On the surface of this trilogy, the male characters appear to be heroic individuals characterized by courage and rationality. However, after examining in more detail the opposition of male vs. female amongst the characters in the *Oresteia* it is clear that the female characters embody the positive characteristics which are stereotypically associated with men in Ancient Greek society. Men are most often characterized as rational, intelligent, and courageous in Greek Mythology where as women are characterized by poets like Hesiod, as a "baneful race" (Hesiod 66.591). Aeschylus dispels this notion of women as baneful and helpless by personifying his female characters with stereotypical masculine characteristics and gender roles. Clytemnestra, Cassandra, and Athene's actions and mannerisms, which Aeschylus illustrates throughout the *Oresteia*, distinguish them as more conventionally masculine than Agamemnon and Orestes. Several of the characters in this tragedy appear in subsequent works written by authors such as Euripides. In particular Agamemnon appears in the play *Hecuba* providing a further example of the nontraditional portrayal of a male character, Agamemnon, as weak in comparison to a female character, Hecuba.

Agamemnon may be the "greatest king of the heroic age" but in the end he is "struck down by a domestic conspiracy" (Lloyd-Jones 12). After returning from Troy, Agamemnon's fate is sealed by an act of *hubris*. Although Agamemnon knows that walking upon the elegant tapestries is wrong and should be reserved for the Gods, he is foolish enough to give into the master manipulator, Clytemnestra. Her skills of persuasion and reason are depicted in the first play as she gives Agamemnon several reasons to walk on the tapestries including posing the

question, "what do you think Priam would have done had he accomplished this?" (Aeschylus 78.934-35). Clytemnestra is trying to attack Agamemnon's sense of pride by comparing him to the king of Troy, making it seem as though Agamemnon's victorious return will not be as great as other leaders if he does not walk on the tapestries. Although Agamemnon claims to feel "much reluctance to waste the houses substance with (his) feet," Clytemnestra is still able to persuade her husband to go against his better judgment and walk on the tapestries (Aeschylus 79.948-49). Her line of argumentation eventually cracks through Agamemnon's thin layer of reason, painting a picture of Agamemnon as physically strong but mentally weak. During this instance in the play we see the opposition between a male and female character and it is clear that Clytemnestra has taken on the masculine role of reasoning and persuasion, while Agamemnon has been reduced to a mere pawn in her game.

Agamemnon is also unable to avoid succumbing to the plot of another woman, Hecuba. Aeschylus only describes Agamemnon's *nostos*, or the lack thereof, but in Euripides' play *Hecuba* the audience gets to see Agamemnon on the battle field and he is again portrayed as mentally weak and easily persuadable. While in the slave camp of Trojan women Agamemnon is confronted by Hecuba and she asks Agamemnon for his "passive support" in her plot to murder her son's killer (Euripides 46.872). Technically Hecuba is Agamemnon's enemy because her husband Paris began the war by abducting Helen. So not only should Agamemnon have no trust in her because of her association with his enemy, but Agamemnon also admits that he is "skeptical of women" (Euripides 47.885). These are two very good reasons why Agamemnon should not grant Hecuba her favor, but due to his inability to avoid persuasion he grants Hecuba this favor, merely responding "as you wish" (Euripides 48.898). In this ironic twist of fate the

commander of the Greek army succumbs to the persuasion of the Trojan queen who has been reduced to nothing more than a slave. Both Hecuba and Clytemnestra's wisdom is exhibited through their ability to persuade Agamemnon, a physically strong character to go against his better judgment, making Clytemnestra and Hecuba the truly powerful individuals.

Not only does Aeschylus portray Clytemnestra as intelligent and persuasive, but through dialogue between the chorus and Clytemnestra, particularly the discussion concerning Agamemnon's return, Aeschylus cultivates an image of Clytemnestra as unfeminine. The Chorus does not believe Clytemnestra when she announces "Priam's city is taken by the Argives," because the Chorus believes in the "unreliability of the female sex" (Aeschylus 43.267, Lloyd-Jones 14). Soon after, the Chorus realizes Clytemnestra speaks the truth and instead of praising women they merely attribute her reliability and truthfulness to the fact that she behaves "like a prudent man" (Aeschylus 48.351). Here Clytemnestra has taken on the traditionally male role of ruler and is speaking rationally, thus embodying several positive characteristics which are stereotypically associated with men. Clytemnestra's masculinity also stems from her ability to slaughter her husband with no feelings of remorse. The Chorus is shocked when Clytemnestra blatantly says, "by my hand he died, and my hand shall bury him, to the accompaniment of no weeping from the house" (Aeschylus 111.1553-54). Clytemnestra dispels the notion that women are helpless when she murders Agamemnon because of his sinful and hateful actions including the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigenia and his return to their kingdom with Cassandra, a concubine and slave. Although Clytemnestra is victimized by Agamemnon she empowers herself and fights backs (Wilmer 2).

Like Clytemnestra whose words shocked the Chorus, Cassandra surprises everyone when she speaks for the first time. Although Cassandra is portrayed as the property of Agamemnon she is able to truly speak her mind and is not afraid of revealing the future of the house of Atreus. Much like Clytemnestra, the Chorus does not believe her ominous words that "a great evil is being plotted in this house" due to the fact that she is merely a slave (Aeschylus 89.1102). However, Cassandra is under divine influence and has been given the gift of clairvoyance from Apollo. Thus, Cassandra enters into the house knowing that "for (her) there waits a rending with the two-edged spear" due to her clairvoyance (Aeschylus 91.1149). Cassandra willfully accepts her death with bravery and courage illustrated by her entrance into the cursed house of Atreus. Not only does Cassandra illustrate the subjugation of women, but she also becomes the embodiment of courage and bravery typically thought of as masculine characteristics. Like Clytemnestra, Cassandra dispels Aristotle's argument that "women are inferior and should not be depicted as brave or intellectually clever" (Wilmer 1). Cassandra exhibits courage by revealing the future unto disbelieving ears, and she also bravely enters the house of Atreus knowing that her death awaits her within.

Unlike Cassandra who accepted the words of Apollo concerning her imminent death, Orestes wavered in his decision to carry out the oracle, which Apollo delivered to him, stating he must "take vengeance on those guilty of murder" (Aeschylus 146.273). Thus, Orestes must commit matricide and kill the woman who brought him to life. For this reason Orestes questions his mission, asking for reassurance, he says "Pylades what am I to do? Shall I respect my mother, and not kill her?" (Aeschylus 182.897-88). A very unheroic Orestes is almost overcome by his

doubts concerning his divinely ordained act of matricide. Without Pylades firm reminder that Orestes previously made an oath to Apollo, Orestes may never have gone through with the act. This incident illustrates wavering determination and a lack of courage in Orestes' character and these unfavorable characteristics are stereotypically associated with women.

The oracle also reveals that Orestes will endure many "loathsome ills" for his act of matricide. Orestes is sought after by the Erinyes for his crime, but luckily the patron goddess of Athens comes to Orestes' aid once he calls for her, "And now with pure lips I call in pious accents on this country's queen, Athene, to come help me" (Aeschylus 226.287-89). In this sense Athene becomes Orestes savior and protector, a very masculine role. Athene establishes a trial in order to determine Orestes fate, and in future instances "restrain injustice" (Aeschylus 252.691-692). Orestes is found innocent due to a tie in which Athene rules that the defendant will be acquitted of all charges. Although Athene is portrayed as sympathetic, Aeschylus also depicts her as extremely powerful and rational. Her power emanates from her ability to control the Erinyes and protect Orestes from them. Athene's rationality is demonstrated in her insistence on a fair trial and the establishment of a homicide court so that "in future time also there shall remain for the people of Aegeus forever this council of judges" (Aeschylus, 251.683-84). Athene and Orestes relationship depicts the role reversal reoccurring throughout the *Oresteia*, portraying the female character as more masculine and the male character as more feminine.

The opposition between male and female within Aeschylus' trilogy of Greek tragedy consists of the depiction of male figures as less masculine than the female figures. Aeschylus forces the reader to reevaluate the opposition between the sexes, comparing Clytemnestra,

Cassandra, and Athene's courage and rationality to that of Agamemnon and Orestes. The *Oresteia* frames women as courageous and intelligent individuals, which contrasts other Greek writers like Hesiod's description of women as a "great plague" (Hesiod 592). However, Euripides play *Hecuba* reveals that there are other ancient tragedian authors who also portray some of their male characters as less powerful in comparison to the female characters. Aeschylus confirms that men and women's gender roles are not static; particularly in this case the female characters embody stereotypically male characteristics and take on male gender roles. The *Oresteia* includes an "extraordinary repertoire of powerful" female roles in comparison to the male characters which "appear in the worse light" (Wilmer 2).

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