
Womanlike Power: The Study of Clytemnestra's Role as a Powerful Female Character in the Patriarchal Greek Society of Agamemnon

In ancient Greek Society women were not regarded as equals with men, they were viewed as inferior and incapable of doing what a man could. They had to act submissive and be under a man's control and oftentimes could not do or speak on their own will. However, throughout *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra plays a variety of roles and can be examined through a variety of lenses. She has done things which can be argued as either great or foolish but, one thing that is indisputable is that she is a powerful character who challenges the role of a typical woman in this patriarchal Greek society. This can be seen through an analysis of her dialogues and interactions between the chorus and Agamemnon. Clytemnestra regularly deals with skepticism from the chorus as they view her as a foolish women who is not able to do the job of a man. However, she proves them wrong each time destroying the idea of what a typical woman should be. She is also able to outsmart and manipulate Agamemnon on many occasions in both mental and physical battles. She proves that she is unlike any other woman in that society and was not going to conform to their ideals of what a woman should be like.

As the play begins the Clytemnestra sees that the beacon is lit and deduces that the only reason it would be lit is if the Greeks had defeated the Trojans. When she relays this to the chorus she is met with skepticism. They accuse her of having a "dream" or a "vision" that she so "easily believed", simply because she is a woman who in their eyes cannot be trusted with this kind of information. (274) However, Clytemnestra stands her ground by holding onto her belief that the Greeks had conquered Troy and refused to bend to the choruses skepticism, which shows how defiant she is. The chorus is filled with the village's wisest and eldest men so naturally most women would be completely submissive to them. This is why it is a very bold and unusual move to disagree with them, and it ends up being the right decision. After the Herald arrives and says that Troy has fallen the chorus believes him without question but, Clytemnestra had "raised her cry of joy" already and it was "long ago". (587) The fact that Clytemnestra proved this group, of some of the most wise and knowledgeable men, wrong is a huge accomplishment. They doubted and "laughed" at her and said it was "like a woman of her to lift her heart so light", essentially saying that all women believed in things without evidence or reasoning. (592) Clytemnestra destroys this stereotypical notion as she was able to use her own reasoning to know that Troy had fallen and she , a "wit wandering" woman like the chorus would describe , was able to prove them wrong.

Clytemnestra bears a deep hatred for Agamemnon as he sacrificed their daughter and so she is

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determined to exact her revenge for her daughter. When Agamemnon arrives from war, she calls her “dearest husband” to “step from” his “chariot” and to “not set foot on earth” but to walk on the “tapestries” she had laid out. (905 – 908) Clytemnestra does this as walking on tapestries is seen as a very disrespectful act to the gods and so if they were to be angry with Agamemnon they would aid her in his murder. Women were often seen as clueless and incapable to doing things that required a lot planning and execution but Clytemnestra proves that is capable. This shows the extent to which Clytemnestra has carefully planned the murder. She wants to ensure that her plan does not fail and takes all measures necessary to do so. This also shows how manipulative she can be as she refers to Agamemnon as her “dearest husband” to give him a false sense of comfort and relief. Agamemnon disagrees and does not want to walk on the tapestries but Clytemnestra uses his strong will against him, she asks him to “not cross” her will and he replies that “he shall not make his will soft for her”. (931 – 932) Clytemnestra knows that Agamemnon will continue to act like he is above her and so she appeals to this sense of manhood and pride. She continues to feed Agamemnon with the idea that he is more powerful than he is by saying things like “oh! The power is yours”. (944) She is feeding Agamemnon with lies as he is a sacrificial beast that she will murder in order to satisfy her own need for revenge. She forces Agamemnon to bend to her will as he gets so caught up in his pride that he forgets his worries and walks on the tapestries just as Clytemnestra had planned. Her ability to manipulate and outsmart Agamemnon shows that she is not a typical submissive woman, she has the capability to plan ahead and use her wit and charm to achieve her goals.

The act of killing Agamemnon shows a plethora of ways Clytemnestra exerts her physical and mental dominance over her male counterpart. After the murder Clytemnestra begins by explain how she, unlike a typical Greek woman, “feels no shame” in the act but instead felt that it served a “necessity”. (1374) She had truly felt that Agamemnon deserved to die and acted on it and made sure that she would not fail. She ensured that Agamemnon would not be able to “escape nor beat aside his death, as fishermen cast their huge circling nets”. (1382) This imagery is used by Aeschylus to show how Clytemnestra had trapped Agamemnon in a net from which he had no escape like a fisherman would catch a fish. This not only shows much power and intellect she has but that she is capable of using it against a king like Agamemnon. The murder not only proves her intellectual prowess by manipulating Agamemnon but displays dominance and power in his death as well. When the place doors open they disclose “the bodies of Agamemnon / and Cassandra, with Clytaemestra standing over them”. (1370-1371) This dramatic entrance emphasizes her grandeur as she is standing tall above her enemies, like that of a fury. She is able to take on the role of a fury as she exacts her revenge by killing Agamemnon, completing the cycle of retributive justice. She further displays her dominance in the way she describes how she killed Agamemnon, she “struck him twice in two great cries of agony / he buckled at the knees and fell. When he was down / I struck him a third blow”. (1384 – 1386) This shows how merciless Clytemnestra is and how much power she really has. She

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delivered two blows to Agamemnon and had essentially killed him and brought him to his knees but in pure vengeance and anger she delivered a third blow as a symbol to show her strength and might. Aeschylus also chooses to say that she struck Agamemnon twice and he let out “two great cries of agony” to show how much pain and suffering he was in and how powerless he was to defend against it. Ultimately this scene exemplifies how Clytemnestra has the strength, power and intellect to act independently on what she deems is necessary, something which women were incapable of doing.

In conclusion Clytemnestra has demonstrated that she is capable of fighting against the convention of what a normal female character should be. Clytemnestra stands up for what she believes is true against all of the skepticism of the chorus. She shows that she is able to think and act independently of others want her believe. She is able to outsmart and outplay her husband and king Agamemnon throughout the novel. She skillfully manipulates him into doing her bidding and when the time is right she executes and shows her physical dominance over him as well. Clytemnestra destroys the notion that she is like a typical Greek woman and continues to shine light on what a typical woman should be like. Aeschylus uses her to show what a force a strong and independent woman would have had and will continue to have in contemporary society.

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