

Aneesh Chattaraj- 826860

Take Home Assessment

# Are myths of female murderers simply about gender roles?

Aristotle stated, “The male is by nature superior, and the female inferior, the male ruler and the female subject” in his work *Politics*<sup>1</sup>. Throughout ancient history, the role of women in each culture and society has varied. Gender roles have gone through much changes throughout human history and are continuing to evolve in the modern era. Ancient Greece and Rome have strong and influential goddesses in positions of power, yet they are considered a patriarchal society. A lot of the information we gain about the role of women living in these archaic societies is deduced from the works of epic poets like Homer, Hesiod, Virgil and Ovid, to name a few. Gender Inequality and gender roles of ancient societies have been a topic of many pieces of research and debates; some of them have regarded women’s position as demeaned while others have given a different interpretation<sup>2</sup>. The question arises if myths of female murderers in mythology simply about gender roles since, in ancient Greek society, murder was not commonly associated with women.

Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides are the three most acclaimed Greek tragedians whose works have survived. Their plays contain complex female characters who were acted by men and composed mainly for a male audience<sup>3</sup>. Women of patrician rank are shown to display destructive behaviour when they are subjected to negative instances in their life, maybe instigating that they are less capable than men. In Aeschylus’s tragedy, *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra murders her husband Agamemnon on his return to the city. Agamemnon has been at war in Troy for around ten years; he sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia to the goddess Diana to win the war and also on his return brings back Cassandra, daughter of Priam and who was granted the power of prophecy

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<sup>1</sup> (Jowett 1999)

<sup>2</sup> (Katz 1992)

<sup>3</sup> (Discussed in seminar 11 when talking about plays)

by Apollo, as a prize of winning the war. These underlying themes of the play suggest Clytemnestra as a villain because she murdered her husband, a hero and a victim because she lost her daughter and later avenged her death. Clytemnestra is suggested to be the living manifestation of her daughter's revenge; this has been analysed from her speeches where she states "But even if, without having offended the gods, our troops should reach home, the grievous suffering of the dead might still remain awake—if no fresh disaster transpires. These are my woman's words; but may the good prevail clearly for all to see!"<sup>4</sup>. Clytemnestra states that she is proud of what she has achieved by killing Agamemnon; she vividly describes his murder, which seems to make the audience pity Agamemnon and judge Clytemnestra at this instance<sup>5</sup>. This is supported in the following lines where the Chorus are shocked by her actions and words, and they could not believe that a woman is capable of such violence and especially to a king<sup>6</sup>. She continues saying "You speak as to some thoughtless women, you are wrong.", this shows her distinguishing herself from other women and breaking gender norm roles<sup>7</sup>. She again tries to justify her actions to the Chorus by stating "His death the work of my right hand, whose craftsmanship Justice acknowledges.", which is ironic since she was having an affair with Aegisthus<sup>8</sup>. This again instigates that women should be loyal to their husbands, whereas men can have multiple affairs. In all, Clytemnestra's behaviour out of vengeance turned her into a villain who overcame by rage and was compared to heartless monsters. This did go against the traditional female norms and made the men of that time question the disruptive behaviour. Another female murderer in Greek mythology which would make one question about the gender roles is Medea. In Euripides, Medea alike, Clytemnestra has defied female

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<sup>4</sup> (Weir Smyth 2020)

<sup>5</sup> (Ag, 1359-1386) Seminar 11

<sup>6</sup> (Ag, 1387-1413) Seminar 11

<sup>7</sup> (Ag, 1387-1413) Seminar 11

<sup>8</sup> (Ag, 1387-1413) Seminar 11

gender norms and exhibits male tendencies. The play opens with a nurse narrating the story of Medea, how she betrayed her family to help Jason and left her home to be with Jason in Corinth. She was now exiled from her homeland and was emotionally shattered because Jason had left her for Glauce, daughter of the king of Corinth. Medea was cast aside after this which angered her. Creon, king of Corinth, observed this and decided to exile her and her children. Medea in retaliation to all this made plans to destroy Jason. She sent Glauce, Jason's bride, a poison dress which killed her<sup>9</sup>. Then she went on to kill her own children which would crush Jason, as she wanted him to lose everything he cared for at the time. In lines 765-790, she plots her plan and seems determined about it. She kills her children for revenge which seems to again bend her role as a woman since mothers are supposed to love their children unconditionally and mourn their death. Unlike Clytemnestra, Medea had a questionable history; she had murdered her brother and betrayed her family all because of her love for Jason. She believes her terrible crimes are just due to the injustices she has faced. She transgresses and surpasses moral as well as female behaviour norms. The Chorus in Medea is a group of women who describe the terrible things that are happening and show no impacting effect in the direction of the myth. This could have been done on purpose in the play to show how women should not participate in affairs. They have been shown to sympathise with Medea indicating the oppressive nature they faced then<sup>10</sup>. It is interesting to note that Medea claims that evil has overcome her which means she is aware of her actions but continuing on with her plan out of anger<sup>11</sup>. She was even hesitant to kill her children and was re-evaluating her options but all in vain as evil overcame her.

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<sup>9</sup> (Medea, 785-790) Seminar 11

<sup>10</sup> (Medea, 1300s) Seminar 11

<sup>11</sup> (Medea, 1050-1090) Seminar 11

Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, beauty and passion, placed a curse on the women of Lemnos, which causes them to become repulsive to their husband. The men of Lemnos, frustrated by this, decided to be intimate with the women of Thrace and this enraged the Lemnian women. They slaughtered their husbands and all the men on the island and decided to create a world without men. This shows the reversal of gender roles and women of Lemnos becoming more independent and warrior-like<sup>12</sup>. The norms of gender roles do not apply to goddesses but only to mortals, insinuating the presence of a hierarchy with women at the bottom. The story of Diana and Actaeon in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is an excellent example of this hierarchy which shows how mortal norms do not bound goddesses. Actaeon happened to come across the naked goddess bathing in a pool while he was on a hunt. Diana transforms the unfortunate hunter into a stag out of anger; the punishment was unjust as many historians have proclaimed<sup>13</sup>.

Throughout the analysis of female murderers to answer the question "Are myths of female murderers simply about gender roles?" we came across various statements in the works we analysed which might imply the patriarchal ideology of gender spheres where women should act in accordance to their gender. This shall be viewed from a feminist perspective, murderers like Clytemnestra and Medea had committed horrendous crimes which seemed extreme and self-destructive. However, the events leading up to these crimes should also be emphasised on. Cassandra and some of the other secondary female characters could be considered more ideal women since their nature followed the traditional female outlook even though they did feel oppressed. These female murderers were indeed villainous, but the men in their life who performed adultery and took harsh decisions were equally devious. In many instances

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<sup>12</sup> Steven 1990

<sup>13</sup> Seminar 10, Ovid's readings.

them being called “Women” in the course of their crimes indicates how unexpected it is of the female gender to act like that. So yes, myth of female murderers could be related to gender roles of the time, women when they challenge men on their dehumanisation and their treatment makes the men concerned, as shown by King Creon who tried to banish Medea before she could act out on her emotions and feelings.

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