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Ancient Athenian Drama- Agamemnon

Though Aeschylus's play leads the viewer to think Agamemnon is the key figure in the play, it is Clytaemnestra that is the central character. The play reveals her power, prowess and strength that she uses to control the men in her life as well as the village, "Threaten away! I'll meet you blow for blow"(1) It also shows her feminine side in the raw emotion and passion she displays in herself while she plots her justice.

The Trojan war was fraught with women, figures who were often thought of as trading commodities - pawns to be used by the man to get what he wanted. They were expected to be faithful to their husbands but were often taken as slaves and lovers as this same faithfulness was not expected or required of the men. They were thought of as the weaker sex who were merely to do man's pleasing, care for and have children and keep the home and were deemed of little significance when it came to decision making or making the rules. Only the goddesses were viewed in a different light with the thought that if they were not pleased men would be punished. One such goddess was Artemis who was ultimately the cause of Agamemnon's demise, " My captains, Artemis must have blood"(2) and his response signed his death warrant.

One woman who went against the prototype of the typical woman was Clytaemnestra. She was Agamemnon's wife and the queen of Argos. The elders feared her because she exuded a strength that was supposed to be a man's trait, not a woman's. She claimed to be the ruler of Argos, talked back to the elders and in the end was a murderer. She also portrayed herself as that faithful wife who was so anxious to finally have her husband home so she can cater to him. This is a guise that she plays very well but is not totally convincing. As she speaks of the tragedies of the war she is very descriptive in her narratives of blood shed. The passion she puts into the death of the pregnant hare by the bird of prey and its suffering is almost like a self reflection of her anguish over the loss of her daughter by her own husband. In the scene where Clytaemnestra announces that the war is finally over and the Greeks have won, the elders don't believe her and challenges her authenticity of her announcement, "You treat me like a child,

you mock me?"(). They can't grasp that she has the knowledge of how the war ended without someone having informed her. In viewing the play along with the reading the viewer can more clearly understand the mocking-like interchange that is taking place in this scene. In skipping ahead to her narrative of how she murdered her husband she shows very masculine characteristics much like a hunter bragging over a "kill".

Clytaemnestra shows another characteristic of cunning and deceit as she gloats Agamemnon into walking on the red carpet after his return from war. Tapestries and carpets were for honoring the gods and not meant for mortals. It is imperative that Agamemnon feels that her only desire is to please him and that to her he is on the same level as a god for his bravery and valor. Agamemnon is conceited enough that he is vulnerable to her urging but cautious to send an apology to the gods for just this moment of fame for his wife. She taunts him with words to which he concedes, although not totally comfortable, and does her bidding. "O give way! The power is yours if you surrender all of your own free will to me"(4), this again shows her power even over her husband and her need to possibly be the superior mate. Clytaemnestra knows that once his feet hit the carpet her plan for his murder will soon come to fruition. At this point in the play the viewer can almost feel the hatred she has for him and realize that he has signed his own death warrant once he enters the castle.

Cassandra, the woman taken from Troy by Agamemnon to be a slave, plays a significant part in the plot of the play. When she went against Apollo he cursed her with prophesy and the ability to see into the future. She knows how evil Clytaemnestra is and what her plan for the king is. She tries to warn the elders and because she was given her gift by a god they believe her. This sets the climax of the play, what can they do? Can they do anything? Is it already too late.

In the final scenes of the play Clytaemnestra reveals her hatred for her husband stemmed from so long ago when he sacrificed his own daughter, flesh of her flesh, to fight in a war. He sacrificed Iphigeneia without hesitancy, "Yes, he had the heart to sacrifice his daughter"(). She describes in great detail how she did it, how he suffered and how justice has now been served and no more blood will need to be shed.

The elders know that the bloodshed is far from over. Agamemnon started the bloodshed with the death of his daughter and Clytaemnestra will continue the bloodshed with the death of Agamemnon.

Works Cited

The Norton Anthology World Literature. Agamemnon, n.d. Page 695, Lines 1448&1449: Page 661, Line 201: Page 663, Line 277 :Page 680, Lines 938&939: Page 661, Line 223&224.