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Motherhood in Greek Tragedy: Licence to Kill

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Introduction

In tragedy women are often put in a conflict against men on an *oikos* as opposed to *polis* basis.¹ This clearly indicates the collision of two worlds; the male of duty that resides in the *polis* sphere and the female of feelings and family that resides in the *oikos* sphere. Surprisingly, women in Greek tragedy often become active and powerful and exit their *oikos* when called to defend family values and bonds.

This paper discusses motherhood, in specific, as one of the determining forces in women's behaviour in tragedy and, often, as the motivating power behind their actions. Motherhood is time and again related to the women of tragedy who turn into criminals and to some extent it renders their unconventional behaviour acceptable. Thus, it often gives women the licence to exceed the limitations applying to their sex. There are

occasions when a mother commits murder to revenge the death of her child, as, for example, Klytaimnestra and Hekabe do.² Alternatively, a mother can use her motherhood to take vengeance against her husband, as in the case of Medeia. There are cases when a mother has failed in her role: Agave kills her own son unknowingly and Iokaste becomes her son's wife. In extreme cases the mother kills herself after her motherhood has ended or failed (Eurydike³ and Iokaste).⁴ Notably, several of the women mentioned above first acquire a voice, even when they do not speak a word as in the case of Eurydike, only when their motherhood is threatened in one way or another.

We believe that the figure of Klytaimnestra is worth closer examination at this point: this paper will focus on the example of the mother of Iphigeneia and the wife and murderer of Agamemnon to make its point concerning motherhood as a driving force for women's actions, as a murder motive and as an excuse. In doing so, we must first explain the innovation and the dynamics that Aischylos brought to this character in his play *Agamemnon*: Klytaimnestra, a figure reshaped by Aischylos for the needs of his *Oresteia*, was previously a woman who had only a secondary role in the killing of her husband, and was driven to this act by her passion for her lover.⁵ In tradition she was the weak accomplice of Aigisthos, and the treacherous wife of Agamemnon, but in Aischylos she became the strong and determined principal avenger of her daughter's death, with Aigisthos now featuring only as a weak and feminised⁶ accomplice by her side. Notably, Klytaimnestra becomes the colossal figure of the *Oresteia* exactly because her motherhood enters the story and drives her horrible actions. Aischylos' treatment of the *Oresteia* myth had a huge impact on subsequent literature and art in general up until today.

The case of Klytaimnestra

In the sources predating Aischylos the story was already rich, with a wealth of characters and details. Usually the two accomplices, Aigisthos and Klytaimnestra, are joint partners in the murder of Agamemnon and more often than not the death of Aigisthos is the climax of Orestes' revenge.⁷ In tradition the motive of Klytaimnestra is usually her adultery and her thirst for power – until we come across a poem of Pindar. It is his version which links the murder to the sacrifice of Iphigeneia for the first time, as far as we know (*P.* 11.22-6). The brevity of the reference to Klytaimnestra, however, might imply the familiarity of the audience with this specific version.⁸

Apparently, when Aischylos decides to write a trilogy on the story in 458 B.C. the story already exists; he gives it, however, a decisive turn: not only is Klytaimnestra placed in the foreground of the killing but she is even transformed into a colossal figure, contrary to any other attested version in the history of this myth. She becomes the main murderer, presented with male characteristics, and Aigisthos is simply her weak and feminised accomplice. Her motive is plainly related to the death of Iphigeneia, whose salvation is silenced in the *parodos* of the *Agamemnon* (cf. *A.* 248). There, the story of the girl's sacrifice is presented as a past event, with additional references being made throughout the play. Iphigeneia is not saved in the *Oresteia of Aischylos*, and her death is clearly used by the poet as part of her mother's motivation to kill her husband. Klytaimnestra is retrospectively harsh with her husband and very critical of his choices (ll. 1414-20); what is more, she is clear about the reason of her revenge in two passages.

A. 1525-9:

ἀλλ' ἐμὸν ἐκ τοῦδ' ἔρνος ἀερθὲν
τὴν πολυκλαύτην
Ἴφιγένειαν ἀνάξια δράσας
ἄξια πάσχων μηδὲν ἐν Ἄιδου
μεγαλαυχίῳ, ξιφοδηλήτῳ
θανάτῳ τείσας ἄπερ ἦρξεν.⁹

A. 1551-9:

οὐ σὲ προσήκει τὸ μέλημ' ἀλέγειν
τοῦτο ἔπος πρὸς ἡμῶν
κάπεσε κάτθανε, καὶ καταθάψομεν,
οὐχ ὑπὸ κλαυθμῶν τῶν ἐξ οἴκων,
ἀλλ' Ἴφιγένειά νιν ἀσπασίως
θυγάτηρ, ὡς χρή,
πατέρ' ἀντίσασα πρὸς ὠκύπορον
πόρθμευμ' ἀχέων
περιχεῖρα βλοῦσα φιλήσει.¹⁰

Furthermore, it is Klytaimnestra's death which becomes the peak of the action in the *Choephoroi* and the matricide is central to the trilogy as a whole. Apparently Aischylos has chosen between versions and selected one which places emphasis firmly on Klytaimnestra. Apart from allowing him one of his greatest character creations, his choice is also used as the basis for an explicit -and extensive- major theme running through the trilogy and culminating in the trial scene in the *Eumenides*: gender inversion. So the change is of strategic importance. Aischylos' use of

Klytaimnestra was, in short, one of the main innovations that re-invented a story well-known at the time.

Part of the success of the *Oresteia* has to do with the creation or clearer presentation of the deeper emotions that lead to the characters' actions. For example, Klytaimnestra's maternal feelings are of crucial importance in the plot of the trilogy because she takes action driven by them. Agamemnon's paternal feelings are also vital to the trilogy, exactly because he fails in them. Orestes' different feelings for each of his parents drive his actions throughout the trilogy. Thus the opposition between *polis* and *oikos* that we have already discussed would also be applicable in the case of Iphigeneia's sacrifice. The general Agamemnon, seen through the prism of fifth-century Athens, would have to serve the *polis*. Klytaimnestra, on the other hand, according to the expected female orientation, would have to serve her *oikos*, its values and the well-being of her family.

Reception of the Oresteia

The reception of the *Oresteia* by Sophokles and Euripides has already been discussed extensively by modern researchers.¹¹ This section is only meant to bring up, in brief, elements found in these discussions. The general outline of the plot of Sophokles' *Elektra*¹² is not that different from the Aischylean *Choephoroi*. Unlike what happens in Aischylos, in Sophokles the motive of Klytaimnestra is never related to Iphigeneia's death, she and Aigisthos are joint partners in the crime, Klytaimnestra is killed first – so that the matricide is not the climax of the revenge - and Sophocles does not replicate Aischylos' intense concern for the moral issues raised by the matricide.¹³

Euripides' *Elektra*¹⁴ is a play similar in certain aspects to the *Choephoroi* of Aischylos: there is the recognition of Elektra and Orestes that leads to the preparation of their revenge, the murder of Klytaimnestra is the climax of the play, and the Furies pursue Orestes raising the moral question of matricide. However, it is Elektra who has the dominant role in the play. It is important to note that Klytaimnestra is sympathetic to some extent because she is allowed maternal feelings both for Orestes and for Elektra.¹⁵ In other cases her feelings for her murdered child override her feelings for her other children.

In *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, a posthumously produced play of Euripides, put on stage by his son in 405 B.C., Klytaimnestra comes to Aulis accompanying her daughter and offers another viewpoint of what is about to happen. Hers is a more sentimental approach in accordance with family values and maternal feelings. This is the only securely attested case that we have for a reaction of Klytaimnestra at the actual time of the sacrifice, pointing to a collision between the two parents,¹⁶ even though it is the salvation version that is followed.¹⁷ Klytaimnestra is presented as a strong woman, albeit incapable of saving her daughter, and she defends her child with a speech on family values. Her female defence is put on in ll. 1146-1208.¹⁸ Lines 1171-83 are prophetic of the criminal act of Klytaimnestra that is to follow, and foretell what, to her, would be its justification.¹⁹

Concluding on the ancient perceptions of the heroine

The innovation of Aischylos in the treatment of the *Oresteia* myth was both extensive and critically important for future representations. The tragedian magnified the conflict between Klytaimnestra and Agamemnon by making her stronger, and

therefore a more than apt opponent of the king. He pushed Aigisthos aside and brought forth a neglected motivation of Klytāimnestra that added to the tension of the story: the death of her daughter. This made her the victim of Agamemnon, it explained her anger and passion for revenge more adequately than adultery or the thirst for power ever could and, as a result, complicated things considerably.²⁰ Aischylos' version, both more intense than ever attested before as well as contemporary, won him the first victory of the 458 B.C. dramatic contest (*Agamemnon argumentumMGFV /TrGF iii testimonium Gh65a.2-3*).²¹ The trilogy had a huge impact on the reception of the story thereafter and the perception of the main characters. It still has a huge impact today and it remains a widely spread story.

Klytāimnestra in modern days: Some examples

The question arising when examining cases of reception of the story of Klytāimnestra has been one of identifying the motive for her actions and the extent of her guilt in modern societies and modern times. Is she the main murderer? Do modern versions follow the innovation of Aischylos that renders her actions justifiable or not? Actually one comes across both readings of her action. Sometimes the death of Iphigeneia is subtly but not clearly related to the murder of Agamemnon. Let's start with two paintings: (PICTURE 1) 1. Guérin, Pierre-Narcisse (1774-1833)

Klytāimnestra hesitates before killing the sleeping Agamemnon.

(PICTURE 2) 2. John Maler Collier (1850–1934), *Klytāimnestra after the murder*, 1882

In both cases she is the murderess. Whether hesitant or decisive, proud and cruel after the deed, it is always her.

An important Greek poet, Odysseus Elytis, the winner of the Nobel prize for Literature in 1979, wrote a poem entitled *Agamemnon*, which became well known when it was turned into a song by a famous Greek singer, Eleftheria Arvanitaki.

The poem reads:

Αγαμέμνων

Γρήγορα που σκοτεινιάζει, φθινοπώριασε,
Δεν αντέχω τους ανθρώπους άλλο, χώρια εσέ.
Που μιλάς και η νύχτα κλαίει σαν το σκύλο σου
Προδομένος απομένει ποιος; ο φίλος σου.

Αγαμέμνων Αγαμέμνων άμοιρε που σου
που σου `μελλε να το βρεις απ' τη γυναίκα σου.
Και το ένα σου Αγαμέμνων και το δέκα σου
θα μετράει στα δάχτυλά της η γυναίκα σου.

Άσ' τον άνεμο να λέει άσ' τον να φυσά
κάποιος θα `ναι ο Αγαμέμνων κάποια η φόνισσα.
Κάποτε κι εσύ θα φτάσεις ποιος ο νικητής;
αλλά βασιλιάς μιας χώρας ακατοίκητης

Αγαμέμνων Αγαμέμνων άμοιρε που σου
που σου `μελλε να το βρεις απ' τη γυναίκα σου.
Και το ένα σου Αγαμέμνων και το δέκα σου
θα μετράει στα δάχτυλά της η γυναίκα σου.²²

There is talk of betrayal but not clearly related to Iphigeneia, whilst Klytaimnestra is called a murderess (*φόνισσα*), a rather harsh choice of word.

(PICTURE 3) In the 1962 film *Electra* of Michalis Kakogiannis, based on the play of Euripides, the opening scene presents Klytaimnestra and Aigisthos killing Agamemnon,

as joint accomplices. They are shown as cruel but there is no reference to Iphigeneia whatsoever: no excuses allowed. Such a scene of course is never included in the original play of Euripides.

What happens though when the motive of the murder is related to the sacrifice of Iphigeneia? A completely different story emerges... The 2012 production of a play titled *Klytaimnestra* by the playwright Gwyneth Lewis was presented only few months ago in Cardiff. (PICTURE 4) In a *Guardian* interview (16.4.2012)²³ the playwright notes: “*Imagine that your husband is away at war, and imagine hearing that he has allowed your daughter to be killed in order to further his strategic interests. Far from being the manic man-woman of the Oresteia, I wanted to show a Clytemnestra who was grieving and unable to cope.*” A complete ‘non guilty’ verdict is offered by Lewis, as *Klytaimnestra* speaks lines such as “No man should come between a mother and her daughter” and “Who'll speak for the dead girls if I don't?”

Our next example comes from a famous choreographer and dancer of the sixties. When Martha Graham's *Clytemnestra* premiered in 1958 it became an instant hit, so it's no surprise that a 2008 revival followed. (PICTURE 5) In 2008, another famous dancer, Fang-Yi Sheu acts as *Klytaimnestra*. In her solo, *Klytaimnestra* anticipates murdering her husband in what is known as the knife-dance. What is interesting about Graham's *Klytaimnestra* apart from its success is the implication of the act as the result of the pain for Iphigeneia. This is made more evident in a cinematic adaptation inspired by Martha Graham's "*Clytemnestra*", which delves into the motives and pre-meditation of a woman on the verge of committing a heinous crime. It features contemporary dancer, Myra Beltran, in a Manila closer to Graham's time. It is known as the ‘Manila 1958

Clytemnestra'. The empty swing explains the pain that informs the action. (PICTURE 6)

We now turn to Rhian Samuel's 'Clytemnestra' (Mvt 6: Defiance). Rhian Samuel was born to a Welsh-speaking family in Aberdare, Wales, in 1944. She has written a great deal of vocal music, including *Klytaimnestra* (after Aeschylus), for soprano and full orchestra, commissioned by the BBC in 1994 (PICTURE 7). In this work for soprano and full orchestra, Aeschylus's words are taken as the basis for the portrayal of a mother whose daughter has been murdered by her husband, Agamemnon. And for that *Klytaimnestra* takes revenge. In Movement 6, she has just killed him, and asks to be treated justly.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed motherhood, in specific, as one of the determining forces in women's behaviour in tragedy and, often, as the motivating power behind their actions, and it has argued that motherhood is time and again related to the women of tragedy who turn into criminals and to some extent renders their unconventional behaviour acceptable. *Klytaimnestra* has been our main example: A figure who had been reshaped by Aeschylus for the needs of his *Oresteia*, was previously a woman with only a secondary role in the killing of her husband, and was driven to this act by her passion for her lover. It is in Aeschylus that she first became the strong and determined principal avenger of her daughter's death. Notably, *Klytaimnestra* becomes the colossal figure of the *Oresteia* exactly because her motherhood enters the story and drives her horrible actions. Aeschylus' treatment of the *Oresteia* myth had a huge impact on subsequent literature and art in general up until today. Through the ages her more

recent receptions are still influenced by the extenuation of doubt that Aischylos first offered her. As one of the modern adaptations of the play has put it: “No man should come between a mother and her daughter”.

¹Goldhill, S., *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 1986) 114; Zeitlin, F.I., “Playing the other: theatre, theatricality and the feminine in Greek drama”, in *Nothing to Do with Dionysus?* Ed. Winkler, J.J., and Zeitlin, F.I., (Princeton, 1990) 76; Easterling, P.E., “Women in tragic space” *BICS* 34 (1987), 22; Foley, H.P., “The conception of women in Athenian drama”, in *Reflections of Women in Antiquity*. Ed. Foley, H.P., (New York, 1981) 161. Foley notes, however, that this should not be seen as a simple equation, *oikos* (female)-*polis* (male), but as a more complex model.

²Loreaux, N., *Mothers in Mourning*, trans. Pache, C., (Ithaca/London, 1998) 41; 54-6, suggests that grief over the loss of a child sometimes becomes wrath and action.

³ According to Easterling *Women*, 22, Eurydike, who is presented as an ideal wife of the conventional type, behaves in the way the unconventional women of tragedy would, when she commits suicide and curses Kreon, her husband, as she dies.

⁴ In addition, mothers of dead children are repeatedly put on stage to lament the death, or imminent death, of their offspring (the Persian queen, Niobe, Europe, Eos, Thetis) and this suggests that the Athenian audience was moved by the image, and, apparently, by the emotional bond between mother and child. They would probably sympathise with the tragedy of a mother led not only to extreme lamentation, but sometimes to murder or suicide because of the death of her child.

⁵Denniston, J.D., *Euripides, Electra* (Oxford, 1939 [1968]) 9 (intro.), suggests that her role is subordinate to that of Aigisthos until Aischylos' *Oresteia*; March, J., *The Creative Poet, BICS Suppl.* 49 (1987) 84-5.

⁶ See A. A. 1625-7, where the members of the chorus address him as γόναι. For indications that the old men of the chorus are also presented feminised to some extent, thus leaving Klytaimnestra as the only character with strong masculine characteristics, see MacClure, L., *Spoken Like a Woman* (Princeton, 1999) 98-9.

⁷Cf. Bernabé, A., *Poetae Epici Graeci [PEG]* (Leipzig, 1987) *Nostoiargumentum* 17-9; Hesiod *Katalogos* fr. 23a.27-30 MW; *Odyssey* 3.309-10. See furthermore Kamerbeek, J.C., *The Plays of Sophocles, Electra* (Leiden, 1974) 1; March, *Creative*, 84-86 and March, J., *Sophocles, Electra* (Warminster, 2001) 2; Garvie, A.F., *Aeschylus, Choephoroi* (Oxford 1986 [1988]) 9-10 (intro.): in Homer the story is briefly but repeatedly used as a paradigm which, depending on the speaker and the listener, is accordingly transformed: on occasion Klytaimnestra is isolated as the killer of Agamemnon to serve as a contrast to Penelope.

⁸March, *Creative*, 91; 97-8. March suggests that another version intervened between Stesichoros and Pindar that brought Klytaimnestra and the sacrifice of Iphigeneia to the foreground of the action; in her view this would be Simonides (Page, D.L., *Poetae Melici Graeci [PMG]* (Oxford, 1962).

549; 608 fr.I (a) + 2). There is no secure evidence, though.

⁹*I deem not that the death he died*

Had overmuch of shame:

For this was he who did provide

Foul wrong unto his house and name:

His daughter, blossom of my womb,

*He gave unto a deadly doom,
Iphigenia, child of tears!
And as he wrought, even so he fares.
Nor be his vaunt too loud in hell;
For by the sword his sin he wrought,
And by the sword himself is brought
Among the dead to dwell.*

¹⁰*Peace! for such task is none of thine
By me he fell, by me he died,
And now his burial rites be mine!
Yet from these halls no mourners' train
Shall celebrate his obsequies;
Only by Acheron's rolling tide
His child shall spring unto his side,
And in a daughter's loving wise
Shall clasp and kiss him once again!*

¹¹See especially March, *Creative*, 81-118 and March, *Electra* 1-11; Garvie, *Choephoroi*, 9-26 (intro.).

¹² Note that the date of the play by Sophokles is unclear, as is the date of the homonymous play of Euripides. It is widely believed, however, that Sophokles probably wrote his play after Euripides wrote his *Elektra*; Sophokles' *Elektra* is considered to be one of the late plays of the poet. March, *Electra*, 22, dates the play to 413-10; Kamerbeek, *The Plays*, 6, dates the play between 425-409, closer to the latter.

¹³March, *Creative*, 104; 115.

¹⁴ Euripides' *Elektra* is usually dated on stylistic details to 422-16 B.C. The older suggestion for 413 B.C by Denniston, *Elektra*, 33 (intro.) is no longer considered probable. Kamerbeek, *The Plays*, 6; March, *Elektra*, 6, suggest 422-16 B.C.

¹⁵ The trial of Orestes is included in another play, the *Orestes*, and there it is treated differently than in the *Eumenides*, though with clear allusions to it.

¹⁶Luschnig, C.A.E., *Tragic Aporia: A Study of Euripides' Iphigeneia in Aulis*, Ramus Monographs 3 (1988), 112. As Luschnig notes, the arrival of Klytaimnestra, Iphigeneia and Orestes in the *IA* transforms the camp into home. In this way, the collision of two distinct perspectives on the imminent sacrifice by two different worlds, the military and the familial, becomes readily discernible; so too the reasons for or against the occurrence of the sacrifice.

¹⁷ The *IA* does not necessarily have implications for the connection of the death version with the maternal opposition to the sacrifice, because of its late dating. The death of the girl was already allowed as a possibility, and Euripides could have used the opposition of Klytaimnestra to create the expectation that he would follow the death and not the salvation version.

¹⁸ See Synodinou, K., "Clytaemnestra in the *Iphigeneia at Aulis* of Euripides: from submission to revolt", *Dodone* 14 (1985) 64, for the view that Klytaimnestra, who comes to Aulis with the conventional virtues of a wife, turns into a person in revolt; Alsina, J., "Observaciones sobre la figura de Clitemestra", *Emerita* 27 (1959), 318.

¹⁹ The chorus of women from Chalkis, who in general have a moderate reaction in the play, add their voice to hers against the male perspective of Agamemnon in lines 1209-10, in their attempt to persuade the king that he would not be reproached if he was to save his child: πῖθῶ τὸ γάρ τοι τέκνα συσσώζειν καλόν, / Ἀγάμεμνον ὀυδεὶς πρὸς τᾶδ'

ἀντερῆ βροτῶν. Moreover, in lines 917-8 it is clear that the female chorus sides with Klytaimnestra and with the female-maternal perspective of things: δεινὸν τὸ τί κτεῖν καὶ φέρει φίλτρον μέγα, / πᾶσιν τε κοινὸν ἐσθ' ὑπερκάμνειν τέκνων.

²⁰Moreover, Aischylos presented the question of the matricide as unsolvable by traditional epic or human means and eventually employed an Athenian institution (the Areopagos), along with divine intervention, to attempt a solution.

²¹Radt, S *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta* Volume 3 [*TrGF*], (Göttingen, 1985).

²²*It is already getting darker. It's autumn time*

I don't stand people any longer. You also

While you are talking, night laments like your dog

Betrayed stands alone – who? your friend

Agamemnon Agamemnon, person with no fate –

It was meant to be done to you by your wife

Let the wind blow, let it blow wild

There will always be an Agamemnon and a murderess

One day you too will victoriously arrive-a winner,

but only as king of an inhabited land

Both your beginning and end, oh Agamemnon,

Will depend on your wife's will.

²³ [http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2012/apr/16/clytemnestra-makeover-gwyneth-](http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2012/apr/16/clytemnestra-makeover-gwyneth-lewis)

lewis