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Social Mores in Greek Mythology

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Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* is one of the most famous works from ancient Greece. The character Cassandra from the first part of *The Oresteia*, Agamemnon, was famous throughout Greek and could often been seen depicted on vases, amphoras or jars, and frescos throughout Greece. The Metropolitan Museum of art has multiple neck amphoras depicting Cassandra’s capture from the temple at Troy. One of Cassandra’s most famous depictions is a Roman fresco of her kidnapping where Ajax and another warrior, presumably Odysseus, can be seen tearing her from the statue of Athena that is deliberately looking away from Cassandra.

Cassandra refuses to have a child with Apollo, which in her time would have been a great honor to her, and because she was so desirable, brings honor to Apollo as well. “I yielded, then at the climax I recoiled – I deceived Apollo!” (Aeschylus 151). Apollo punishes Cassandra for her dishonestly by making people perceive her as dishonest, no one will ever believe her prophecies even though they are accurate. Athena ignoring her pleas for help at Troy is also a form of justice in solidarity with Apollo although the ones who take her are also thoroughly punished. The inclusion of Cassandra in *The Oresteia* is an interesting choice, she is one of the main focuses of the first part, Agamemnon, however she is disconnected from the rest of the character in the convoluted family. Apollo was also an interesting inclusion since he is not a regional god in Athens or the surrounding area.

Cassandra’s myth revolves around a system of societal norms, morals, and the punishment for breaking any of the unspoken rules set by those norms and morals. Dike, sanctioned divine justice, is enacted on Cassandra and those that remove her from Athena’s temple. The logic for this punishment follows nomos, life lesson that every Greek should know, such as do not disrespect of reject the gods. Themis, divine justice often predetermined by fate and prophecy, also plays a large part in Cassandra’s story. These three social mores are shown throughoutAeschylus’s *The Oresteia,* and in Greek neck amphoras and Roman frescos depicting Cassandra.

Dike plays an important part in many famous Greek myths as the most powerful punishments either create heroes or becomes warning that teaches nomos. In the neck amphora and the Roman fresco Ajax can be seen dragging Cassandra off a statue of Athena. While Athena does ignore the pleas of Cassandra, the warrior’s actions are still disrespectful, and Athena earns the right to punish him, dike. In the Odessey, Odysseus is punished for removing Cassandra from Athena’s temple and killing the cyclops, but he survives to tell his stories and becomes a hero.

Nomos is directly connected to dike, gods generally punish people who break the unwritten rules, and the myths of punishment become warning against breaking said rules. Tantalus, the great grandfather of Agamemnon, is severely punished and becomes an educational tale that teaches the nomos that cannibalism is not acceptable. Tantalus’s descendants Atreus and Thystes do not learn this nomos and end up perpetuating the cursed fate of their family line with more cannibalism. Cassandra’s myth teaches two things, do not go back on you word and, what was unfortunately the norm in ancient Greece, be honored to sleep with someone powerful even if you are unwilling. This reinforces the nomos of male power and women as child-bearers that was common in the ancient Greek world.

*The Oresteia* shows how Cassandra’s cursed gift of prophecy gives her insight into themis. Her ties to fate and prophecy also connect her to Agamemnon’s cursed family. Agamemnon’s family has been tied to dark prophecies and fates even before the death of Iphigenia. Before her death at the hands of Clytemnestra, Cassandra sees the divine justice that it coming to them. “The house that hates god…slaughterhouse of heroes, soil streaming with blood” (Aeschylus 145). The idea of themis is very contradictory and intertwined with moira or fate. Breaking tradition leads to divine punishment which leads people to their fates, however, keeping with tradition means people are exhibiting free will. Cassandra is killed by Clytemnestra because Agamenon brings her back from Troy and because it is her fate, a fate that stared when she broke the tradition of submitting to the gods.

The social mores of themis, dike, and nomos are all deeply intertwined, and the myth of Cassandra is a prime example of their effects. Cassandra is included in *The Oresteia* to remind the audience that there are punishments for breaking the unspoken mores. The inclusion of Apollo emphasizes the importance of fate and prophecy however his interaction with Cassandra also reinforces the idea of male power. Cassandra has ties to Apollo through her prophetic powers and ties to Athena as her priestess before Troy got sacked.

While Cassandra’s myth is a famous one, it is often passed over for ones that are more easily translated into modern terms. Because Cassandra’s fate is so heavily tied to the sexual relations and rape it is hard to modernize it when we currently have a much different view on those ideas. The myth of Cassandra teaches us many things about the ancient Greek world and their culture as well as reflecting on human behavior and social structure.

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*I did not use artificial intelligence in creating this paper.*