

CLYTEMNESTRA AND THE WOMEN:
How Clytemnestra challenges the gender
norms of Homeric literature.

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In Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, the character of Clytemnestra consistently confronts the gender-norms of Homeric literature. Her man-like behaviour is noted by the townsmen of Argos, and eventually culminates in the slaying of her husband Agamemnon, on his return back from Troy. Clytemnestra's remorseless speech and audacious actions is contrasted with the meek deliberations of the Argive townsmen, who falter at the screams of their king. This essay seeks to examine how Clytemnestra's pursuit of justice requires a subversion of her role as a woman in the norms of Homeric literature, and how by righting the sacrifice of Iphigenia through the mete of blood, Clytemnestra acts in the role of the (male) Homeric hero instead.

In order to begin an examination of Clytemnestra, and how her actions challenge the gender-norms of Homeric literature, it is important to have an clear understanding of what these norms are in the first place. A gender norm is a set of behaviours and attitudes considered appropriate or acceptable for a given gender. Such norms naturally differ throughout history and culture, and it would be anachronistic for modern-day gender-norms to be used as a baseline of comparison. Likewise, it would be fallacious for one to speak about the gender norms of “Ancient Greece” — for as Herodotus can attest, the cultures of the Mediterranean are diverse and heterogenous. This is why, the distinction of “Homeric literature” is made. For *Agamemnon* is a play set within the framing context of Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* — stories from the proverbial ‘Age of Heroes’. Therefore, by examining *Agamemnon*, as well as the *Iliad* and the *Odyessy*, we can establish a baseline of what these norms are — as well as how Clytemnestra breaks them in *Agamemnon*.

The role of women is secondary to that of men, in the gender-norms of Homeric literature. Passivity and deference are the norm, and outside of the rancour of the Gods, we see no examples of female assertiveness, in the world of Homer. Beginning with the *Iliad*, the ‘Rage of Achilles’ opens with the ransoming of Chryseis, and the subsequent confiscation of Briseis from Achilles. The treatment of Briseis and Chryseis shows that (at least within the scope of the Trojan War,) women are often little more than objects — captives, or the spoils of war. One may argue that the demeanour of Briseis and Chryseis is explained by

the fact that they are slaves, but even Helen — a queen in her own right, acts in relative passivity. Although she protests the cowardice of Paris in Book III line 510, she submits without a word to the replies of Paris.

Likewise, in the *Agamemnon*, we see a similar portrayal of the inferior role of women. Most noteworthy is the time when the Chorus, the Argive townsmen pay their visit to Clytemnestra, and say:

We've come, Clytemnestra. We respect your power.

Right is it to honour the warlord's woman,

once he leaves the throne.

(Aeschylus 258)

Furthermore, during the interval when the townsmen of Argos wait for the arrival of the Herald, we are treated with a display of contempt and incredulity at the word of Clytemnestra. And it is clearly said, that these sentiments are attributed to the fact that she is a woman, as opposed to the novelty of her system of fire relays, or anything else:

— Just like a woman

to fill with thanks before the truth is clear.

— So guillible. Their stories spread like wildfire, they fly fast and die

faster;

rumours voiced by women come to nothing.

(Aeschylus 470)

1 Bibliography

Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*. Trans. Robert Fagles. Introd. W.B. Stanford. New York, U.S.A: Penguin Group, 1990. Print.

Homer. *The Iliad*. Trans. Robert Fagles. Introd. Bernard Knox. New York, U.S.A: Penguin Group, 1990. Print.