Clytemnestra as *Femme Fatale*

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Although the classification of femme fatale *was not widely established until the twentieth century, the image of a strong female using seductive charm for malicious purposes has been prominent in art, and especially theater, for centuries. Clytemnestra proves herself one of the earliest examples of a deadly dame by viciously murdering her husband in an attempt to avenge the daughter he sacrificed. As shown in* Agamemnon*, by Aeschylus, Clytemnestra is independent and intelligent and she uses these skills, combined with her womanly wiles, to create a trap for Agamemnon. The murder is obviously premeditated, showing that she is cold and calculating and willing to go to any means to achieve her goals. In addition, upon Agamemnon's victorious return to his home, Clytemnestra lures Agamemnon into a false sense of security by being both submissive and coy. She does not aggressively attack him the moment he arrives. She does not even object to him bringing home another woman. She simply plays the part of simpering wife until he gets into the house. Clytemnestra embodies every characteristic of a classic* femme fatale.

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To understand Clytemnestra as a *femme fatale*, one must first understand the Clytemnestra that is depicted in Aeschylus's version of Agamemnon's demise. As *Agamemnon* opens, King Agamemnon has been at war in Troy for exactly 10 years. A watchman sits waiting for a signal fire to tell him that the city of Troy has finally been taken as a chorus of the "old men of Argos" tell the story of Helen and Paris and the start of the Trojan war. The chorus then describes how Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter to calm the raging sea so that he and his army could join his brother in the war against Troy. During their introductory narration, the chorus tells the audience that Clytemnestra has been in charge of the city for the past ten years while Agamemnon has been at war. The men describe Clytemnestra as "the architect of vengeance / growing strong in the house / with no fear of the husband / here she waits …. the mother —/ Memory womb of

Fury child-avenging Fury!" (Aeschylus 31). This vivid description paints an imagine of a vengeful mother and shows that Clytemnestra has been planning her revenge for years. The old men are fearful of Clytemnestra and obviously worry that she is plotting against Agamemnon, but they do not seem to know or understand the extent of her homicidal schemes. In the last few lines of the chorus' introduction, they state that they "will know the future when it comes," which could signify that they do not know or want to know Clytemnestra's plans (Aeschylus 32).

Later, when Agamemnon has returned to the city, Clytemnestra greets him with a lengthy speech about her deep love for him, her fear that he would never return, and her justification for sending away their son, Orestes. She describes her fear that the men of the city would rise up against her while Agamemnon was away and kill their son in order to take over the city for themselves (Aeschylus 39). In addition to allowing her a moment of sympathy for being left alone by Agamemnon, she also offers a valid explanation of why she sent Orestes away that dissuades suspicion, even though the real reason for his absence is so that he would be unable to interfere with her murderous plans. Clytemnestra uses this reasoning and her public professions of love and worship toward Agamemnon to convince him of her devotion and submission. She plays the perfect simpering, coy wife to soothe him into complacency and to dissuade any doubts or suspicions he may have had about her character. It is also worth noting that Clytemnestra ingeniously avoids mentioning either of her daughters. She does not bring up the absence of Iphigenia, whom Agamemnon savagely sacrificed at the beginning of the war, because that would have probably led to an argument between them and would have certainly revealed Clytemnestra's lingering grief and her subsequent desire for revenge. For unknown reasons, she also fails to mention Electra. This could have been an attempt to avoid any allusion to the death of Iphigenia, perhaps she could not even bear to utter the word daughter yet, or, more likely, Clytemnestra could have been playing to Agamemnon's patriarchal sense of value. In ancient Greek society, and many other, more recent societies, only men had valuable roles in city life, therefore only male heirs would have mattered in the furthering of a family line. Clytemnestra would have known that Orestes would have been the heir that Agamemnon valued and cared about and she made sure to explain his whereabouts publicly and in such a way that gained her compassion.

The fact that Clytemnestra never mentions Electra or Iphigenia is significant because it shows the reader the lack of value women were shown in this society. Even the daughters of the King are ignored and forgotten. Iphigenia was sacrificed without hesitation and Electra is never even mentioned in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, reinforcing the common view of women's lack of importance. Similarly, Clytemnestra's explanation of Orestes absence is another way of dissuading any suspicions Agamemnon may have developed. This amount of forethought in her speech and cunning manipulation further proves the intelligence of Clytemnestra. Additionally, the allusion to the lack of respect or value women received serves to further contrast Clytemnestra's strength and rarity.

After greeting Agamemnon with professions of love and devotion, Clytemnestra convinces him to walk into their house on a crimson tapestry so that his conquering feet my never again be soiled by dirt (Aeschylus 39). Agamemnon realizes that this would be an act of pride that would anger the gods and he refuses to succumb to such "pomps of honor," but Clytemnestra does not

back down and quickly manipulates him into agreeing to obey her request (Aeschylus 39). This interaction between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon is significant because it shows the strength and authority in Clytemnestra that would not have been common in women of the time period. In front of all his countrymen, Clytemnestra demonstrates her power over Agamemnon by forcing him to bend to her will. In addition, the act depicts Clytemnestra's willful character. She played the simpering submissive wife for a while, but her refusal to back down showed her true nature.

Finally, Clytemnestra gets Agamemnon to go into the house and her plan is set in motion, but before he agrees to go inside Agamemnon introduces Cassandra, the prophetess of Apollo, whom he claimed as a prize from war. After publicly arguing and coldly ridiculing Clytemnestra for her long speech, Agamemnon's interaction with Cassandra is warm and heartfelt, creating a stark contrast. Agamemnon even requests that Cassandra be treated with kindness and compassion (Aeschylus 40). Although it would have been considered completely ordinary for a conquering hero to claim a concubine in wartime, the public display of concern and affection that Agamemnon showed to Cassandra would have been an extreme insult to Clytemnestra. Especially since Clytemnestra was condemned for taking a lover in her King's absence and was forced to publicly deny the truth of her affair.

After the murder of Agamemnon and Cassandra, Aeschylus has Clytemnestra be seen by the chorus of old men with a sword in her hand standing over the corpses. Clytemnestra defiantly admits to the murders and gives the men of Argos a long speech stating that she committed the murders for three reasons, which Kathleen Komar states succinctly in *Reclaiming Klytemnestra: Revenge or Reconciliation*: "that [Clytemnestra] is avenging her daughter's death and punishing Agamemnon for Kassandra, and that [Clytemnestra] is an embodiment of the ancient curse on the house of Atreus" (1431-47). Of course, the most prominent reason for the murder is Clytemnestra's desire for vengeance for her daughter: "Klytemnestra's motivation and intentions are announced and defended before she even glimpses Kassandra" (Komar 32). Some scholars have differing opinions on the main reason for Clytemnestra to have committed the murder. For example, Dorothy Wilner compares different versions of the story of Clytemnestra and states, "Later versions of the murder of Agamemnon, such as those of Pindar as well as Aeschylus, recognize that Clytemnestra may have moved against her husband at least partly in retribution for his sacrifice of their daughter. In Homer's version, however, Clytemnestra is presented as a women who plotted the death of her husband because she had taken a lover" (Wilner 66). No matter the order in which the motives are listed, it is generally agreed upon that revenge, jealousy, and to further the curse are the three reasons for Clytemnestra's actions, although Aeschylus seems to make it very clear that he believes she is motivated by motherly grief in his beginning description of Clytemnestra as an "architect of vengeance" and by having her justify her actions first by saying, Agamemnon "sacrificed his own child, our daughter, / the agony I labored into love" (Aeschylus 31, 45). In any version of the story, it is obvious that Clytemnestra had a myriad of motives and justifications for her actions. She is clearly more than a woman simply driven mad by grief; she is intelligent and calculating in her vengeance.

Now that Clytemnestra's actions have been thoroughly justified, it is time to turn to the means by which the murders were committed. There is much debate on exactly what type of weapon Clytemnestra used on Agamemnon and the manner in which he died. Some translations of the

story mention an axe, others a sword, but all descriptions of the murder are vague. In an essay in 1898, C. G. W. Warr supplied evidence that Clytemnestra actually used both weapons and stated that “she first cut [Agamemnon] down with two blows of the axe falling on the head, which was an easy mark; then, when he was down and at her mercy, she finished him with one thrust of the sword of Aegisthus” (350). Almost 100 years later, A. J. N. W. Prag revisits the topic of Clytemnestra’s weapon and develops evidence to support a new theory. Prag says that the allusions in many of the stories to an “axe” refer to the wood-cutting axe that would have been kept in the kitchen. This would have been a convenient weapon in close proximity, but Prag believes that the many writers of this story chose to have Clytemnestra use a sword instead to show that the murder was carefully planned. Prag believes that both weapons are mentioned in the stories for a reason, but that they are not both used (246). Prag’s description of events seems more likely in the context of the story, especially in Aeschylus’s version. Clytemnestra is shown as an independent woman, with the strength and intelligence of a man, who has ruled a country in her husband’s place for 10 years. It is only fitting that her act of vengeance be completed with a man’s weapon. In addition, Aeschylus pointedly shows Clytemnestra standing over the bodies with Aegisthus’s sword, evidence that the entire act was committed with just the one weapon. It is also significant that Aeschylus has Aegisthus specifically state that the murder was solely Clytemnestra’s doing and then call it “woman’s work” (47). In the traditional Greek household, the woman’s job would have been purely domestic, rearing children, cleaning, cooking, etc. To call an act of murder “woman’s work” is to shift a cultural paradigm, for fighting was certainly considered an area of male expertise. This statement further asserts that the story should be read from a feminist perspective and offers evidence of Clytemnestra being a *femme fatale.*

All of Clytemnestra’s actions support the theory that she is the embodiment of a classic *femme fatale.* The creation of the American Noir films of the 1940s - 1970s depicts females as “lethal seductresses” that avoid traditional romance and domesticity by employing their seductive nature in sly plots of homicide (Boozer 20). Boozer reiterates this point later by saying that “these dark sirens of classic noir, it must be remembered, use their sexuality as a means to an end” (21). Clytemnestra certainly fits this description of *femme fatale.* She not only uses her sexuality to soothe her husband into a false sense of security, she also seduces Aegisthus, her husband’s mortal enemy, into helping her with her murderous schemes.

In addition, according to Boozer, “it has been widely observed that the *femme fatale* in films of the 1940s is a timely indicator of wartime misgivings about sex roles, marriage and sexuality. It seems no coincidence that the rise to prominence of Hollywood’s lethal siren occurred simultaneously with wartime and postwar readjustments in society” (20). Thomas Schatz expounds upon this theory in *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Film-making, and the Studio System* in which he says, “changing views of sexuality and marriage were generated by the millions of men overseas and by the millions of women pressed into the work force. The postwar ‘return to normalcy’ never really materialized - the GIs’ triumphant homecoming only seemed to complicate matters and to bring out issues of urban anonymity and sexual confusion” (113-4). Both men propose that the creation of the *femme fatale* was a way for men to cope with the fact that women had gained strength, identity, and autonomy in their absence. *Femmes fatales* were the embodiment of what men feared women would become and were a warning for women about what happened to females who reached for too much power. When this template for a story is

applied to Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, the play looks identical to the plot of a 1940s Noir film. Clytemnestra meets all of the criteria to become a *femme fatale* and the plot of the story, especially when considered with the rest of Clytemnestra's story in *The Orestia*, specifically her own murder, it is similar to the Noir genre.

Sue-Ellen Case, a prominent feminist writer, supports the idea of reading Clytemnestra's story from a feminist perspective and even calls *The Orestia* an obvious "battle of the sexes". Case suggests, however, that female readers need not identify with Clytemnestra. She says that it is appropriate that female roles of the time were played by men because the characters are simply creations of male fantasy and have little to do with the reality of women, especially during that time period. Specifically, she states,

> the feminist reader might conclude that women need not relate to these roles or even attempt to identify with them. Moreover, the feminist historian might conclude that these roles contain no information about the experience of real women in the classical world. Nevertheless, the feminist scholars must recognize that theatre originated in this kind of cultural climate and that the Athenian experience will continue to provide a certain paradigm of theatrical practice for the rest of Western theatrical/cultural history. (169)

Despite her suggestion that women need not relate to Clytemnestra or those like her, it is important to remember the significance of the last sentence in her statement. This type of culture not only created the idea of theater that is practiced today, but the patriarchal culture is still prominent in many areas. It is important for women to realize how they were represented and viewed by the patriarchy in the past and compare those representations with current ones to measure the amount of change that has taken place. In addition, it is important for women to embrace the strength and cunning embedded in these prominent *femme fatale* characters and utilize only the positive attributes in the ever-present fight for equality. These stories can serve as a warning for women to not become too powerful, conniving, or pitiless, but to embrace the strength within them for positive uses.

Clytemnestra serves as a perfect warning for women on the perils of allowing anger and a need for justice to go too far. Therefore, Clytemnestra's representation of a *femme fatale* is extremely important to consider in feminist theater. Clytemnestra was obviously a strong woman and the intellectual equivalent of a man, who used her feminine charm and sexuality to seduce Aegisthus into helping her plan the homicide of Agamemnon and usurp the throne. She commits the act of murder on her own, overpowering her husband and Cassandra and slaying them both with a sword, a warrior's weapon (Aeschylus 47). Additionally, Clytemnestra fits the template of the *femme fatale* by avoiding "traditional romance and domesticity" and instead spending her time and energy planning the vicious murder of her husband, which Boozer claims is a common mark of the *femme fatale* in Noir drama (20). In Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra perfectly fits each of the criteria that defined the classic *femme fatale* even though the classification had yet to be created during the time of her story. Through such means Clytemnestra becomes one of the earliest representations of the capabilities of a strong female.

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