Alessandro Pepe

Professor Fiske

Greek Tragedy

28 April 2016

Clytemnestra as an Antihero

Mythologically speaking, Clytemnestra is a character that many consider to be a villain. Indeed, she kills her husband Agamemnon in the play of the same name by Aeschylus, but her actions are calculated and reactionary in much the same way as Euripides' Medea, and in a way Clytemnestra's situation is somewhat worse. Agamemnon wrongs Clytemnestra by killing her previous husband and child, and raping her to produce their children. When it is time to go off and fight a pointless war at Troy, he sacrifices one of their children in order to achieve winds good enough to set sail. Naturally Clytemnestra did not take this lightly, and for the next ten years she had ample time to plan her revenge. Indeed, she displays a very resolute agency throughout her appearances in the *Orestia* cycle, and she proves her intelligence by arguing for and justifying her own actions. Now, all this does not make Clytemnestra a hero per se, but it does not make her a villain either. In this paper I will argue that Clytemnestra is in fact an antihero who should not be condemned for what she does and her reasons for doing it, but the fate that befalls her by the hands of her son Orestes is nonetheless an apropos one.

To consider Clytemnestra as a villain through and through is to ignore another woman in Greek tragedy who is in a similar position, the titular character of Euripides' *Medea*. Medea is a foreigner caught in a tight position facing banishment at the hands of her own husband because of his infidelity, and so she exacts bloody revenge on him by killing his new bride to be and his children. Clytemnestra is a foreigner to Argos (daughter of Tyndareus, king of Sparta) caught in a tight position when her husband kills her daughter and goes off on a ten year bloody and infelicitous spree across the countryside, and so she exacts revenge on

him by committing her own infidelity, and killing him and his concubine prize upon their return to Argos. Both women were justified in their actions, and both are in rather similar situations, but because Clytemnestra faces consequences for her actions she is considered a villain in general consensus whereas Medea does not necessarily fall into that same sort of judgement. I will not argue for either woman's respective ethics, but both of their senses of justice are acquiesced by the time their plays end. One would not consider either woman to be very virtuous in exacting revenge upon the man who wronged them, and indeed both women react in an altogether bloody fashion. This quite obviously disqualifies them as heroes, and if they are not heroes, and they are not villains for their respective revenges are justified, then both women can only be antiheroes. An antihero is not meant to be looked up to as a bastion of morality, and indeed Clytemnestra is clearly the opposite of this. But in a world where one is stolen, raped, cheated on, and has multiple children killed, Clytemnestra does not exactly have to be that bastion of morality. There comes a breaking point, and with the thousand injuries she suffered by the hand of Agamemnon, she saw fit to exact her revenge, with ten years to arrive at that conclusion. She had plenty of time for Agamemnon's wounds against her to fester, and within maybe ten minutes of his arrival home he is dead. Clytemnestra is motivated, calculated, and deadly, but she is less a villain than a seeker of justice.

When Agamemnon kills their daughter Iphegenia, Clytemnestra would seem like an extraordinarily weak willed character to simply not react to this egregious breach of humane childcare. The very fact that she is filled with bloodthirsty revenge is enough to allow one to sympathize with her very human desire to get back at her husband in any way that she can. Not only does Agamemnon kill their child, but Clytemnestra receives reports of his infidelity while on the Trojan campaign, further fueling her bloodlust and desire for revenge. As the chorus begins the first stasimon “What begins as 'an exultant hymn for triumph over Troy' ends in apprehension for the conqueror” (Winnington-Ingram 131), and rightfully so, as

Clytemnestra eagerly awaits the return of her husband “So she commands, full of her high hopes. That woman—she manoeuvres like a man” (Aeschylus 103) There are three places within Aeschylus' play Agamemnon where Clytemnestra displays her wiles as an antihero. The first place is when she discusses with the chorus her time spent waiting for Agamemnon to return and how eagerly she awaits his return, “Yet so great is she that she does not fear his return, but rather longs passionately for it, because it will give her the opportunity of avenging herself and of demonstrating her superiority” (Winnington-Ingram 133). The chorus of course does not know that this is what she is thinking, but to the audience it is on the same level of apprehension and inexorability as Oedipus finding himself to be the one he seeks in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. One knows how the play ends already, and as Clytemnestra awaits the return of her husband one cannot help but feel that apprehension.

As she describes in great detail the taking of Troy by her husband's forces, she betrays her own bloodlust by describing the battle and conquest with as much gruesome detail as she can muster. “They are kneeling by the bodies of the dead, embracing men and brothers, infants over the aged loins that gave them life, and sobbing, as the yoke constricts their last free breath, for every dear one lost” (Aeschylus 115). The manner in which she describes the remnants of the battle of Troy is reminiscent of a seer, picking out specific moments the aftermath of the war and giving them life on stage as if she sees it with her own eyes and is able to put it into such poetry that it enraptures the attention of the Leader, begging Clytemnestra to continue with the story despite doubting her knowledge of the events in the lines preceding (Aeschylus 115). Her ability to ensnare the attention of men with her words is foregrounded here, and I am reminded of Satan from *Paradise Lost,* and his ability to do much of the same towards Eve. Clytemnestra parallels with Satan in this respect, and in this moment she displays this power in foreshadowing for moments later in the play in which she uses this ability to justify her actions against her husband. In this moment however she gives the audience just a brief taste of these abilities. The Leader even remarks upon how much she

sounds like a man in this instance, “full of self command” (Aeschylus 116). Clytemnestra wishes “Oh let no new disaster strike!” (Aeschylus 116) upon the returning Greek army, creating a sort of dramatic irony as the gods do incite the seas upon the returning Greeks, thinning the ranks of an already war-beaten legion. In this manner it suggests that the gods may in fact be on Clytemnestra's side for Agamemnon is delivered to her unscathed.

As a seduction figure Clytemnestra is second to none. She seduces both her husband as well as Cassandra into the house and to their deaths, though Cassandra is not convinced by her coaxing for she sees what will happen to her as soon as she crosses the threshold into the house. Clytemnestra kills Cassandra because of her role as concubine, despite of course Cassandra's lack of willingness to be one. Agamemnon is given Cassandra amongst the dividing up of the spoils of the conquest of Troy, and so Cassandra ends up embodying Agamemnon's infidelity while on the Trojan campaign. So despite Clytemnestra's inability to lure her into the house, she certainly makes an attempt to do so. She compares her situation to that of Heracles, who was sold into bondage himself and was forced do endure the hardships of slavery, but she goes on to say that “From us you will receive what custom says is right” (Aeschylus 143). Cassandra remains impassive however, as she sees right through the subtext of this quotation: Clytemnestra abides only by her own customs that she herself lays down. The only custom that Cassandra will receive from her is death and she clearly knows this. Cassandra does not speak a word to her and remains transfixed throughout this entire interaction, with Clytemnestra gradually getting more and more frustrated as she begins to show her true colors with the withering of her patience: “Already the victims crowd the hearth, the Navelstone, to bless this day of joy I never hoped to see! --our victims waiting for the fire and the knife, and you” (Aeschylus 144). Here she describes Agamemnon, already inside the house and unaware of his rapidly approaching demise inside the belly of the whale, unknowingly waiting to be slaughtered by his slighted wife as she beckons to Cassandra to join Agamemnon in his grisly fate. In a way she becomes a sort of grim reaper in this part of

the play, calling both characters into her domain that she has spent ten years preparing to be their final resting place, wherein she becomes a judge, jury, and executioner of those that she has deemed wronged her for over ten years. Cassandra suffers from the knowledge of what will happen to her and her captor at the hands of Clytemnestra, and tries to tell the chorus of their fates, but ultimately she marches stoically inside in acceptance.

Agamemnon on the other hand is none the wiser when his wife greets him, and she ensnares him with her words, drawing him within the house not unlike Satan drew Eve to the apple tree in *Paradise Lost.* One can consider Clytemnestra to have executed this speech masterfully, and I would like to assert that with ten years of time spent to working out her revenge, she had plenty of time in order to plan out how to draw the sheep to slaughter; for ten entire years she had time to ruminate and stew in the anger that the sacrifice of Iphigenia brewed within her, and when she receives word of her husband's infidelity this rage must have boiled over to a feverish, molten fury. With that length of time being as it was, she had far more than enough time to envision the best ways to take her husband's life, and what to say to get him precisely where she wanted him.

> Where this woman had sat solitary during her husband's absence was upon his throne, as the Chorus pointed out on her first speaking entrance; now the royal man returns, and the glories of his state are described by Clytemnestra herself with fulsome rhetoric. The whole passage, which at the beginning speaks the modest, loving wife and is dominated, like Clytemnestra's address to the Herald, by the theme of the relationship between man and woman. (Winnington-Ingram 132)

This is the cornerstone of her speech, this relationship between the sexes, for she plays to Agamemnon's ego with as much detail as she described the burning of Troy before; dripping with gruesome and bloody detail she plays up his successes to his pride, and pampers his ego with his dominance and her submission. "Thus, when she kills her husband, it is not only an act of vengeance, but also a blow struck for her personal liberty" (Winnington-Ingram 132),

for indeed all of this she turns on its head when she slays her husband with three blows, in the same fashion as one would sacrifice an animal to the gods. With this offering to the god of her choosing, she achieves her vengeance for the loss of her previous husband and children, and by taking Agamemnon's cousin as her lover, she has avenged his infidelity on the Trojan warpath as well.

A particularly large piece in Clytemnestra's speech to Agamemnon regarding the male and female roles is that she uses Agamemnon's hubris to his disadvantage and downfall. In this manner she manages to get the gods on her side by having him walk on red robes into the palace, which back in the Greek tradition was an affront to the gods. Agamemnon bristles at the thought of angering the gods further than he did at Troy, but when Clytemnestra insults his masculinity for refusing to do so, she manages to goad him into it. This is a carefully crafted dilemma for it presents Agamemnon with two problems: if he obeys his wife and walks on the robes he is submitting to her will, but if he disobeys her and refuses to walk on the robes he is placing his belief in divine retribution over the good will of his wife. The genius of this is not necessarily the dilemma of it, but that Clytemnestra is presenting Agamemnon with this dilemma in public, emasculating him despite his victorious homecoming in front of the chorus: "Priam – can you see him if he had your success?" (Aeschylus 138). Indeed she insists that Agamemnon is on par with the gods for his conquest of Troy, and suggests that if Priam had been victorious instead of Agamemnon and the Greeks, he too would have seen himself as the gods' equal. Agamemnon reluctantly agrees to this and begins to walk across the robes barefooted before pausing. Clytemnestra encourages him, further appealing to his hubris that he as a man was made to walk on the robes of the gods for the wealth of his father's house is enough to grant him that right: "Destitution, our house has never heard the word. I would have sworn to tread on legacies of robes, at once command from an oracle, deplete the house – suffer the worst to bring that dear life back" (Aeschylus 140). The combination of Agamemnon's already gleaned riches combined with

the spoils and glories of Troy, she argues, are more than enough for him to be granted the same rights as the gods, and finally Agamemnon walks across the entirety of the robes. Now, Agamemnon is of course not a god, and thus for this act of hubris Clytemnestra prays for his punishment: “Zeus, Zeus, master of all fulfilment, now fulfil our prayers – speed our rites to their fulfilment once for all” (Aeschylus 141), which is a doubled edged prayer for sure.

After Cassandra has her prophecy and goes inside, the murders occur, and Clytemnestra displays the bodies in front of the chorus almost gleefully;

> Words, endless words to serve the moment – now it makes me proud to tell the truth...I brooded on this trial, this ancient blood feud year by year. At last my hour came. Here I stand and here I struck and here my work is done. I did it all. I don’t deny it, no. He had no way to flee or fight his destiny. (Aeschylus 160-161)

She describes in detail the murder, and likens it to a spring rain that new things grow out of. She calls his body a “masterpiece of Justice” (Aeschylus 162), and that is Justice with a capital J. She sees the murder of her husband as a Platonic divine form of Justice, or the ultimate kind of justice that there is. The chorus attempts to admonish her, but from here she goes into her defence of herself and her actions. She claims that the people of Argos stood idly by while Agamemnon murdered Iphigenia, casting no curses and calling for no banishments for him upon his grisly act. Thusly, they should do the same for her upon her delivery of Justice to Agamemnon: nothing at all. She proceeds to Cassandra, calling her “his faithful mate who knelt at the rowing-benches, worked by every hand. They have their rewards” (Aeschylus 163), in reference to Agamemnon’s infidelity with Cassandra and possibly many more of “the golden girls who spread the gates of Troy” (Aeschylus 163). By his sins are his sins repaid, she says in essence, for she has gained her revenge for both of Agamemnon’s insults against her. By taking Aegisthus, Agamemnon’s cousin, as her lover she has continued the curse upon the house of Atreus, for she has put him back in power with the death of Agamemnon. She claims this is the will of the gods, for despite being the

intellectual superior of Aegisthus, strictly speaking through gender roles he is still technically in charge by blood with the death of Agamemnon. This is a ruse though because Clytemnestra is far more powerful than Aegisthus, and she is merely using him as a prop to exact her revenge against Agamemnon for his infidelity, but for Agamemnon's murder of Iphigenia she claims "By the sword you did your work, and by the sword you die" (Aeschylus 166).

Shortly thereafter Aegisthus himself appears to gloat over the body of Agamemnon. In his speech he identifies himself as the intellectual inferior to Clytemnestra because he boasts and brags over his not yet cold cousin in a murder that he himself did not commit. As for his role in Clytemnestra's vengeance, she mostly used his penis more than she used him as a whole. Still, he seems highly prideful of his role in the proceedings; "So you see him, down. And I, the weaver of Justice, plotted out the kill" (Aeschylus 169), which is a dubious claim considering Clytemnestra said earlier that she had had many years to plan out the perfect way for her husband to die. And indeed the blood is on her hands and not Aegisthus' hands, which reduces his boasts to completely toothless ejaculations. Through so much of these said ejaculations he brings the chorus to anger, something that Clytemnestra did not do because she countered their every argument against her with a justification that made sense. Aegisthus proves himself to be an ineffective leader immediately by threatening the people of Argos with torture if they do not obey him, and gets ready to call his men in to get these unruly old men with sticks under control. Clytemnestra intervenes however, calming the situation immediately by turning the situation back to the point at hand; "What we did was destiny" (Aeschylus 171), and indeed she has crafted the downfall of Agamemnon into what could only be destiny because of her ten years spent crafting her revenge and how best to get Agamemnon into the house, how best to enact her vengeance, and how best to defend herself with justifications that make a healthy amount of sense. The role of Aegisthus here is to highlight how little power he has because he immediately backs down in the face of Clytemnestra; she is the one in control here, and she controls both the conversation and

Aegisthus. As the play ends, Aegisthus and the Leader exchange petty insults of two parties who are both beaten under the reins of their better. The chorus has been put into their place as having no true argument against Clytemnestra's actions because she has rebuffed all of their complaints, and Aegisthus has been put into his place because of his obvious sheepishness in the face of Clytemnestra. She is no villain, she is an antihero with her revenge gained.

The delight of reading Clytemnestra's lines is in how many ways her words can be interpreted. Laura McClure agrees, citing Clytemnestra as "a character who skillfully exploits the ambiguities inherent in language through her use of metaphor" so that her words reveal a "superabundance of meaning" (McClure 123). She goes on to describe Clytemnestra's words as the equivalent to that of a magical incantation, and points to her speech in which she lures Agamemnon into the house, namely in the final line. Clytemnestra prays to Zeus, directly calling his attention to Agamemnon's walk over the red robes and the heresy it implies, though at face value it appears to just be a prayer to Zeus for the return of her husband to his house. However, with this line coming directly after Clytemnestra convinces Agamemnon to walk across the red draperies and display his hubris to whichever god may be watching, it could also be seen as her checking to make sure they saw Agamemnon do the deed. It is as if Clytemnestra is saying "Did you see what he just did Zeus? He did a bad thing!" as if to justify her actions just that much further when she murders him.

McClure goes on to say that Clytemnestra's speech in the original Greek "evokes traditional magical language" (126), citing previous instances of magic use by women in previous texts in the Greek tradition, singling out examples in the original Greek of "triple repetition, double chiasmus, anaphora and assonance as stylistic features which contribute to the incantatory effect" (126). Indeed, the means by which Clytemnestra defends her actions after the murders comes across as full of these stylistic features, even in the English translation. However, I would push back on the idea that this is a magical effect, because to credit Clytemnestra's persuasive genius to that of a magic trick is to devalue her wit, logic,

and argument. Clytemnestra does not need magic in order to accomplish her goals because she is intelligent enough to defend her work with words rather than incantations. Just because her rhetoric may or may not sound like traditional magical incantations does not necessarily mean that this is what she is using to complete her revenge, for it likens her craftiness as a character to that of a Salem witch.

Though Clytemnestra's vengeance is focused mainly in the *Agamemnon*, Florence Mary Bennett Anderson studies her appearances in *The Libation Bearers* and the *Eumenides* as both plays further bolster her high intelligence and power on display in the first play. When Orestes, in disguise, comes to the house in order to convey the false news of his own death, he asks to speak to Aegisthus first. However, Clytemnestra comes to the door instead, and upon receiving the news, “she expresses bereavement with dignity, mourning the event as another blow from the inexorable [curse] that persecutes the Atreid family” (Anderson 303). Anderson goes on to note however that Clytemnestra considers keeping the news secure for herself and Aegisthus are only ruling Argos via sheer tyranny. It is essentially themselves against the people, and so:

> She must regard the present crisis as serious, despite her own relief at the assurance that Agamemnon's son is dead. For, bereft of hope that the heir might return to re-establish the former dynasty, the intractables of the cowed state might now be exasperated to rebellion. The scene, short as it is, clearly shows the Queen as adequate to any situation, expected or unexpected, and flawless in dignity. (Anderson 304)

This is a highly important feature of Clytemnestra to note, because it shows that despite having ten years to plot out her revenge against Agamemnon, she is definitely suitably intelligent to adapt to any changing situation. She immediately recognizes the fact that the news of Orestes' death might incite a hopeless rebellion from those she rules, and because she makes haste to squelch the news despite the relief it brings her, it further displays that aforementioned intelligence because of how quickly she thinks of the ramifications the news

could bring. If the news of Orestes' death were first presented to Aegisthus for instance, he may seek to have the news decreed from the rooftops to further gloat his total victory over the house of Atreus, which considering his words at the end of the first play nearly got him beaten to death by a chorus of old men with sticks, would not be the best outcome. Clytemnestra as the first recipient of the news however is a display of her genius and control.

Despite Clytemnestra being a highly intricate and intelligent character, Aeschylus did not necessarily believe that she was superior to men in general, just that she was superior to Aegisthus. Considering the ending of the *Eumenides* and Aeschylus' interest in the relative status of men and women,, R. P. Winnington-Ingram writes:

> This...issue becomes explicit during the trial of Orestes, when Apollo proclaims the superiority of the male, and Athena endorses his judgement with her vote. This scene, if variously interpreted, has been recognised to be important. Equally it has been recognised that Clytemnestra, for whose murder Orestes was on trial, is herself depicted as an anomaly: a woman with the mind and counsel of a man. (130)

Indeed, at multiple points during the *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus foregrounds Clytemnestra's masculine qualities ad nauseum, casting her as a sort of outlier among women. It can be considered then that he thought Clytemnestra's intelligence was alien to the general Greek population's idea of a normal woman, thus she could only have masculine qualities to highlight how abnormal the idea of intelligence in a woman was in those times. So despite her revenge being extremely well planned, well executed, and well defended, she ultimately deserves her comeuppance at the hands of Orestes. Because the gods side with Orestes and proclaim the trial in the *Eumenides* in his favor, it suggest that despite Clytemnestra's intelligence and man-like qualities, she is still a woman who is inferior to the will of man. This idea unfortunately undoes her power somewhat, for these are the gods themselves proclaiming that she is man's inferior, and as intelligent as she is she cannot hope to argue with the gods about gender rights. Aeschylus, despite his interest and portrayal in

Clytemnestra as a strong female character, ends up undoing her power at the last because of the pervading misogyny of the time. This implies that Clytemnestra is meant to be seen as a female outlier rather than as a standard, and that the qualities that made her successful to begin with within the story are subject to scrutiny because they are supposedly male qualities, cheapening the idea that women could ever do such a thing to their husbands.

Clytemnestra as a character can be viewed as a monster, a murderer, a villain, and a criminal, but I maintain that she is an antihero whose actions were justified in the *Agamemnon*. Perhaps it is her spellbinding use of rhetoric with which she defends herself, perhaps it is the reasons she cites for committing the bloody deed, and perhaps it is the feminist in myself agreeing with a woman who was wronged and wants to cheer her for getting her revenge. Regardless of this, it is important to keep in mind that just because she managed to get her revenge does not mean that she is a hero at all, and because of the underhanded tactics she uses to grasp her revenge, she is quite far from the mere idea of a hero, let alone a feminist one. This places her right in the middle as an antihero who did bad things for the right reasons, but it is important to note that while she is a brilliant character who conquered the man who wronged her, Aeschylus wrote her as an outlier to that of the common woman, furthering the institutional misogyny of the time in which he lived. The implication here is that there are no women that are better than men, and those that think that they are are conniving, bloodthirsty killers. So while one could praise Aeschylus for writing a smart and justified woman, one must take this character with a grain of salt because of her ultimate treatment at the end of the *Oresteia*.

Works Cited

Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*. Trans. Robert Fagles. London: Penguin Classics, 1979. Print.

Florence Mary, Bennett Anderson. "The Character of Clytemnestra in the Choephoroe and the Eumenides of Aeschylus." *The American Journal of Philology* 53.4 (1932): 301-19. Print.

McClure, Laura. "Clytemnestra's Binding Spell (Ag. 958-974)." *The Classical Journal* 92.2 (1996): 123-40. Print.

Winnington-Ingram, R. "Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 68 (1948): 130-47. Print.