

Laura Ngo

Professor Borst

Classical 30: Classical Mythology

25 August 2022

### The Male Gaze: Women as a Femme Fatale

Myths were a form of storytelling that instructed and guided Greek culture and belief systems. Although the earliest Greek myths transcended as an oral tradition, they later transitioned to written literature and language. These texts included stories of the divine gods, gender norms, and natural phenomena that played an integral role in shaping morals and values. Also, they elaborated on ideas and events to facilitate the Greek's understanding of the world. Ancient Greek poet Hesiod's *Theogony* and Greek tragedian Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, explore and elicit the subordination of women within Greek society. Hesiod discusses his viewpoint on the creation and existence of women within the mortal world as a consequence of betrayal amongst the divine gods. He depicts how Prometheus, son of Iapetos, betrayed Zeus by giving humanity the fire that Zeus had taken away. However, he also incriminates women as a scapegoat for the chaos toward men; how they were only created as a means of Zeus' punishment and live as mortals to wreak havoc and plague all of humanity. With this in mind, his perspective toward women leads to a stubbornly misogynistic stance and highlights an opinion that may have been prominent within Greek culture and society. Perhaps his male gaze and condemning perspective toward women illuminates how men viewed femininity as a threat and how they may use alienation as an escape path to contain this threat and further segregate the two genders during the Greek era. And Aeschylus further emphasizes this alienation towards women by drawing on his characters' misogynistic attitudes toward Clytemnestra after she murdered her

husband, Agamemnon. Her husband had chosen to sacrifice their daughter Iphigeneia for his profit, a dilemma that immediately infuriated Clytemnestra as a mother. As such, to avenge the death of their daughter, she spends the entirety of his absence plotting his death and ultimately luring him to his death. However, rather than being seen as a hero who embraces her power and authority, she is hastily murdered by her son Orestes and condemned by her deed.

Ultimately, while Hesiod deploys his antagonistic gaze to express a societal belief that women are the root of all evil, Aeschylus observes how women are the victims of oppression even amid dire circumstances.

Through Pandora's juxtaposing nature between delicate and deceitful, Hesiod displays the normalized opinion of women within Greek society. Hesiod captures her creation as he states how Athena had "crowned her head with lovely wreaths of fresh flowers that had just bloomed in the green meadows" (Hesiod *Theogony* 576-577). He continues by stating that "immortal gods and mortal men were amazed when they saw this tempting snare from which men cannot escape" (Hesiod *Theogony* 588-590). From this, Hesiod is illuminating that women are seen as tempting and beautiful before they are beasts. However, his intention of elevating female beauty may not be to engage in admiration but to establish women as beautiful evil who can easily manipulate men with their charm. Moreover, the idea of Pandora's original state of being crowned can be associated with high class and divine status, and how her later association with being a mortal may distinguish her as a goddess and instead as a wicked being.

Hesiod maintains a misogynistic viewpoint by fixating on the significance of men assuming the dominant role and controlling their women to emphasize how women are second-class figures that must be kept inferior. He states how if a man does not wish to marry and avoid "the malice of women," he will reach "harsh old age with no one to care for him" and

“di[e] at the end only to have his livelihood shared by distant kin” (Hesiod *Theogony* 603-607). However, if a man marries a woman who is foul, he will be “plagued by unabating trouble in his heart and in his mind” (Hesiod *Theogony* 610-612). From the surface, Hesiod offers marriage as rather an ultimatum between dying alone or enduring the hardship of maintaining a woman in marriage and the detrimental effects this may cause. Nevertheless, Hesiod does not appreciate or perceive women as equal partners. He sees them as the root of evil, a scapegoat, and a burden for men.

Furthermore, he firmly sutures his gaze on women and villanizes them to resonate with the common belief of women within Greek society. He paints how they are a “nagging burden” that are “no good sharers of abject want, but only of wealth” (Hesiod *Theogony* 592-593). From this, he is portraying them as exploiters to men, that they only seek to abuse and take advantage of men for their money rather than provide purpose or aid their masculine counterparts in any day-to-day troubles. He continues to structure women as abusers through the use of metaphor. He acknowledges how male bees “feed drones that contribute only to malicious deeds (Hesiod *Theogony* 595) and that these drones “stay inside in their roofed hives and cram their bellies full of what others harvest” (Hesiod *Theogony* 598-599). Ironically, he reverses the roles of male and female bees. Worker bees are all female; from a young age, they hold the great responsibility of taking care of the queen and later transition to foraging, which is the dangerous task of collecting nectar, pollen, and water to maintain the colony. Male bees, on the other hand, are drones. They do not work; their sole purpose is to inseminate the queen bee. Essentially, from the eyes of Hesiod, women reap the hard work of men, although this is not the objective case. Within Greek society, male domination was prevalent. As such, men often forced women to become domesticated by trapping them at home and treating them as inferior beings; within their

patriarchal society, women underwent oppressive treatment because of elitist men who desired to control them. Essentially, we can see how Hesiod mirrors the Greek patriarchal society and how they justified the subordination of women by painting them as wicked exploiters that male domination can remedy.

The prominent loathing toward women remains consistent in Aeschylus' portrayal of Clytemnestra's demise after murdering her husband. Translator and American poet, Richard Lattimore, acknowledges how Clytmnestrea welcomed her husband, Agamemnon, back into their home. However, shortly after his return from the Trojan war, she "pinioned him in a robe and stabbed him to death" while he was bathing (Lattimore, *Introduction to the Oresteia*, 6). Unbeknownst to her, her rebellious children, Orestes and Electra, sought to kill her. Lattimore further compares the death of Agamemnon as tragic but acknowledges how "the deaths of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are nothing of the sort" (Lattimore *Introduction to the Oresteia* 8). More so, Aeschylus depicts how various members of the Chorus showed a lack of pity upon Clytemnestra and remarked that her demise was due to her stupidity. One member states how "it is like a woman indeed to take rapture before the fact has shown for true, they believe too easily [and] are too quick to shift from ground to ground" (Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 483-486). From this, rather than empathizing with Clytemnestra for being a mourning mother, they express disdain for her and perpetuate the notion that women as a whole are impulsive and illogical beings. More so, from deceit to her demise, it is evident that the Greek people, even her children, prioritized their father over their mother. They rally to Agamemnon's aid despite his ruthless decision to sacrifice one of his own but fail to compensate for the grief Clytemnestra endured. Her sole motivation for the murder of her husband resided in a burning hatred in her heart and "the grief of her daughter's son" (Chen Week 5). However, the Greeks did not meet her call for justice with

sympathy. They saw her revenge as tainted because of her affair with Aegisthus. Ultimately, though Aeschylus' and Lattimore's discussion on the Chorus' perception of Clytemnestra and women, they express the common but harmful attitude toward women.

All in all, through the lens of Hesiod's misogyny and Aeschylus' portrayal of the villainization of Clytemnestra, we can better understand how Greek culture and society often held prejudiced beliefs towards women. Hesiod subjects them as an affliction to humanity and demonizes women to encourage and justify male domination and control within their patriarchal society. Because women were already deemed inferior, it could have been easier for Greek authors like Hesiod to barbarize them, use them as a scapegoat for wrongdoings, and further segregate the two genders to preserve the cultural image of their society. Aeschylus, however, evaluates how women, even those who experience vulnerability such as Clytemnestra, are promptly condemned for attempting to render justice by enforcing power over men given their circumstances. More so, he acknowledges how men alienate and ostracize women if they contradict the standardized norm of femininity or liberate themselves from the oppressive responsibilities that society enforces. In other words, for men to maintain their power and cope with the threat of femininity, myths during this era relied on expressing the idea of shaming and negatively characterizing female characters to resonate with their male Greek audience.