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THE REPRESENTATION OF CLYTEMNESTRA AND HECUBA IN FIFTH-CENTURY ANCIENT ATHENIAN TRAGEDY AND POTTERY

I started my research when I discovered that my department had an opportunity for me to complete an honors thesis. Intrigued, I discussed the idea with my then academic advisor, Dr. Marilyn Goldberg. She encouraged me to undertake this herculean task, and I did. I began working with (now retired) Dr. Jay Freyman and reading a large selection of Greek texts (my choice of focus). Due to the retirement of Dr. Freyman, I started writing my thesis under the guidance of Professor David Rosenbloom. We discussed potential topics, and, eventually settled on a general idea of female killers in Athenian tragedy. Professor Rosenbloom helped me begin more research on this topic and also narrow the focus to Clytemnestra and Hecuba. Professor Rosenbloom also encouraged, me to apply for an undergraduate research award grant. With his assistance, I received this grant, which enabled me to review visual records of pottery pieces depicting Clytemnestra and Hecuba. Overall, I entered research because of the opportunity and curiosity in Greek Mythology and the idea of complex women.

[LEFT] 2014. Photograph by Marlayna Demond, '11.

[RIGHT] Albin O. Kuhn Library and Library Terrace, 1995, University Archives, Special Collections, University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC).

INTRODUCTION

Scholarship on classics has intensely examined the lives of women in the ancient world. Opinions about what attitudes towards women were in ancient Greece vary from flagrant misogyny to a subtler, yet still strongly defined patriarchy. In classical Athens of the fifth century BCE, married women were preferably secluded, but they could be seen in public in certain circumstances (Goff 2004, 48). These instances often centered on a woman's role in ritual contexts (Goff 2004, 48). Women were considered emotionally less stable than men, and this belief and their association with rituals surrounding life and death tied women more closely to nature outside of the polis (Just 1991, 217; Goff 2004, 50). There was always a hint of anxiety towards women in Athens, as their passionate natures were considered unstable. However, women were needed for citizenship, as it was only granted to men with two Athenian parents (Goff 2004, 80). As Just notes, "in the passionate nature of women there lurks the constant threat of violence and injury" (Just 1991, 197). Women were inherently necessary, yet also inherently feared.

Scholars believe that this cultural anxiety towards women can be seen throughout Greek myth, in particular through violent female murderers. As two queens on opposite sides of the Trojan War, Clytemnestra and Hecuba are examples of these violent women whom scholars have interpreted through the prism of Athenian misogyny. Scholars have interpreted the portrayal of these women in Athenian tragedy, — Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Hecuba in Euripides' *Hecuba*, — as examples of this cultural anxiety and underlying violence (Foley 2001, 200). Clytemnestra is seen as the ultimate threat of women — the tension wrapped in the wife and mother released violently in murder (Foley 2001, 200). Hecuba is seen as the ultimate result of degradation within caused by violence (Reckford 1991, 30). These are the most common interpretations of these two women.

The belief that women are threats to society is visible in Greek mythology. The direct ancient myths are reflected in drama, poetry, and visual representation. Vases dating from the fifth century BCE

can be found in museums throughout the world, and many depict scenes from Athenian mythology. These images can, to an extent, reflect the misogynistic interpretation of Clytemnestra and Hecuba.

However, these visual portrayals of Clytemnestra and Hecuba contrast with the written portrayals in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Euripides' *Hecuba*. Instead of being presented in the background as a violent female monster, Aeschylus' Clytemnestra is controlling, masculine, and justified, and is one of the main figures. In the play, her murder of Agamemnon is revenge for those who cannot speak for themselves, such as Iphigenia, the sacrificed daughter whose death let the Trojan War begin, and the other children slaughtered by Agamemnon's ancestors. Hecuba, on the other hand, evokes sympathy from the audience, but she is no passive victim. Like Clytemnestra, she avenges those who have no other avenger. Specifically, Hecuba orchestrates the blinding of Polymestor and the death of his two sons to take revenge for his murder of her own son, Polydorus, and the Hellene sacrifice of her daughter Polyxena, the virgin daughter sacrificed to Achilles at the other end of the Trojan War. These differences in the characters show the writers' intentions, as the unique elements create a commentary on a world in war. Aeschylus and Euripides emphasize the domestic response to war and male transgression. Aeschylus writes Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon as revenge for the sacrifice of Iphigenia, and he depicts her resulting murder as either a by-product of the violent world she inhabits or her role as a scapegoat so that of the House of Atreus can continue. Euripides uses Hecuba's sympathetic feminine victimhood to punish male wartime transgressions of fundamental moral and religious precepts. The pottery allows the audience to read how Aeschylus and Euripides diverge from the myth, and emphasizes this purpose. Each woman is connected to the natural world, and punishes the crimes against Greek basic laws.

THE VISUAL RECORD

The majority of Greek myth was generally passed down orally from generation to generation. Permanent written records of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were not made until the reign of Peisistratus in Athens (ca. 561-527 BCE). Yet, these two poems existed and circulated for centuries before, and they were well known throughout the Greek world. In fact, the majority of Greek mythology that survived to the modern age can be traced to Roman authors. Literary evidence for the ancient Greek perception of their own myths is practically non-existent. It is only possible to separate Clytemnestra and Hecuba



FIGURE 1. 1873.0820.374 from the British Museum, the killing of Clytemnestra



FIGURE 2. 63.1246 from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, the killing of Aegisthus

of mythology be separated from the tragic characters composed by Aeschylus and Euripides through analyzing the visual record.

Mythology was a common theme throughout Athenian history. On the vases, scenes from various myths of which the literary record is scarce or nonexistent still remain today. On these vases, modern eyes can glance the destruction of Troy, the death of Priam and Troy's royal family, the murder of Agamemnon, and the killing of Clytemnestra in their original form. The vases portray the famous myths without tragedian twisting and literary construction. This view of Clytemnestra and Hecuba, upon inspection, differs greatly from the creations of Aeschylus and Euripides.

In the vase painting, Clytemnestra is shown as a violent, transgressive woman but still inferior to men. This coincides with the myth as it appears in Homer, in which Clytemnestra helps her lover Aegisthus murder her husband Agamemnon as he returns from Troy. In Figure 1, a stamnos from the British Museum dated to around 480-460 BCE shows the retaliatory killing of Clytemnestra by her son Orestes. Orestes and Clytemnestra are the main figures of focus — centered in the middle of their side. Orestes is the active figure; he is the one with the dagger, prepared to kill. Clytemnestra, in an interesting moment of femininity, runs away even as she seems to entreat her son to stop. In two pieces from the Boston MFA, Clytemnestra is more active and violent and jarring. In Figure 2, she is shown trying to save her lover Aegisthus. On the vase, she wields an axe. The fact that she holds a weapon is significant and transgressive, since few women on Attic pottery have been found holding weapons



FIGURE 3. 63.1246 from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (opposite side), the murder of Agamemnon



FIGURE 4. 1843.1103.22 from the British Museum, the death of Priam

(Medea and Clytemnestra are two of the notable exceptions). These violent portrayals stand out prominently since “at about the time of the Peloponnesian War, images of women at home or engaged in ritual come to dominate decorated pottery” (Lewis 2002, 9). However in Figure 2, Clytemnestra, although violent and monstrous, is not the main perpetrator — Orestes is the main perpetrator.

Hecuba remains background in the images in Figures 3 through 5. She is only seen as a victim of violence, usually as her husband is sacrilegiously killed. This is the consistent image seen in Figure 3, where she mourns her husband Priam, which shows her mourning her son Hector as Achilles impiously drags his body. Figure 6 shows Hecuba as the pitiful victim of violence at the capture of Troy as she and her daughter Cassandra are being ripped away from the statue of Athena (again sacrilegious, but the Greeks get punished for this later). She is only portrayed as an object of sympathy and the images emphasize more the blasphemous nature of the Greeks.

With the absence of any literary record to provide any pure version of their myths, the oral stories of Clytemnestra and Hecuba must be viewed on pottery. Clytemnestra emerges as a monstrous figure, but behind the lead male actors. Hecuba also remains decoration as she, and her city, are victimized by the victorious, ruthless, irreligious Greeks. The visual depiction of these two women is remarkably consistent whenever they are portrayed, forming a coherent cultural view of them from their mythology. From this assembled image, it is possible to see the differences fashioned by later playwrights and question why these two women were portrayed differently.



FIGURE 5. 63.473 from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Achilles dragging the body of Hector



FIGURE 6. 1867.0508.1333 from the British Museum, Hecuba and Cassandra are torn from the statue of Athena

CLYTEMNESTRA

It is easy to accept Aeschylus' Clytemnestra as an example of Athenian misogyny. She is set up as a strong challenge to masculine rule. In fact, many scholars agree Clytemnestra is only a disobedient woman who is put in her place in order to reassert the traditional customs of the society. However, to define misogyny as the sole motivation for Clytemnestra's creation by the playwright ignores key elements of her character and the trilogy. Assuming that she is born of misogyny bypasses all the anguish and emotional stress described by the chorus as the result of Agamemnon's murders in his quest for glory. Furthermore, this assumption also ignores her speech and accusations against her husband, something that the chorus cannot refute. Clytemnestra's presence in the *Agamemnon* does evoke questions, but this paper argues that she is more than a strong woman rising only to be repressed in order to reassert Athenian patriarchy. Clytemnestra punishes the wrongs of Agamemnon against the unwritten laws.¹ However, continuing the pollution of the House of Atreus, she is reduced from a rightful regent, who has policed the boundaries of the unwritten laws that should not be transgressed, to a corrupt tyrant and adulteress who is killed by the rightful heir Orestes in an effort to purge the pollution. However, this transformation is only completed when the court scene clears Orestes and incorporates the Erinyes into the city, causing Clytemnestra's storyline to resemble the "*pharmakos* complex" described by Bennett and Tyrrell. Aeschylus' depiction of Clytemnestra does more than reassert Athenian patriarchy and misogyny.

Clytemnestra does in part represent a transgressive woman who is controlled in order to reassert traditional gender roles. She is, after all, an adulteress and acts masculine instead of feminine, showing as the watchman says "...a woman's hope-stiffened heart that urges like a man." (*Ag.* 13-14). As such, Roger Just mentions her as an example of female danger, noting the fate of the House of Atreus at her hands (Just 1991, 197). McClure discusses her shifting persuasive speech, which contains both feminine and masculine elements (McClure 1999, 70-1). Clytemnestra also murdered her husband — a crime which Apollo condemns, "Marriage is a thing of destiny,/ greater than any oath, and Justice guards it" (*Eum.* 242-3). Apollo even claimed that Zeus judged her crime worthy of death, "Not once from my far seeing throne have I/ said anything...that Zeus himself...did not command" (*Eum.* 716-719). Scodel notes that her murder of Agamemnon mimics Iphigenia's sacrifice, and "that the use of human victims perverts sacrifice into impiety," thus Clytemnestra open to downfall later (Scodel 1996, 119). Foley argues that she attempts to gain and maintain control that was usually denied to women by claiming justification in her acts (Foley 2001, 227). However, she ultimately fails in this by connecting her act to the *daimōn*, thus losing her asserted independence, and she is finally condemned (Foley 2001, 229). Zeitlin argues that "by slaying her husband and by choosing her own sexual partner...[Clytemnestra] shatters the social norms and brings social functioning to a standstill" (Zeitlin 1978, 161). As such, she has left Orestes and Electra in perpetual childhood. Children needed to move from maternal connections (being taken care of by their mother), to paternal ones (either entering the world of men in the polis or being married off to the father's benefit). Clytemnestra plays a role in the "myth of matriarchy" (Zeitlin 1978, 161), stories in which women have power, but in the end show themselves unqualified for it, hence the necessity for men to control women and society. It rests on the "deep-seated conviction that the female is basically unruly" and centers on the anxiety of female suppression (Zeitlin 1978, 162).

In the trilogy, Clytemnestra has become the worst of tyrants. The chorus of slaves refers to her as "that godless woman" (*Cb.* 51). Her daughter hates her, and prays "that someone soon appear and avenge you, father, killing the killers, exacting justice" (*Cb.* 159-60, 166-8, 169-71). Orestes prays, "May I never share my house with such a woman! I'd rather die first childless, so help me god!" (*Cb.* 1137-8). Electra says that her mother "bartered us away" (*Cb.* 159). When Clytemnestra is pleading for her life, Orestes asserts that "I was sold, disgraced," to which she asks "If so, then where's the price I got for

you?” (*Ch.* 1044-5). His response “I’m ashamed to taunt you openly with that,” hinting at her deal and relationship with Aegisthus. The *Choephoroi* depicts Electra and the chorus as captives of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Rosenbloom demonstrates that “Orestes arrives to kill the hubristic monsters, liberating himself, his sister..., his *oikos*, of which the slaves are part..., and his city” (Rosenbloom 1995, 91). This is fair, because tyrants in Athenian ideology can be killed by anyone with impunity in the city. She is an arrogant tyrant, who killed her husband sinfully for power. Some older texts do support this view of a monstrous woman, such as the *Odyssey*. Interestingly, later writers, like Sophocles and Euripides, take more sympathetic lines on Clytemnestra. Eventually, Clytemnestra is killed, thereby reasserting the cultural balance in the *Oresteia*.

The condemnation of Clytemnestra only comes in the latter two plays of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. In the *Agamemnon*, there focus is on the crimes of Agamemnon. He returns, having won glory and power — but at the expense of a generation of men. The chorus sings,

The war god, broker of bodies, he who loads the scales in the spear clash, sends in return for the loved ones only a heavy dust from the fires of Troy, dust bitterly wept for, urns packed tight with ashes that had once been men. (*Ag.* 500-5).

Agamemnon’s glory was bought with the blood of others. He also comes home boasting of victory, trailing his prize behind him and walking on priceless goods that should not be trampled. His actions are crimes against the gods. Yet as he returns boastful and enriched, the chorus says that the people are talking and that their minds turn dark,

“All this,” some mutter to themselves, “all this for someone else’s wife.” All through their grief resentment smolders against the champions of justice, the sons of Atreus. (*Ag.* 509-13).

They say that “the citizens are talking and...every hurled out curse demands full payment for the loss” (*Ag.* 518-21). This glory of Agamemnon’s is not well received; the people, who have paid its price with their fallen sons and brothers, are turning rebellious. He returns home in glory, in stark contrast to the men that return home as ash. The chorus continues,

Fearful, I wait to hear what now goes cloaked in secrecy. For the gods in their own time see to the ones who kill so many, and the black Erinyes

deliver, piecemeal, down into darkness one who thrives unjustly, grinding his life away until his luck is turned around, and he, a shade among the swarming shades that close in all around him, has no strength left to fight them off. The price of excessive glory is excessive peril. (Ag. 522-34).

This ill-gained glory and arrogance will not be permitted to continue. They know that Agamemnon cannot be allowed to live, having won his wealth and glory in such a way. Burkert noted that “conquest, as wish fulfillment, is a disturbance of balance provoking retribution” (Burkert 1982, 77). Clytemnestra brings that retribution, even if she, by the same logic, makes herself liable to it.

Clytemnestra emerges as punisher to Agamemnon since he has violated the unwritten laws. As noted briefly before, the unwritten laws refer to moral customs of the Ancient Greeks. They originated before laws were written down, and are not directly mentioned as “unwritten” until the fifth century BCE as written laws were developed (Thomas 1996, 16). During this time, there were long debates over the definition of the unwritten laws, also called *nomoi*, and their difference from the written law (Thomas 1996, 17). Sophocles portrayed this argument at length, especially in *Antigone*. In his *Memorabilia*, Xenophon describes the difference between written and unwritten laws where the unwritten are divine that all should keep (Xen. *Mem.* 4.4.13). The unwritten laws continued to develop as an idea even while the written laws developed, and neither became obsolete or lost prominence. Rather, the unwritten laws continued to be regarded with as much authority as the written laws (Thomas 1996, 19). The laws dealt with such matters as the murder of kin, the guest-host relationship, human sacrifice, revenge of family members, the burial of bodies, how bodies ought to be treated, and so on.

There are several ways in which Agamemnon has transgressed the unwritten laws. The complete annihilation of Troy, including its shrines and innocent, and the conquerors’ boasts about it do not sit well with the gods. In the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra foreshadows the gods’ anger at these actions,

Now if they only reverence the gods that keep the city, the shrines and holy temples that keep the city, the shrines and holy temples of the conquered land, then they, the vanquishers, might not be vanquished in their turn. Let no unboly passion overwhelm them, taken by greed to ravage what should be left alone. (Ag. 386-93).

However, the Greek army did not follow this prayer. Ordered by Agamemnon, Troy was completely destroyed as the Herald recalls,

...he has harrowed Troy, broken her soil up with the just spade of avenging Zeus. The altars, too, and all the holy shrines are leveled, and the seed is dying out from all that land. (Ag. 596-600).

The chorus also describes the horrible decimation to evoke even more anger against Agamemnon,

The king of birds to the kings of the ships, black eagle and a white behind it, in full view, bard by the palace, by the spear-hand, ripped open a hare with her unborn still swelling inside her, stopped her from her last chance ever to escape. (Ag. 133-8).

There was more to Troy's desecration that Aeschylus' audience would have known. Cassandra, a prophetess and dedicated celibate, is raped by Ajax, and Agamemnon makes her his concubine. Priam, who lies there pleading and begging, is slaughtered on top of an altar. The Achaeans wronged the gods during their destruction of Troy.

There is also Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia. She tries to plea for her life, but the chorus recounts how her entreaties "counted for less than nothing to the captains frenzied for battle" (Ag. 262-3). Agamemnon knows it is a crime even as he does it, saying

My fate is heavy either way, heavy if I refuse to obey, and heavy too if I kill my child, pride of my house, staining these father's hands with streams of maiden blood spilled at the altar (Ag. 236-41).

He knows that sacrificing Iphigenia is a crime against the unwritten laws. The chorus, also acknowledging this, condemns the sacrifice of Iphigeneia,

And when he secured the yoke-strap of necessity fast upon him, yielding his swerving spirit up to a reckless blast, vile and unholy, from then on he was changed, his will annealed now to mere ruthlessness. For men are made bold in the throes of madness urging evil, in love with cruelty, courting sure disaster. And so he steeled himself into the sacrifice of his daughter to quicken a war waged for a woman... (Ag. 248-59).

The sacrifice is a crime against the unwritten laws, which must be punished. Calchas, the seer who initially divined the need to sacrifice

Iphigenia, goes on to predict that “the royal house, and in harmony with these sing sorrow, sorrow...” (*Ag.* 176-7). He also predicts vengeance for the sacrilegious sacrifice, “for wrath waits, ready to rise again, an ever wakeful keeper of the house, unforgetting, secret, never to be denied its vengeance for the child” (*Ag.* 169-73). There is no argument to deny that these acts are wrong.

All these wrongs accumulate and the breaking point is the carpet scene. Agamemnon here tramples expensive woven fabrics as he walks into the house, never letting his feet touch the ground. This is an act typical of his former rival Priam. Agamemnon warns “You shouldn’t coddle me/like a woman, or grovel, mouth wide with loud hurrahs,/ as if I were some barbarian” (*Ag.* 1054-7). He admits that if Priam had won “he would have trampled on fineries” (*Ag.* 1074). He also notes the immorality of the act, saying,

Don’t draw down envy upon my path by strewing it with robes./ Only the gods one honors in this way./ A man who walks on fineries such as these/ walks fearfully. Revere me like a man,/ not like a god. (Ag. 1057-61).

On walking over these expensive fabrics, Agamemnon flaunts his excess of riches, calling it “such woven opulence that silver bought” (*Ag.* 1087). Wohl describes this carpet as a sort of *agalma*.ⁱⁱ Its destruction flaunts his power and disrupts the societal structure of his world (Wohl 1998, 88). He flouts his fortune in face of the dead, is willing to sacrifice such wealth of the house, and disrespects the gods. This scene embodies Agamemnon’s arrogance and irreverence.

Agamemnon’s guilt is not entirely forgotten throughout the trilogy, as the *Eumenides* contains a thinly veiled condemnation of him. The Erinyes recall his sacking of Troy, and warn of punishment,

I tell you, then, revere.../ the altar of Justice./ don’t kick it over in a wild forgetfulness,/ fixing your hungry gaze/ on some brief gain beyond it./ Vengeance will track you down./ The inevitable waits. (Eum. 631-38).

The Erinyes go on, referring to the shipwreck that the Herald described back in the *Agamemnon* (*Ag.* 738-63), singing that,

But the wild man, I tell you, shamelessly defiant/ in the face of justice, hauling/ his plunder off — he’ll be compelled,/ in time, to lower his sails when the storm grips him/ and his yardarm snaps and shatters./ He calls to those who will not hear him him/ as he wrestles to get a grip on whirling water,/ and the god howls with laughter/ to see him there, the

*body and cocky man/ who'd brag that no bad thing could ever touch him/
and now flails, battered by sorrows,/ waves rising insurmountably around
him./ His lifelong wealth breaks up on the reef of Justice,/ and he sinks,
unwept, unseen. (Eum. 642-59).*

This recounts Agamemnon's first punishment from the gods. As he hauled his ill-begotten treasure off from Troy, his ships were destroyed by a storm, leaving, as the Herald recalls, "the Aegean bloomed with Achaean corpses,/ and everywhere the wreckage of their ships" (*Ag.* 751-2). However, Agamemnon returns home and boasts of his victory. The carpet scene follows, which embodies his arrogance. He then enters his home, and is killed in the bath by Clytemnestra. His good-fortune is shattered, and he is buried without mourning from the one who should mourn his death most: his wife, Clytemnestra. Agamemnon's arrogance and irreverence thus warrant his death.

While the House of Atreus is tarnished from Agamemnon's crimes, it is also already full of pollution from his ancestors. Cassandra describes the house as, "a house that hates the gods, one that knows by heart stories of kin murdering kin, a slaughterhouse for men, a killing floor drenched in blood" (*Ag.* 1240-3). Here she knows that "children are wailing for their slaughter, for the flesh their uncle roasted, and their father ate" (*Ag.* 1247-9). Atreus (father of Agamemnon and Menelaus) murdered the children of his brother Thyestes and fed them to him after Thyestes committed adultery with his brother's wife and sought to take the throne. This is not the only instance of child-killing in the house. The originator of the house of Atreus was Tantalus, who tried to feed his son Pelops to the gods. There is a *daimōn*, or *alastōr*, connected to the house. Cassandra even connects the *daimōn* to the Erinyes,

*The choir that sings as one, yet sings its tunes discordantly and only brings
on discord, can't leave this house. Yes, soused on human blood to utter
recklessness, a home-brewed rioting band of Eryinyes is dwelling there,
not easily driven out. (Ag. 1357-62).*

The chorus laments it, "Furious Spirit, you swoop down on the house, on the two heirs of Tantalus..." (*Ag.* lines 1680-2). Clytemnestra refers to it, "the triple-gluttled Spirit of this race! He feeds the lust for blood deep in the belly..." (*Ag.* 1692-4). She even claims connection to the spirit — tying her to the Erinyes also, avenging those children also who were killed with no defender, "masquerading in the image of this dead man's mate, the old and pitiless avenger of Atreus, in a

manic feast, cut him down as payment, a grown man butchered for the butchered young” (Ag. 1724-9). The murders of children and the utter destruction of property were left wrongfully unavenged.

Clytemnestra emerges as an avenger of those who have not received justice for the crimes committed against them. She seeks revenge for the households of Argos that lost their sons at war while Agamemnon received glory. She also seeks revenge for the ransacked and desecrated city of Troy, for Cassandra the rape victim, for her daughter Iphigenia who was sacrificed without pity, and for the children slaughtered in the House of Atreus. She becomes an avenger to punish those who broke the unwritten laws and committed horrendous acts of violence. At the close of the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra is, like the Erinyes, a part of the natural order, where certain laws may not be broken. Agamemnon’s acts challenge these laws. This is evident in Clytemnestra’s dialogue with the chorus after Agamemnon’s murder. At first, they are obviously repulsed. However, as she challenges them, they cannot satisfactorily rebuke her. She first charges Agamemnon with Iphigenia’s murder,

Not one of you said anything against this man, when easily, with no compunction, as if it were a beast he slaughtered, plucked from a wide field swarming with fattened sheep, he slit his own child’s throat — the child I carried, in pain bore, loved — and all for what, to charm the winds of Thrace? Why wasn’t he the one you banished from the land in punishment for that foul act? (Ag. 1615-23).

The chorus does not respond to that charge, but rather goes on to call her names, crying “Your daring’s outrageous, your words/ too cocksure” (Ag. 1630-1). Clytemnestra then accuses Agamemnon of bringing a concubine into the house of his wife. Again, the chorus does not answer her charge but laments. They charge her with connection to the *daimon* in the house, and she latches onto that connection. It is a connection to the universal powers of justice and revenge in the world, and now it is a connection she possesses. The chorus is never able to successfully challenge Clytemnestra’s claims, as each attempt is refuted and disproved. They only go on call her awful, to insult her, and to lament their king. Yet they cry,

Charge answers charge, and who can weigh them, sift right from wrong? The ravager is ravaged, the slayer slain. But it abides, while Zeus on his throne abides, that he who does will suffer. That is lan. (Ag. 1794-8).

Clytemnestra avenges Iphigenia's sacrifice and punishes the crimes of Agamemnon; though it will leave her open to her own murder, she is connected to the Erinyes as punishers of crimes against nature.

The Erinyes — an ancient source of violent vengeance — avenge crimes against nature, such as killing blood-kin. They are a necessary horror in the ancient Greek world, and Clytemnestra is clearly linked to them. Many of the earlier references to the Erinyes foreshadow Clytemnestra. She swears her act “by Justice...by Ruin, by the blood-crazed Erinyes” (*Ag.* 1637-8). In her first words in the play, Clytemnestra says, “εὐάγγελος μὲν, ὥσπερ ἡ παροιμία, ἕως γένοιτο μητρὸς εὐφρόνης πάρα” [As herald of gladness, with the proverb, may Dawn be born from her mother Night!] (*Ag.* 264). “Μητρὸς εὐφρόνης” means “Mother Night.” More specifically, εὐφρόνη is a euphemism for “night.” This calls to mind the words of the Erinyes later in the *Eumenides*, their reoccurring address to “ὦ μᾶτερ Νύξ.” (“O, Mother Night”). McClure also outlines how Clytemnestra's speech during the carpet scene shows the characteristics of ancient Greek curses with its deceptive use of metaphor, formulaic style, repetition, alliteration, assonance, isocola, personification, and rhythmic phrasing — characteristics which again occur in the Erinyes' binding spell on Orestes in the *Eumenides* (McClure 1999, 80-92). In the final play, it is Clytemnestra who urges the Erinyes on to kill Orestes because he has shed the blood of his family. She rouses them to the chaotic, violent, and blind vengeance that Erinyes embody.

It is fitting that Clytemnestra called upon the Erinyes, as women in ancient Greece were thought to be more closely connected to these outside laws of nature and religion than they were to the inner workings of the city and its democracy. The virgin was connected to Artemis, referred to often in literature as “untamed mares” (Zaidman 1992, 241). Marriage was seen as “a yoke placed on virgins who are wild and untamed” (Just 1991, 231). Women became more closely associated with certain rituals from which men were restricted, especially those pertaining to birth, marriage, and death. These events were closely linked to the more mysterious side of nature, outside the realm of the city. Women had “an alignment with the nonhuman” and “an association with the divine” (Goff 2004, 50). Perhaps this is why Just states that “the terrifying nightmare figures of Greek mythology — the Moirai, the Erinyes, Harpies, Graiai, Sirens, Skylla and Charybdis, Medusa and the Sphinx — and bodies of folklore, are, again, characteristically women” (Just 1991, 218). This idea appears in the *Agamemnon* when the chorus refers to Cassandra,

She's like a wild creature, fresh caught. She's mad,/her evil genius murmuring in her ears./She comes from a city fresh caught./She must learn to take the cutting bridle/before she foams her spirit off in blood... (Ag. 1063-7).

As a woman closer to the domestic world and influenced more by the crimes of against nature, Clytemnestra embodies inherently the chaotic vengeance the Erinyes govern.

However, Clytemnestra's actions as such left her open to revenge herself. The pollution of the House of Atreus continued. Agamemnon's curses hounded Orestes, and (as mentioned earlier) the House of Atreus was left in confusion. Aegisthus, whom the chorus insults as "You woman!" and "A coward to the life" (Ag. 1876, 1897), forces his way onto the throne with Clytemnestra beside him. He cannot rule; his femininity and cowardice cannot be accepted upon the throne of Argos. The House of Atreus is near dead, and Orestes and Electra are left in a state of suspension. Orestes, as son and heir, needs a father to help him make the transition from boyhood into citizenship. Zeitlin describes the process as "detaching the boy from his natal household and his maternal associations and retraining him for his social and political roles" (Zeitlin 1978, 170). Electra needs her father to marry her off; without a father she remains a virgin. The siblings must bring their house out of this confusion. This can only be achieved through their mother's death (Zeitlin 1978, 171). So then by necessity, Clytemnestra is killed. This brings about her own curses, and the Erinyes — associated with her — hunt after Orestes. They follow the smell of blood on his hands, as he is still defiled even though his deed was necessary. He is only absolved of this guilt when the trial clears him and Athena incorporates the Erinyes into Athens as the Eumenides. In the end, Clytemnestra's curses are blotted out and she is left forgotten.

Clytemnestra's transformation from an avenger into a murdered-and-forgotten woman resembles the "*pharmakos*^m complex" described by Bennett and Tyrrell. This concept develops when the community has been defiled by some act offensive to the gods — Bennett and Tyrrell write that "the Greek ritual concerns purification of miasma incurred by murder..." (Bennet and Tyrrell 1990, 239). They describe the process as "the *pharmakos* pattern [where] an innocent scapegoat is selected, the sins and guilt of the community put on his head, and the unfortunate creature, human in Ionian custom, driven abusively from the city" (Bennett and Tyrrell 1990, 238). A marginal member of the society is chosen and turned into a savior, a complete

reversal of roles. In the example that Bennett and Tyrrell give from Aristophanes' *Knights*, the Sausage Seller — a corrupt and base man — is transformed from his lowness into the savior of Demos' household while Paphlagon is expelled.

Clytemnestra's role is reversed when Orestes becomes the vindicated avenger. When Clytemnestra asks her son to list his father's wrongs as well, Orestes replies "Don't you dare judge him, he suffered, you sat at home" (*Ch.* 1048). He makes no mention of Clytemnestra's justification, and thus does not validate her claims. Iphigenia is only referred to in passing, as "cruelly slaughtered" but unnamed (*Ch.* 275). There is no mention that Agamemnon sacrificed her. The desecration of Troy and of the sacred virgin, Cassandra, are not brought up explicitly. Without these details, Orestes reinforces Clytemnestra's status as an adulteress, and Clytemnestra loses her place as mother. Clytemnestra tries to appeal to Orestes as his mother by baring her breast, but she is denied. When Clytemnestra's curse is dispelled at the trial, Athena manages to incorporate the Erinyes into the city as the Eumenides. This reversal reversal of the curse and its force is the reversal to which Bennett and Tyrrell refer. The miasma of murdering one's husband, which Apollo describes as unjust, and to allow it is to "spit on, treat as less than nothing,/ the solemn vows of Hera, the fulfiller,/ and of Zeus" (*Eum.* 237-9), Clytemnestra's adultery, and the perpetual childhood of Orestes and Electra are removed and blessings are brought into Athens. The Erinyes become the Eumenides in Athens. Athena describes the blessings they will bestow on the land,

Blessings that bring victory without dishonor,/ blessings that come from earth, and from the water/ of the sea, and from the sky that make the air/ across the land breathe out in sunlit breezes;/ blessings that make the earth's yield swell, and the thick/ herds grow more bountiful as time goes on/ and never fail my people. Their seed, too,/ you'll bless and protect, and may you favor most/ the purest among them, make them prosper most. (*Eum.* 1050-8).

While Clytemnestra tries to curse Orestes, it morphs from a force of harm intended to kill into a force of benefit to help Athens. As a result, Clytemnestra, once a mother and avenger, changes into a tyrant and is expelled from the city. She continued the pollution, which hurt the community, but now the Eumenides bring fruitfulness and blessing to Athens. Bennett and Tyrrell observe that "driving out pollution and welcoming in prosperity constitute the double signifieds of the *pharmakos*" (Bennett and Tyrrell 1990, 249).

While Clytemnestra's end and the Erinyes' fates in the plot do resemble the "*pharmakos* complex" described by Bennett and Tyrrell, it is unclear if Clytemnestra can certainly be called a *pharmakos*. What remains clear is that Clytemnestra is more than a victim of Athenian misogyny. Clytemnestra is a strong transgressive female character whose downfall reasserts the traditional Athenian patriarchy; however, there is more than that to her character development in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Agamemnon's crimes and the current pollution in the House of Atreus cause Clytemnestra to come forth as an avenger for the helpless victims. However, her own crimes leave her open to the same vicious cycle and the pollution is only relieved through Orestes' acquittal of her murder. She might have undergone the "*pharmakos* complex," but there is much more to the character of Aeschylus' Clytemnestra than has been readily accepted.

HECUBA

Few characters in Euripides' plays elicit as much pity and horror from modern audiences as Hecuba, the former queen of Troy. In the course of the play, she loses everything. Once she was a queen, but she is now a slave; once a mother, she loses all but one, who is then killed as well. Yet, modern readers cringe over what they see as the sheer brutality of her revenge against Polymestor, who killed her last son. With the murder of the last two of her children, many modern scholars, like Thalmann, Abrahamson, Keyser, Reckford, and Segal, are of the opinion that Hecuba just snaps; pressed down by so many sorrows, the death of her son Polydorus is the straw that breaks her sanity and the reason she becomes a vengeful monster. Her descent into brutality culminates in Polymestor's prophecy that Hecuba will turn into a fiery-eyed dog, drown, and leave behind a rock monument. Scholars agree that Hecuba is pitiful. They agree that Polymestor is guilty and deserves punishment, but also that Hecuba's orchestration of the murder of his two young sons is abhorrent. Polymestor's blinding is a bit too much for modern stomachs to accept as the acts of a sane person. This was not necessarily true for the play's original audience. In fact, contrary to modern revulsion, as Segal briefly suggests and Foley points out, Hecuba was justified in her revenge, and her final transformation symbolizes more than her degradation.

It is difficult for modern audiences not to cringe at Polymestor's punishment. His cries offstage are unsettling, but the figure that emerges from the tents is repulsive. Hecuba describes him as "a blind man reeling madly with blind steps" (Eur. *Hec.* 1051). Many compare the

man's fate to that of the monstrous cyclops Polyphemus. Polymestor describes himself as a rambling beast, "I support myself on my hands and feet/ crawling like a four-footed beast of the mountain" (*Hec.* 1058-9). He acts like one as well, which shows in his words, "Quiet! I sense the stealthy movement of women here./ Where should I rush to glut myself with their flesh and bones...?" (*Hec.* 1070-1). His two innocent children also evoke pity as Polymestor describes them, "torn limb from limb, and flung out on the mountain/ as a cruel and bloody banquet for the dogs" (*Hec.* 1077-8). The audience, influenced by the monstrosity of these acts and the pitiful image of Polymestor, begins to view Hecuba as less of a sympathetic woman and more of a debase, savage creature; Hecuba forms an image of brutality. Thalmann remarks that "the play reveals clearly the problem with revenge and revenge drama, that the avenger, no matter how deeply injured, no matter how defensible the cause, becomes in the act of revenge morally indistinguishable from the victim" (Thalmann 1993, 153). Abrahamson states that Hecuba "under the pressure of torture beyond endurance the sufferer becomes as bestial as the tormentors" (Abrahamson 1952, 121). Likewise, Keyser writes that Hecuba "is both victim of cruel circumstances and agent of similarly monstrous violence" (Keyser 2011, 114). Reckford also writes that "her passion for revenge...arises naturally enough from her grief and loneliness..." and will eventually lead to "her inward dehumanization" (Reckford 1991, 30). Segal claims that the play portrays "a corrupt society and brutalizing conditions deform even a noble nature, as the pitiable *mater dolorosa* becomes a monster of vengeful hatred" (Segal 1993, 158). Their words seem to echo that of the chorus in Hecuba, "Wretched man, the evils that have been inflicted on/ you are certainly hard to bear..." (*Hec.* 1083-4).

Yet, there is a second half to that sentence that denies pity for Polymestor and lends credence to the justice and sanity of Hecuba's actions, "but a man who has done/ shameful things must pay a terrible reckoning" (*Hec.* 184-5). Polymestor murdered Hecuba's son Polydorus, who was his guest-friend (ξένος or 'xenos,' plural 'xenoï'), for money. Polymestor violated the most sacred taboo in Greek culture and religion: the sacrosanctity of *xenoï*. He claims to have done this as a friend of the Greeks, for their benefit. However, Hecuba disproves this in the trial scene, Polymestor never touched Polydorus while the Trojans were winning nor did he share the wealth taken from the act with any Hellene. If Polymestor was indeed a friend of the Greeks, he would not have killed the Trojan prince during the war and/or sent the money to support the Greek forces. Finding her point valid,

Agamemnon rules in Hecuba's favor. The trial shows Polymestor not a true Greek ally, and therefore he is completely guilty (Foley 2001, 286). Polymestor's excuse for Polydorus' murder is,

I was afraid that if the boy were left alive as your enemy, he would rally Troy and colonize it again, and the Achaeans would realize that one of Priam's sons was still living and launch a new expedition against the Phrygians' land. Then they would plunder and lay waste these plains of Thrace, and we, the Trojans' neighbours, would suffer the misery which we endured a short while ago. (Hec. 1139-45).

He also says "I have suffered all this to further your interest — because I/ killed your enemy, Agamemnon" (Hec. 1176-7). Hecuba's response is eloquent and damning,

You claim that you killed my son to save the Achaeans from a second ordeal and to help Agamemnon. But...you monstrous wretch...what interest of Agamemnon's were you so keen to further? Were you planning to make a marriage alliance with some Greek? Or are you a relative of his?...Were they really going to sail here again and cut down the crops of your land? Whom do you think you will persuade of that? It was the gold that killed my son...the gold and your greed. For tell me this. How was it that when Troy prospered and our towering wall still embraced our city, when Priam was alive and Hector's spear triumphant, how was it that you did not kill the boy, or keep him alive and bring him with you to the Argives — that is if you had really wanted to do this man a favour?... But when we were no longer in the light and the smoke signaled that the city was in enemy hands, you killed the guest-friend who had come to your hearth...If you were a friend to the Achaeans, you ought to have taken the gold you are keeping, which you say is not your own but his, and given it to them...But you cannot bear to let it out of your hands even now. No, you still persist in keeping it in your house. (Hec. 1196-1224).

Agamemnon agrees with Hecuba, "I do not think that it was for my sake or indeed/ that of the Achaeans that you killed a man who was your/ guest-friend. No, you wanted to keep the gold in your house" (Hec. 1244-6). Agamemnon repeats the chorus' words before, "Since you/ have the hardiness to do ignoble deeds, you must put up/ with disagreeable treatment" (Hec. 1250-2).

Polymestor was guilty of a terrible crime, and his punishment was not necessarily unsettling to Euripides' audience. Yes, a man's line was destroyed, which justifies Clytemnestra's murder in the *Oresteia*.

True, the mutilation of the human body and the transformation of a man into pathetic beast were unsettling (Keyser 2011, 128). However, as noted before, Polymestor had done great crimes against *xenia*. Reckford describes him as “a man who has broken the most sacred ties of honor, decency, and guest-friendship” (Reckford 1991, 37). This violation went against the aforementioned unwritten laws.^{iv} Like the most hated of characters in our own media whose deaths are cheered no matter how bloody, it is quite possible that the Athenian audience in Euripides’ day wanted the villain to get his comeuppance. Also, the great epics, myths, and tragedies of the Greeks were quite bloody for vast portions. According to the ancient Greek culture that supported vengeance on a personal and universal scale, Polymestor was a great villain whose brutal violation of the unwritten laws justifies the brutality of his punishment.

Women take more religious roles in the polis, and are portrayed as defenders of tradition. This is apparent in Sophocles’ plays, especially in the *Antigone*, which depicts the defense of the unwritten laws regulating of burial as Antigone’s passionate concern. “Women are particularly vulnerable to chance and to abuse, and most dependent on traditions designed to protect the weak,” so it makes sense that this part of the population becomes associated with its defense (Foley 2001, 287-8). These *nomoi* became threatened in Euripides’ world of politics and war, and are corroded under the force of it (Foley 2001, 296).

Society itself in the *Hecuba* has become corrupt due to systematic violation of the unwritten laws. Besides Polymestor, there is the Greek army led into impiety by the demagogue Odysseus, who persuades the assembly of soldiers to sacrifice Polyxena. The chorus calls Odysseus “a ποικιλόφρων (131), shifty-minded, κόπις, ἡδυλόγος, δημοχαριστής (132), a prater, smooth-talking, people-flatterer” (Synodinou 1994, 194). He controls the people with flattery and smooth-talk, and it causes the chorus to “question the moral-political integrity of Odysseus” (Synodinou 1994, 194). When Polyxena’s death is recognized as “a brutal murder...[it] hints at the degeneration of democratic processes and of patriotic conventions employed by Odysseus” (Synodinou 1994, 189). He also violates the χάρις [gratitude] he owes to Hecuba, who saved his life in Troy. “Relations of reciprocity are transitive; by proposing to sacrifice Polyxena, Odysseus harms Hecuba and violates their relationship” (Rosenbloom 2010, 4-5). Odysseus argues that the sacrifice is necessary to reward Achilles, but does not conclusively justify human sacrifice. Rosenbloom notes that “If the war-dead demanded compensation such as Achilles’, chaos would ensue”

(Rosenbloom 2010, 5). Odysseus' argument does not convince the justification or his innocence. The guilt of the army as it returns from pillaged and defiled altars, as well as that of Odysseus threatens the entire moral order. Hecuba expresses this,

Well then, we are slaves and perhaps we are weak. But the goods and the principle of law that rules them are strong. It is because of this law that we believe in the gods and we can base our lives on a clear distinction between wrong and right. If you corrupt this when it is referred to you, and those who kill their guests and dare to violate what the gods hold sacred are not punished, nothing in our human life is safe. (Hec. 798-804).

Polymestor is obviously a cur, but the second jab “dare to violate what the gods hold sacred” is intended for the Greek army, the victors who trampled the sacred temples in Troy. The Achaeans and their leaders promote a corrupted world order.

The world of Hecuba has lost its fundamental *nomoi* and is corrupt to the core. Hecuba cannot act against Odysseus — as a slave, what power does she have to act against a king with an entire army behind him? However, she can act against Polymestor, at least with small help and in secret since Polymestor was a Thracian, not a Greek, and Agamemnon does not believe that he is a true ally to Hellas. This is why two children are taken from Polymestor — one for Polydorus, and one for Polyxena. Hecuba notes this explicitly in line 749, where (when referring to Agamemnon) she says, “I could not take revenge for my children without/ this man’s help.” (*Hecuba* 749-50); Hecuba says she is revenging *children*, not just *a* child.

The natural world seems to support Hecuba’s actions. Something is still holding back the winds so the fleet cannot sail on, and only after Hecuba’s revenge on Polymestor do the winds blow (Segal 1993, 221). This allows time to deconstruct, through horrific violence, a moral order with the sacrifice of Polyxena and the murder of Polydorus and then seemly reconstruct it once again through violence. The winds are stayed until order is balanced. Hecuba’s revenge needs to occur so that this impasse will end.

Many scholars argue over how to reconcile her transformation predicted by Polymestor if her deeds were justified and she does not represent an internal corruption. Abrahamson says that “the poor and tormented woman, having suffered the worst from enemy and friend alike, has become as they. Suffering has turned a pitiable human being into a ferocious animal” (Abrahamson 1952, 128). Segal also claims that Hecuba’s transformation shows her becoming a monster;

in contrast to Polyxena, Hecuba loses her inner nobility and this is reflected in her physical change (Segal 1993, 158, 161). Keyser discusses the significance of Hecuba's becoming a dog specifically. He argues that dogs were thought of by the Greeks as eaters of corpses and were connected "with the spirits of the dead, and often their vengeance" (Keyser 1997, 136).

While Keyser discusses this point as showing Hecuba's brutalization, there is a point that he does not emphasize enough. He shows that Hecuba's transformation is associated with the dead and their vengeance — a vengeance already proven as justified. He notes also that "the avenging Erinyes [were] conceived as canine in tragedy" (Keyser 1997, 136). The Erinyes in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* are "like a hound that can't/ stop sniffing out the bloodtrail" (Aes. *Eum.* 144-5). They constantly follow the smell of blood of those corrupted by the miasma of killing kin. Hecuba's final transformation, after her justified vengeance against Polymestor, fully connects her with those spirits of vengeance who are brutal yet necessary. It marks her withdrawal from the corrupting world and permanent position in the world of the *nomoi*.

Euripides' Hecuba does not represent the culmination of inner degradation in an increasingly corrupted world. The world around her is corrupted, and the unwritten laws of the world are in jeopardy. As a woman, she is closer tied to these laws because of the feminine connections to the natural world, and in turn avenges them. Polymestor meets his harsh fate as due recompense for his terrible crimes. Hecuba stands justified, and her actions fully connect her to the avenging Erinyes. Her predicted final transformation cements this. Despite what seems to modern audiences as a horrific outcome, Hecuba was not so monstrous. She was justified in her revenge, and her end represents more than a final culmination of dehumanization.

CONCLUSION

Aeschylus and Euripides instilled more in the characters of Clytemnestra and Hecuba than many scholars have thought. As figures standing on either sides of the Trojan War, Clytemnestra and Hecuba were constructed to represent a domestic response to violent male transgression against the unwritten laws. By policing these boundaries, Clytemnestra and Hecuba move beyond the surface of their mythical portrayal and became deeper characters embodying critique of a polis immersed in war and conquest.

Clytemnestra has often been seen as a figure of horror, a violent woman meant to be suppressed. Seeing her through the constructed prism of Athenian misogyny, she becomes the ultimate nightmare — the necessary, yet wild, wife, whose violence destroys those central to the polis. The anxiety towards women in fifth century BCE — how they were essential, but that their innate wildness endangered the legitimacy and lives of the men around them — comes to a climax with her crimes, adultery, her husband’s murder, and the near destruction of the House of Atreus. It is this interpretation seen in visual portrayals of Clytemnestra, whereas she wields her ax against men, which is a common symbol of her character at that time. However, Aeschylus in the *Oresteia* creates a Clytemnestra that is more than a monster. In the trilogy’s first play *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra stands triumphant in the end. Agamemnon had transgressed the moral boundaries of their world; the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the defilement of Troy’s altars, the countless of soldiers, and his impiety towards the gods are all acts of transgression. Clytemnestra also acts for the nameless children whose blood taints the halls of Atreus’ house. Her murder of Agamemnon is in response for crimes against the natural laws, and can be seen as justified. Her position as such is underlined with a connection to the Erinyes — those chaotic primordial forces of justice. Yet it is the state in which she leaves Atreus’ line which leads to her destruction. Orestes and Electra are stuck in a state between childhood and adulthood, and Orestes must seek revenge for his father. In the end, the gods choose rather to let Clytemnestra be forgotten than to let a man’s house fall. Her end may resemble the “*pharmakos* complex” described by Bennett and Tyrrell, but the matter requires further treatment. Still, Aeschylus’ Clytemnestra goes beyond the portrait of a monster on vases and in the scholarly canon.

Hecuba is cited as an example of degradation — the victim pushed to the breaking point. She becomes an admittedly pitiful monster and is damned as such. This pitiful Hecuba appears on vase paintings, as she mourns and pleads for her loved ones. However, Euripides’ character is more than a product of inward corruption caused by torture and tumult. Hecuba, like Clytemnestra, becomes an avenger for those who cannot speak and a punisher for the wrongs against natural laws. As a slave, she cannot punish the wrongs of the Achaeans and Odysseus — their desecration of Troy and Odysseus’ broken χάρις — but she can act against the completely damnable Polymestor. Her acts against him are violent, but deserved. Her expected fate as a dog is representative less of her inward degradation but instead of a connection to the Erinyes — the hounds that forever

follow the *miasma* of human blood and crime. Euripides' Hecuba is not a pitiful victim broken down until she is less than human, but instead an avenger who aligns herself less with the world of men than with the primordial world of the Erinyes.

Both women represent a critique of the world in which the playwrights lived. Both Aeschylus and Euripides knew the price of conquest and they had seen it in Athens — Aeschylus saw the price of men that Athens paid pressing itself into conquest and the beginnings of the first outbreaks of the First Peloponnesian War by the time he wrote the *Oresteia* and Euripides wrote *Hecuba* during the great Peloponnesian War. Clytemnestra and Hecuba are artistic critiques of that conquest; they represent the damage and response that male aggression can cause — especially since conquest tended to lead to transgression of the natural laws. With Clytemnestra and Hecuba, Aeschylus and Euripides showed that these were not actions that went without consequence.

As literary constructions used to critique the world of the playwrights, Clytemnestra in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and Hecuba in Euripides' *Hecuba* emerge as more than interpretations of misogyny. Clytemnestra is not just a villain brought down to assert male dominance. Hecuba is not a weak female victim reduced to something less than human. In these plays, Clytemnestra and Hecuba became greater than their portrayals on contemporary pottery. They are avengers, policing boundaries that should not be transgressed. They represent agents of the natural laws, and the consequences of breaking them.

ENDNOTES

- i. “Unwritten laws” as I refer to them embody the set of religious, moral, and cultural code of the ancient Greeks; a set of right and wrongs that seemed innate and unbreakable. These dealt with such things as guest-host relations, the marriage bed, human sacrifice, etc.
- ii. An *agalma* refers to an object or possession of such inherent value that is lost once someone tries to put a price on it. It is meant to be priceless.
- iii. A *pharmakos* is the Greek “scapegoat.” It is a person who is sacrificed or exiled by the community “to save its own skin” (Bremmer, 1983, 300). They were marginal members of the society not necessary to its survival and were made out to seem more important than they really were — typically noble men, young virgins, etc. in myth. For more, see Bremmer (1983).
- iv. See note i above.

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