of antiquity as evidence not only to describe the role of women in ancient Greece but also to delineate the ancient female gender sphere. Likewise, at points where there is little evidence to draw on, the Fantham text turns to the Homeric epics, Athenian dramas, or didactic poems in order to give a vital, impressionistic account of women's social roles in the ancient Greek world.

Beginning with women in Archaic Greece, one can recognize the initial limitations in our knowledge because of the lack of remaining work from this period. Fantham et al. suggest that, "although the wives and maidens of the Archaic period are largely fictional and measured according to received paradigms of deportment, the important moments in their life cycle and the constraints under which they lived in many ways remained characteristic of Greek women in the Classical and later periods as well" (Fantham et al.1994.11). While the Fantham text utilizes several major works from this particular period, those that remain relevant to my feminist argument are the Homeric epics and the poems of Hesiod and Semonides. Fantham et al. explain, "we can offer vivid fragments of the cultural conceptions that aimed, through praise and blame, to shape [the Archaic woman's] experience" (Fantham et al.1994.11). The text starts by emphasizing the, "exchange of women among aristocrats" (Fantham et al.1994.11), as it allowed

for not only, “the exchange of gifts” (Fantham et al.1994.11), but also, “a panhellenic network of social obligations and a complex group of kin relations” (Fantham et al.1994.11). While wives performed important functions in the household, the work of Hesiod presents a more complex image of the home that featured “one female slave to do the work, and a wife who [was presented as performing] few if any functions in the household beyond producing children” (Fantham et al.1994.11). This was almost certainly a male misogynistic fantasy, but continued to play a part in later Greek conceptions of women.

While the bulk of a citizen woman’s conventional role was rooted within the domestic sphere, the Fantham text argues further that, “Archaic art and literature also stress the important public role of women as mourners of the dead” (Fantham et al.1994.44). While the women physically handled the bodies, they also served to publicly mourn the dead through dramatic acts of lamentation: “tearing hair, cheeks, and clothing and beating the breast” (Fantham et al.1994.44). This was perhaps the most public display of emotion that was allowed to the ancient women, particularly in the Archaic Greek period. Fantham et al. explain that, “by the beginning of the sixth century, Solon reportedly drafted laws regulating the conduct of female mourners at funerals” (Fantham et al.1994.46). While it is unclear whether these laws were proposed in order to control women’s behavior in public or rather “aimed in part at curbing the ostentation of aristocratic funerals” (Fantham et al.1994.46), it is notable that these legislations pertained particularly to the public image, reputation, and behavior of mourning women. Not only this, but Solon’s laws prohibited specific acts: “unmanly and effeminate extravagances of sorrow” (Fantham et al.1994.47), and suggested that offenders would be “punished by the board of censors for women” (Fantham et al.1994.47).

Hesiod's work is a vehicle through which he not only presents the origins of the ancient Greek gods but also expresses a misogynistic conception of the female as a whole. Through his work, he articulates the strict boundaries of the female gender sphere and, in turn, expresses the rising tension felt by the common Greek man. This traditional perspective of Greek women is a misogynistic representation of the female who, in fact, seems to influence or at any rate coincide with the later Athenian dramas. Specifically, the myth of Pandora speaks to the creation of women, i.e., Zeus' "curse for mortal men" (Hesiod, *Theogony*. 605). Hesiod states that Zeus creates the first female "to look like a shy virgin" (Hesiod, *Theogony*. 574). Her external appearance is, "all dressed up in silvery clothes... wonderful to look at" (Hesiod, *Theogony*. 576-8), but underneath her veiled face, her "golden tiara" (Hesiod, *Theogony*. 581), and her "wreath of luscious springtime flowers" (Hesiod, *Theogony*. 580), she is simply a danger constructed and sent to men by the gods. Her virginal, youthful, and beautiful appearance is merely a façade that is "irresistible to men" (Hesiod, *Theogony*. 593), and hides her "lovely evil" (Hesiod, *Theogony*. 588). With this, Hesiod remarks that Pandora is the birth of "the deadly race and population of women, a great infestation among mortal men" (Hesiod, *Theogony*. 595-6).

Hesiod's Pandora myth also comments on the existence of tension between husband and wife. A poignant remark appears as Hermes bestows her: "in [Pandora's] breast lies and wheedling words and a cheating heart" (Hesiod, *Works and Days*. 97-8). Hesiod describes an innate fear men felt toward their wives. The perceived duplicitous nature of women conveys the husband's constant concern not only of infidelity but also of an emasculating loss of power. Furthermore, Hesiod lists the different relationships that exist between a husband and wife. First, there is the man who "escapes marriage and women's harm" (Hesiod, *Theogony*. 607-8), but, in turn, will "[come] to deadly old age without any sons to support him... when he dies, distant

relatives divide up his estate” (Hesiod, *Theogony*. 608-11). The second, “marries as fated... [And] has a life that is balanced between evil and good, a constant struggle” (Hesiod, *Theogony*. 611-14), – in part because of the need to support the offspring the wife gives him. Lastly, the third, “marries the abusive kind, he lives with... pain in spirit and mind, incurable evil” (Hesiod, *Theogony*. 614-16). All three examples articulate the anxieties of a Greek male, concerned with lineage, estate, and the nature of the wife.<sup>4</sup> Regarding Hesiod’s work, the Fantham text explains, “Women’s creation is part of man’s fall from a Golden Age into a world marked by death, disease, labor, and the need to produce heirs from a creature whose seductive beauty conceals her unreliability, her greediness, and her uselessness” (Fantham et al.1994.39). While the wife exists as a negative and draining aspect of a man’s life, “[she] is a necessary evil as because without her a man cannot have a son to inherit his property” (Fantham et al.1994.39).

On the other hand, the Fantham text considers the Homeric wife, Penelope in particular, as a depiction of archaic ideal. This perspective is remarkably different from Hesiod’s portrayal, as it seems to emphasize a wife who is ‘praised’ rather than ‘blamed.’ Why would these two archaic accounts be so different? Fantham et al. explain, “scholars have speculated whether the different attitude that Hesiod (or Semonides) develops toward women is the product of his being less than an aristocrat, a farmer faced with difficult economic stresses posed by intensive agriculture on small holdings of land and a less than reliable social environment” (Fantham et al.1994.44). While Hesiod’s account focuses on the negative impact of wives or women, Penelope, in particular, is regarded for her strengths within the domestic sphere of the home. Homer’s work directly celebrates the woman’s duty, “not only to produce and raise heirs but also

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<sup>4</sup> Notably, the last of these three examples is best replicated through Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. (Aeschylus, *Oresteia*)

to preside over her household by weaving and watching over the domestic slaves and goods. This last role was particularly vital, given the frequent absence of her husband on military or diplomatic missions” (Fantham et al.1994.35). In conclusion, the archaic portrayal of the epic wife reveals that this idealized woman “could influence in various ways the world outside her home... when the husband was in residence, a wife could greet and converse with guests... Although she was meant to spend her time indoors, the Archaic wife could also serve her society by performing rites for the gods” (Fantham et al.1994.36).

From the Fantham text, there emerges a clear dichotomy between these two portrayals of women coming out of Archaic Greece. These portrayals were certain in practice influenced by social factors, namely class and wealth. Fantham et al. reiterate the sense of *praise* that *individual* women were able to attain through archaic works:

The Homeric poems and early aristocratic lyric celebrate the importance of the woman’s role as wife and mother, and praise her beauty, skill, and intelligence. Like men, these women are viewed as adult moral beings; their decisions may be subject to divine interference, but they are equally rational and can be praised for their moral integrity. (Fantham et al.1994.39)

This perspective of women is truly notable as it ascribes a surprising amount of agency to individual women. These accounts are still highly subjective, however, as they are written from a male perspective, perhaps of a certain comfortable class, and delineate a man’s standard of the idealized, perfect wife. This is also not to say that all Homeric women are praised. The Fantham text notes that a Homeric woman is praised on an individual level while Clytemnestra’s actions, for instance, bestows a bad, wicked reputation on *all* of womankind. It explains, “Thus praise for the Homeric woman is individual, whereas blame is generalizable” (Fantham et al.1994.39). I think this notion of generalized disparaging or blaming of all women is mirrored through both Hesiod and Semonides’ work. On this note, the other view of women is exemplified through the

works of these two archaic poets and, in turn, emphasizes that the “tradition developed at length a considerably more ambivalent attitude to wives” (Fantham et al.1994.39).

Turning to the Semonides’ poem, one can see that Semonides expands upon the work of Hesiod in order to create his lengthy catalogue of women. He begins by explaining how “[Zeus] made women’s minds separately in the beginning” (Semonides, *Fr.* 7. 1). In turn, he personifies each woman with a particular animal and its respective negative traits. The catalogue describes, “the wicked vixen, a woman who knows all things... nothing escapes her notice... her mood keeps changing” (Semonides, *Fr.* 7. 7-11), as well as “the weasel, a wretched, miserable sort... she is mad for bed and lovemaking” (Semonides, *Fr.* 7. 50-53). These portrayals of women address not only the presumed nature of a woman but also her vilified behavior. These characteristics directly play off of the female stereotypes that originate from a male perspective – the uncontrollable sexual nature of a woman, the continuously changing mood of a woman, or the nagging perceptive woman. Likewise, these stereotypes address the negative impact a woman can have on a man, possibly through her sexuality or charm. Semonides states, “all her attention, all her planning throughout the day is fixed on this: how she can do a person the greatest possible harm” (Semonides, *Fr.* 7. 80-2), and furthermore that, “no man can stop her, either by uttering threats or...by speaking to her gently...” (Semonides, *Fr.* 7. 15-8). This relays that all the woman’s time and energy goes directly into making a man’s life miserable – and he is, in fact, powerless against this.

Semonides’ catalogue continues as he describes different types of women who directly challenge either the male ordered world and its structure or the husband himself. Semonides declares, “she who seems to be the most self-controlled turns out to commit the greatest outrages” (Semonides, *Fr.* 7. 108), and he finishes with the depiction of “the bitch, a mischief-

maker just like her mother” (Semonides, *Fr.* 7. 12). Again, this relates to the hidden, wicked nature of *all* women – both mother and daughter – always working to deceive and drain the male population. Furthermore, another woman is described as, “peering and roaming everywhere” (Semonides, *Fr.* 7. 14), while she “keeps up her constant useless howling” (Semonides, *Fr.* 7. 20), and “yelps even when she sees no person there” (Semonides, *Fr.* 7. 14-5). This seems to refer directly to the public image of a woman and reiterates a need to constrain the woman inside the home, to silence her howling, yelping nature, and train her like the wild dog she is. This bitter perspective on the nature of women is repeated: “From the sea: she has two minds...she rages unapproachably, like a bitch with puppies...this is what such a woman most resembles in mood; the sea too has its different natures” (Semonides, *Fr.* 7. 27-42).

This male anxiety and negativity surrounding the wife seems to carry through into the Classical Greek period. As the Fantham text discusses “Women in Classical Athens,” it uses aspects of specific dramas as well as ancient texts from philosophers and historians in order to piece together a historical view of women in ancient Greece. Fantham et al. state, “Every respectable woman in classical Athens (ca. 480-323 B.C.E) became a wife if she could; not to marry... provided no real alternative“ (Fantham et al.1994.69). The text further describes, “a proper Athenian wife, who [would], ideally, have spent most of her time indoors unless she were participating in religious events” (Fantham et al.1994.69). Lastly, the Fantham text articulates the tension, anxiety, or even fear that a new bride would have felt: “every bride lives the life of a foreigner in her new home; husbands can escape from the house if the marriage goes badly, but wives cannot. They are dependent on one person, for whose sake they must undertake the pains and risks of childbirth” (Fantham et al.1994.69).

While Fantham et al. suggest that upper class marriages in classical Athens were becoming more and more endogamous, thus implying that the bride may have been familiar with her new family and husband, it is also very revealing to analyze Xenophon's text, *Oeconomicus*. Xenophon's source functions as a treatise that articulates the ancient Greek gender roles and sexual division of labor. Likewise, it is an ancient text that serves directly to delineate the conventional role of a female within the *oikos*, the home. Xenophon's work is particularly relevant in its description of the ideal Greek wife and her relationship to both the husband and the home. Through this text, we see that the man marries the wife when "she [is] a very young girl and [has] seen and heard as little as possible" (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*. III.13). She is kept pure and uneducated in order for the man to educate "[his] wife to be the way she ought to be" (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*. VII.4). In other words, the husband teaches and endows his wife with the "appropriate" (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*. VII.4) knowledge that is integral to her female role. The *logos*, the knowledge, that is given to the wife by her husband is inherently masculine. In turn, a "wife's manly understanding" (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*. X.1) reveals that all understanding and knowledge is deeply entrenched in the male ordered world. This archetype for the ideal, submissive, and obedient wife arguably becomes an intellectual match to her husband. In this sense, it is assumed that it is normal for the young, uneducated, girl to be *trained* by her husband and *given* the necessary knowledge in order to become a 'good' wife. Furthermore, Xenophon's text describes the female's work as such: "not always try to sit about like a slave but to try, with the gods' help, to stand at the loom like a mistress" (Xenophon, *Oeconomicus*. X.10). This illustrates this conventional role of a Greek female and specifies her duties within the home.

Through these sources, one can see that the Athenian women's power was situated within the *oikos*. Much of the women's work was, indeed, inside the household as they were in charge



of the children and the slaves. Women maintained and controlled the economy of the household. Similarly, jobs such as “weaving and the making of clothing for the family... was a woman’s most important contribution to the economy of the household” (Fantham et al.1994.103). The Fantham text continues to explain the transition from Archaic Greece to that of Classical Athens and the changes this brought with it to the social sphere:

In contrast to the public praise and blame of women in the archaic period, poets, law-court speeches, and philosophers all express the view that respectable women (wives, mothers, daughters, sisters, and other close female relatives of the speakers) should remain silent or subdued in public and avoid being discussed by men... Not only women’s names, but women themselves were supposed to keep out of public view, with the important exception of their appearances at funerals and festivals as various cults and rituals required. A woman who travels outside of the house must be of such an age, that onlookers might ask, not whose wife she is, but whose mother. (Fantham et al.1994.79)

While women were once able to express emotion through public lamentations, they were now faced with stricter laws regarding their public appearance and behavior, as Greece shifted into the Classical period. Solon’s laws regarding the female mourners at funerals “prescribed that only close kin could mourn for the dead, thus prohibiting the ostentatious practice among the aristocracy of hiring women mourners and denying older women a source of income” (Fantham et al.1994.76). Women were still more circumscribed by the conventional roles and duties that were assigned to them by the male order.

While female mourners were required to maintain a fairly subdued manner in public, “women in classical Athens legitimately appeared in public contexts when they engaged in ritual activities” (Fantham et al.1994.83). Religion and ritual were important within the city and therefore, were “an integral part of everyday life, and women participated as much as men” (Fantham et al.1994.83). While worship was a critical aspect of religious life in Athens, Fantham et al. also explain, “These rituals apparently helped to mark and facilitate a girl’s transition to

marriage and motherhood, to celebrate her role as weaver, and to harness women's reproductive powers to promote the fertility of the entire society" (Fantham et al.1994.83). Thus, one could argue that these rituals served not only to foster positive attitudes surrounding the conventional female role but also to support the androcentric order that circumscribed women within the domestic sphere.

Regardless of the full extent in which women were allowed to perform in these ceremonies, it seems as though some ancient works "[suggested] that religion could lead women into adultery" (Fantham et al.1994.95). In turn, it becomes clear that men's anxieties regarding a wife's loyalty played a large part in confining women to the home. The Fantham text explains the importance placed on women regarding purity, faithfulness, and chastity within the context Athenian law:

Law-court cases on the subject of adultery or concerning the violation of marriage laws give us a good idea of the male concerns over honor and the legitimacy of their children that led to women's confinement in the *oikos* and of the complex relations that could develop between women of different social status in the household. (Fantham et al.1994.113)

Male anxiety was felt toward the wife. Likewise, seduction or adultery was considered "a more heinous crime than rape" (Fantham et al.1994.114). Incredibly high standards were imposed on the wife; harsh consequences also served to punish an adulterous wife – regardless of whether she was truly guilty or simply accused of infidelity.

In conclusion, these idealized standards of femininity fit precisely within the patriarchal ideology of Greek society, both public and private. The conventional female role that was assigned to women enabled the subjugation and oppression of woman. Men remained in the public sphere while providing for the family. On the other hand, women served as domestic housekeepers and slaves to their reproductive abilities. The Fantham text summarizes the work

of the renowned philosopher, Aristotle as it reads, “[P]atriarchy is natural and in the best interests of all who inhabited a Greek city-state. Women are suited by nature for their private role in the household and because they are naturally inferior to men, they should be trained to moral obedience to their husbands and fathers” (Fantham et al.1994.122). From a male philosopher’s point of view, women were biologically created as inferior to men. Their subdued, exploited, and circumscribed female role was set in stone by the natural world and, in turn, the female was naturally placed in a subjugated position within the deeply rooted, longstanding androcentric world order.

The Fantham text allows us to tease out the nature of resentment that develops within the social structure of distinct male and female spheres. This resentment manifests itself within the relationship between husband and wife. The negative images of women are founded on the anxieties felt by men: concern focused on both the public image of women and the faithfulness of the individual wife. In particular, men forbid public displays of emotion or overly ostentatious behavior in public. Ambivalence toward the wife or blaming of the wife also appears in response to male anxiety regarding the wife’s fidelity and work ethic. Hesiod and Semonides’ portrayals of women present a caricature that assumes that almost all women are deceitful, wicked, adulterous, and slaves to their sexual nature. Similarly, these imagined women embrace masculine-like powers or their tricky feminine guile in order to emasculate, humiliate, and exhaust their male partner. On the other hand, it also is clear that the female experienced anxiety as well, particularly toward a new husband, his home, and the exceptionally high standards surrounding the role of the wife.

It could be argued that these very tensions also gave rise to the positive images of females who fostered and reinforced ‘good’ or ‘proper’ behavior in women. This very different image of

women not only supported male order but also further perpetuated the subjugated position of women within androcentric Greek society. Specifically, portrayals such as Penelope, the good and faithful wife, or the ‘worker-bee wife’ articulate this fostering image of a female. Mythical women such as Pandora, Clytemnestra, or the other women personified as animals in the work of Semonides communicate this disparaging, negative image of females. In Helene P. Foley’s work, “The Conception of Women in Athenian Drama,” she directly outlines this dichotomous portrayal of women. She states that the ‘good’ women “align themselves with marriage, or, as virgins, sacrifice themselves for the preservation of family, state or nation, while the [‘bad’ women, e.g. Clytemnestra, Medea...] resist marriage and confinement to the *oikos*, behave irrationally, and uphold private interests” (Foley, 1981. 142). This idea will be a central theme in my analysis of Greek tragedy.

My interpretations of the Greek dramas draw on not only the ancient voices discussed in this chapter but also the theoretical frameworks introduced in chapter two. In turn, my analysis will bring a feminist perspective to an investigation of ancient Greek women and the gender dynamics at play within ancient Greek myth. This is done in hopes to further our understanding of the conventional role of women in the classical world while also developing ideas surrounding the varying depictions of femininity within ancient narratives. In conclusion, the points that I draw upon later in my exploration directly address the tensions and varying portrayals of women discussed in this chapter. I outline here the most important of these points that I bring to my analysis.

1.) Ancient stereotypes, caricatures of the wife, emphasize the negative traits of a woman from a male perspective. They are a reflection of the Greek male anxiety felt towards the wife.

- 2.) Ancient treatises that dictate how to run the household speak of teaching the wife and endowing her with masculine knowledge and *logos*.
- 3.) Rituals within the city looked to foster positive, ideal images of women, i.e., social structures in Athens promoted females who were subordinate, passive, and complicit to male dominance.
- 4.) Ancient Greek scholars promoted ideas guided by primitive scientific knowledge in order to circumscribe the female in a biologically inferior position.

## Chapter 2: Contemporary Feminist Theory

Contemporary feminist theory serves as a framework that can be applied to my feminist readings of the ancient Greek dramas. The ideologies developed in the work of Judith Butler are germinal to my analysis. However, I will also bring the work of Monique Wittig, Luce Irigaray, Sherry Ortner, Ute Frevert, and Edwin Schur into my discussion, as their theories are also relevant and useful when applied to the Greek dramas. Each feminist piece further develops our understanding of the female gender role and the patriarchal subjugation of women. Likewise, the theorists engage the question of deviance and suggest for the possibility of subversive gender resistance within this deeply rooted system of oppression. Each feminist framework I turn to in this chapter will address relevant issues regarding gender, femininity, and the role of women through a pointed, ideological standpoint. Drawing on this perspective allows for one to consider the ancient voices and what, in sociological terms, they are saying. Using this contemporary work as a lens helps to grasp at ancient gender dynamics that are not always apparent at first glance. Answers to my investigation of gender emerge as my feminist interpretation, the conventional female role, and radical pieces of feminist theory are applied to and considered alongside the ancient Greek narratives. Through this analysis it is revealed that these Greek works, although produced in an ostensibly misogynistic and oppressive period of antiquity, make reference to critical issues of gender and femininity. Thus, these works serve as an interesting site in which to posit questions regarding deviance and subversive behavior.

While some of the mythological plays, particularly those based on Homer's epic, serve to reinforce conventional ideals regarding gender in antiquity, I will argue that through a feminist interpretation, the tragic female characters are representative of something much more complex.

Through the tragic female, there seems to emerge an inverse of the social constructions of gender, femininity, and the prescribed societal norms present within Classical Greece. Because characters such as Clytemnestra and Medea stand to emphasize the archetypal ‘bad’ woman, they become an ideal site in which to posit questions regarding femininity, deviance, and subversive gender behavior.

### **Judith Butler: Performative Gender**

Judith Butler’s work, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” as well as her novel, *Gender Trouble*, are essential to our understanding of gender, femininity, and the existence of a gendered self. Because of this I will provide a basic outline of her theory regarding performative gender. I will then be able to position her work alongside the work of other theorists to create a composite list of the most important theoretical points. Judith Butler’s phenomenological theory draws upon various discourses and argues that gender is a socially constructed identity that is “in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity institutionalized through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler, 1998. 519). In this sense, as gender is performed it is not only reinforced but also naturalized. As the social agent acts out a particular identity, said individual comes to believe that the illusions and cultural assumptions about of gender are reality. As these acts are repeated and continually performed, the identity is reified and the agent’s gender is stabilized.

Butler argues that, “what is called gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo” (Butler, 1998. 520). From this, one can gather that these acts embody cultural ideals regarding gender and, in turn, conform to prescribed notions of femininity or masculinity. For the social agent, “gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements,

and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler, 1998. 519). The body becomes a physical marker for identity and gender through the usage of language, gesture, and “all manner of symbolic social sign” (Butler, 1998. 519). Butler also references the work of Simone de Beauvoir in order to emphasize that, ““woman,” and by extension, any gender, is an historical situation rather than a natural fact” (Butler, 1998. 520).

Butler further unpacks the concept of ‘woman’ and its context within a historical situation:

When Beauvoir claims that 'woman' is a historical idea and not a natural fact, she clearly underscores the distinction between sex, as biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity. To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of 'woman,' to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. (Butler, 1998. 522)

For Butler the body holds a significant cultural value. Gender, specifically in this case Butler refers to *woman*, is part of a cultural ideology that is not only fashioned and circumscribed by society but also rooted within history. In turn, it is continuously reaffirmed through a social agent’s performance within society. This, however, also suggests that one does, in fact, have agency in one’s own gender performance. But Butler confirms that one is complicit in these performative acts because, “gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (Butler, 1998. 522). Butler continues, “The tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the creditability of its own production. The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness” (Butler, 1998. 522). In other words, gender is active produced by performance.



Butler's work carefully deconstructs the social position of women and their status as an oppressed group. Butler wonders if "the category of woman is socially constructed in such a way that to be a woman is, by definition, to be in an oppressed situation" (Butler, 1998. 523). She thinks that illusions of gender perpetuate oppressive aspects of society that further women's subjugated position. I will look to use Butler's discussion of oppression and resistance as a guide to delineate the key aspects of society that perpetuate the subordination of women. Butler's emphasis on an oppressive society is useful, as it directs my investigation and allows for the introduction of other relevant theorists. The important points that I will discuss emerge in four different sections: language, 'nature / culture,' emotion and behavior, and lastly, deviance. These sections will address not only how these aspects play out within the context of hegemonic masculine order but also how they are particularly relevant to my exploration of the tragic women present in Greek drama. What is more, these four focal points serve as a vehicle to communicate foundational forms of oppression that, in turn, can lead to deviance or subversive resistance. These traits – deviance and subversive resistance – will carry through to my discussion of the tragic women, as they highlight particular aspects of what Butler calls *gender trouble* (Butler, 1990. 46). More specifically, this refers to the resistance of a gendered identity "through the mobilization, subversive confusion, and proliferation of precisely those constitutive categories that seek to keep gender in its place by posturing as the foundational illusions of identity" (Butler, 1990. 46).

### **Monique Wittig / Luce Irigaray: Language**

Judith Butler's work considers the foundational aspects of society and, in turn, their involvement in perpetuating the subordination of women or the gender binary system. Using Monique Wittig's feminist work as the basis for her argument, Butler discusses the power of

language and its ability to subjugate or exclude women. Wittig, for instance, argues, “persons cannot be signified within language without the mark of gender” (Butler, 1990. 29). Language labels individuals, assigns meaning to their bodies, and, in turn, “constitutes a conceptual episteme by which binary gender is universalized” (Butler, 1990. 29). Through hegemonic masculine order, the consciousness of a person becomes encoded with masculine values and thoughts. Deconstructing the etymology of the word *virtue*, we see that its origins are directly associated to masculinity and defined as male. In turn, the *logos* – the reason, the logic, and the discourse coming out of the classical world and carrying through to modernity – can be connected to the androcentric masculine world. One could suggest that women, from the very beginning of gendered language, have been excluded.

Returning to Butler’s discussion of Wittig, it is clear that while Wittig views language as a tool that may be used to subordinate women, she decidedly argues that “[language] is in no way misogynistic in its structures, but only in its applications” (Butler, 1990. 36). In this sense, for Wittig, language can be “radically transformed” (Butler, 1990. 36), in order to be utilized differently or carry different meanings. Butler also introduces Luce Irigaray, another French theorist, who presents a different theory on language. Irigaray’s argument suggests rather that, “the possibility of another language or signifying economy is the only chance at escaping the “mark” of gender which, for the feminine, is nothing but the phallogocentric erasure of the female sex” (Butler, 1990. 36). Irigaray also regards the feminine as a binary opposite to the masculine: “The feminine is the signification of lack, signified by the Symbolic, a set of differentiating linguistic rules that effectively create sexual difference” (Butler, 1990. 38). Irigaray’s theory suggests that language reifies gender categories and the gender hierarchy. The

ways in which language is fixed within society serves to perpetuate female subordination, exclusion, and oppression.

It is undoubtedly clear that language is pervasive, powerful, and symbolic. Language has the ability to encode meaning, ascribe labels, or even “create “the socially real” through the locutionary acts of speaking subjects” (Butler, 1990. 156). This power found through speech, however, is fully accessible to males and only partially, if at all, to females. This process creates the subordination of the female as “[the] socially constituted asymmetry disguises and violates a pre-social ontology of unified and equal persons” (Butler, 1990. 156). Language is, as Wittig suggests, “oppressive when it requires that the speaking subject, in order to speak, participate in the very terms of that oppression” (Butler, 1990. 156). Wittig proposes that women must dramatically change their place in society. Because language has the ability to be transformed, she suggests that women must “assume the position of the authoritative, speaking subject – which is in some sense their ontologically grounded “right” – and overthrow both the category of sex and the system of compulsory heterosexuality that is its origin” (Butler, 1990. 157).

The ideas of these theorists are relevant in the context of the Greek dramas in that they suggest for the possibility of resistance and deviance through language. It will be central to my investigation to discern whether or not authoritative speech, with regards to the rebellious female characters, can be a site for gender resistance. This theory also will provide support when considering the symbolic and literal exclusion of certain female characters.

### **Sherry Ortner: *Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture***

Butler’s work also turns to discuss the feminist appropriation of Levi-Strauss’s ‘nature / culture’ theory. She explains the feminist work “to support and elucidate the sex/gender distinction: the position that there is a natural or biological female who is subsequently

transformed into a socially subordinate “woman,” with consequence that “sex” is to nature or “the raw” as gender is to culture or “the cooked”” (Butler, 1990. 50).

This feminist reconfiguration of Levi-Strauss’s structuralist anthropology is relevant both to my discussion of theory and to Butler’s work regarding gendered identity. Its relevance is revealed as Butler describes how cultural meaning, implications, and symbolisms are “imposed” or circumscribed upon the female identity in order to support hegemonic masculinity and forms of male domination:

The binary relation between culture and nature promotes a relationship of hierarchy in which culture freely “imposes” meaning on nature, and, hence, renders it into an “Other” to be appropriated to its own limitless uses, safeguarding the ideality of the signifier and the structure of signification on the model of domination. (Butler, 1990. 50)

In the same vein, this emphasizes that *nature* is directly associated with the female and that the female’s passive body is merely a site “awaiting signification from an opposing masculine subject” (Butler, 1990. 50). The male then is associated with culture. This entails a male association with activity, the reasoning mind, and *logos* – all aspects that further perpetuate the gender binary system and the subordination of women.

Sherry Ortner’s work, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture,” is a theoretical piece that further develops this idea and searches to pinpoint “the underlying logic of cultural thinking that assumes the inferiority of women” (Ortner, 1974. 68). Her argument assumes there is a universality of female subordination that is perpetuated through three types of data:

(1) Elements of cultural ideology and informants’ statements that explicitly devalue women, according them, their roles, their tasks, their products, and their social milieu less prestige that are accorded to men and the male correlates; (2) symbolic devices, such as the attribution of defilement, which may be interpreted as *implicitly* making a statement of inferior valuation; and (3) social-structure arrangements that exclude women from participation in or contact with some

realm in which the highest powers of the society are felt to reside. (Ortner, 1974. 69)

In her suggestion that female subordination is deeply rooted in every aspect of society, she also looks to explain how this came to be and what this means in terms of the ‘nature / culture’ dichotomy and framework. Moreover, she looks to define the ways in which women are situated closer to *nature* or positioned in-between the conceptions of *nature* and *culture*.

She begins by breaking down the implications behind the conceptual categories of nature and culture. She argues that culture can be associated to “the notion of human consciousness, or with the products of human consciousness (i.e., systems of thought and technology), by means of which humanity attempts to assert control over nature” (Ortner, 1974. 72). The human mind and system of thought work to manipulate, change, or “impose” some essence of itself on nature. Ortner continues, “Thus culture (i.e. every culture) at some level of awareness asserts itself to be not only distinct from but superior to nature, and that sense of distinctiveness and superiority rests precisely on the ability to transform – to “socialize” and “culturalize – nature” (Ortner, 1974. 73). Ortner reveals that if women were, in fact, viewed with a closer affinity to nature, “then culture would find it “natural” to subordinate, not to say oppress, [women]” (Ortner, 1974. 73). This suggests that, in the context of Ortner’s theory, women’s subordination is naturalized and normalized.

What still remains to be answered, however, is: where does women’s connection to nature come from? Why are women viewed with a closer connection to nature than men? Ortner takes on this task by delineating three levels at which a woman’s physiological being might be perceived as closer to nature:

(1) women’s body and its functions, more involved more of the time with “species life,” seem to place her closer to nature, in contrast to man’s physiology, which

frees him more completely to take up the projects of culture; (2) woman's body and its functions place her in social roles that in turn are considered to be at a lower order of the cultural process than man's; and (3) woman's traditional social roles, imposed because of her body and its functions, in turn give her a different psychic structure, which, like her physiological nature and her social roles, is seen as being closer to nature. (Ortner, 1974. 73)

Each level carries with it a different meaning. Women's portrayal, in this case, emerges from a biological argument that considers birth, maternity, and child rearing close to the conception of nature. But Ortner also notes that while a woman's conventional social role perpetuates her connection to nature, it is undeniable that she is also a very necessary member of society or culture. In other words, 'culture' is only perpetuated through the production of more humans. Because of this, 'woman' stands in an intermediate position in-between culture and nature. While a woman might be viewed as closer to nature, her reproductive role is still required in perpetuating the continuation and growth of society.

This intermediate position can be interpreted from several different perspectives. For instance, it "may have the significance of "mediating," i.e. performing some sort of synthesizing or converting function between nature and culture" (Ortner, 1974. 84). Specifically, this is in relation to the domestic role of women and their job of childrearing or, through Ortner's words, "the socialization of children" (Ortner, 1974. 84). This mediating role, however, is pivotal in producing "culture's continued viability [which] depends upon properly socialized individuals who will see the world in that culture's terms and adhere more or less unquestioningly to its moral precepts" (Ortner, 1974. 84). So, this maternal role is not only valuable to the perpetuation of hegemonic ideologies but also limiting to the woman. Because this female serves to uphold the stability of the family and male order, she is circumscribed by society's "[heavy] restrictions" (Ortner, 1974. 85), and "universally socialized to have a narrower and generally more

conservative set of attitudes and views than man, and the limited social contexts of her adult life reinforce this situation” (Ortner, 1974. 85).

The last relevant piece of Ortner’s theory that remains to be discussed is regarding the ambiguous position of the female role since it can be aligned with *either* culture or nature. In this mode, however, Ortner describes the ““ignoring” (and thus subverting) or “transcending” (and thus achieving a higher synthesis of) those social categories...” (Ortner, 1974. 85). This perspective is relevant as it “can account easily for both the subversive feminine symbols (witches, evil eye, menstrual pollution, castrating mothers) and the feminine symbols of transcendence (mother goddesses, merciful dispensers of salvation, female symbols of justice...)” (Ortner, 1974. 86). These female forms are considered ambiguous because they have a tendency to be drawn to one extreme or the other – the “utterly exalted, [or] sometimes utterly debased” (Ortner, 1974. 86). Regardless of what side this role takes, however, its form will be inhuman, mythical, and “not within the normal range of human possibilities” (Ortner, 1974. 86).

Ortner’s theory will become especially relevant in the interpretation of the Greek plays when applied to the female characters and their associations with recurring themes of nature, reproduction, and maternity. The male values that are imposed upon and encoded within the female consciousness will be apparent through the ‘good’ women who enable and foster male order. Likewise, the ‘ambiguous position’ of the female located between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’ will be relevant when exploring specific characters who appear as inhuman, i.e., goddesses, witches, or gorgons, and align themselves either with the patriarchy or symbolize subversive femininity. Lastly, I will also discuss the ways in which certain female characters are symbolic manifestations of ‘nature’ or ‘culture’ and, in turn, how this reflects on their behavior, portrayal, and perceived nature.

### **Ute Frevert: *Emotions in History – Lost and Found***

Recognizing that the construction of gender is key to the creation of an identity, it is necessary to consider all aspects that make up the performance of gender. The work of German historian, Ute Frevert, is quite remarkable as she deconstructs the history of emotions and, in turn, the process in which emotions became notably gendered or became representative of the self. Frevert's piece, "Emotions in History – Lost and Found," discusses exactly how it came to be that women "preferred to speak about anguish or desperation" (Frevert, 2011. 88), or the idea that, "even if women were known to be furious, and legitimately so, their rage was considered harmful. It was passion rather than affect, and thus far more enduring and dangerous" (Frevert, 2011. 89). Frevert's exploration through history suggests that the conception of 'woman' has always included the assumption that she is incapable of rage or anger. In fact, "Romantic writer Friedrich Schlegel... associated rage with masculinity" (Frevert, 2011. 91), while women were notoriously labeled as *weak* or *passive*. Here one can see that a person's performance of emotion, particularly of rage, would, in turn, ascribe that person with a particular gender.

Frevert also discusses the paradox that exists regarding emotions. She explains, "Letting rage take possession of one's mind and actions was considered inappropriate, irrational, and uncivilized" (Frevert, 2011. 94). Since masculine power has long been considered of his self-control, creative mind, and logical thinking, the male is capable of rage as long as it is controlled. The female, on the other hand, would be overcome by rage, because she lacks moral willpower and discipline (Frevert, 2011. 94). The paradox ensues, however, as history reveals that "women were granted feelings that without a doubt had an empowering effect" (Frevert, 2011. 95).

Frevert uses the words of Cureau de la Chambre to describe women's rage as a "rapid torrent that cannot be stopped and that overflows with words and threats" Frevert, 2011. 95).



This type of rage was forceful, empowering, and frightening (Frevert, 2011. 95). Likewise, rage was thought to be capable of harming others, particularly a woman's children, and it "contradicted the ideology of gender characteristics that had become enshrined in a complex system of social and cultural practices since the late eighteenth century" (Frevert, 2011 95-6). The Greek dramas directly support these claims regarding female emotions, as any female characters perceived with overwhelming emotions are considered dangerous, capable of monstrous actions, and, in turn, feared. As Clytemnestra and Medea are overcome by rage and desperation, they become comparable to savage animals, powerful forces of nature, or heartless monsters.

For Frevert, the conventional image of women expressing anger was marked by "tears... desperation, grief, and sadness" (Frevert, 2011. 98). These deeply rooted stereotypes "not only structure how people perceive and judge that behavior; they also bear an impact on how men and women feel and express their feelings" (Frevert, 2011. 98). The woman is expected to turn her anger into an internally expressed form of sadness rather than something that is expressed externally or in the public sphere. Her extreme level of sensibility must be "filtered through reason and thought" (Frevert, 2011. 110), in order for her not to become "frenzied" (Frevert, 2011. 109). But, what happens when this is not the case? If a female performs a public expression of rage, then does she, in fact, gain some sense of empowerment?

Frevert considers the possibility of a deconstruction of stereotypes, gender norms, and "eternal laws of nature" (Frevert, 2011. 117), through her discussion of women during the French Revolution:

To many a sceptic, [the revolution] had turned women into those horrible "hyenas" immortalized in Friedrich Schiller's famous *Song of the Bell*. Published in 1799, the poem found strong words and images to condemn the "uproar" of the

people fighting for freedom. Women, as Schiller saw it, had behaved in a particularly outrageous way. Driven by “blind rage” they “change into hyenas / And make a plaything out of terror, / Though it twitches still, with panthers teeth, / They tear apart the enemy’s heart.” For Schiller as much as for Welcker, revolutions that let women take an active political stance allowed them to mutate into wild beasts thus ultimately becoming a threat to humanity. (Frevert, 2011. 117-8)

Frevert’s work makes an important case for the empowering essence behind women’s rage and, in turn, the fear this evokes within the male ordered world. Angry women are beastly, monstrous women. Because their actions deconstruct the cultured, ordered male world in which they exist, these angry women are placed within the *chaotic, uncultured* world from which they came – they are the savage beasts of the natural world that have stripped themselves of the masculine encoded world order. As the male world labels them as deviants, these women are excluded, dehumanized, and ‘othered.’ Again, the Greek plays support these ideas and present similar situations. Female emotion will become especially relevant when applied to the ‘bad’ women, Clytemnestra and Medea. One will see how certain emotions empower a woman to act beyond her human capabilities and, in turn, enable her to transform into something monstrous and inhuman.

### **Edwin Schur: *Labeling Women Deviant***

Before returning to the work of Butler, I will discuss the label of *deviant* – how it came to have such symbolic meaning and what exactly this meaning entails. I turn now to Edwin Schur’s body of work from 1984 titled, *Labeling Women Deviant: Gender, Stigma, and Social Control* in order to explain the ways in which definitions of ‘normal’ or ‘deviant’ are gendered. Schur begins his argument by premising the idea that the various labels prescribed onto women for their deviance has great significance:

With great regularity women have been labeled – and they still are being labeled – “aggressive,” “bitchy,” “hysterical,” “fat,” “homely,” “masculine,” and “promiscuous.” Judgments such as these, and the social reactions that accompany them, represent a very potent kind of deviance-defining. They may not put the presumed “offender” in jail, but they do typically damage her reputation, induce shame, and lower her “life chances.”... [These perceptions] help us to recognize perceptions and ideas that frequently dominate interaction between males and females. (Schur, 1984. 3)

With this passage, Schur explains that deviant females who go against society’s prescribed norms are labeled as damaged and shamed for their behavior. He explores gender dynamics and relations and suggests that they show how “daily interaction reflects, and in turn reinforces, the overall disparities in social and economical power between the sexes” (Schur, 1984. 4). The damaged female body and psyche reflects just how “routine devaluation adversely affects females specifically and our patterns of social life more generally” (Schur, 1984. 4).

Schur quotes the work of Howard S. Becker to articulate his argument regarding deviance even further:

*“...Social groups create deviance by making the rules whose infractions constitutes deviance, and by applying these rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is not a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an “offender.” The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label (Becker 1963, p. 9; italics in original). (Schur, 1984. 5)*

In summary, Schur argues, “Women’s deviance, like any deviance, is a social construct” (Schur, 1984. 5). The origins behind the concept of ‘deviance’ are socially dependent on societal norms and its construction is situated around masculine power. Just as with the other theories I have discussed, Schur’s framework is relevant when applied to the interpretations of the 5<sup>th</sup> century Greek dramas and their portrayals of ‘bad’ women, i.e., Clytemnestra and Medea. Likewise, Schur’s theory is central not only in that it addresses the questions of gender introduced earlier in

this study but also because it articulates female forms of deviance and the consequences that come with this type of subversive behavior. Schur continues, “These presumed offenses emerge when women are perceived as having violated specific gender system norms – by behaving or even presenting themselves in ways deemed inappropriate for females” (Schur, 1984. 7). Again, one is confronted with females acting outside of their prescribed gender role. In turn, they are shamed, punished, or labeled as ‘deviant’.

Another critical aspect of Schur’s argument is explored when one considers what specific categories of women are labeled as ‘deviant:’

The fact that major offenses *against* women, which we *profess* to consider deviant, in practice have been responded to with much ambivalence. That the female victims in such instances as sexual harassment, rape, and woman-battering have themselves often been treated as though *they* were the “deviants” again reflects the overall devaluation of women. (Schur, 1984. 7)

Society professes contradictory ideas regarding female ‘deviance.’ The helpless or victimized female, in this sense, is labeled ‘deviant’ in order to reaffirm masculine power over the woman who is in an inferior, devalued social position. Containing a woman in this vilified role serves to perpetuate her subordinated, helpless position in society. Rather than protecting the helpless woman it is a protection and reestablishment of the male position of dominance and power. Schur’s argument considers this idea fully and, in turn, suggests that the female body is a site in which male power is imposed. Shaming or punishing the deviant woman continuously reaffirms the male body as a superior subject while the female body is further reified as a subjugated object. Schur describes how a woman’s lower social position is continuously reified:

Woman’s vulnerability to stigmatization rests on their general social subordination, their relatively poor power position. At the same time, when women are effectively stigmatized, that reinforced their overall subordination and makes it more difficult for them to achieve desired goals. This is part of what

labeling analysts mean when they note that stigmatization can become self-propelling or snowballing in its impact. (Schur, 1984. 8)

Much along the lines of Butler's theory, Schur's argument is founded on the idea that the continuous reification of women's deviance further perpetuates the subordination and lowered position of women. The insidious, productive power of this social construction allows for it to be not only unconscious but also deeply rooted within the daily actions of each and every social agent. While these discursive perceptions, "operate to impose control" (Schur, 1984. 8), they also serve to "keep women under control, or in their "place," regardless of whether anyone has consciously intended that effect" (Schur, 1984. 8). This reiterates that it is the individual acts that constitute the deviance.

The last piece of Schur's argument that remains to be discussed is the use of 'exceptionalism labels' – a term which Schur describes further through this passage:

When a woman achieves to an extent or in ways that stereotypical notions describe as beyond female capacities, it is assumed and said that she must be "exceptional"... It is not just an assertion that most women do not do these things, but rather an implicit claim that "typical," "normal," and even "natural" women do not and cannot do them. Such reasoning allows the categorical type to stand, as does the description of a woman who behaves contrary to type as "acting like a man," or as being "masculine." The numerous stigmatizations of women for violating gender norms considered throughout this book can be seen as mechanisms for maintaining preconceived cognitive categories, just as they are also mechanisms for keeping women, individually and collectively, "in line." (Schur, 1984. 30)

Schur explains that while labels of deviance function as a form of social control, acts of deviance are necessary to the system as a whole. Without these 'ruptures' in female behavior, there would be no way for the preconceived categories to stand. The conventional, 'good' female cannot exist without a binary opposition of the 'othered,' 'bad,' or deviant woman.

Schur's theory of deviance labels becomes very helpful when applied to the work of Homer or the Greek tragedians. It accounts for the idea that when women act in particularly deviant ways, they transcend their femininity and become something more representative of a monstrous, savage, or even witch-like character. This explains further why these myths allow for these types of female portrayals. They are, in fact, myths that are capable of transcending the boundaries of society and gender. They allow for unreal situations: masculine, empowered women acting out and killing their husbands and committing infanticide or androgynous goddesses who serve to support and foster the patriarchal Greek order. All this, however, is played out in an inhuman realm that is enacted through the sphere of drama.



Butler's theoretical framework is useful as it has a relatively large scope and, therefore, the ability to be applied cross-culturally. The performative acts that construct the gendered self can be considered from various perspectives. Very important is Butler's discussion from the vantage point regarding forms of resistance and their relation to power. Butler argues, "In [gender identity's] very character as performative resides the possibility of contesting its reified status" (Butler, 1998. 520). Butler suggests that there are possible points in which gender may be deconstructed and, in turn, there is a "possibility of subverting and displacing those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power" (Butler, 1990. 46). Butler argues, "If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking of subversive repetition of that style" (Butler, 1998. 520).

Because gender is unstable, it is capable of change or transformation. While Butler searches for a means to destabilize gender, she also hopes for a way to remove gender altogether. She reveals that methods of resistance and deviance can be located within the body and the performance:

The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found precisely in the arbitrary relation between such [performative] acts, in the possibility of a failure to repeat, a de-formity, or a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmatic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction. (Butler, 1990. 192)

A gendered identity relies on a continuous repetition of acts in order to be stabilized and reified. If the social actor breaks away from this pattern of performance, the person's gender can be transformed. As Butler also suggests, "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (Butler, 1998. 522). She implies that these gendered acts not only serve as a form of social control but also circumscribe an individual within a specific nature. This is also suggested through the work of Frevert and Schur, as it is clear that those who act against patriarchal order are labeled as deviant and, in turn, punished.

But, at this point, could we assign some level of empowerment to an individual who deviates from the prescribed social order and the scripted performance of gender? This is one of the questions the Greek texts will suggest answers to. The tragic women I discuss – Clytemnestra, Medea, and Agave – perform their femininity in a very specific way that inverts conventional gender norms, dismantles the gender binary system, and creates what Butler calls '*gender trouble*.'<sup>5</sup> They embody masculine traits and beastly, savage qualities that directly contradict the prescribed image of Greek womanhood. These feminist theories I have discussed analyze the patriarchal effort to maintain gender roles and then suggest the possible subversion

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<sup>5</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

of these roles in epic or tragedy. Because I have framed the relevant aspects of each theory, I will be able to refer back to these elements as I continue on to my exploration of these theories through the Greek myths. I list here the most important theoretical points I bring into my investigation.

1.) Butler's work makes it clear that performative acts create and reinforce both gender and identity. These acts are compelled by societal norms that have been established by the long-standing patriarchy.

2.) Gender perpetuates the subjugated position of females humans in society while 'woman', a socially constructed category, is formulated in such a way that reinforces this oppressed position.

3.) In turn, *gender trouble* is the subversive resistance to and transformation of performative acts that, in turn, changes the construction of gender.

4.) The hegemonic masculine order constructs a consciousness that is encoded with masculine values and thoughts. These manifest through behavior that serves to foster and enable the male ordered world.

5.) From the beginning of gendered language, women have been excluded and their power diminished. This is also represented through the exclusion of women from 'culture' and, in turn, the imperative need for 'culture,' i.e., language, thought, and male ideology, to be imposed and scripted upon the female body – the empty, passive vessel for male knowledge.

6.) This association between woman and *nature* also reinforces the female role founded on biology and sexual reproduction, i.e., maternity and childrearing.

6a.) While this suggests that women are necessary to the function and reproduction of male culture and society, it also furthers the very limited and constrained lifestyle of the female.



6b.) Also, the ambiguous position of woman allows for the possibility of female subversion and transcendence. This is analyzed through Schur's explorations of 'exceptionalism labels.'

7.) Gendered emotions are socially constructed in order to reinforce the subjugated, and inferior position of women within society. Some women who act out emotions that are typically thought of as 'masculine' are subsequently labeled as deviant. For example, angry women can be vilified as monstrous, as we shall see in exploring the women in tragedy.

8.) Finally, labels of deviance are a tool of oppression that allows for women to be both victim and 'offender.' The 'bad' women of the dramas are, in fact, representative of helpless women who act out and, in turn, find themselves labeled as deviant offenders.

9.) More than one of these theories seem to suggest that the female body is a site in which masculine ideologies can be imposed in order to establish and perpetuate male power and superiority. In turn, these tools keep women in their 'rightful,' subordinated place.



From a feminist perspective, I will argue that the mythological dramas I shall consider not only demonstrate the social construction of gender and femininity but also serve to reinforce conventional ideals regarding gender in antiquity. Some female characters stand as symbols for male order and domination. Their reverence to the masculine world is apparent in their behavior, perceived character, and interactions with other women. What is more, female characters that enact subversive performances of femininity are viewed as challenging the male order, threatening to conventional gender roles, and, in turn, are punished as such. Euripidean tragedy, however, allows for something different, more complex, and explosive in nature. Perhaps this is possible only because of the mythological, fairytale-like nature of Greek drama but one should wonder

what this means regarding gender and power in Classical Greece – a society that is, ostensibly, rooted within the patriarchy and circumscribed by masculine, androcentric values.

### Chapter 3: Penelope as the Ideal Wife and Woman

#### *Epic as an Archaic Example*

The following chapters are my feminist interpretations of ancient Greek texts. Likewise, these chapters will draw on the previously discussed theories and ancient voices in order to investigate the ways in which gender plays out within the ancient works. The first text I will use in my discussion of gender is Homer's epic poem, the *Odyssey*. Composed in ancient Greece around the late 8<sup>th</sup> century, the *Odyssey* is a useful example to explore archaic conceptions of gender, femininity, and deviance. Although this text differs in that it is an epic poem and not a drama, the *Odyssey* frames gender in such a way that it could not be left out of my discussion. Because this text was produced before the dramas, it also serves as a natural starting point to ground my investigation of gender.

The *Odyssey* is the story of Odysseus and his long journey home after the Trojan War. As Odysseus struggles to return home to Ithaca, his wife, Penelope, patiently awaits his return. Penelope's character, however, is crucial as a placeholder of power within the tale of the *Odyssey* – a poem that is, ostensibly, dedicated to Odysseus and his *nostos*. As Odysseus is lost at sea and feared to be dead, Penelope finds her home overrun by the suitors who hope to gain her hand in marriage. Although Penelope is expected to remarry, she remains hopeful of her husband's return and loyal to her marriage by crafting a scheme. She pretends to mourn her father-in-law's death while weaving, and secretly unweaving, a death shroud. She prolongs the period of mourning and, therefore, is able to avoid remarriage. Once her deceit has been revealed, she is pressured to pick one of the men.

Fortunately for her, however, Odysseus returns to Ithaca to take back what is rightfully his. In his disguise, he is able to test his wife's loyalty. After he has slain the suitors and revealed his true identity, Penelope also tests *his* character in hopes of proving that he is the real Odysseus. Once he has passed Penelope's test, the two are able to reaffirm their love and their marriage. Once again reunited in their marriage bed, they share an intimate conversation that recounts the trials they faced over the years. This interaction emphasizes not only the strength and power of their marriage but also Penelope's loyalty and devotion to her husband.

The *Odyssey*, Homer's epic poem, is a useful source to begin exploration of ancient Greek gender dynamics and the female role. Placing this archaic mythological piece alongside the 5<sup>th</sup> century tragedies, we see in the *Odyssey* a female character constructed to reveal the ideal wife and mother. This female, much like the goddess Athena, upholds androcentric values regarding marriage, sexuality, and power. Many of the females presented in the 5<sup>th</sup> century tragedies will be foils for Penelope's character, emphasizing the negative traits of femininity and the pathologies of womanhood that Penelope does not embody. My reading of the *Odyssey* will examine how Penelope constructs the archetypal 'good' female and, in turn, what this says about femininity as a whole. Lastly, I will use the work of the previously discussed theorists in hopes to further unpack the gendered interactions at play.

Penelope's female character is a faithful, beautiful wife as she, "waste[s] with longing for Odysseus, while here [the suitors] press for marriage" (XIX.161-2).<sup>6</sup> She remains chaste not only in her husband's absence but also with regards to the presence of suitors. While they pressure her to remarry, she remains loyal to her husband and "grieves for the man she married in her girlhood" (XIX.316). Likewise, Penelope's character is encoded with many attractive traits. She

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<sup>6</sup> Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fitzgerald, New York: Vintage Classics, 1990. Print.

is a “grave and wise” (XIX.82) woman “with immortal grace to hold the eyes of the Akhaians” (XVIII.241-2). In the presence of Penelope’s beauty, the suitors feel “instant weakness” (XVIII.265), and “their hearts [grow] faint with lust” (XVIII.266). Furthermore, Penelope is described as protecting her home like some “god-fearing king” (XIX.131).

Penelope’s well-poised demeanor is clearly complementary to her husband’s character. She appears as an intellectual equal to Odysseus several times throughout the epic. The first instance of this is shown as she cleverly unweaves the shroud. One of the suitors shares the story of Penelope’s deception:

Here is an instance of [Penelope’s] trickery: she had her great loom standing in the hall and the fine warp of some vast fabric on it; we were attending her, and she said to us: ‘Young men, my suitors, now my lord is dead, let me finish my weaving before I marry, or else my thread will have been spun in vain. It is a shroud I weave for Lord Laertes, when cold death comes to lay him on his bier. The country wives would hold me in dishonor if he, with all his fortune, lay unshrouded.’ We have men’s hearts; she touched them; we agreed. So every day she wove on the great loom- but every night by torchlight she unwove it; and so for three years she deceived the Akhaians. (II.100-114)

Penelope is portrayed here as the conventional, deceptive female who challenges the male gender sphere with feminine guile. I would argue, however, that this moment’s complexity is framed by the image of Penelope mourning her “dead” father-in-law. While she is, in fact, deceiving the suitors, she is also acting on a scheme that hopes to preserve her marriage and continue her loyalty to Odysseus. She has a premeditated plan, “the happy thought to set up weaving” (XIX.165), and therefore, her words as repeated by the suitors in this passage are deliberately fashioned in order to manipulate them. She is cleverly putting on an act, playing off of the conventional role of female mourning, in order to cater to the sympathies of the suitors. Her calculated words explain that she is weaving her father-in-law’s death shroud.

This passage seems to have a double meaning as her scheme is, in fact, a literal way to honor her husband. By upholding her end of the marriage she is able to maintain her chastity for three years. The story of the weaving is later recounted from Penelope's perspective. It is notable that Homer uses the exact same lines in order to present Penelope's side of the story.

Furthermore, she elaborates, "I have no strength left to evade a marriage, cannot find any further way; my parents urge it upon me, and my son will not stand by while they eat up his property" (XIX. 184). Penelope's genuine investment in her marriage to Odysseus is made perfectly clear. What is more, she expresses these words directly to the disguised Odysseus on his initial return home. She presents herself as unable to escape remarriage and left with no other choice. Her need to finally consider marriage is validated by acceptable social reasons, i.e., her son, her property, and her parents. She explains her situation as being unfavorable and makes it clear that her choice to remarry is not motivated by passion, lust, or greed. Shifting the focus back to Penelope's intellect, this moment shows her character to be quite calculated and clever. Because her scheme serves to stall the suitors and protect her marriage to Odysseus, it is viewed in such a way that does not discredit her reputation – particularly in the eyes of her husband. Her actions uphold a highly valued aspect of the male sphere, the marriage to one's husband.

Applying a lens of feminist theory to these interactions helps to deconstruct Penelope's behavior and articulate the significance it has in the context of my investigation. Drawing first on Judith Butler's theoretical framework, I suggest that Penelope is manipulating her performance of gender (i.e., femininity) in order to satisfy her personal needs. This goal serves to uphold and preserve her marriage. Butler's theory states that performative acts create a gendered identity. Gender is produced by the social actor and through this performative outlet. While the bulk of

these performances unconsciously aim to reaffirm and reproduce socially upheld norms and values, there is room for a performance to transgress.

By applying this concept to Penelope's behavior outlined above, I would suggest that what we see here is a manipulated performance of femininity. Within the whole of my investigation, this is only one of several examples in which a performance of femininity is manipulated to the social actor's and female character's advantage. By deliberately acting out a conventional role of femininity, the women of the dramas are able to achieve a personal goal like tricking a male character. However, in the case of Penelope's deception, her performance serves rather to protect her marriage, thus representing something inherently 'good' to the Greek male audience and acceptable in a male ordered social setting.

Penelope's 'good' character is kept intact. Unlike the women of tragedy, Penelope is not labeled as 'deviant.' Schur's theory on gender, deviance, and stigma does not apply to Penelope's case within the structure of the *Odyssey*. This appears to be intrinsically connected to Penelope's actions, i.e., her desire to uphold the institution of marriage and to maintain her given position within the social hierarchy. I will unpack this further and discuss the significance of Penelope's actions on a larger scale within the conclusion of this chapter.

When the suitors have been vanquished, Penelope can also be viewed as an "equal" to her husband as they are reunited for the first time. As Penelope states, "There are secret signs we know, we two" (XXIII.124-5), she, yet again, calculates her actions in a very clever way. She directly challenges Odysseus in order to prove that he is her husband. Through this, Penelope reveals that she is on the same cognitive level as Odysseus, someone known for being particularly clever as well. Furthermore, Penelope directly addresses this equality through her phrase, 'we two', and she seems to imply that they are one and the same. As Penelope tests her

husband, she is able to, “[try] him to the breaking point” (XXIII.206). Odysseus’ emotional outburst proves that Penelope’s test is successful. She is able to evoke a reaction such as this from a usually calm and calculated man.

Penelope, however, influences many men with deliberate plans, tricky persuasion, and carefully chosen words. Whether it is the unweaving of the shroud (2.100-120), the story of her dream (19.620-670), or her final test for Odysseus (23.210), she assumes a mindset that is very similar to her husband’s. Penelope’s patience, wit, and her ability to outsmart Odysseus portrays the equality between the couple through their ‘like-mindedness.’ The story of Penelope’s dream is another interaction that can be further unpacked within the discussion of Penelope’s role. She prefaces her dream by explaining, “My forlorn thought flows... wondering: shall I stay beside my son and guard my own things here, my maids, my hall, to honor my lord’s bed and the common talk? Or had I best join fortunes with a suitor, the noblest one, most lavish in his gifts... my son being still a callow boy forbade marriage...but now the child is grown...” (XIX.608-17). She again explains the necessities behind her thoughts of remarriage. This time, however, she is directly addressing her disguised husband.

Although Penelope’s recognition of her husband is not explicitly discussed within the text, I am thoroughly convinced she is able to see through Odysseus’s disguise – especially when she is regarded as an intellectual equal to her husband. As she asks the disguised Odysseus to interpret an ostensibly innocent dream for her, it becomes clear that her dream is a pointed and meaningful metaphor:

Listen: interpret me this dream: From a water’s edge twenty fat geese have come to feed on grain beside my house. And I delight to see them. But now a mountain eagle with great wings and crooked beak storms in to break their necks and stew their bodies here. Away he soars into the bright sky and I cry aloud – all this in a dream – I wail and round me gather softly braided Akhaian women mourning



because the eagle killed my geese. Then down out of the sky he drops to a cornice beam with moral voice telling me not to weep. ‘Be glad’ says he, ‘renowned Ikarios’ daughter: here is no dream but something real as day, something about to happen. All those geese were suitors, and the bird was I. see now, I am no eagle but your lord come back to bring inglorious death upon them all!’ (XIX.620-39)

Penelope’s dream is a direct comment on Odysseus returning to Ithaca in order to regain his rightful place in his home. It is a call to action directed at her disguised husband. It is meant to motivate Odysseus not only to feel pressured and jealous but also to act on these feelings and vanquish the suitors. The disguised Odysseus accepts this challenge as he suggests his interpretation of the dream: “Has not Odysseus himself shown you what is to come? Death to the suitors, sure death, too. Not one escapes his doom” (XIX.645-7). In reply, Penelope explains the test of the bow, which will set Odysseus up to reveal his true identity and, in turn, allow for his killing of the suitors. Through this scene, the relationship between Penelope and Odysseus is made clear – even as Odysseus’s true identity overtly remains disguised. Penelope sees through this disguise and challenges her husband to quickly bring justice, peace, and order back into their home. While Penelope’s loyalty to her husband remains undoubtedly strong throughout the epic, her dream, in particular, serves as a playful reminder and call to action of her husband through a feigned interest in the suitors, or as the dream suggests – her *geese*.

In a similar vein of thought, Penelope’s character is signified as “equal” to her husband through the imagery of lions. Penelope mourns the loss of her husband as she states, “Pain- more pain than any living woman. My lord, my lion heart, gone, long ago- the bravest man...” (IV.774-5). She once again repeats this line in her dreamlike state, “My lord, my lion heart, gone, long ago- the bravest man...” (IV.867). One can assume that a ‘lionhearted man’ is representative of a brave man; therefore, Odysseus embodies the image of a lion through his bravery. Eurykleia, the nurse, also describes Odysseus as a lion. Directed at Penelope, she states,

“If you had only seen [Odysseus]! It would have made your heart glow hot! – a lion splashed with mire and blood” (XXIII.49-51). The nurse describes Odysseus as a valiant, savage man after he has slaughtered the suitors and taken back his home. Worrying about her son, mourning her lost husband, and concerned about the state of her home, Penelope’s “mind [turns] at bay, like a cornered lion” (IV.843). At this point, she, like Odysseus, becomes personified as a lion. Penelope’s maternal instincts drive her to this animal-like intensity that, in turn, leaves her feeling trapped and emotional.

The personification of a woman’s animal-like nature is a recurring theme throughout my investigation of the Greek works. When considered alongside the earlier discussed feminist theory, these animal metaphors have the potential to be read as symbols relating directly to gender, femininity, and deviance. Through the lens of Sherry Ortner’s piece, a woman’s body, her reproductive abilities, and her maternity are all biological aspects that ground her closer to nature rather than culture. In the Greek works, the women are personified as animals when they are overwhelmed by their maternal instincts. By transgressing the masculine culture that circumscribes the female body, a woman develops an animal-like savageness that is feared by the male world. Ute Frevert’s framework would also emphasize the emotional aspect of the personified woman, as it is this sense of overwhelming emotion that drives a woman to become beast-like, terrifying, or murderous. The inhuman form that a female body takes on through personification can also be considered through the lens of Schur’s ‘exceptionalism labels.’ These women, in their personified and feared form, are most certainly labeled as deviant by a male spectator. This label is imposed upon the female body in order to constrain her and place her back in her ‘rightfully’ subordinated position.

While this female transformation is present within the later tragedies, Penelope's character does not fully transform. While personified as the lioness, Penelope's character does not act out in an inhuman, beast-like way. Because she represents something inherently 'good' to the masculine audience, Penelope is therefore *capable* of becoming this beast but maintains control over her emotions. What allows her to remain calm and in control, however, is Athena's divine influence over Penelope's rising emotions. Athena's role will be addressed later in this chapter, as it is an element of masculine power and control that is essential to my investigation and remains to be discussed.

Returning to the text of the *Odyssey*, I will now turn directly to the relationship between husband and wife. I use the term *equal*, for lack of a better word, in order to describe Penelope's relation to her husband, Odysseus. Because Penelope is reflective of the ideal, perfect wife, she is able to be comparatively similar to Odysseus on an intellectual level. The ideal wife would most likely reflect the characteristics of her husband as she would have been taught and trained under his watch. Xenophon's text, *The Oeconomicus*, serves as the basis for this argument. Referring back to my earlier discussion of Xenophon's work, one can recognize that Penelope's character directly reaffirms and reinforces these idealized feminine traits in which a wife was expected to have or learn. In this sense, the man teaches and endows the wife with the necessary 'masculine' knowledge that is integral to her female role within the *oikos*. The *logos*, the knowledge, that is given to the wife by her husband is inherently masculine and supports the male ordered world. A wife's understanding of the social world would, in turn, reveal that *all* understanding and knowledge is deeply rooted within the systematically ordered patriarchy.

If Penelope were arguably the archetype for the ideal, faithful wife, then she would, in fact, stand as an intellectual match to her husband, Odysseus. Following this idea, I would

suggest that Penelope was *trained* by her husband and *given* the *appropriate* knowledge in order to become a wife such as this. Feminist theory supports this idea as well. Theory suggests that the female body can be viewed as a site in which masculine order is imposed. Female consciousness is encoded with masculine ideologies, values, and thoughts that foster and enable male power. In turn, this also reifies the subjugated female position within society. Ortner's framework discusses this concept in reference to the masculine culture that is prescribed onto the female body. These tools of oppression aim to put women in their 'rightful' place. It is a male dominated system of power that perpetuates the subordinated female position.

Furthermore, Xenophon's text describes the female's work as connected to sitting and spinning at the loom. Penelope does, in fact, illustrate this conventional role of a Greek female. The image of Penelope standing over her loom, however, is representative in the *Odyssey* of her utilizing her feminine guile, manipulating the prescribed female gender role, and ultimately, staying chaste and loyal to her husband. In this sense, Xenophon's text describes the division of labor present within the ancient Greek world. In turn, Penelope takes advantage of this conventional role and deliberately acts it out through her performance of gender.

In the *Odyssey*, the goddess Athena also appears as a figure who upholds and supports the male ordered world; she appears to do this as she influences and charms Penelope's character. The suitors, for instance, seem to credit Athena for Penelope's clever plans. The suitor states, "[Penelope] may rely too long on Athena's gifts – talent in handicraft and a clever mind; so cunning... Wits like Penelope's never were before, but this time – well, she made poor use of them" (II.124-130). But while the suitors find Penelope's scheme to be, "incomparably cunning" (II.94), the audience would have been delighted that she had outsmarted these men in order to wait out her husband's return home.

Athena intervenes on Penelope's behalf several times throughout the epic: "heart-prompting from the grey-eyed goddess came to the quiet queen, Penelope: a wish to show herself before the suitors; for thus by fanning their desire again Athena meant to set her beauty high before her husband's eyes, before her son" (XVIII.200-5). In this passage, Athena's influence makes Odysseus jealous, thus spurring him on to take back his home and his wife. Athena also appears in Penelope's dreams as "a figure of dream in a woman's form" (IV.848). Athena intervenes in the form of a "dim phantom" (IV.889), in order to calm Penelope of her overwhelming anguish and sorrow. Athena convinces Penelope to "Lift up thy heart" (IV.878), and let go of her fears. At this point, early in the poem, Penelope seems to be losing control of her emotions. She "[tastes] neither food nor drink" (IV.841), and she appears to be in a highly overwhelmed, emotional state. Ironically, as Athena intervenes, she convinces Penelope to take control of these emotions. Athena not only favors Odysseus but also fosters the patriarchal order. In this sense, with the absence of Odysseus, the goddess Athena keeps Penelope's female character in line: calm, most of the time, obedient, and faithful to her husband.

Within in the text of the epic, Clytemnestra's character is directly compared to that of Penelope. Clytemnestra's adulterous female character is a foil for loyal Penelope. For instance, the ghost of Agamemnon describes his wife, Clytemnestra, as "heartless" (XI.477), "adulteress" (XXIV.225), a "whore" (XI.494), who has "[plotted] a thing so low, defiled herself and all her sex, all women yet to come, even those few who may be virtuous" (XI.502-4). Clytemnestra's character is not pardoned nor is she vindicated from her actions. Rather, from her husband's bitter perspective, her actions diminish the reputation of all women. In Agamemnon's opinion, the song of Clytemnestra "will be forever hateful. A bad name she gave to womankind, even the best" (XXIV. 227-8).

On the other hand, Agamemnon contradicts his previous statement as he notes that Penelope is “a valiant wife” (XXIV.218), a “faithful daughter” (XXIV.220), and a “mistress of her own heart” (XXIV.222). Penelope is so separated from the rest of the female gender that she is incomparable to the other women. In her idealized feminine state, she is the “girl [Odysseus] brought home” (XXIV.218), who was “true to her husband’s honor and her own” (XXIV.219). Unlike Clytemnestra, she would not contemplate killing her husband as she is, “too wise, too clear-eyed, [and] sees alternatives too well” (XI.519-20). Beyond Penelope’s faithfulness, the notable differentiation between these two females is Penelope’s *clear-eyed wisdom*. Let it be noted that the epithet ‘clear-eyed’ is used only several other times throughout Robert Fitzgerald’s translation of the epic. Telemakhos, Penelope’s son, is “clear-eyed as a god” (XX.141), and Odysseus is described as, “a clear-eyed man and wise” (VIII.415). While Fitzgerald chooses to translate Athena’s epithet as “grey-eyed” (I.219), Robert Fagles, translates her epithet as, “clear-eyed” (1.9; VI.94; VI.97).

This concept of *clear-eyed wisdom* seems in Homer’s epic to represent the masculine encoded consciousness I argued for earlier in this chapter. I will consider this form of wisdom once more through my investigation of the *Eumenides*. In this later drama, Athena’s character again employs a powerful wisdom in order to foster masculine rule. Athena, in this regard, is the physical manifestation of male ideology and masculine encoded consciousness. These epithets used by both Homer and the later tragedian, Aeschylus, make a direct association between husband, wife, and son and, furthermore, between them and the goddess who upholds and enables the patriarchy.

One feminist interpretation of the epic would consider Penelope as an empowered female who challenges the male gender sphere. Through my reading of the *Odyssey* and my

consideration of the feminist theories, however, I would argue that Penelope's behavior not only reinforces and upholds the male-aligned social order but also reflects her *dependence* on her husband and son throughout the epic. Her feminine cleverness is there to support and validate the masculine wisdom and intelligence of her husband, Odysseus, and the goddess, Athena. Likewise, it is possible that to a Greek audience, Penelope's intellect would consist of only what her husband had actively chosen to *give* and *teach* to her. What her character claims is not an independent empowerment but rather an enabling reverence directed at supporting her husband and family.

Based on my analysis of Penelope's character, I would argue that Penelope has no more agency than any other wife, mother, or slave in the ancient Greek world. Her 'idealized' feminine image is as such because it is presented from the point of view of a male. Her character stands to promote the 'good' female that remains subservient to the male gender sphere. Through my feminist reading, I would also argue that Clytemnestra and Medea, while presented as rebellious and 'unconstrained' women, are, in fact, depicted as vilified, self-destructive, and inhuman characters. They commit unthinkable, horrible crimes but in the process are dissociated from their female roles. They are labeled as deviant women in an attempt to circumscribe them back within their subordinated, feminine place. Unlike Penelope, they are successfully challenging and deconstructing the gendered spheres. The tragedy is, however, that these rebellious women are left with nothing - childless, dead, or excluded from 'the human world' entirely. The tragic women's label of deviance is a part of the system of oppression. It can be construed as an attempt to circumscribe them back into their 'rightful' place in androcentric society or as a label that further excludes and subordinates them from society.

The moments in which the tragic women detach themselves from the oppressive, androcentric Greek order provide evidence to answer this investigation's focal questions of gender. On one level, these tales can be read as a way to delineate the idealized female character or the condemned female behavior, but on another level, the dramas express something much more rich that challenges or dismantles the gendered spheres, and in turn, problematizes a deeply rooted system of oppression. The later playwrights were able to explore, manipulate, or even uproot clearly established systems of the social world. This will be discussed at length when I turn to my interpretation of Euripidean tragedy.



## Chapter 4: Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*

Within the context of my investigation, the *Odyssey* provided an archaic framework in which I was able to analyze gender and apply the feminist theories. What was revealed was an idealized female, Penelope, who supported and upheld the patriarchy. Similarly, Athena appeared as a physical manifestation of masculine wisdom that aimed to further foster androcentric order. While Penelope manipulated her feminine performance in reverence to her family, marriage, and home, Clytemnestra appears within the *Odyssey* as a stark contrast to the loyal wife. Clytemnestra aimed rather to destroy these ‘sacred bonds’ and, in turn, was ascribed with a label of deviance and a pervasive social stigma.

The following chapters in my investigation will now turn to discuss the 5<sup>th</sup> century Athenian dramas. These tragedies are particularly telling when considered through the lens of feminist theory. The female antagonists written into these plays exist as a vehicle to challenge, manipulate, and, at times, fully dismantle constructions gender. What is more, through these women, one can consider the significance of their gendered behavior and, in turn, the very real consequences these actions have on their female character. Within the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra directly challenges the family, home, and prescribed female role. Her resistance is subsequently refuted within the *Eumenides*, the third play of the *Oresteia*. With the dismissal of Clytemnestra’s murder, the justification of Orestes’s case, and the isolation of the Furies below the city, patriarchal rule is successful in that gender is ‘rightfully’ reordered and circumscribed to fit back within androcentric order.

#### 4.1) The *Agamemnon*: Clytemnestra's Performance

Aeschylus's tragedy, *Agamemnon*, captures the drama of a royal family from Argos. King Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, waits for her husband to return home from the Trojan War. In his ten-year absence, Clytemnestra has not only assumed her husband's role in the palace but also has taken on a lover, Aegisthus and secretly fashioned a murderous plot to avenge the sacrifice of her daughter, Iphigenia. Punishing her husband for his role in Iphigenia's death, Clytemnestra waits for his homecoming and then, with the help of her lover, murders both Agamemnon and his concubine, Cassandra. The chorus warns Clytemnestra that her son will return to Argos to avenge his father's death but Clytemnestra is unwilling to listen to their words. Usurping her husband's power, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus return to the palace to begin their reign over Argos.

Looking to the opening scene of the tragedy, the male characters perceive Clytemnestra in a masculine, empowered position. The watchman's poignant speech sheds light on Clytemnestra's agency and reputation within the palace. Under the strict order of Clytemnestra, the watchman has spent "one whole year awake" (2)<sup>7</sup>, watching for a signal fire. The man regards Clytemnestra with obedient respect as she, a woman, "maneuvers like a man" (13). From this remark, one can already see that women are considered less capable than men, especially in a political setting. The opening scene continues as the chorus, a group of old men from Argos, also reaches out to Clytemnestra. For these men, she is their "lone defender" (256), and they "respect [her] power" (256), because they must "honour the warlord's woman once he leaves the throne" (1260). While her husband is absent, Clytemnestra has logically moved into a seat of power and has been accepted as taking charge. The men of Argos respect her as an authoritative

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<sup>7</sup> Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Group, 1984. Print.

figure. This perception of Clytemnestra, however, has also been subject to change as her actions are increasingly driven by a self-indulgent desire for revenge against the husband whose status has given her current power. At the beginning of the play, these men seem to view Clytemnestra as a savior and critical stand-in for her husband. The irony, however, is that while the chorus initially presents Clytemnestra in this positive light, it is *her* actions that become responsible for the ruin of the royal family, and they already fear the impending catastrophe that they cannot speak about.

As the leader of the chorus praises, “Spoken like a man, my lady, loyal, full of self-command” (355-6), he remarks that Clytemnestra’s confidence in speech resembles that of a man. Her voice is heard, respected, and obeyed by other men. This speech, in particular, pertains to the fall of Troy, thus making it a victory speech. In this sense, she is like the commander of an army who is able to motivate men and in a very public setting. She is victorious in the sense that her burning beacons have warned her of her husband’s imminent return. She takes full credit for this political tactic by admitting, “I ordained it all” (314). It is “fire” (315), and “my burning sign” (317). Clytemnestra, in these scenes, displays attributes that are typically confined to the male gender sphere. She is calculated, calm, and commanding.

She also refers to the victory of the Trojan War. She states, “The city’s ours- in our hands this very day!” (322). Ostensibly, Clytemnestra is referring to the sack of Troy. One could suggest, however, that she also is alluding to her husband’s return and *her* intent to rise to power after his death. After ten years of waiting, it is finally known that the war is over and her plan can now commence. Read in this way, Clytemnestra’s speech is full of irony and even sarcasm as she states, “let no lust, no mad desire seize the armies to ravish what they must not touch-overwhelmed by all they’ve won!” (344-6). One could argue that this is in reference to the

sacrifice of Iphigenia. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter in order to achieve favorable winds from the gods. In this sense, Clytemnestra blames Agamemnon not only for the loss of her daughter but also for his selfish desire to succeed. As she states, “The run for home and safety waits” (347-8), her words ironically describe Agamemnon’s false sense of security as he returns home from the war. Continuing her speech, “even if the men come back with no offence to the gods, the avenging dead may never rest” (349-50), Clytemnestra suggests that Agamemnon *appeased* the gods through his sacrifice, but her deceased daughter still deserves and seeks revenge. Clytemnestra is the living manifestation of that revenge.

In the context of the previously discussed feminist theory, Clytemnestra’s actions reflect a manipulated gender performance. Her language and empowered, masculine presentation confirm her manipulated performance. Butler and Wittig’s theories contextualize the usage of language as a possible site for gender resistance. In this sense, Clytemnestra no longer resembles the passive, subordinated character that would have been prescribed for the ancient Greek female body. Rather, she is a commanding force through her language and interactions with the male characters. This also draws a direct connection to Ute Frevert’s theory regarding gendered emotions. When a female expresses emotion that is uncontrollable, wrathful, or full of rage, she embodies something monstrous that is not only feared by men but also perceived as animalistic and, in turn, personified as such. This is true in the case of Clytemnestra. As she challenges the male sphere or acts on her maternal instincts, she is subsequently personified with animal-like behavior or traits.

Clytemnestra’s motives and the nature of her maternal instincts can be considered through the text and then further discussed through a lens of feminist theory. She plots to murder her husband in order to avenge her daughter’s death. Clytemnestra’s actions are initially

described as very masculine and she actively aggresses against her male counterpart. On the other hand, her driving motivation begins as maternal by nature. There are several key moments in which the chorus references maternity through the usage of animal imagery. If not to comment on the significance of Clytemnestra's failed maternity, then what reasoning would Aeschylus have to evoke violent imagery that references mother animals? Through the lens of Sherry Ortner's social framework, these could be examples of an inherent, biological connection between the female body and nature. In the absence of masculine culture, the female is representative of something animalistic, savage, and primal. She is the 'mother animal' who is enraged and, in turn, her behavior is dominated and controlled by this emotion. From a male perspective, this type of woman is dangerous and feared. This type of imagery is also what allows for the female to transform into something entirely 'inhuman' and capable of murder.

An example of this personification occurs in the animal imagery of the *Agamemnon*. As the chorus states, "like vultures robbed of their young, the agony sends them frenzied" (54-5), they are to the audience also alluding to Clytemnestra's emotional loss of her daughter through the imagery of the birds. This metaphor suggests that Clytemnestra, in her anger, is *frenzied* and emotional. The chorus presents another metaphor that links the animal-nature to maternity through the image of birds and a hare:

The kings of birds to kings of the beaking prows, one black, one with a blaze of silver skimmed the palace spearhand right and swooping lower, all could see, plunged their claws in a hare, a mother bursting with unborn young- the babies spilling, quick spurts of blood- cut off the race just dashing into life! (118-124)

This extended metaphor is relevant to the story of Iphigenia's sacrifice. The king of birds, in this sense, is a reference to king Agamemnon. The bird violently kills a pregnant hare and her unborn babies. This is suggestive of the 'animal nature' that will possess Clytemnestra to enact her

murderous plan against her husband. I would also suggest that there is an added emphasis on the killing of the unborn young, as the animals are killed at a young age and unable to live their lives fully, much like Iphigenia. These metaphors also carry themes of violence and gore. This directly reflects the bloodshed and murders not only of Iphigenia but also of Agamemnon, Cassandra, and later, Clytemnestra herself.

These animal metaphors continue through the image of lions. As the chorus brings up the “ravenous lion’s tender, helpless cubs, the suckling young of beasts that stalk the wilds” (141-2), they describe a violent and wild female lion that is mothering her innocent and defenseless lion cubs. This too is an image applicable to the innocent, virginal Iphigenia and Clytemnestra’s later violence and uncontrollable anger over her child’s death. This scene reiterates the idea that a mother’s offspring is defenseless and completely dependent on the mother. It is critical to keep in mind that Clytemnestra’s motives are at base very feminine in the sense that she feels a maternal-drive to seek revenge. Clytemnestra, in fact, displays an apparently instinct-driven, uncontrollable, animalistic need to violently punish her husband. This can be seen as she proudly describes the murder: “So [Agamemnon] goes down, and the life is bursting out of him- great sprays of blood, and the murderous shower wounds me, dyes me black and I, I revel like the Earth when the spring rains come down...” (1410-3). Clytemnestra savagely stabs her husband and as the blood rains down and stains her body, she joyously celebrates her success. This moment directly confirms Clytemnestra’s separation from culture and humanity. She has become the beastly, monstrous woman overwhelmed by her emotions: her rage and pervasive desire for revenge. It is a prime example of the female’s inherent animal-nature that thrives on this savage violence.

These animal metaphors suggest that if a child is threatened, the mother will become as protective and territorial as an animal. Another lion image is described in reference to a stolen infant:

A man once reared a lion cub at hall, snatched from the breast, still craving milk in the first flush of life... like an infant just born Its eyes on fire, little beggar, fawning for its belly, slave to food...[the lion] went through the flock to prepare a feast, an illicit orgy- the house swam with blood, none could resist that agony-massacre vast and raw! (713-30)

This image is different from those others as it lacks the element of maternity. There is no mother present, but rather a young cub that has been stolen by a man from its mother. The relevance to the situation at hand is that Agamemnon has stolen Iphigenia from Clytemnestra. In the text, the cub is defenseless and needy as it constantly craves sustenance. Clytemnestra may have been defenseless against her daughter's death, but the cub grows up and violently kills a flock of animals.

While the lion metaphors are moments that signify the face of motherhood, the innocence of children, and death, I believe they have the capability to encompass a much broader theme as well. It is critical, in this regard, that Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, and Aegisthus are all referred to as lions throughout the tragedy.<sup>8</sup> When Agamemnon describes his victory at Troy, he references the "beast of Argos" (810), and "crashing through [the Trojan] walls our bloody lion lapped its fill, gorging on the blood of kings" (812-3). The lion, for Agamemnon's character, is connected to not only his city, i.e., he links the animal to his homeland, but also his selfhood, i.e., it is literally a piece of him or his property as he uses the possessive pronoun *our*. There is irony present here as well through the reference of lions murdering kings.

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<sup>8</sup> Even Orestes is referred to as a lion in the second play of the trilogy, *The Libation Bearers*. When the chorus states, "Justice came at last... crushing vengeance... to Agamemnon's house returned, the double *lion*, the double onslaught drove to the hilt" (922-927), they reference Orestes, the double lion, and his murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

Turning to Clytemnestra's character, both she and her lover are described as beasts through the prophetic voice of Cassandra. As Cassandra states, "She is the lioness, she rears on her hind legs, she beds with the wolf when her lion king goes ranging" (1274-1277); she articulates the deception and adultery of Clytemnestra through the image of a female lion. The wolf, in this passage, is none other than Aegisthus and the lion king is Agamemnon. Cassandra continues, "...someone who plots revenge. A lion who lacks a lion's heart, he sprawled at home in the royal lair and set a trap for the lord on his return" (1231-1234). It is particularly relevant that Cassandra personifies Aegisthus with the images of both a wolf and a lion. Aegisthus's lion is different than the other lions as it lacks courage or some aspect of powerful agency. He is the character that has latched onto another individual, Clytemnestra, in order to attain power and vengeance. This speaks to the fact that Aegisthus, in his relationship with Clytemnestra, is the weaker individual. Even Aegisthus admits, "the treachery was the woman's work" (1668), thus implying the idea that he does not have direct agency. Clytemnestra planned and carried out her plot of revenge that just happened to work in Aegisthus's favor as well. Furthermore, Aegisthus seems aware of his emasculated status as the chorus calls him a "coward" (1676), for allowing a woman to do a man's job. He becomes overwhelmed with anger and challenges the chorus to a fight, thus attempting to defend his bruised male ego.

Using the previously discussed metaphors as a foundation, one can wonder what the lion stands for and symbolizes in the context of these different characters. Channeling the lion cub metaphor, it could be suggested that the characters were perhaps once innocent and pure but through their actions or their situations, became these savage and violent individuals. Clytemnestra was devastated when her husband killed her daughter, Iphigenia. From that moment, she transformed into the inhuman, angry, violent beast that was willing and able to



commit murder. Clytemnestra's rage is what allows for her to become this non-human entity that is personified through images of lions, savage beasts, and vengeful mothers.

Looking back to the feminist theory, I argue that these metaphors are directly playing out Frevert's theory of gendered emotions. Likewise, it also draws on Schur's theory of 'exceptionalism labels.' Clytemnestra's behavior - the murders, the challenging of masculine power, and the direct resistance of conventional femininity - are representative of moments that "stereotypical notions [would] describe as beyond female capacities" (Schur, 1984. 30). She is breaking the traditional norms of gender by challenging masculine domination and power. In turn, she is labeled as deviant, as an animal, and as capable of 'inhuman,' savage behavior. This language is an attempt to circumscribe her back within the strictly regulated female gender sphere. Schur conceptualizes these mechanisms as both methods for control and tools of oppression.

In the case of the two male characters, the lion symbolizes something much different. Agamemnon's character, for example, allowed for the sacrifice of his own daughter in order to attain favorable winds from the gods. One could suggest that Agamemnon's choice to be successful in war rather than to protect his own family, his daughter, was the moment in which he became a murderous character. Lastly, it is revealed that Atreus, Agamemnon's father, betrayed Aegisthus's father. Aegisthus's father was served the flesh of his own children and then exiled. Aegisthus describes, "Atreus drove us into exile, my struggling father and I, a babe-in arms, his last son..." (1636-7), and then turns to justify his part in the murder by concluding, "but I became a man and Justice brought me home" (1638-9). Clytemnestra's lover, in this regard, was once an innocent child but grew into the role of a savage, angry man obsessed with revenge.

Clytemnestra is not just a mother, she is also an archetype of the unfaithful, adulterous wife. This was directly addressed through the archaic example of the *Odyssey*, where Clytemnestra is compared against the faithful and loyal wife, Penelope. While her husband is away at war, she actively commits herself to another man, rejects her domestic role and duty, and rejects the sanctity of her marriage. Clytemnestra directly addresses male anxiety about the unfaithful woman by dramatically validating her role as Agamemnon's wife:

Have [Agamemnon] come [home] with speed... may he return and find [his wife] true at hall, just as the day he left her, faithful to the last. A watchdog gentle to him alone, savage to those who cross his path. I have not changed. (599-605)

Clytemnestra's speech is well played out in her acknowledgement of her husband's possible fears. Likewise, she purposefully presents herself in such a way as she is addressing not only the male chorus but also her husband's messenger. This moment is another manipulated performance of femininity. This time, however, it is used in order to manipulate its audience and the male sphere. Unlike Penelope's goal of protecting her marriage, Clytemnestra not only looks to achieve a personal goal of revenge but also hopes to supercede her feminine role and attain a masculine seat of political and social power. Rather than protecting her marriage, Clytemnestra plans to destroy it through the murder of her husband.

I will now turn my discussion to a close reading and explanation of the pointed imagery Clytemnestra uses within her speech, i.e., her very deliberate performance of femininity. She recapitulates the importance of purity in the home as well as continued devotion to her marriage i.e., *true at hall* and *faithfulness*, to Agamemnon. Keeping the earlier discussion of animal imagery in mind, Clytemnestra uses the image of a dog to personify her loyalty and faithfulness. The dog, and the symbolic representations its image implies, is used several other times throughout the tragedy. The watchman, loyal to Clytemnestra, refers to himself as "like a dog"

(3) while waiting on the roof and following her orders. Clytemnestra states that she “would salute that man the watchdog of the fold” (857), furthering the note that he is a loyal and attentive figure. At the last scene of the play, Aegisthus also yells, “You tempt your fates, you insubordinate dogs- to hurl abuse at me, your master!” (1697-8). This scene suggests that the old men of Argos, the chorus, are at a lower social standing than Aegisthus.

The symbol of a dog suggests a sense of loyalty to an owner or a status of servitude. Furthering this symbolism, it alludes to the idea that Clytemnestra, a wife and a female, is at a lowered social position that is meant to be submissive to the husband and male figure. The earlier discussed feminist theory would add evidence to further support this idea as well. Within this gender performance, Clytemnestra is using conventional norms of femininity – an assumed lower social status – to her advantage. Clytemnestra presents herself as a traditionally passive woman and thus appears to be situated in the submissive female position. Coming out of this performance, she does not appear to be challenging the male sphere and her deceptive plan remains hidden.

While Clytemnestra’s speech is meant to persuade her husband of her loyalty, it simultaneously speaks to her domesticity, her maternal instincts, and her emotional need for revenge. These are traits, however, that are not true in the case of Clytemnestra’s character. This speech is her playing out a dramatic, feminine role in order to convince the messenger of her loyalty and, in turn, to allow for Agamemnon to return home unaware of the danger he faces. She must strategically present herself in a specific light in order to assuage any fears the men, particularly her husband, might have. If the messenger were to be alerted of Clytemnestra’s behavior, he would report back to Agamemnon and foil Clytemnestra’s plans. This scene is similar to Penelope’s plan within the *Odyssey*, as both women deliberately act out a female role

in order to manipulate the ways in which their male audience perceives, believes, and trusts their character. Because women are inherently seen as deceptive, these performances become believable and dramatic. It is a performance in which the women look to convince and persuade their male audience. Penelope's motivations, however, were based on her marriage, family, and her husband. Clytemnestra's performance is motivated by much more insidious, deceptive reasons.

Clytemnestra continues her speech in an attempt to further persuade the messenger, the chorus, and husband of her faithful adherence to her marriage:

The strains of time can never break our seal. In love with a new lord, in ill repute I am as practiced as I am in dyeing bronze. That is my boast, teeming with the truth, I am proud, a woman of my nobility – I'd hurl it from the roofs! (606-610)

She once again reiterates the honored bond, i.e., the *seal* of marriage. It is a political, social, and gendered contract that she pretends to uphold. This stands as a stark contrast to the role of Penelope within the *Odyssey*. Ironically, Clytemnestra states that she is as unfamiliar with adultery as she is with dyeing bronze. The concept of dyeing bronze is complex in that it has several layers. Clytemnestra is ostensibly saying that she is unskilled in this specific craft. In reality, however, a bronze sword would be dipped in liquid in order to temper the metal. This is symbolic to Clytemnestra's later murder of Agamemnon as she 'dyes' her sword in blood and stabs him with it. Finally, the last two lines of Clytemnestra's speech emphasize her pride, honesty, and social status.

These lines are weighted with irony not only because she lies about her affair and loyalty but also because she portrays characteristics that are not necessarily associated with a proper, honest, and subdued female. For instance, she is loud, boastful, and full of pride. She wants to publicly announce herself by placing herself in the public sphere. These traits are usually more

associated with a heroic Greek male. Likewise, her self-praise exposes her deception as her performance is too over the top. In response to this passage, the chorus states, “she speaks well, but it takes no seer to know she only says what’s right” (612-3). The chorus recognizes that she has directly addressed a typical man’s anxieties and has crossed the line of quiet, proper female in order to become a bold, empowered, and emotionally charged actor. This moment speaks to Edwin Schur’s theory of ‘exceptionalism labels.’ It is here that a ‘non-standard, exceptional’ woman is revealed. The chorus knows the truth about Clytemnestra’s adultery and initially doubts her motives. This scene, in turn, is her challenging the chorus, this group of men, to expose or publically question her true nature. It is her challenging the male gender sphere. Ironically, the chorus does not act on their doubts and they do not alert Agamemnon’s messenger. She successfully persuades the men through her performance of femininity. She pretends in speech to embody piety, chastity, and vulnerability – all aptly suited to the archetypal wife.

Looking directly to Clytemnestra’s interactions with her husband, Agamemnon, one can now move on to watching the gender dynamics and power struggle in play between the couple. As she asks him to “never set the foot that stamped out Troy on earth again” (898-9), she attempts to make him walk upon a crimson tapestry. Agamemnon, fearing the wrath of the gods, replies, “you treat me like a woman. Groveling, gaping up at me- what am I, some barbarian peacocking out of Asia?” (912-3). Agamemnon questions Clytemnestra’s motives and actions. This is the first moment in which a male directly addresses her newfound empowerment. This is also Clytemnestra’s moment to humiliate her husband and, in turn, show that she is capable of denying ‘the patriarchy’ and its *nomoi*. Her power makes Agamemnon feel emasculated as she speaks in a commanding manner to her husband. Clytemnestra boldly states, “where’s the glory

without a little gall?" (934), and Agamemnon quickly replies, "and where's the woman in all this lust for glory?" (935). This interaction articulates the masculine value placed on glory, pride, and power. As Clytemnestra actively challenges her husband to act with indifference to the gods she not only portrays her self-indulgent desire for glory but also her willingness to act impudently. Agamemnon, in turn, questions where his wife's traditional femininity and subdued nature has gone.

Clytemnestra's character changes throughout the tragedy. She shifts from a failed mother who has been robbed of her daughter to that of a violent, murderous woman. Even further, there are moments when she also claims to resemble the lonely wife who has patiently waited for her husband to return from war. Before Agamemnon comes home, she describes her husband's ten-year absence:

I am human. Nothing I say was learned from others. This is my life, my ordeal, long as the siege he laid at Troy and more demanding. First, when a woman sits at home and the man is gone, the loneliness is terrible, unconscionable... and the rumours spread and fester, a runner comes with something dreadful, close on his heels the next and his news worse... the rumours broke like fever, broke and then rose higher. There were times they cut me down and eased my throat from the noose. I wavered between the living and the dead. (844-864)

In this moment, Clytemnestra's depiction of her character is a stark contrast to the female she embodies throughout the play. She does not claim the status here of a violent, angry mother who is bent on revenge. She does, however, still claim agency over her thoughts and actions. This speech also portrays the duplicity of Clytemnestra's character, as she is a wife who has taken on a lover in her husband's absence. In this regard, the female gender sphere, the domestic realm, challenges the male gender sphere of public, political actions and war. She attempts to state that the female experience is harder and more pained. The other aspect of Clytemnestra's speech reveals a wife's vulnerability and weakness while her husband is away at war. While loneliness

could be Clytemnestra's subtle defense for taking on a new lover, it also seems to articulate the emotional trials a woman faces in her husband's absence.

Clytemnestra's heartfelt, emotional speech is a stark contrast to her bold, "brazen words" (1423), after she has successfully murdered her husband. Clytemnestra proudly defends her actions and asserts herself against the men of the chorus:

[Y]ou try me like some desperate woman. My heart is steel, well you know. Praise me, blame me as you choose. It's all one. Here is Agamemnon, my husband made a corpse by this right hand- a masterpiece of Justice. Done is done... (1426-1431)

Comparing this image of Clytemnestra to the vulnerable wife she has claimed to be earlier, she is unrecognizable. She fully separates herself from her husband and male counterpart by suggesting that her heart is hardened and unable to feel emotion. Therefore, she disconnects herself from all femininity as women are the emotional beings guided by feelings while men are the rational thinkers. While Clytemnestra seems to be indifferent to the opinions of the chorus of men, she also asserts that she was justified in her actions. She is the active agent in this situation. By admitting to her actions, however, she seems to need some aspect of recognition from the men around her. Furthering this idea, the chorus replies, "woman made [Agamemnon] suffer, woman struck him down" (1481-2).

Clytemnestra attempts to validate herself and her actions, however, by returning to the idea of motherhood. She once again reiterates that she was justified in her motives because of her maternal need for revenge. She questions, "name the one charge you brought against [Agamemnon] then. He thought no more of it than killing a beast, and his flocks were rich, teeming with their fleece, but he sacrificed his own child, our daughter, the agony I laboured into love to charm away the savage winds of Thrace" (1439-1444). She directly connects herself to

her daughter through the act of childbirth. This action is tied to femininity and womanhood. It is the female's job to produce children and, likewise, it is her 'curse.' Drawing on Ortner's theoretical framework, this again implies the inherent connection between the female body and the natural world. In this case, however, the biological nature of the female is not only Clytemnestra's burden to carry but also serves as a justification for her monstrous actions.

Aeschylus's tragedy describes a prominent female figure through which one may explore gender dynamics. These social roles, in the context of the play, further our understanding of femininity, deviance, and resistance to the conventional female role. In the light of previously discussed feminist theories, we must also wonder why the playwright would create a world such as this and how these gender dynamics are significant within a wider scope.

Clytemnestra presents herself in multiple different ways through the *Agamemnon*. Through this, we see Judith Butler's theory of performative gender and identity coming into play. In the context of Butler's work, Clytemnestra's manipulation of her performance constitutes itself as subversive resistance, i.e., '*gender trouble*.'<sup>9</sup> At times, Clytemnestra deliberately acts out a conventional version of femininity that would be appropriate for a woman in her situation and expected of her by her husband and her male audience. She performs this necessary 'female' role in order to get her personal goals met. These goals, however, serve to deconstruct the masculine order and hide her deception thus construing her behavior as both a challenge and a threat to the male sphere.

On the other hand, Clytemnestra also presents herself in a much different way that reflects her disconnect from her femininity and female role. For instance, Clytemnestra's interactions with the male characters, especially her husband, articulate an empowerment usually

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<sup>9</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.



ascribed to a more dominating, male character. She demands the attention of the stage through not only her actions but also her pointed, commanding dialogue. At this point, language becomes a site for resistance in the most basic sense. Even further, by actively aggressing against her husband on his return home, Clytemnestra boldly emasculates his character and challenges his masculine power. At this point in the drama, she is an active agent in an ostensibly androcentric world. Through her subversive resistance, she finds empowerment and authority. She then uses this power to actively manipulate the characters around her and destroy not only her family but also her home. This side of Clytemnestra is outspoken, empowered, and extremely present within the public sphere. Each of these more masculine traits come into fruition as an active rejection of the passive, subdued female role. It is, in fact, Clytemnestra's resistance to her prescribed female role.

Clytemnestra's empowerment, however, is also marked by a growing bloodlust and desire for control. While she first justifies the murder of her husband with a maternal drive for revenge, this reasoning becomes clouded and obscured by overwhelming emotion and a desire for political power. Applying Ute Frevert's theoretical framework here, one can recognize that Clytemnestra has actively transformed into the much feared, monstrous woman who is overwhelmed by uncontrollable emotions. In this sense, the animal metaphors used throughout the play reflect this change within Clytemnestra. Her frenzied emotions, maternal instincts, and capability to become a savage creature of nature all allow for Clytemnestra's descent into inhumanity. It is what allows for her to become the 'inhuman' entity discussed directly through Ortner and Schur's work.

The climax, the murder of Agamemnon and Cassandra, is, in fact, Clytemnestra's brief moment of satisfaction. It is also, however, the moment she commits the crime that leads her to

ruin and her death. As voiced by the chorus, Clytemnestra will be punished for her actions when her own son, Orestes, later murders her. In this sense, she will be labeled as deviant and punished for her crimes against the masculine order. Her crimes include her adultery, the murder of her husband, and her resistance to prescribed feminine norms. Clytemnestra's attempts to deconstruct the male world are successful within *this* play but not within the whole of the trilogy. By the third play of the trilogy, the *Eumenides*, the gendered structures are reordered back into their 'rightful' positions. While Clytemnestra successfully breaks down the gendered institutions within the *Agamemnon*, resistance is not possible within the wider scope of this narrative.

Looking ahead to the third tragedy in Aeschylus's trilogy, one can see the continuity in the way gender dynamics are being played out. By keeping the gendered relations presented in the *Agamemnon* at the forefront of one's mind, one can see that this third play is a direct response to and reappropriation of these same notions of gender. While the *Eumenides* will be ostensibly Clytemnestra's final opportunity to justify her actions and avenge her death, it also will develop into the reordering of the gendered spheres and the reification of the ideal female figure. While the *Agamemnon* describes Clytemnestra as a potentially empowered female, the *Eumenides* depicts Clytemnestra without power and without agency. She is successful in the murder of her husband but will be eventually thwarted by not only the Athenian justice system but also the asexual female goddess, Athena. Ultimately, the patriarchal structure, aided by Athena, will win out within the trilogy of the *Oresteia*!

#### **4.2) The *Eumenides*: Reestablishing Male Order**

At this point in my investigation, I will turn to the third play of Aeschylus's tragic trilogy, the *Eumenides*. As a continuation of the first two plays, the *Agamemnon* and the *Libation Bearers*, this third play is useful in that it directly addresses how the gender spheres, previously

deconstructed by Clytemnestra, are ‘rightfully’ reordered and masculine order restored. Orestes, seeking revenge for his father’s murder, has slain his mother, Clytemnestra. The Furies, in turn, look to punish Orestes for his matricide. The trial of Orestes emphasizes the long existing tensions between the female and male spheres. This is undoubtedly apparent through the arguments provided by the participants in the trial as well as the symbolic ramifications of the participants themselves. The arguments presented by each side are also relevant to my investigation when considered through a lens of feminist theory.<sup>10</sup> Each aspect of the trial and those involved will be fully discussed throughout this chapter.

At the opening of the play, Orestes is surrounded by the sleeping Furies. Apollo assumes the role of Orestes’ guardian and after placing the sleeping spell over the Furies, persuades him to go to Athena and seek justice. This play is also Clytemnestra’s last opportunity to avenge her own murder. Her presence in the play, however, is limited as she only appears in the form of a ghost. She verbally attacks the Furies for sleeping and commands them to pursue her son. As the Furies awake, they realize they have lost Orestes and continue on their search to avenge his mother, Clytemnestra. Athena’s character, representing civil justice and masculine order, suggests that the only fair solution is for Orestes to be judged in court for manslaughter. She elects ten men to stand in as a jury in order to fairly hear the arguments from both Orestes and the Furies. While Athena believes that Orestes should be pardoned and freed from punishment, she states that her vote will only be used if the jury is tied in their decision.

Apollo, speaking on behalf of Orestes, presents an androcentric argument that focuses on the conception and birth of a child. Apollo suggests that because the male, the husband, provides

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<sup>10</sup> I would also like to note here that my choice to include only the first and third plays of the *Oresteia* within my investigation is done so in order to clearly articulate Clytemnestra’s impact within the first play and, in turn, the ramifications and subsequent reestablishment of masculine power within the third play.

the female with the seed, a child, she is merely the host and body for which the child may develop. She, however, has no blood relation to the child. Using Athena's birth as an example, Apollo remarks that the body of Zeus alone produced Athena.<sup>11</sup> With this argument, the blame is placed solely on Clytemnestra for killing her husband. Orestes, on the other hand, is relieved of all blame. The votes are tied and Athena, siding with Orestes, declares that he is free from punishment.

The Furies, in their defeat, are angrily bent on destroying Athens. Athena, however, recognizes that the Furies are wise in their age. They represent the old world and its respective gods. Athena persuades them to change their ways and to take a place in Athens not only protecting the prosperity of Athenian men but also receiving honor from all of Athens.<sup>12</sup> After Athena has calmed the anger of the Furies, they accept her offer and become figures of peace, protection, and prosperity rather than angry, frightening, vile protectors of motherhood and maternity.

The Furies, the chorus of this drama, symbolize various different aspects of gender. As the tragedy opens up to a scene at Apollo's temple, the audience is presented with a horrifying image of the Furies. Apollo's priestess, Pythia, describes the effect the Furies have over her composure, "[My] strength drains, it's very hard to stand, crawling on all fours, no spring in the legs... an old woman, gripped by fear, is nothing, a child, nothing more" (36-9). The priestess describes them, "Women, sleeping, nestling against the benches... women? No, Gorgons I'd call them; but then with Gorgons you'd see the grim, inhuman" (49-51); She describes the Furies as not only feminine but also monstrous. They manifest in a form of feminine repulsiveness. The

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<sup>11</sup> Aeschylus. *The Eumenides*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Group, 1984. Print. 260-1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.* 268-71

Priestess further enlarges on this theme, “black [the Furies] are, and so repulsive. Their heavy, rasping, breathing makes me cringe. And their eyes ooze a discharge, sickening” (55-7). Pythia, a devout and pious female, is disgusted and physically knocked to the floor by these horrible female creatures.

My interpretation would suggest that their repulsive depiction is because of what they signify and stand for. The Furies are, in fact, the physical embodiment of Clytemnestra’s rage and savagery. They are the physical representation of not only the emotion that overwhelms and controls the female body but also a potentially challenging and threatening force to the male sphere. While Clytemnestra was able to transgress her feminine character and transform into something monstrous, the Furies *are* the inhuman monsters who protect and foster the enraged female desires. They are the feminized forces that carry out the destruction of male order. Considering the feminist theories of Edwin Schur and Sherry Ortner, the Furies are presented in a very stereotypical form. The Furies – similar to the ancient portrayals of Medusa, the Gorgons, and temptress witches – are the ‘inhuman’ but feminized beings who, in their primal connection to nature, disavow the patriarchy and are labeled as deviant feminine characters.

Pythia’s female character serves as a foil to the Furies. She represents all that they are not, through her servitude and piety to Apollo, a male deity. Apollo, a male god, then appears. He expresses a similar reaction to the Furies, but is abusive toward them. “[The Furies] disgust me. These grey, ancient children never touched by god, man or beast – the eternal virgins. Born for destruction only... loathed by men and the gods who hold Olympus” (71-6). Apollo states that the Furies are old and have long plagued mankind, specifically men. He also suggests that they have never been tamed or controlled by male figures, thus further explaining the reason for his hatred.

Apollo's character is a foil to the Furies. While they represent a savage female protector, Apollo takes the shape of a male authority figure. He upholds an arrogant version of the masculine values and the patriarchy. Unlike the male characters from *Agamemnon*, Apollo is a strong male figure who directly addresses the opposing female characters, the Furies, in their challenge of the male gender sphere. He actively looks to reorder the structure in order to put the Furies in a 'rightfully' subordinated position within society.

This explains Apollo's hatred toward the Furies and why Aeschylus sets the third play up as trial. In a broader sense, it is these very contradictory ideals that are being judged as each character speaks on behalf of his or her principles. As Apollo states, "Authority – you? Sound out your splendid power... And what of the wife who strikes her husband down?" (207-9), he questions the Furies' authority, their power, and their right to judge men rather than women. The Furies respond, "Matricides: we drive them from their houses... that murder would not destroy one's flesh and blood" (208-10). The Furies' power is rooted in the female family lineage and blood ties.

Apollo, however, disagrees with their reasoning. Emphasizing his character's symbolic meaning, Apollo states, "You'd disgrace – obliterate the bonds of Zeus and Hera queen of brides! ... disgrace love, the source of mankind's nearest, dearest ties. Marriage of man and wife is Fate itself, stronger than oaths, and Justice guards its life" (211-6). With this, one can recognize that Apollo's male character is a reflection of androcentric ethics. Much like Penelope in the *Odyssey*, Apollo supports the bonds of marriage and all that marriage stands for. While characters such as Penelope, Athena, or Apollo look to foster strong bonds of marriage, the Furies disavow this relationship and strictly value the female role.

As the Furies respond, “Never try to cut my power with your logic” (225), they further emphasize that Apollo’s power stems from his masculine mind – the *logos*. The very act of reasoning like this is at odds with the Furies’ power and is an attempt to subdue their nature. Finally, Apollo states, “I’d never touch it, not as a gift – your power” (226). The Furies’ power is something that Apollo would never want. One interpretation of this would suggest that their empowerment is rooted in something innately emotional, feminine, and a stark contrast to the male sphere associated with logic, reason, and the clear light of day. I read this as a moment that considers not only the tensions felt between the ‘male’ and ‘female’ spheres but also the duality between ‘culture’ and ‘nature.’ Drawing on this, Ortner’s feminist theory would emphasize that the culture associated with the masculine, male sphere is encoded upon the female body thus separating the female from her supposed inherent biological connection to the natural world. By encoding this ‘culture’ onto the female body she is then placed into a subordinated position below the male gender. The dissociation with ‘culture’ is what I would suggest is reflected through the Furies. Their inability to be controlled by the male order is what makes them repulsive, monstrously inhuman, powerful and, in turn, *feared*.

While it could be argued that the Furies articulate a feminine sense of empowerment, they do not represent much that is positive by this point in the play. They do, however, have *pathos*, since Apollo is so abusive. Aeschylus invests within their characters a number of vile and despised attributes. They do represent something innately violent and savage through their actions and words. They refer to Orestes as a hurt “fawn” (245), and they are the “hounds” (245), that must “hunt him [and] rake him down” (246). They speak of their work as “man-killing labour” (247), and “out of [Orestes] living marrow [they] will drain [their] red libation, out of [his] veins [they] will suck [their] food” (263-4). They speak of brutally punishing Orestes for

his crimes and consuming his body. It is significant that Pythia references Dionysus and his “wild women” (25), in her prayer at the opening of the play. In this regard, the Furies seem to be related to the image of the savage, enraged, all consuming female maenads. Much akin to the maenads, the Furies dance and lyrically speak of violent acts. They state, “...now we long to reveal our art, our terror, now to declare our right to steer the lives of men, we all conspire, we dance! We are the just and upright, we maintain” (308-10). With this invocation, they directly reference their control over men, their power against the male sphere, and their belief that they justified in their actions.

In this moment, the Furies are actively rejecting, challenging, and influencing the male gender sphere. They continue their savage dance, “Over the victim’s burning head/ this chant this frenzy striking frenzy/ lightning crazing the mind/ this hymn of Fury/ chaining the senses, ripping cross the lyre, withering lives of men” (329-33). The Furies articulate not only their violence and raging anger toward men but also their connection to emotions, sensations, and the crazed female mind.<sup>13</sup> It is again dramatically overstated that the Furies are aligned with an emotional, natural side of the world. It is also overtly explained that they are the raging protectors of mothers, daughters, and the whole of womankind. The Furies, at their most base form, are representative of the woman unhinged and released from masculine social order. This further emphasizes the ‘nature / culture’ and ‘female / male’ dichotomies that play significant roles within this third play of the trilogy. What still remains to be discussed, however, is where the Furies are and what power they have at the end of this play – that, in fact, is one of the most revealing aspects of the *Eumenides*.

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<sup>13</sup> Much like Clytemnestra within the context of the *Agamemnon* in that she was a crazed, emotional female obsessed with avenging her daughter’s murder.



Clytemnestra is another feared female figure in the *Eumenides*. She is driven by the same violent need for revenge that was visibly present in her character within the first play of the trilogy. In this sense, the *Eumenides* is Clytemnestra's last opportunity to gain sympathy and avenge her own death. Her ghost reveals, "I go stripped of honour, thanks to you, alone among the dead. And for those I killed the charges of the dead will never cease, never – I wander in disgrace, I feel the guilt... withering guilt from all the outraged dead" (99-103). She claims that the spirits in the underworld continuously torment her and she deserves retribution in order to be at peace. As she continues, "But I have suffered too, terribly, from dead ones, and none of my spirits rages to avenge me. I was slaughtered by his matricidal hand" (104-6), she reminds the audience that she was killed at the hands of her own son.

Looking back to *Agamemnon*, one will be reminded of Clytemnestra's changing female form. At times she was in that play fully possessed by a maternal instinct and need to avenge her daughter's death. At this point, however, she reflects none of these maternal characteristics. Her desire for revenge is now pointedly aimed at her *own* son. Her anger is "the mother dragon's deadly fury" (129). She is no longer the mother figure who could have possibly gained some sense of sympathy. Rather, she is the vicious, monstrous female who lacks empathy toward her husband or her son. This is the 'inhuman' form of being that is attained through some sense of transgression, a loss of conventional, androcentric femininity. In turn, Clytemnestra renounces and rejects all her maternal and domestic responsibilities. It is a renouncing of the encoded masculine values. Her sole agency, her only chance for revenge, lies in the hands of the Furies. She has, so to speak, become a Fury to the Furies! She urges them on to greater deeds of violence.

During Orestes' trial, Apollo formulates a very male-oriented argument in order to defend Orestes' case. Considering the values that are ascribed within Apollo's character, his argument is explicitly aligning with masculinity, male dominance, and the subjugated female position. As Orestes argues with the Furies, it becomes clear where each character stands within this argument. Orestes states, "[Clytemnestra] killed her husband – killed my father too" (608); he places two counts of murder and blame upon his mother. The Furies respond to this, "The blood of the man she killed was not her own" (611), which reveals that, to the Furies, the most valued relationship is that of motherhood or blood relation. Orestes responds to the Furies by questioning his blood relation to his own mother, "and I? Does mother's blood run in my veins?" (612). The Furies, continuing to uphold their value of a blood connection between mother and son, directly challenge what Orestes is suggesting about his lineage. They challenge, "How could she breed you in her body, murderer? Disclaim your mother's blood? She gave you life" (613-4), and they set themselves up to directly contrast the phallogocentric argument presented later by Apollo.

The Furies embody a female oriented and female centered view of the world – a direct challenge to the androcentric view put forth by the male characters in the drama. This is addressed as Apollo makes his claim regarding a child's birth and its connection to *only* the father:

The woman you call the mother of the child is not the parent, just a nurse to the seed, the new-sown seed that grows and swells inside her. The man is the source of life- the one who mounts. She, like a stranger for a stranger, keeps the shoot alive unless god hurts the roots. (666-71)

The male-focused argument that Apollo presents separates females not only from their role of maternity but also from their capability and power to give birth. While it suggests that the female

is still the host, the womb, and the protector of the unborn child, the child is of no blood relation to the mother nor are children bonded to the mother anymore than a stranger would be to another stranger. Women, in his definition, have no agency and no power.

This androcentric ideology explicitly *excludes* the female from childbearing and her reproductive power. The male usurps the power of reproduction by removing maternity, motherhood, and the female parent from society. Sherry Ortner's work would conceptualize this moment as a reification of the subordinated female in her 'othered' position. Through Apollo's reasoning, the female is excluded from 'culture,' made into a passive being, and value is placed solely on the male. Through an argument such as this, Clytemnestra, for instance, is completely denied her maternal character. While Clytemnestra's actions were once justified by the murder of her daughter, her revenge becomes unreasonable in light of Apollo's male-centered ideology. Her character loses validity, power, and a vital connection to her children. What is more, Apollo's argument punishes the female gender as a whole on account of Clytemnestra and the Furies. This punishment strives to reestablish masculine order and restructure the gender spheres that have been threatened and shaken by Clytemnestra's actions within the *Agamemnon*. In this sense, Apollo's purpose within this play is to put the female back in her 'rightful,' subordinated place. In light of feminist theory, his ideology is a masculine tool of oppression imposed upon the female gender. As the play continues, however, we see that his claims are overstated.

The last female character to be discussed in this chapter is Athena, the asexual goddess. Athena's character is significant as she, like Apollo and the Furies, also symbolizes a larger, critical theme that is present throughout *The Oresteia*. Athena is associated with masculine characteristics of justice and war. She is a female deity who is fully a part of and supports the male gender sphere. Within the context of the *Odyssey*, Athena was representative of a force that

upheld and fostered male order, i.e., Penelope's loyalty to her marriage. I would argue that Athena takes on a very similar role within this drama as well. She again embodies and further promotes this idea of 'masculine wisdom.' This emphasizes what the theorists would suggest to be the masculine values encoded within female consciousness. Likewise, Athena imposes these very principles onto the Furies in order to persuade them to take a subordinated position within society. In this, Athena rightfully reestablishes the gender spheres and is complicit in enabling the hegemonic masculine order, but she does so by honoring the female element as an important part of that order.

In the *Eumenides*, Athena's association with justice also requires that the Furies be heard. This is articulated through her words, "two sides are here, only half is heard.... Injustice... should never triumph" (440-5). Both Apollo and the Furies respect Athena's presence in the drama. She is persuasive and acts as a mediator between the two opposing sides. As Athena asks the Furies, "You would turn over responsibility to me, to reach the final verdict?" (447-8), they respond, "We respect you. You show us respect" (449). This is the first moment in which the Furies are not blinded or overcome by their rage. Orestes also shows his respect to Athena by stating, "I shall accept your verdict" (484). These moments speak directly to Athena's influence and power of persuasion. While 'persuasion' could perhaps be perceived as a 'sneaky' feminine trait used in order to trick a man, I would argue that Athena's power of persuasion is inherently viewed in a positive light as it serves to enable and foster androcentric order. Schur's theoretical framework would agree with this as he suggests for labels of deviance only when the social actor's actions and motivations go against hegemonic order or what is deemed appropriate by society. For instance, if a woman were to use persuasion against a man in order to trick him, she

would be at risk of being labeled as deviant and, in turn, this kind of persuasion would carry with it a sense of social stigma.

Athena's character also appeals to the gender dynamics through the story of her birth. Her origin story coincides directly with Apollo's argument regarding the mother's lack of agency in birth. Likewise, in his speech, he directly addresses Athena and uses her as an example of his argument: "The father can father forth without a mother. Here she stands, our living witness. Look – child sprung full-blown from Olympian Zeus, never bred in the darkness of the womb but such a stock no goddess could conceive" (672-7). Athena's response is equally important in regards to the larger theme of masculine power present within the drama. As Athena remarks upon her birth she also admits that she is swayed by Apollo's argument:

No mother gave me birth. I honour the male, in all things but marriage. Yes, with all my heart I am my Father's child. I cannot set more store by the woman's death- she killed her husband, guardian of their house. Even if the vote is equal, Orestes wins. (751-6)

Athena articulates *her* values and morals through this speech. She is a female deity, but fully expresses a desire to uphold masculine values and devoutly honor the patriarchy, i.e., the overarching social system. She aligns with Apollo's views, his argument, and sides with Orestes' character in the trial. She claims to fully honor the male sphere but *not* in a sexual manner. As not overtly sexual, she does not pose as a threat to the male characters but rather is enabling male power within society. While she admits that, "Zeus... Gave me some insight, too, that has its merits" (858-9), she reveals that her wisdom was bestowed to her by the ruling male god. Athena is "the only god who knows the keys to the armoury where [Zeus's] lightning-bolt is sealed" (837-8) and she "put[s] [her] trust in Zeus" (836). This female deity is born from a male figure, upholds the masculine values, and is submissive to the male ruler. She is the only female trusted

with masculine power, not only her father's lightning-bolt but also her father's wisdom and knowledge.

Through the lens of Sherry Ortner's feminist theory, one could suggest that Athena's character is a symbol for *culture*. Ortner's work suggests that another view of femininity exists in an 'ambiguous position' as it can be associated with either 'nature' or culture.' From this perspective we are introduced to the "feminine symbols of transcendence" (Ortner, 1974. 86), that allow for "mother goddesses, merciful dispensers of salvation, [or] female symbols of justice" (Ortner, 1974. 86). These symbols stand in stark contrast to those that are subversive symbols: witches, castrating mothers.<sup>14</sup> The former of which are noted for being revered while the subversive symbols associated with nature are "utterly debased" (Ortner, 1974. 86). Regardless of the association, these symbols and images appear through mythical, exceptional forms that possess inhuman capabilities. Athena, for instance, is encoded with undoubtedly male values and, in turn, becomes representative of 'masculine wisdom.' Her actions serve to benefit the male sphere and she is directly associated with *justice*, *war*, and other highly masculinized aspects of society. Athena is so engrossed within the male social system that perhaps she stands in within the play as this symbol of *culture* – a female symbol of justice that is exalted. From this, Ortner's theory would suggest that Athena's actions represent (male) *culture* in opposition to (female) *nature*, i.e., the Furies and Clytemnestra. I will discuss this idea further through my dissection of Athena's persuasion and her ability to honor the Furies but also place them into a physically subordinated, lower position.

Athena's character stands as a stark contrast to Clytemnestra. Athena's attributes, her masculine traits, serve as a foil to the deceptive, feminine wiles presented through

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<sup>14</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Clytemnestra's character. But Athena is proven as nonetheless feminine. She displays her feminine power as the trial ends and Orestes is freed from punishment. The Furies are overwhelmed with anger and repeatedly cry out long, wrathful lines of speech, "You younger gods! – you have ridden down the ancient laws, wrenched them from my grasp – and I, robbed of my birthright, suffering, great with wrath, I loose my poison over the soil, aieeee!" (792-5). When the Furies refuse to be calmed and threaten to destroy the land of Athens, Athena gently asks the Furies to let go of their anger and give up their long held hatred toward men and matricides:

Yield to me... and now you'd vent your anger, hurt the land? Consider a moment. Calm yourself... by all my rights I promise you your seat in the depths of the earth, yours by all rights – stationed at hearths equipped with glistening thrones, covered with praise! My people will revere you. (805-819)

Athena is calm and persuasive, but again it is clear that these traits are used in order to benefit male order. She says exactly what the Furies need to hear, much as Clytemnestra's character did in the face of the messenger and the chorus of men from Argos in the *Agamemnon*. Athena acknowledges that the Furies have the potential power to destroy the lands of Athens. Even further, Athena offers them a glorified, rich, and praised seat of power *under the earth of Athens*. The Furies repeat their lines from above and Athena again attempts to calmly persuade them:

You have your power, you are goddess- but not to turn on the world of men and ravage it past cure... Let me persuade you. The lethal spell of your voice, never cast it down on the land and blight its harvest home. Lull asleep that salt black wave of anger – awesome, proud with reverence, live with me. The land is rich, and more, when its first fruits, offered for heirs and the marriage rites, are yours to hold forever, you will praise my words. (833-46)

Athena takes away their expression of power, anger, and agency, but offers them something ostensibly desirable in return. She offers the Furies a role that means, unlike before, they will be valued and praised by the people – particularly the men – of Athens.

Through this arrangement, the Furies will no longer be despised in the eyes of society. But at what cost does this come to the Furies? From my feminist reading, I see the Furies as being silenced by Athena. Their feminine rage is taken away and replaced by a reverence to the masculine order of society. The role of the Furies, not to mention the literal placement of them *below* the city deep in the earth, is now appropriate to the city as it fosters marriage and, in turn, an institution that further enables male power. The Furies are put in their ‘rightful’ place – below the city of Athens, subordinated to the male rule, and under the foundation of society and culture. Through Ortner’s theory, this is, in fact, culture and the male society appropriating nature and the female body in order to control, encode, or place it in its ‘rightfully’ subjugated position. It is Athena who makes this happen. Her feminine ‘persuasion’ can be read as a masculine tool of oppression.

The Furies are asked, in fact, to *protect* the prosperity of the Athenian men and “make the seed of men live on, [so] the more they worship [the Furies] the more they thrive” (919-20). Athena shifts their position of power from one of torturing men and avenging slain mothers to that of caring for and tending to men much like “a gardener loves his plants” (921). Referring back to Apollo’s argument on the absence of a mother in a child’s life, like Apollo, Athena regards the female as a gardener of sorts.<sup>15</sup> It is notable that Athena’s persuasion of the Furies speaks to gardening and asks of them to “take root in the land” (910), of Athens. With Sherry Ortner’s theoretical framework in mind, Athena appears to connect the Furies to the natural world, fertility, and reproduction, in a way that acknowledges and serves masculine order. Even as Athena dissociates the Furies from a purely feminine empowerment, the Furies still remain to

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<sup>15</sup> “Just a nurse to the seed, the new-sown seed that grows and swells inside her” (*The Eumenides*. Trans. Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Group, 1984. Print. 667-8).



be seen as a force with an inherent connection to nature. This appears to be a significant connection that speaks to Ortner's theory regarding the dichotomy of 'nature / culture' and 'female / male.' Even with the supposed power given to the Furies, they are still placed in a subordinated position literally below the city of Athens. They are, in this sense, excluded from 'culture' but remain under its control. The Furies are now directly associated with the domestic sphere and marriage as well. They praise "the lovely girl who finds a mate's embrace, the deep joy of wedded life – O grant that gift, that prize, you gods of wedlock, grant it, goddesses of Fate!" (969-72).

Through the exploration of Athena's feminine character, I believe we are still left with several major questions regarding gender. Does Athena exhibit any of the feminine wiles that are presented within Clytemnestra's character in the first play? Is there any room for these potentially dangerous traits in the idealized image of the female? If Athena is, in fact, the idealized female figure, then what would one say about her ability to persuade the characters around her? As she works to dissolve the anger of the Furies, she literally evokes the power of persuasion. Athena states, "if you have any reverence for Persuasion, the majesty of Persuasion, the spell of my voice that would appease your fury" (893-5), and the Furies reply, "Your magic is working... I can feel the hate, the fury slip away" (908-9). I would argue that she exercises here an acceptable version of feminine wiles, but only because they serve to benefit and reinforce the androcentric world order presented in the drama. This provides the audience with a reason why Clytemnestra is unsuccessful in the closing of the play. Athena convinces Clytemnestra's avenging spirits, the Furies, to give up their rage and their values regarding motherhood and matricide. In this sense, the physical manifestation of Clytemnestra's anger and fury is thwarted and put in a 'rightfully' subordinated, excluded place.

We, as humans, create fairytales, myths, and gods in order to articulate certain values associated with humankind. I would argue that Athena, much like Penelope in the *Odyssey*, represents the most valued characteristics of a female from the male point of view. This seems to be a common stereotype of the ‘good’ woman, as it was also articulated through Semonides’ portrayal of the ‘good’ wife, the worker-bee wife. This personified image of the female emphasized the type of woman who served the husband, respected the male sphere, and was compliant to male order and passive in the face of male dominance.

Athena aligns herself with phallogocentric ideologies and the rational, logic based masculine world. This is clear, as she not only sides with Orestes and Apollo but also deliberately uses persuasive methods to calm the wrath of the Furies and give them a limited but real sense of power in an androcentric order. I think this provides an answer to one of my critical gender questions. Yes, Athena does, in fact, use feminine wiles – like Clytemnestra in the *Agamemnon* – but unlike Clytemnestra this behavior is not for Athena’s own personal gain. Rather, Athena acts on behalf of the patriarchy in order to subordinate the challenging, deviant female characters: the Furies and Clytemnestra. Orestes is freed from punishment while Clytemnestra, a fellow feminine figure, is doomed to suffer in the underworld. Furthermore, Athena persuades the Furies to calm their “rage that patrolled the crimes of men” (515). In turn, the Furies agree to join this new world alongside – or rather *below* – Athena and the city of Athens. This seems to suggest that the female-centered values regarding maternity or the importance of punishing men for matricide are forgotten and left behind. What remains on account of the Furies is strictly a reverence for marriage, domesticity, and the male ordered social world.

The audience is presented with several females who deliberately challenge the male gender sphere and patriarchal order. While the male characters present in *The Oresteia* are unable to acknowledge or constrain the challenges against them, it is Athena's character who is shown to be capable of setting the gendered spheres back to their 'rightful' order and circumscribing the females back into a limited, subordinated position. This third play, the *Eumenides*, serves the purpose of reestablishing the androcentric society that had been previously challenged and threatened by Clytemnestra's subversive and 'deviant' acts within the first two plays of *The Oresteia*.

## Chapter 5: Euripidean Tragedy

### *Societal Breakdown*

The last segment of my investigation will turn to the two tragedies, the *Medea* and the *Bacchae*, produced by the 5<sup>th</sup> century Athenian playwright, Euripides. These dramas play a necessary role in my study of gender – particularly femininity – as they address themes discussed in the preceding chapters while also positing possibly different answers to some of my more complex questions regarding gender. Furthermore, these plays demonstrate a more comprehensive deconstruction of the gender spheres and, at times, society as a whole. My interpretation suggests that Euripides' tragedies differ in that they are more conscious of the limitations of the political sphere and its association with gender dynamics and androcentric systems of social order. While my discussion of resistance and *gender trouble*<sup>16</sup> rings true throughout this final chapter, I will also point out that Euripides' work brings with it another level of complexity that reflects the political shifts happening and the tensions felt in the city of Athens.

The *Medea* was written within the first year of the Peloponnesian War while the *Bacchae* was produced approximately twenty-four years later during the final years of the war. With this in mind, I argue that these plays are Euripides' articulation of the consequences of war and the collapse of society. In turn, the *Medea* communicates a female character who successfully challenges the male sphere and foreshadows the impending crumble of Greek civic culture. The *Bacchae* reveals rather the destruction of Thebes as a whole. As a merciless god seeks to punish the city, he leaves the women ruined, the royal family destroyed, and the male leaders dead or

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<sup>16</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

exiled. This last drama develops into a breakdown of not only *gender* but also *society* and the foundational social institutions that manifest in ‘*culture*.’

### 5.1) The *Medea*: Destroying The *Oikos*

My initial summary of this drama serves to emphasize the social structures that create a female pathology and the female rage seen through Medea’s character. This play, much like the *Agamemnon*, underscores the image of the powerful, violent, and wrathful female figure. Through the character of Medea, the play also explores the engagement of this figure with the family, the domestic sphere, and the so-called performance of femininity. In comparison to Clytemnestra in the *Agamemnon*, there are remarkable similarities and differences within Medea’s character that reinforce and emphasize my arguments regarding not only gender dynamics but also the performance of femininity, the all-consuming female rage, and the tension between the role of mother and wife.

Euripides’ play, *Medea*, opens to a state of conflict. A nurse recounts the story of Medea and Jason, how they came to be in Corinth, and Medea’s betrayal of her natal family in order to help Jason. The back-story: Jason and the Argonauts had set sail from Thessaly to the land of Colchis. While in Colchis, he met Medea, king Aietes’ daughter, who helped him procure the Golden Fleece from her father and killed her own brother to enable Jason’s and her escape.

Medea, now exiled from her homeland of Colchis, is emotionally distraught, as Jason has abandoned her for another woman. Full of hatred and anger, Medea curses herself and her two children. Creon, king of Corinth and father to Jason’s new wife, senses that Medea’s anger will lead to trouble. Fearing her wrath, Creon exiles her and her children from the city of Corinth. But Medea persuades Creon to allow her to stay within the city for one more day – this, however, is all the time she needs to successfully act out her vengeful plot to make Jason suffer. Medea

confronts Jason and much to her dismay, is completely dismissed. He reveals that his new wife, the king's daughter, will elevate his political status in a way Medea could never accomplish. Likewise, he is indifferent to the help she provided him in Colchis and states that the *only* help he received was from Aphrodite and the goddess's love spell.

Fortunately for Medea, she happens to run into Aigeus, King of Athens. Aigeus admits that he is on a search to find a cure to his sterility. Medea promises to use her knowledge of magical drugs in order to help him father children in exchange for a safe haven in his city. As her plan comes to fruition, Medea decides that she has no choice but to kill her two children. She returns to face Jason and puts on a façade of a caring, powerless, scorned wife. She begs Jason to forgive her for her anger, uses his paternal sympathy to her advantage, and sends a wedding gift to his new wife. Medea has used her magical, witch powers to poison the gift, a crown, and as the bride places it on her head, the poison consumes her body. The poison consumes Creon, her father, as well in his attempt to embrace her lifeless body. Medea decides to act out the final step of her plan and kills her two children. As Jason hears of the deaths, not only of his bride but also of her father and his two children, he is destroyed. Medea proudly displays the bodies of her two children and flaunts her success to Jason. She flies off to Athens in the chariot of the Sun, stealing with her the bodies of their children and leaving Jason alone in his ruin.

In the *Medea*, we are presented with a female character who resembles Clytemnestra in several different ways. Both females suffer because of their husband's actions. Both husbands trick their wives, but while Clytemnestra's husband murdered her daughter, Medea's husband has chosen to abandon her altogether. The nurse describes Medea's overwhelming emotions:

[Medea] doesn't eat, surrenders to her sorrows; her life has melted into a river of tears since realizing the wrong her husband does her... she'll turn her white cheek away to herself, and let out a wail for her dear father, her country, her home,

which she betrayed to come with her husband, who has now so dishonored her.  
(24-33)<sup>17</sup>

This moment clearly sets Medea's character up for her transformation not only into the wrathful wife who seeks revenge but also the inhuman form that transgresses femininity as a whole. She vocally expresses her pains and, much to the dismay of the nurse, has given herself over to her own emotions.

The act of losing oneself to and being overcome by emotions is here regarded as a feminine trait and one that is very dangerous to a character. We saw this through Clytemnestra's character as she allowed her suffering and her rage to motivate and influence her actions. Likewise, in the *Eumenides*, the Furies were a physical representation of the emotionally driven, feminized monster. So too will Medea's character transform into an unstable, violent, and destructive character. In the context of Ute Frevert's theoretical work, it is again the gendered emotions that allow for this transformation. Once perceived as incapable of controlling emotion, Medea becomes feared in the eyes of others and capable of monstrous behavior. What is more, this speaks again to Schur's theory regarding 'exceptionalism labels' and their ability to perpetuate these perceptions of women becoming 'inhuman' when they surpass what is normally conceived of as typical 'feminine behavior.' The nurse directly confirms this type of subversive behavior within Medea's volatile character. In turn, the nurse reveals her own unease, "I'm afraid [Medea] may be planning to do something rash. Her mind is dangerous. She will not endure mistreatment... she's a frightening woman: not easily will someone engage with her in hatred and sing a victory-song" (37-45). She fears what Medea's character is now capable of and, rightly so, as she foreshadows the impending ruin of the family.

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<sup>17</sup> Euripides. *Medea*. Trans. Stephen Esposito. Boston: Focus Publishing/R. Pullins Company, 2002. Print.

Medea directly confirms the concerns presented by the nurse. She openly states to the chorus, “A woman is generally full of fear, a coward when it comes to self-defense or the sight of a sword; but when she’s been wronged in anything touching sex, no mind is more homicidal than hers” (262-266). While she aptly uses this moment to appeal to the chorus to justify her actions and keep these women from exposing the truth, she also reveals how the subdued wife can transform into this dangerous female. She openly acknowledges that her rage has driven her to homicidal thoughts, thoughts that motivate her to murder. Medea also reveals, an angry woman is a ‘spoiler’: “And what is more, we’re women, quite unable to manage good, but none the more skilled when it comes to crafting every kind of evil” (407-9). She reinforces the androcentric idea that women have a natural propensity to evil, if mistreated. She reinforces the culturally embedded fear that innately doubts the female and her motives, even if she has not committed any crime. Furthermore, she reinforces the negative portrayals of femininity voiced through that of Semonides’ archaic catalogue of women. As Medea voices her thoughts to the all-female chorus, she suggests that they are all one and the same. She implies that any member of the chorus could be in her situation and, in turn, would act equally as wicked as she plans to act. With this, Medea establishes a sense of camaraderie between the women.

In the drama, Medea’s character is both a wife and a mother. Through her dialogue, however, it becomes clear that there is an existing tension between these two roles. At the beginning of the play, the nurse reveals that “[Medea] hates her children, does not enjoy seeing them” (36). Unlike Clytemnestra, Medea has developed an aversion to her maternal instincts. Medea is also referred to as “glaring like a bull at [her children], as if to do something” (92). The imagery of a bull is masculine and full of anger. Furthermore, this anger is directed at her *own* children. The nurse also describes Medea’s glare as like that of “a mother lioness” (187). This



echoes the imagery from *Agamemnon*, as Clytemnestra is also referred to as a lion and lioness. It is significant, however, that the nurse describes Medea with reference to two very conflicting animals. The bull is a clear symbol of a masculine anger while the mother lioness evokes a much different meaning. Medea is savage and territorial, *like* a mother animal, but in reality, her need for revenge will oblige her to abandon the characteristics of a mother.

In the context of feminist theory, these animal comparisons ascribed to Medea reflect her growing separation from femininity, her overwhelming emotions, and her transgression away from conventional images of womanhood. This moment is suggestive of Schur's concept of exceptionalism labels. As Medea shies away from her maternity and outwardly voices toxic plans for her children, she continues to embody the inhuman, primal figure who is both full of rage and feared by others. This character shift becomes much more apparent throughout the drama. Medea's growing detachment from her maternity is entirely clear by the very end of the play. Jason accuses Medea not only of being, "a lioness not a woman" (1342), but also a "polluted child-murdering lioness" (1407). While the nurse seemed to fear that Medea would act on her anger, she still attributed to Medea some sense of motherhood. As Medea acts in such a way that directly challenges the conventional female role and the male sphere, she is labeled deviant, her womanhood removed, and described by others with inhuman, animal-like behavior.

Medea's internal conflict is expressed in the scene in which she voices her hesitation to kill her children (1036-1061). She argues with her decision but ultimately convinces herself to kill the two boys. By the end of the drama, her actions have destroyed the purity and sanctity of the domestic sphere; this includes the space of the home and her role within it as wife and mother. Here, her speech reveals her mixed emotions, but some internal force pushes her to overcome her natural fears:

Deprived of [my two children] I shall drag out a grievous and painful life. And you will never again see with your dear eyes your mother... why do you turn your eyes to me, children? Why smile this final smile? Ahh! What should I do? I have no heart, women, when I see the bright eyes of children. I can not. Good-bye to those plans made before. I shall take my children from the land. Why should I harm them, to hurt their father, when I would harm myself twice as much? No, I will not. Farewell to my plans. And yet, what's wrong? Do I want to be laughed at for letting my enemies off scot-free? The deed *must* be done! Ugh! The weakness of even letting soft thoughts into my mind... My hand shall not be turned from its purpose! Ah! Ah! Do not, my spirit, do *not* do this deed! Let them live – O wretched thing! Spare the children! If they are *alive* there in Athens with us, they will gladden you... No, by those Avenging Demons in Hades it is impossible that this should happen, to leave my children for my enemies to insult. (1036-1061)

In Medea's dialogue, it is as if she is arguing with another individual. There is this maternal, caring female that is Medea's suffering and conflicted self. On the other side, however, she exhibits a self-indulging need for revenge and disgust in the face of weakness or humiliation. Her maternal side emerges as she considers the presence children have in a mother's life. But the stronger side of reasoning is her selfish desire for revenge as it wins over her consciousness. Much like Clytemnestra, Medea's single-minded focus of revenge becomes the motivator behind her actions. As the Chorus leader, a woman, asks Medea, "But how will you dare to kill your seed, woman?" (816), Medea replies, "Because it is this that will sting my man most" (817). This seems to speak to Semonides' catalogue of women and its suggestion that women's sole purpose in life is to do the greatest harm to men. In this play, Medea's single-minded purpose is to destroy her husband. Her focus is strictly to get revenge and make Jason suffer, regardless of what kind of self-sacrifice this entails. She actively and deliberately decides to kill what is closest to her, her two children, in order to punish Jason for his actions and satisfy her own need for justice and revenge.

By the end of the drama, one could argue that Medea's overwhelming fury blinds her from even the most innate female trait, her maternal instincts. As she states, "So then, call me a

lioness, if you like... for I've fittingly driven my sting into your heart" (1358-60). Here she proves just how disconnected she has become from her selfhood. She does not care that her children are dead. Her only focus is satisfying her own need for revenge and making sure that Jason suffers. By the end, she is neither a wife nor a mother – her character has transcended femininity, the conventional female role, and gender in its entirety. Her fury is so overwhelming that it overtakes these typical female roles.

The final scene is a physical representation of Medea's transformation. Her character explicitly takes on an inhuman, mystical appearance. She drives the chariot into the sky, grasping her children's lifeless bodies, now more of a witch than a wife, mother, or woman. From this image, I would suggest that Medea's figure stands as a stark contrast to that of Athena in the *Odyssey* and the *Eumenides*. Through the lens of Ortner's theory, Athena is the exalted, feminine symbol for justice and, in turn, becomes representative of the male associated *culture*. Medea, however, reflects the "subversive feminine symbol" (Ortner, 1974. 86), of the witch who is capable of infanticide. In this final scene, Medea does, in fact, appear outside of "the normal range of human possibilities" (Ortner, 1974. 86), and she is, from this perspective, completely discredited and "utterly debased" (Ortner, 1974. 86). Medea has given up the conventional 'nurturing' role and her maternity – but at what cost? How viable is her revenge against Jason when it comes at the cost of her children, her home, and her femininity. This idea of self-destruction and ruin is key in my investigation of Euripides' tragedies. This will be discussed further in the conclusion of the chapter.

Looking to Medea's interactions with the other characters, one can see her performing an act of conventional femininity to achieve her goals. Medea needs the chorus, a group of women, and the nurse to trust her and keep quiet about her plan so she purposefully reminds them of the

hardships of womanhood and marriage. Attempting to gain their sympathy, creating a sense of camaraderie, Medea speaks of the oppressive nature of men, husbands, and marriage:

The one who was everything to me (I know it) has turned out the worst of men, my husband. Of all the creatures that live and have understanding we women are the wretchedest breed alive; first, we must use excessive amounts of cash to buy our husbands, and what we get are masters of our bodies. This is the worst pain of all. In fact, this is the greatest struggle whether he'll be a good or bad one, for divorce brings no repute to wives, and yet they cannot deny their husbands... They say that we spend all our time at home, and live safe lives, while they go out to battle. What fools they are! I'd rather stand three times behind a shield than bear a child once! (228-251)

Medea is able to use their gender to her advantage and, connecting on a deeper level, establishes this notion of identification among all the women. The nurse already expressed her initial doubts of Medea's character. This moment, then, becomes Medea's chance to justify her actions and gain the support of her fellow women. She plays off of the ill treatment women get from their husbands and the process of marriage. While one could argue that Medea's act is genuine, I would suggest that the last line gives away her false persona. It occurs to me that this is a very typical empowered, masculine point regarding war that Medea expresses. She suggests she would rather stand in the male position at war than carry out her feminine duty of bearing children. In the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra uses a similarly masculine comparison to reference her unfamiliarity with adultery. Albeit subtle, these two statements seem to speak to Clytemnestra and Medea's subversive performances of femininity that serve to challenge male society.

Medea uses her feminine performance again to her advantage in the tragedy. As she states, "I entrust you with all important tasks – tell [Jason] nothing of what I've decided to do, if you wish your mistress well, and are a woman" (821-3), Medea commands the nurse, her long trusted slave, to keep the secret and help her carry out her murderous plan. This is a moment

when she openly challenges the female gender sphere. She is not only challenging the nurse to keep her secret but also stating that the nurse will be less of a woman if she reveals Medea's plan to Jason. If the nurse were to expose Medea's secret plan, she would be considered as betraying a fellow woman as well as her mistress, a woman of a higher social class. The critical question to ask here is why does the chorus allow for Medea to get away with murder? The nurse is bound to Medea by her servitude thus explaining her loyalty. The chorus, however, is not bound by servitude to Medea but still remains silent about the truth. Much as in Clytemnestra's case, the chorus knows the truth but does not aim to challenge her actions.

With the men of the play, however, Medea puts on a ruse, an act of apparent femininity that stands as a stark contrast to her self-presentation with the women. Medea's performance is not fixed within the play but rather she manipulates it in order to accomplish certain goals. Looking first to her dialogue with Creon, Medea's character now resembles a vulnerable, scorned wife. As Creon tells Medea she must leave the city immediately, she states, "oh! How wretched and utterly ruined I am!" (277). She no longer embodies the powerful, wrathful woman. She plays the role of the victim. Creon also exposes his innate fear of Medea. Unlike the nurse, however, he directly addresses and publicly states these fears. He states, "I fear you – no need to dress up the language – fear you'll work some incurable harm to my daughter. And many things contribute to this fear: you're clever and much versed in doing harm, and you're grieving the loss of your husband's bed" (282- 287). He doubts Medea's motives, thinks that she is crafty, and acknowledges that her anger is dangerous and destructive. In reply, Medea states, "since I am a wise woman, some are jealous, others annoyed, yet I'm not over-wise. You fear me – fear something unpleasant? Don't be afraid of me, Creon, I haven't the means to do harm to men who are the rulers" (304-6).

At this point, she attempts to assuage his fears. She tries to stand before him as a vulnerable and subdued female. She plays off of the conventional image of femininity. A critical distinction to make as well is that she says that she is *wise* rather than *clever*. Clever women are not trustworthy while wise women, especially those who are not *too wise*, are seemingly knowledgeable, logical thinkers, i.e., more aligned with the male sphere, rational thought, or possibly other female characters who associate themselves with ‘male wisdom.’ Creon replies to Medea, “Soothing words you’ve spoken, but ... A woman, just like a man, who is quick to wrath is more easily guarded than one wise and silent” (316-320). Creon, a fairly perceptive man, recognizes that she is too eager to present herself as wise and trustworthy. His innate feeling of uneasiness regarding Medea has strengthened his preconceived doubts surrounding the female character. Clytemnestra’s character was perceived in a similar way in the *Agamemnon*. The men doubt Clytemnestra’s motives and also question her feminine character. Medea, like Clytemnestra, must also put on this performance of femininity in order to manipulate and persuade the other characters.

Medea, in a further attempt to gain the trust of Creon, plays the role of the nurturing mother. This is her performance as she acts out a role of conventional femininity. She states, “A single day allow me to remain to think through where I shall go into exile and find some means of life for my children... Have pity on them! You are a father of children, too... My concern isn’t for me if we go into exile; my tears are rather for them and their misfortunes” (340-3). The audience is well aware of Medea’s disingenuous performance, as it has already been revealed that she now has toxic plans to murder her children. Likewise, Creon has just stated, “I cannot love you more than my own family... by far the dearest thing to me, after children” (327-30), so it becomes clear that Medea is playing directly off of Creon’s sympathy for children and family.

Her feminine performance is an act of motherhood and helpless vulnerability. What is more, it plays to the paternal nature that is emphasized through male characters such as Jason or perhaps even Apollo in the *Eumenides*.

This moment is full of irony as well. Medea's major concern is not of her children but rather for her own safety and her need for a city to turn to after her exile. Creon accepts Medea's plea and allows her to remain in the city for one more day. Once she is alone with the chorus, she proudly congratulates herself for playing her role so well and duping the king. She states, "Do you suppose I'd ever have flattered that man unless devising something for my profit? I'd never have talked to or touched him with my hands" (364-70), and she questions how the chorus could have fallen for her act. But she reveals, "[Creon] allowed me to remain this day, in which I'll make three people corpses: father, daughter, and my husband. I have so many ways of killing them, I don't know which I'll try first, my friends" (373-7). Medea's anger is as strong as ever, and here she has dropped the 'vulnerable mother' act. The murder is premeditated and planned out in detail. Further considering her scheme, she wonders, "What city will accept me? ... I'll wait a little longer, and if some tower of refuge appears for me I'll proceed to the crime with silence and deceit. But if an unmanageable disaster drives me away, I'll take the sword myself..." (387-94). She does not consider all the consequences but only where she will go afterward. Her thoughts are not of her children but instead of the possibility of suicide. This seems to emphasize the level of disassociation Medea has with her family and children. Similarly, it reevaluates just how far Medea will go to punish Jason. In this sense, she is so driven by revenge that she would rather die than go unsatisfied.

Unlike Medea's interaction with Creon, her initial dialogue with Jason reveals her true character and her wrathful anger. But the second time she speaks with Jason, she extends the ruse

we have already seen in her conversation with Creon and plays the role of a defenseless, subdued woman. The two separate interactions with her husband show the stark contrast between these two forms of female accommodation and response to aggression. During their first dialogue together, Jason recognizes “what an irreparable evil a savage temper is... for your foolish words you’ll be driven out... saying that Jason is the vilest of men” (447-52). Medea’s response is a public outburst of anger as she boldly accuses him of abandonment and betrayal. She states, “Vilest of creatures! This is the worst thing I can say about your so called manliness! ... the worst of all diseases of humankind, a lack of shame” (465-72). Through her words she strips him of his masculinity. She boldly challenges him and questions his manhood. Again, this representation of the female figure is closely related to that of Clytemnestra. This is the angry, controlling, dominating female who expresses masculine characteristics and an ability to challenge a man’s masculinity and authority.

In the second interaction between the couple, Medea’s tone and presentation is drastically different. Her speech not only serves as an apology to Jason but also places her in a subdued role:

Jason, I’m asking you to forgive the things I said before; it’s natural that you should put up with my moods, for the many intimacies we shared. I... rebuked myself: “Wretched woman, why do I rage and tail at those who plan things well for me?... Should I not put aside my anger?["... I thought this over and saw how very stupid I’d been, how foolish the anger that filled me. But now I praise you and think you showed sound sense... It was I who was foolish, lost control when I ought rather to have joined in those plans... But we are what we are – I won't say that we’re bad – we women... (870-90)

Medea says exactly what Jason needs to hear. Her performance is manipulated in order to achieve some level of trust from Jason. Similarly, it is what one would more or less expect to hear from a conventional Greek woman. It is not an aggressive attack on Jason’s character but



rather Medea's reproach of her own behavior. She puts herself down several times while also flattering Jason's ego. In the last line, however, she refers to *all* women. She plays with the idea that women are inherently less pure or good than men. She attributes her actions to this emotional and unstable 'female nature.' This line contradicts her earlier statements directed at the chorus. Before, to the other women, Medea had claimed that all women are naturally wretched and only skilled when it comes to acts of evil; in front of the women, she justifies her actions by saying all women act this way. For Jason, however, she persuades him that women are not necessarily bad, but sometimes lose control of their emotions and anger. She manipulates the stereotypical 'nature' of woman to her advantage in order to attain Jason's trust and accomplish a personal goal.

Much as in her interaction with Creon, Medea here takes advantage of Jason's paternal instincts in order to gain his trust. As Medea's children hug her, she states, "I'm on the verge of tears and full of terror. The long-standing quarrel with your father is over; now I have filled your tender cheeks with my tears" (903-5). This moment can be interpreted in several different ways. Medea's tears could symbolize her hesitance to go through with infanticide, or her grief that she has actually decided to do it, or even a moment of joyous anticipation, as she is one step closer to successfully accomplishing her plan of revenge. Medea struggles here to suppress her maternal instincts. As Medea continues to cry, she claims that "[she] was thinking about [her] children" (925), and makes the excuse, "a woman is naturally womanish and prone to tears" (928). I would argue that this internal conflict is further articulated as she states, "when you [Jason] were praying that they live, pity came over me whether this would happen" (930-1). This moment is short lived, however, as she once again abandons any maternal instincts that might have held her

back and her focus reverts to Jason's betrayal, his abandonment, and the consequential vengeance he must, in turn, face.

Medea's character shows a major transformation by the end of the play. As argued before, I would suggest that her rage is so encompassing and powerful that by the end it allows for her to be revealed as something monstrous and inhuman. There are several moments throughout the play that allude to this idea. The nurse, describing Medea's condition, states, "[Medea] listens to friends' advice no more than some rock or wave of the sea" (28-9), thus implying that Medea is some natural, uncontrollable force that is far from human. This also emphasizes a closeness or affinity to the natural world, a force that seems to be a representation of her fury and her anger. The nurse further describes, "...watch out for the savage bent, the hateful nature of her self-willed mind" (102-4), thus not only reiterating the idea that Medea's dangerous power is rooted within her but also positing that this is representative of an inherent female 'nature.' She continues, "the cloud of [Medea's] grief starts, is rising, will kindle to flames when her spirit fans it to greater fury" (107-9). Once again, an uncontrollable force of nature serves as a metaphor for her unstoppable, increasing anger. The image of the fire growing also explains Medea's increasing level of crazed fury throughout the play. After she kills her children, the chorus of women accuses, "Wretched woman, you must have been rock or iron to kill the children seedlings you bore with a fate inflicted by your own hand" (1279-81). They relate her actions to that of a hard substance, as she, from their point of view, is both heartless and inhuman for killing her children. Lastly, another clue to Medea's transformation is "Hecate, who lives in the recesses of [her] hearth" (497). Several times throughout the drama, Medea references her immortal lineage and magical powers, which allow for her to transcend the prescribed boundaries of gender that exist to limit her female character. Thus, this also speaks to

Medea's ability to encompass the 'ambiguous' female position that is put forth through Sherry Ortner's discourse of the 'nature / culture' dichotomy.

One is left with several questions regarding Medea's immortal presence in the end of tragedy. Medea, engulfed by her own rage and emotions, is motivated to kill her children and her husband's new wife. In the application of our feminist theories, it becomes clear that both Medea and Clytemnestra's characters are similarly challenging the male ordered world and threatening the ancient Greek gender spheres. However, it is necessary to remember that Clytemnestra's character, by the end of *The Oresteia*, is vanquished, the once-wrathful Furies are calmed, and society is reordered back into its 'rightful,' structured, and masculine way. Something about Medea's character, however, is different in that as she transcends her femininity, she completely destroys the family, and she successfully challenges what is valued within the inherently masculine ordered world. She successfully deconstructs the male encoded sphere, i.e., her family, marriage, and home. Medea, in fact, attains agency and freedom through her androgynous, anti-society form of being. But again, it is necessary to posit the question – at what cost does Medea gain this sense of empowerment?

The historical background of Euripides' tragedy is useful if we are to investigate this question further. The political changes happening in Athens seems to speak to the dramatic symbolism at play within this drama. Euripides' *Medea* was produced and performed in 431 BCE and it serves as one of his earlier known pieces of work. The year 431 BCE, however, also marks the first year of the Peloponnesian War – the war fought between Athens and Sparta. In turn, the years that follow would also mark the fall of Athens and the crumbling of the city and its society. In some sense, Medea's character is a foreshadowing of the loss of Athens' dominance and the breakdown of the city. The rising political tensions between Athens and

Sparta are perhaps represented by Medea's uprooting of society – the destruction of both the family and the home. Through this interpretation, the cultural and political significance of this time period would suggest that Medea's actions point toward the destruction of 'culture' – particularly in the realm of the *oikos* – and the destruction of the androcentric order of Athens, where the play was enacted in 421 BCE.

Medea's character transcends her gender by acting out a subversive performance of femininity. By applying Ortner's work to this performance one can see that Medea the character inhabits an 'ambiguous' position located between 'culture' and 'nature.' However, by the end of the drama, Medea's character develops a close affinity to nature through her inhuman, mythical character of 'the witch' who not only commits infanticide but also directly challenges the male order. Both positions are supported by Ortner's work, as they remain outside of conventional human capabilities. What is more, as Medea becomes further enveloped in her emotions – her wrath and desire for revenge – she is labeled deviant through comparisons to inhuman, savage animals. These overwhelming emotions are physically manifested through Medea's transformation into the witch-like character that she reflects by the final scene of the tragedy.

While she is, indeed, "successful" in punishing Jason, she pays the price of self-destruction. This self-ruin is marked by her inhuman character and her complete disassociation with maternity. She is separated from her womanhood and carries the lifeless bodies of her children in the chariot. Medea's self-destruction seems to suggest that resistance and 'gender trouble'<sup>18</sup> is not possible when it challenges the male order – one either supports or they do not support the male system, there is no room for resistance. While Medea is not put back in a

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<sup>18</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

‘rightfully’ subordinated place<sup>19</sup> she is dehumanized. She destroys the family – the basis for all Greek life – and in turn, the final portrayal of Medea is not that of a woman but rather a monstrous being. Euripides frames the image of Medea as a woman who has lost everything. From a perspective such as this, resistance does not seem possible, if human culture in a Greek context is to continue.

### 5.2) The *Bacchae*: The Collapse of the *Polis*

The second of Euripides’ tragedies to be discussed here is the *Bacchae*. The drama focuses on Dionysus, the god of wine, fertility, and religious ecstasy. Pentheus, the ruler of Thebes, refuses to acknowledge Dionysus as a god and, in turn, forbids any worship or sacrifice in the name of Dionysus. As the drama opens, however, a disguised Dionysus has returned to his home of Thebes in order to avenge his mother’s death, punish the townspeople for their impiety, and use his divine powers to drive the women of Thebes mad. The drama plays out as Dionysus, in his manipulation of Pentheus and the Theban women, demonstrates his divine power, exacts his wrathful revenge, and punishes the Theban house of Cadmus. In the context of my investigation, however, it is necessary to focus in on the female characters, the effeminate portrayal of Dionysus, and the roles of each within the tragedy.

With the opening of the play, Dionysus reveals that he is accompanied by a cult of devout female worshippers, the maenads, who have followed him to Thebes from Lydia. On the other hand, he has driven all the women of Thebes, including his mother’s sisters: Agave, Autonoe, and Ino, into a maddened, frenzied state. In Mt. Cithaeron, the maenads sing, dance, and “rave with bacchic frenzy” (109).<sup>20</sup> Dionysus’ cousin on his mother’s side, Pentheus, denies that the

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<sup>19</sup> Like that of Clytemnestra or the Furies in the *Eumenides*.

<sup>20</sup> Euripides. *Bacchae*. Trans. Stephen Esposito. Boston: Focus Publishing/R. Pullins Company, 2002. Print.

women are divinely possessed and when confronted by their drunken reveling, believes that the women are boldly evading the laws of Thebes. A herdsman comes forth and articulates his terrifying encounter with the female maenads. It is revealed that even Agave, the mother of Pentheus, has succumbed to the frenzied, bacchic state. As the herdsman explains that the women ripped apart the flock of animals with their bare hands, the destructive and savage nature of the maenads is revealed. With the help of Dionysus, Pentheus disguises himself as a woman in an attempt to see the mysterious rituals of the maenads with his own eyes.

By the end of the tragedy, it is clear that Dionysus has not only tricked Pentheus but also led Pentheus to his death. As the maenads see the disguised Pentheus, they tear him from his hiding spot and ravage his flesh with their bare hands. Pentheus pleads for his mother to stop but, in her frenzied state, she is unable to recognize her own son. The body of Pentheus is ripped to shreds and Agave returns to the city of Thebes with the head of her prey as a prize. In Agave's deluded state, she presents her son's severed head, claiming it to be the head of a young lion she had hunted. As she is persuaded back into a sound state of mind, she recognizes that she has murdered her own son. Dionysus appears to the city of Thebes in his true and divine form in order to exile Agave and her father. In turn, Dionysus has successfully avenged his mother's death and proved his power as a god.

My interpretation of this drama would argue that it follows in a vein similar to that of the *Agamemnon* and the *Medea* through its portrayal of Agave, the savage mother, and the Bacchae, the female devotees of Dionysus. It is critical to my argument, however, to differentiate between the Asian Bacchae from Lydia, also referred to as the chorus, and the Theban Bacchae from Thebes, as they embody two different groups of women throughout the drama. Focusing first on the women of Thebes, Dionysus admittedly reveals that he "forced [the women] to wear the

vestments of [his] mysteries and the entire female seed of Cadmeians, all who were women, [he] drove from their homes in madness. Mingled together with Cadmus' daughters, the women of Thebes sit beneath green firs on roofless rocks" (35-9). Furthermore, Dionysus explains, "It was this very Thebes, of all the Greek lands, that I first incited to female shrieks of ecstasy, wrapping her in fawn skins, putting into her hands the thyrsus, my ivy javelin. I did this because my mother's sisters, of all people, denied that I, Dionysus, was begotten from Zeus" (22-6).

Dionysus uses his divine persuasion against these women, in particular, in order to punish them for their actions. Likewise, his revenge involves, "hounding [the women] from their homes with fits of frenzy so that now, knocked out of their senses, they make their homes on Mt. Cithaeron" (33-4).

Through the initial description of the Theban Bacchae, one can see a clear dichotomy between the conventional, submissive female within the domestic sphere and the frenzied, crazed female who has been driven from her home. The woman in a bacchic state becomes one with nature: she lives within the natural world and uses it to dress herself. As the Theban Bacchae "rave with bacchic frenzy" (109), they not only wear their "garments of dappled deerskin" (111), but also "Make the violent fennel-wands holy all round!" (113). With this, one can see that these female characters, while "driven away from their looms and shuttles" (117-8), are violently separated from the conventional androcentric feminine role and its duties. These women are coerced into a savage state of mind, made to wield a weapon that is both sacred and violent and are closely associated with nature and the primal, natural world. The Theban Bacchae are symbolically representative of a savage, but innocent primal passion. It is in this sense that they begin to represent females – similar to that of Medea in the previous chapter – overwhelmed by passionate emotion, frenzied toward violent action, and separated from what Sherry Ortner

would call ‘culture.’ As the drama progresses, these women fully transform into the inhuman, monstrous characters that not only challenge the male order but also are perceived by the Greek men with both fear and anxiety.

Further emphasizing the direct connection between the Theban Bacchae and the natural world, the chorus sings of the Dionysiac ritual that the women practice: “Hunting the blood of slaughtered goats for the joy of devouring raw flesh” (137-8). The idea of hunting, slaughtering, and devouring is crucial throughout the drama as it personifies a savage and animalistic nature that the women, particularly Agave, embody in their bacchic state. I would posit that this ‘primal femininity’ was seen once before in my investigation through that of the ancient Furies in the *Eumenides*. In relation to Medea and Clytemnestra, however, Agave’s character and actions are different, more mysterious. Medea chooses to kill her children with a sword in order to punish Jason, her husband. Clytemnestra deliberately plans to kill her husband with a sword to punish him for her daughter’s sacrifice. Agave, however, is divinely influenced and blindly rips apart her own son with her bare hands. Agave is not an active agent over her own actions and the murder of her son is actually a form of punishment that has been placed upon her by Dionysus. Even the method of Agave’s murder seems to differentiate her from the other women, particularly Medea, as Medea’s character struggled to convince even herself to take the lives of her own children. Agave, however, in her deluded state, does not think twice about savagely murdering her own son.

The female citizens of Thebes have been driven out of the city with frenzied madness and turned to the ways of bacchic ritual. The male citizens of the city directly address this issue as they personally witness what has become of the female population of Thebes. A messenger describes the women as, “Some, holding in their arms a fawn or wild wolf cubs, offered them



white milk – those who had just given birth and whose breasts were still swollen, having left their new-born at home (698-702). At this point, the animal personification becomes more literal than symbolic. The women have left their children behind in order to replace them with young, suckling animals. It seems as though the women have given up their human sense of motherhood and taken on a maternity that is animalistic in nature. The messenger further describes the savagery of the Theban Bacchae:

[The women] attacked our grazing calves and not with swords in their hands... mauling with both hands a young heifer with swelling udders, bellowing all the while; and other women were ripping apart mature cows, shredding them up. You could have seen ribs or a cleft hoof being tossed up and down. Hanging from the fir trees the ribs and hooves dripped bloody gore. Bulls previously aggressive and tossing their horns in rage now tumbled to the ground, their bodies dragged down by the myriad hands of young women. Their garments of flesh were ripped off faster than you could have winked your royal eyes. (736-747)

As the Theban Bacchae attack the herdsmen and their flock of animals, the audience is shown the duality behind the divinely possessed women. While they were portrayed before as nursing and mothering wild animals, here, in this passage, they *attack* and *kill* the domesticated animals. They rip apart the pregnant and the mature cows; they tear the animals apart with their bare hands.

Lastly, the Theban Bacchae are powerful enough to attack even the bulls, the angry, male cows. The women's attack moves into the surrounding towns as they, like "enemy soldiers" (753), embody something entirely inhuman. The women "snatched children from their homes" (754). They further disconnect themselves from a mothering, maternal image of femininity by physically removing children from the domestic sphere. These women are directly aggressing against male ordered society and their respective conventional female roles.

As the messenger recounts his horrific encounter with Agave and her sisters, he speaks of the feminine, yet monstrous, qualities of the women. For instance, the messenger reveals the medusa-like “snakes that licked [the women’s] cheeks” (698), and witch-like, fiery hair: “on their locks of hair they carried fire but it did not burn them” (757-8). Even as the men defend themselves from the women, their “sharp-pointed spears drew no blood” (761). Through this scene, the women appear to be frenzied to the point that they are rendered inhuman. Similar to Medea’s character at the end of her tragedy, these women seem to be witch-like females who have superhuman powers, snatch up children, and challenge the male sphere of orderly, patriarchal human life. Again, Sherry Ortner’s work can be applied to this scene as the women ascribe to this ‘ambiguous’ position that contributes to their inhuman qualities. It is again the mythical feminized image provided by subversive female symbols: the witch, the gorgon, etc. The image of the Theban Bacchae, however, takes this idea one step further as these women are divinely possessed and physically transforming into monstrous women.

The messenger concludes his warning as he describes the Theban Bacchae after their savage attack: “they washed off the blood while the snakes with their tongues were licking from their skin the drops on their cheeks” (767-8). Although the women have just ravaged a village and destroyed its livelihood, they remain serene and at one with nature. Ostensibly, in this very scene, it could be argued that these women have achieved some sense of empowerment. On the other hand, however, one must remember that their power is rooted within the divine persuasion of Dionysus. The messenger reminds the audience as well, “Women routed men, though not without some god’s help” (764). In this sense, Dionysus enables the women in their destruction of the villages and the families. Dionysus enables the destruction of the city and, in turn, male ‘culture.’

While many aspects of the tragedies of Medea, Clytemnestra, and Agave remain relatively different, it is worth unpacking the animal imagery that runs concurrently throughout all three of the dramas. The imagery in both *Medea* and *Agamemnon* made references to animals with a conventional masculine power, i.e., lions and wolves. As the *Bacchae* uses imagery associated with nature so here too are the women personified as monstrous, savage beasts and lions. As the Asian Bacchae state, “For [Pentheus] was not born from the blood of women. No, his birth was from some lioness or from the Libyan Gorgons” (987-90), they personify Agave’s maternity as inhuman, wild, or even dangerous. As the Gorgons are directly referenced, they draw another comparison between the snake-haired monsters and the Bacchae. The Asian Bacchae continue their choral ode, “Appear as a bull or a many-headed snake or a fire-blazing lion to behold. Go, Bacchus, beast, and with a laughing face cast the noose of death on the hunter of the Bacchae as he falls under the herd of maenads” (1017-23). Through this passage they not only reiterate the imagery of snakes, lions, and beasts but also joyfully foreshadow the murder of Pentheus. They are a herd of destructive, wild women who will actually *overpower* the hunter.

The animal imagery surrounding Agave is carried through to her murder of her son. As the Bacchae ravage the earth, tear the fir tree from the ground, and cause Pentheus to fall into their hands, Agave commands the women to “capture the mounted beast” (1108). In her deluded state, she sees her son as an animal to be hunted. In turn, “it was [Pentheus’] own mother who first, as sacred priestess, began the slaughter” (1114). Agave, “foaming at the mouth and rolling her protruding eyeballs” (1122), appears in an animal-like state of mind. As she, “[tears] off his shoulder” (1127), “[cries] out in triumph” (1133), and “impales on the tip of her thyrsus [Pentheus’ head]” (1141), she acts out her primal, animal instincts. She no longer is cultured, civilized, or even human in form. Agave, carrying the head of Pentheus “as if it were the head of

a mountain lion” (1142), boldly parades the head as a prize. As she regards Pentheus as, “a blessed prey!” (1171), a “young whelp [of a mountain lion]” (1174), and a, “lion-like prey” (1196), she invites the Asian Bacchae to join her in a holy feast on its remains. However, the most devout followers of Dionysus, the Asian Bacchae, are repulsed at this request. This reveals that Agave has surpassed the frenzied state of holy ritual to a point of psychological delusion and insanity. She proudly admits that she, “left behind the spindles at the loom to come to greater tasks, the hunting of wild beasts with my own hands” (1236-7), for “who would brag that he owns the weapons of spear-makers? They are useless!” (1206). Agave’s prideful display emphasizes her disconnect from the conventional Greek female sphere and transformation into a masculine-like hunter. Her remark regarding spears, however, separates her from even the male sphere of hunting as she has rendered weapons useless. The use of her bare hands signifies her primal, wild savagery. While the other tragic females assume masculine roles of power, it seems as though Agave is much different in her female portrayal. She transcends gender and becomes the inhuman savage.

For Agave to return to her ‘normal’ senses, her father must ask her several poignant questions. When he asks, “To whose house did you come when you got married?” (1273), and, “who in this house is the son of your husband?” (1275), he relays questions that directly recall culture: marriage, kinship, and maternity. For her to return to her senses, she must be reminded of the patriarchy, the male ordered world, and her ‘rightful’ place in that society. This moment emphasizes the dichotomy between the ideal wife and the Bacchae. The ideal wife is said to remain domesticated at the loom, subdued inside the home, devout to her husband, and obedient to her maternal duties. The Bacchae, however, embody quite a different order and through their traits represent a challenge and a threat to the patriarchy.

The Asian Bacchae from Lydia, the chorus of the drama, represent a much different group of women in comparison to Agave and the Theban Bacchae discussed above. Dionysus explains that these women are, in fact, “[his] sisterhood of worshippers, [those] who left Mt. Tmolus, bulwark of Lydia, women I wooed from foreign lands” (55-6). While Dionysus plays a part in their role of becoming Bacchae, these women are the most devout worshipers who have followed him from Lydia. While the Theban Bacchae are “stung by the goad of Dionysus” (119), the Asian Bacchae are his “comrades in rest [and] companions of the road” (57). Moreover, the Theban Bacchae are agents of revenge for Dionysus. The Asian Bacchae enable Dionysus’ divine power and his destruction of Thebes. Agave was merely a pawn in Dionysus’ plan for revenge and, because of this, she ultimately suffers for her initial impiety. She is transformed into this savage being as a form of punishment.

The Asian Bacchae, however, represent something more empowered. They are praised and favored by Dionysus. Likewise, they seem to embody a more true form of Bacchus worship. As the wise character of Tiresias reveals, “For Bacchic revelry and mania produce much mantic power: whenever this god comes into the body in full force he makes the frenzied foretell the future” (298-301). It seems as though the truly devout worshippers of Dionysus are gifted with mystical powers. While the Theban Bacchae displayed no sense of ‘wisdom’ beyond their passionate release of primal energy, the Asian Bacchae relay knowledge of divine ‘Truth’ and understanding through their choral songs. They sing, “cleverness is not wisdom nor is it wise to think thoughts unfit for morals. ... Who would pursue ambitious ends and lose what lies at hand? These, in my opinion at least, are the ways of madmen and evil counselors” (395-400). One can wonder: what is this *wisdom* they speak of?

While it can be interpreted from various perspectives, for the sake of my argument, I would argue that it is the divine knowledge they have gained from the worship of Dionysus. Likewise, they ask, “What good is mere cleverness? Or, rather, what god-given gift brings more honor to mortals than to hold the hand of mastery over the head of the enemy?” (877-80). These women seem to suggest that the feminine, negative trait of cleverness is powerless when compared to the divine wisdom of the gods. Even Pentheus is duped by Dionysus’ wisdom. The wisdom of the gods, particularly that pertaining to Dionysus, is exalted and elevated above both feminine cleverness and masculine wisdom. In the context of my interpretation, this serves as a clue to this play’s symbolic meaning. Rather than focusing simply on a breakdown of masculine ideology, the tragedy at hand points to a total dissolution of all social institutions – culture and gender included – at the hands of a merciless god. This will be discussed at length later in this chapter.

Turning back to the Bacchic women, we see that another aspect stands to differentiate the two groups. This separation comes from an ‘inherent female nature.’ Tiresias remarks upon the idea of the ‘good’ or ‘bad’ female in such a way that further explains this difference between the women:

It is not Dionysus who will force women to be self-controlled in Aphrodite’s realm. No, their chastity resides in their nature. [Self control in all things always depends on character.] Just consider the facts. For even in the revelries of the Bacchus the self-controlled woman, at least, will not be corrupted. (314-8)

While I would argue that this is a pointed comment on the female ‘nature’ in general, it is also relevant to the role of the Asian Bacchae. As my explanation of ancient Greek literature has shown, men tended to initially doubt women and their motives regardless of the female’s nature or character. It is notable, however, that Tiresias declares that not all women are bad or sexually

promiscuous – he believes that good or bad actions are based on each woman's respective feminine 'nature.' Therefore, I would suggest that the maenads from Lydia would be considered this 'good' and *self-controlled* type of woman who is able remain honorable in the presence of divine Bacchic power. One cannot say the same for Agave, as she brutally kills her own son while overcome by frenzied emotions. She has been punished by Dionysus for denying his divine power.

The Asian Bacchae seems to have some higher level of being, divine knowledge, and in essence, empowerment. But I stop to wonder what this really means when this empowerment is rooted in one's devout worship of a deity. Medea, for instance, seemed to achieve a sense of empowerment through her rejection of the patriarchy. Through this, however, she is also vilified, labeled deviant, and perceived as a monstrous woman. This does not seem reflective of a positive or 'good' source of empowerment.

Following along the lines of *Medea*, Euripides uses the *Bacchae* as a vehicle to communicate the breakdown of society. This tragedy, however, takes this concept further in that it articulates the fall of masculine order and an explosion of 'culture.' Again, it is necessary to relay the historical background in which this drama was written and performed. While *Medea* was produced earlier in Euripides' career, the *Bacchae* was produced much later, approximately around 407 BCE. This time period was particularly significant in that the war between Athens and Sparta was nearing its end. The concluding years of the Peloponnesian War marked a dark time for the political and social realm of Athens. Euripides writes a tragedy that reflects not only the consequences of the war on the city but also the tension felt by the citizens of Athens. This tragedy carries with it several critical moments that are relevant to my investigation of feminist

theory as well as my argument of the symbolic significance of gender and society behind Euripides work. I will work to outline these key moments in the following conclusion.

Compared to the asexual goddess Athena, Dionysus is an, “effeminate” (353), male deity who is persuading mortals to act in a specifically subversive manner. But while Athena in the *Eumenides*, the third play of The *Oresteia*, enables the growth and continuation of the patriarchy, Dionysus seems to do the opposite. This is marked not only by the inhuman portrayal of the Theban Bacchae and their destruction of the city but also by Dionysus’ presence and influence as he persuades the male characters of the tragedy to dress in drag. From the perspective of Judith Butler, drag represents the concept of ‘gender trouble’<sup>21</sup> in that it is a subversive performance of gender. Dionysus enables the destruction of male order and provokes these various subversive performances of gender. Two particularly powerful elders from Thebes attempt to join in on the bacchic ritual as though they are a part of the maenad group. Their characters represent an attempt by the traditional, foundational male order to adopt Dionysus’ power, but in the presence of Dionysus, they are emasculated and play the role of effeminate worshippers. Likewise, Pentheus, the ruler of the city, also is persuaded to dress and act as a woman – he takes on a similarly subversive gender performance to that of the city’s elders. These male leaders are symbols for masculine power and order. As they are emasculated, torn down, exiled, or savagely murdered, so too is the city itself and its foundational social structures. Dionysus himself is an effeminately portrayed god. Through my interpretation, I would argue that this serves to emphasize Euripides’ acknowledgement of the subversion of gender and, in turn, the symbolic deconstruction of androcentric order and its social categories of sex and gender.

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<sup>21</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.



While Medea's character challenged and, in turn, transcended boundaries of femininity, Dionysus and his maenads go further in their destructive, violent acts. Medea's desire for revenge relied on a single-minded purpose, to punish her husband. In doing this she destroyed her family, its associated male lineage, and her home. In the *Bacchae*, Dionysus has a similarly single-minded purpose, to punish the city of Thebes. By the end of this drama Dionysus has, in fact, destroyed the city and the social structures therein.

Looking to the women present within Euripides' two plays, we see that they are left with nothing. They follow a clear path of self-destruction. Agave, for instance, kills her son and is exiled from the city. She is left without any direct connection to society and thus is powerless. It seems as though Medea is left in a similar sense, but she retains her inhuman form and thus appears to hold onto some sense of power. Euripides works with myths in which the dissolution of gender comes with the explosion of 'culture' and the destruction of society as a whole. With regards to the *Bacchae*, all that remains is the god, his divine wisdom, and his devout followers. The city and all that it contained is left devalued and destroyed.

As the city of Thebes is reduced to nothing, the only empowered character that remains is Dionysus. Each character carries symbolic meaning to the city as a whole. Agave, representative of femininity and maternity, is exiled, silenced, and vilified on account of her brutal murder of Pentheus, her son. Pentheus, the ruler of the city who is representative of male power and order, is ripped to shreds by his own mother and duped by the gods. Cadmus and his wife, seemingly symbols of patriarchal lineage and traditional rule, are transformed into snakes. Each respective aspect of society is deconstructed, removed of power, and devalued. The end of the Peloponnesian War marks the fall of Athens and its loss of political power. In turn, the end of the

*Bacchae* seems to symbolize a similar level of destruction and ruin as the entirety of the city of Thebes crumbles at the hands of a god.

## Conclusion

### *Performing Ancient Femininity*

This conclusion will revisit the central questions of gender presented in my introduction. This will be done in hopes of answering these questions directly while also providing a discussion of my overall findings. These foundational questions guided my study of the Greek myths and aimed to tackle the complexities of the gendered performances portrayed within a number of important ancient Greek works concerned with subversive performances of gender, deviant behavior, or resistance to male power. Moreover, the questions I raised in the introduction considered the consequences of challenging hegemonic masculinity and androcentric social order. If and when subversive behavior occurs, is there an opportunity suggested in these works for the possibility of successful female empowerment? Could the myths produced in an ostensibly misogynistic and oppressive ancient society consider the possibility for a collapse of male power – or does the patriarchy ultimately always win out?

The work of Elaine Fantham, Helene Foley, Natalie Kampen, Sarah Pomeroy, and H. A. Shapiro, *Women in the Classical World* provided my study with a vital overview of ancient Greek women, the various traditional female roles within it, and the different portrayals of women coming out of the ancient Greek world. The ancient voices discussed in the Fantham text relayed various stereotypes, caricatures of the wife, which emphasized the negative traits of a woman from a male perspective. Also discussed were the ancient treatises that dictated how to run the household and spoke of a man teaching his wife and endowing her, if she were worthy, with masculine knowledge and *logos*. Likewise, the rituals within the city of Athens looked to foster positive, ideal images of women while ancient Greek intellectuals promoted ideas that

further circumscribed women in a biologically inferior position. In summary, the culture of Athens, i.e., its foundational social, political, and domestic structures, promoted females who were subordinate, passive, and complicit to male dominance and an androcentric order.

In my discussion of contemporary feminist theory, I established the basic tenants of the theoretical works that would later be applied to my readings of the Greek narratives. Judith Butler's work, *Gender Trouble*, and her theory of performative gender remains central to this investigation. Alongside Butler's work, I introduced several other social frameworks from theorists, including Monique Wittig, Luce Irigaray, Sherry Ortner, Ute Frevert, and Edwin Schur. This particular group of theorists is essential to my study as each supplies a framework that considers aspects of society. When considered collectively, these theorists assess the ways in which society can impact gender performances or perpetuate systems of oppression. Furthermore, they collectively grapple with the overarching concept of femininity and directly engage with questions of deviance and forms of subversive gender resistance. The social theories studied here, pieced together, create a unique perspective that considers language, the dichotomy of 'nature / culture', emotion and behavior, and deviance.

The *Odyssey's* Penelope is the archetype for the 'good' woman and ideal wife. She serves as both a model and a foil to the later, 5<sup>th</sup> century dramatic women in that she aims to protect her family through her performance of femininity. Penelope upholds values concerning marriage, maternity, and sexuality. In this sense, she enables male order, supports the patriarchy, and remains subservient in her domestic role as a wife. However, Penelope is also referred to as complementary to her clever husband, Odysseus. She is his intellectual equal and articulates this several times throughout her performance in the *Odyssey*. Her clever tricks, her feminine wiles, are demonstrated through manipulated performances of femininity. These performances aim not

only to trick the suitors but also to protect her marriage, her family, and ensure her loyalty to Odysseus. It is in this way that Penelope differs from the tragic women who are labeled deviant. Penelope's role in the *Odyssey*, rather, serves proactively to reinforce conventional ideas of femininity. This type of 'good' woman upholds her domestic role and fosters male order. In other words, Penelope is the 'perfect' woman from the male perspective.

The later dramas present females that transgress this idealized femininity. In turn, it is this type of 'bad' woman who is subsequently labeled deviant and must face devastating consequences. Women such as Clytemnestra or Medea challenge the strict boundaries of gender, challenge masculinity and male order, and demonstrate subversive behavior. In the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra is an angry woman driven by a self-indulgent need for revenge. While her actions were initially motivated by a maternal desire to avenge her daughter's death, it changes into an all-consuming fury. She demonstrates typical masculine behavior; her speech is empowered and commanding. She deliberately challenges her husband and takes on a lover. In the carpet scene she strips Agamemnon of his masculinity and later murders him and his concubine. Through her performance, Clytemnestra acts out the type of gendered emotions that are analyzed within Ute Frevert's feminist theory.

We also see Judith Butler's theory of performative gender and identity coming into play within Clytemnestra's performance. In the context of Butler's work, Clytemnestra's manipulation of her performance constitutes itself as subversive resistance, i.e., '*gender trouble*.'<sup>22</sup> At times, Clytemnestra deliberately acts out a conventional version of femininity that would be appropriate for a woman in her situation and expected of her by her husband and her male audience. She performs this necessary 'female' role in order to get her personal goals met.

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<sup>22</sup> Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

These goals, however, serve to deconstruct the masculine order and hide her deception, thus construing her behavior as both a challenge and a threat to the male sphere. This is what differentiates her from a character such as Penelope. Both women manipulate their performance of femininity, but for much different reasons.

The connections drawn in the *Odyssey* between Penelope and Clytemnestra show that their female roles, as a whole, mirror each other. As both wives wait for their husbands to return home, they craft schemes that are physically manifested in the form of woven cloth. Likewise, as the women are perceived and presented with masculine traits, they and their husbands are also characteristically referred to as lions. In the context of both of the women's actions, however, their motivations could not be more different. Clytemnestra plots against her husband in order to seek revenge and plan his murder. Penelope, on the other hand, acts in such a way as to abstain from remarrying and to wait out her husband's return home. Both women are "backed against a wall," and they are overwhelmed by their emotions. Clytemnestra is a lion because she is savage, angry, and hopes to destroy the family while Penelope is a lion because she remains strong in her husband's absence and loyal to both her family and her marriage. In this sense, Penelope and other powerful female characters such as, notably, Athena are symbols of male order. Their behavior serves to foster and support the masculine world.

Aeschylus uses the *Eumenides* as a vehicle to articulate the reordering of the male sphere. In other words, the patriarchal order wins out by the end of the *Oresteia*. The reestablishing of rightful masculine rule and its social order is clear through Clytemnestra's murder, the Furies' subjugated position below the city of Athens, and Apollo's androcentric, winning argument that removes all maternal power from womankind. In the case of Aeschylus' work, resistance to male domination is possible, but the consequences are severely detrimental to the rebellious female.

The moments in which the tragic women detach themselves from the oppressive, androcentric Greek order provide complicated evidence to answer this investigation's focal questions of gender. On one level, many of these tales can be read as a way to delineate the idealized female character or the condemned female behavior, but on another level, the dramas express something much more rich that problematizes not only ideas of female power but also a deeply rooted system of oppression.

The Euripidean tragedies play this idea out. They are able to explore, manipulate, and uproot the long-standing systems of the social world. These tragedies differ in that they reveal a total collapse and explosion of social order. Although Medea's character is similar to that of Clytemnestra in the *Agamemnon*, Medea successfully enacts her revenge against Jason. But while she survives the play, she is ultimately left as a ruined and dehumanized character. Medea is savage and territorial, *like* a mother animal, but in reality, her need for revenge will push her to abandon the characteristics of a mother. By the end of the drama, Medea is neither a wife nor a mother – her character has transcended femininity, the conventional female role, and gender in its entirety. Medea, enveloped in her fury, is disconnected from her typical feminine roles. Not only is this true, but her actions destroy the purity and sanctity of the domestic sphere; this includes the space of the home and her role within it as wife and mother.

The final scene of the *Medea* demonstrates the extent of Medea's transformation. Her character explicitly takes on an inhuman, mystical appearance. She drives the chariot into the sky, grasping her children's lifeless bodies, now more of a witch than a wife, mother, or woman. Medea's figure stands as a stark contrast to that idealized and 'good' woman. Rather, Medea's character is rendered at the end dehumanized, vilified, and monstrous.

Sherry Ortner's framework discussed the "feminine symbols of transcendence" (Ortner, 1974. 86), that allow for "mother goddesses, merciful dispensers of salvation, [or] female symbols of justice" (Ortner, 1974. 86). From this perspective, I interpreted Athena's character to be an exalted, feminine symbol for *justice* and 'masculine wisdom.' Her actions serve to benefit the male sphere and she is directly associated with *justice*, *war*, and other highly masculinized aspects of society. In turn, Athena becomes representative of the male-associated 'culture.'

Medea's character, however, is a stark contrast to this as she reflects the "utterly debased" (Ortner, 1974. 86), and "subversive feminine symbol" (Ortner, 1974. 86), of the monstrous witch who is capable of not only destroying the *oikos* but also committing infanticide. Medea's character symbolically foreshadows an impending crisis for conventional Greek gendered civic culture at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. I argue that this is why her character is capable of successfully carrying out so much destruction. Without a doubt, however, Medea is still a ruined, destroyed character by the end of the drama.

The *Bacchae*, written toward the end of that long and destructive war, articulates a breakdown of not only *gender* but also *society* and the foundational social institutions that manifest in *culture*. In this sense, the *Bacchae* communicates the destruction of the Theban *polis* at the hands of a merciless god. It is by far a much more comprehensive breakdown of society than that featured in the *Medea*. It is not the patriarchy that wins out in the end of this tragedy, but rather it is divine will, religious ecstasy, and the power of the gods that ultimately remains in the end of the *Bacchae*. Both Euripidean tragedies are conscious of the limitations of the political sphere and its association with gender dynamics and androcentric systems of social order. While the *Medea* foreshadows the social and political consequences of the Peloponnesian War, the



*Bacchae* directly correlates with end of the Peloponnesian War, the fall of Athens, and the city's loss of political power.

This investigation outlined various portrayals of women in ancient Greek narrative. Considering these images of femininity collectively, one can see clear patterns emerging. I would also argue that the *Odyssey*'s Penelope, although appearing as the ideal female figure, has no more agency than any other wife, mother, or slave in the ancient Greek world. Her 'idealized' feminine image is an ideal because it is presented from the point of view of a male. Her character stands to promote the 'good' female that remains not only subservient to the male gender sphere but also complicit in reinforcing the subjugated position of women. Penelope's character demonstrates that at times the typical 'tricky' female wiles are permissible within the male system of domination. They must, however, serve to foster the androcentric order. In Penelope's case, for example, her clever tricks maintained her fidelity to her husband and her loyalty to her family.

Through my feminist reading, I would also argue that Clytemnestra and Medea, while presented as rebellious and 'unconstrained' women, are, in fact, depicted as self-destructive, dehumanized characters. They commit savage crimes but in the process are dissociated from their female roles. They are labeled as deviant women in an attempt to circumscribe them back within their subordinated, feminine place, i.e., their 'rightful' place in androcentric society. Unlike Penelope, these women are successfully challenging and deconstructing the gendered spheres. The tragedy is, however, that the rebellious women are left with nothing – childless, dead, or excluded from 'the human world' entirely. From the perspective of feminist social theory, the deviant women's "othering" and dehumanization is a necessary process that reinforces the subjugated position of women in society. In this sense, the rebellious tragic

women's label of 'deviance' is also a necessary part of this deeply rooted system of oppression.

These labels can be read as a tool of oppression that aims to further exclude the women from and subordinate them within a patriarchal society.

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