

## **Unmasking Misogyny: Clytemnestra's Demise in Aeschylus' Oresteia**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the manifestation of misogyny in Aeschylus' version of the Orestes myth through Clytemnestra's change throughout the Oresteia. The Clytemnestra portrayal was deliberately demonized by Aeschylus in the tragedy "Choephoroi" compared to the preceding tragedy "Agamemnon". The portrayal of the vengeful mother was substituted for that of the adulterous wife, a manifestation of bias dictated by the need for demonstrative censure. Incorporating evidence from a literature review and close reading of the Oresteia, this study demonstrates that Aeschylus' bias against Clytemnestra was motivated by misogyny. It argues in favor of deliberately ignoring narrative elements that interfere with the censure of Clytemnestra's actions outside the patriarchal law of young Olympians. These concerns are particularly evident in the Oresteia belief system, within which the matriarchal goddesses are archaic and chthonic, and the patriarchal goddesses are young ruling goddesses. A close reading of the Oresteia has shown that the relation of the positions of the matriarchal and patriarchal gods in relation to each other is used by Aeschylus as a censure of gynococracy. In an age of debates about the marginalization of women, the topic of the suppression of female authority can lead to discussions about how contemporary understandings of gender balance and power dynamics are shaped by historical depictions of women in roles of power and rebellion.

## Introduction

The myth of Orestes is a story of family vendetta. Its main theme is revenge. However, in the Aeschylus version, as the action develops, it evolves into a conflict about women. The essence of this conflict is the dispute over a woman's right to power, revenge, and her children. The connecting link in this conflict is Clytemnestra, whose actions throughout the tragedies of "Oresteia" are put on trial. By putting her actions on trial, Aeschylus expresses a biased assessment of them. This bias, dictated by misogyny, is evidence that the portrayal of Clytemnestra was deliberately tailored to the patriarchal concept of negativity and destructiveness. This paper states that such an approach to the portrayal of Clytemnestra is explained by Aeschylus' endeavor to express the censure of female power and the rebellion of women against male authority. Understanding misogyny in this endeavor indicates how historical narratives have influenced public beliefs about women's social status and help to move closer to understanding how they continue to influence contemporary convictions. To illuminate the theme of misogyny in Aeschylus' adaptation of the myth of Orestes, this paper explores the misogyny manifested in Clytemnestra's changes through "Oresteia".

## Scholarship of the Clytemnestra Study

Scholars have long studied Clytemnestra as an element of misogyny in the "Oresteia". As early as 1948 Winnington-Ingram<sup>1</sup> notes that Clytemnestra's motivation for killing Agamemnon is her envy of his male entitlement. She kills him not so much because she is avenging Iphigenia, but because she is avenging herself and her dignity. Clytemnestra is not satisfied with her femininity and seeks Agamemnon's masculinity. The carpet scene, in which Clytemnestra persuades Agamemnon to step on the carpet, is interpreted by Winnington-Ingram as Clytemnestra's attempt to humiliate Agamemnon, kill him, and take revenge on him. The assertion of the connection between female power and vindictiveness in "Agamemnon" is a censure of female power. This defines the fact of misogyny.

Notably, that Bierl<sup>2</sup> in his work, "Klytaimestra Tyrannos: Fear and Tyranny in Aeschylus's 'Oresteia'" identifies Clytemnestra's actions towards Agamemnon in the carpet scene as an attempt to induce him to

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<sup>1</sup> R. P. Winnington-Ingram, "Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 68 (November 1, 1948): 130–47, <https://doi.org/10.2307/626303>.

<sup>2</sup> Anton Bierl, "Klytaimestra Tyrannos: Fear and Tyranny in Aeschylus's 'Oresteia,'" *Comparative Drama* 51, no. 4 (2017): 528–63, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45176225>.

return to the path of tyranny. Her requests to yield to her and walk the carpet are interpreted by Bierl as an unequivocal order to cede power to her. Bierl defines the dynamic between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra in the carpet scene as an act of political struggle. Clytemnestra's arguments based on the distribution of gender roles can then be seen as evidence that their political struggle is based on a movement of dominance from male to female.

The reverse process occurs in the "Eumenides" when Clytemnestra's tyranny is destroyed by Orestes' revenge. Through revenge, power is once again transferred from woman to man, and this time the transition is peremptory. According to Zeltin,<sup>3</sup> the establishment of a temporary matriarchy in *The Oresteia* is a dramatic demonstration of the social lesson that women's natural sexual unrestraint leads to the promotion of chaos and disempowerment. Thus, Zeltin argues for the manifestation of misogyny in the brief and demonstrative rule of women in *The Oresteia*.

The predetermined defeat of female authority over male authority was described by Bachofen<sup>4</sup> in his "Mutterrecht" (mother right). This predetermination lies in the pattern that historically, women's power has been replaced by men's power. According to Bachofen, the patriarchal family is an isolated organism, while the matriarchal family is built on a family of unshakable kinship. Further, this kinship binds the members of the family by ties until, with the development of the patriarchal principle, the unity is dissolved and superseded by the principle of hierarchy. According to Bachofen, the matriarchal world exists according to the laws of blood kinship and connection to the land, while the patriarchal world operates according to its own laws asserting male supremacy. This division is vividly seen in *The Oresteia* through the belief systems. In it, the Erinyes, who represent Clytemnestra's defense at Athena's trial, are archaic matriarchal goddesses. They assert the superiority of the blood bond of mother and child over non-blood marriage bonds. At the same time, the young Olympians, who patronize Agamemnon in war and defend Orestes before Athena, preach patriarchal law. The defense of Agamemnon and Orestes thus retroactively awards them victory because the patriarchal principle of hierarchy legitimately replaces the archaic ties of blood kinship.

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<sup>3</sup> Froma I. Zeitlin, "THE DYNAMICS OF MISOGYNY: MYTH AND MYTHMAKING IN THE ORESTEIA," *Arethusa* 11, no. 1/2 (n.d.): 149–84, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26308158>.

<sup>4</sup> Johann Jakob Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht: Eine Untersuchung Über Die Gynaikokratie Der Alten Welt Nach Ihrer Religiösen Und Rechtlichen Natur*, 1861, <http://ci.nii.ac.jp/ncid/BA0714270X>.

Hence, the model of the patriarchal family contradicts that of the matriarchal family, and the latter passes into the former with the hierarchical order. According to Tor,<sup>5</sup> Clytemnestra is retroactively relegated to a subordinate member of the isolated family of the patriarchal order. In “The Oresteia and the Act of Revenge: of Desire and Jouissance”, Tor, referring to Lacan’s seminars, once again voices the argument of women’s destructiveness as the cause of their disempowerment in the *Oresteia*. Jouissance, a woman’s destructive sexual drive, becomes the cause of Clytemnestra’s disobedience to the phallic law that Agamemnon preaches. This causes her to commit his murder and usurp his power. According to Tor, Clytemnestra’s cruelty, which manifests itself in the murder of Agamemnon and ruthlessness towards her children, lies in natural female deviancy. Thus, Aeschylus again expresses misogyny through the figure of Clytemnestra, this time in the predestination of her defeat to justice.

However, all the discussion of the demonstrative transition of power from man to woman and from woman to man in *The Oresteia* misses the very moment of Clytemnestra’s transformation. The transformation from a cunning ruler to a tyrant in the “*Oresteia*” is allowed only by the complete eradication in Clytemnestra of the love for her children, which from the very beginning determined her desire to kill Agamemnon. The unjustified change that took place behind the scenes of the “*Oresteia*” is yet another act of bias towards Clytemnestra. This bias becomes another tool of Aeschylus to show women a social lesson, which in turn was driven by misogyny. In this paper, the misogyny expressed through the figure of Clytemnestra is explored through the lens of her change between the tragedies “*Agamemnon*” and “*Choephoroi*”. This change, consisting of the abrupt and unwarranted disappearance of her love for her children, will be argued through a selective reading of “*Oresteia*”. It is argued that in “*Choephoroi*” Clytemnestra was stripped of her love for her children to make her portrayal in “*Oresteia*” more oppressive, and to justify the justice of Orestes’ rise to power.

### **Clytemnestra’s Changes Throughout the Oresteia**

#### *Clytemnestra in “Agamemnon”*

The first instance of revenge in *Oresteia* begins with infanticide – the murder of Iphigenia. The first time Clytemnestra mentions her children is in “*Agamemnon*” 868, during her long monologue to

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<sup>5</sup> Dana Tor, “The Oresteia and the Act of Revenge: Of Desire and Jouissance,” *PsyArt* 27 (2022): 58–73.

Agamemnon. While informing her husband of the suffering she has endured in his absence, Clytemnestra, noticing his confusion, mentions the child that “by all rights should be here.”<sup>6</sup>

By all rights our child should be here . . .  
Orestes. You seem startled.  
You needn't be. Our loyal brother-in-arms  
will take good care of him, Strophios the Phocian.  
...  
Men, it is their nature,  
trampling on the fighter once he's down.  
(Aeschylus 867-875)

The mention of a missing child in line 867 is not only an explanation for Orestes' absence but also Clytemnestra's accusation of Agamemnon with the murder of Iphigenia. Iphigenia is a child who should be “here”, at home in Argos, as much as Orestes. If Agamemnon had not killed Iphigenia, she would still be “here”. She had a right to be “here”, but she is not “here”, and Clytemnestra points this out.

The reason why Iphigenia is not here is also pointed out by Clytemnestra to Agamemnon – she does so in line 875. And here it can be noticed that Clytemnestra's tone is accusatory. When she says that it is in man's nature to “tramp[le] on the fighter once he's down,” she means that it is natural for a man to strike at what is known to be vulnerable. It is this man's nature to strike at a known vulnerability that she attributes to the fact that their child is missing. In the case of Orestes, it means that the people might revolt against the bruised royal house to kill Orestes and overthrow Agamemnon's throne. Therefore, for security reasons, Orestes is not here because he was sent away by Clytemnestra from Argos to the house of Strophios the Phoenician. In the case of Iphigenia, the nature of men to strike at a known weak target means that she, powerless and uncomplaining, was ruthlessly sacrificed by a man – Agamemnon – for the sake of war and his glory. Iphigenia is not “here” because she was killed by Agamemnon. In pointing this out, Clytemnestra reminds Agamemnon how deeply she resents him for the murder of their daughter. She still remembers Iphigenia and the reason for her death. She also cares about Orestes' life, as she sends him away from Argos for his safety. Thus, it is seen that Clytemnestra's love for her children in “Agamemnon” is undeniable.

It is known because Clytemnestra killed her husband as revenge for her daughter. She openly reports this before the elders of Argos. In

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<sup>6</sup> Aesch. Agamemnon. 867, translated by Fagels.

this dialogue, Clytemnestra again points out Iphigenia's vulnerability to Agamemnon. In line 1440 she addresses the chorus of the elders of Argos when they accuse her of unjustly killing Agamemnon. She responds to them by pointing out that they ignore Agamemnon's unjust murder of Iphigenia. This is how Clytemnestra describes the ease with which Agamemnon killed their daughter: "He thought no more of it than killing a beast."<sup>7</sup> These words of hers not only indicate the insignificance of Iphigenia's sacrifice in Agamemnon's eyes but also how easy of a victim, a prey she is for him. Clytemnestra proves that it is the nature of man to "tramp[le] on the fighter once he's down," for Agamemnon sacrificed the defenseless Iphigenia. For this she kills Agamemnon – because he had killed her beloved daughter.

The murder of Agamemnon as a consequence of Iphigenia's murder is determined by Clytemnestra's vision of justice. She says, "By all rights our child should be here" because she is certain of Iphigenia's right to be "here." In Clytemnestra's understanding, the right to be "here", which Agamemnon took from Iphigenia, allows her to take the same right from Agamemnon. Thus, Clytemnestra is firmly convinced of her right to kill Agamemnon to avenge Iphigenia. This is proven by Clytemnestra's undeniable love for her children, as well as her vision of justice.

She asserts and explains this vision of justice very soon after she first mentions her children at the beginning of the carpet scene:

"But now, dear head,  
bright imagined head of my dark blessing,  
step down from your height for me. Yet do not tread  
this gross earth with your Ilion-conquering foot.

...

Now may his paths all merge one crimson red  
as Justice brings him unexpected home.  
As for the rest, sharp thought that outwits sleep  
will work the fated justice the gods keep."  
(Aeschylus, 904-913)

This is the final stanza of Clytemnestra's monologue in which she welcomes Agamemnon back from war. In her monologue, she laments her long separation from him, which had tormented her with despair and fear. Now, happy with her husband's return, she is about to spread a crimson carpet before his feet as a sign of honor and tribute to him. The end of this monologue is the beginning of the carpet scene, in which

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<sup>7</sup> Aesch. Agamemnon. 1440, translated by Fagels.

Clytemnestra arranges a test of Agamemnon's piety. This test is aimed at dispelling her doubts about killing Agamemnon. If Agamemnon does not show piety, it means that he has not changed in the ten years of their separation, and still deserves to have his right to be "here" taken away from him.

The stanza begins with an antithesis in which Clytemnestra directly opposes herself to Agamemnon. Here he is the "bright imagined head" and she is the "dark blessing." This is not to be taken as an allocation of rightness or justice, but rather as a natural determination of the parties. The whole carpet scene, like the whole of the Eumenides, stands on the conflict of two divine perspectives, where Clytemnestra is on the side of the forgotten chthonic goddesses who swirl in the darkness of the underworld, and Agamemnon is patronized by the sun-honored Olympians. In discussing Clytemnestra's adherence to the chthonic goddesses, it is necessary to mention that the Erinyes who protected her interests are archaic goddesses of matriarchy and matriarchal law. Their law asserted the undeniable bond between a mother and her child, as well as the mother's right to her child. They became archaic with the arrival of the young Olympians and their patriarchal law, which asserted the right of men to their children. The low position of the matriarchal Erinyes relative to the young gods also demonstrates the predetermined defeat of feminine interests over masculine ones. Therefore, Clytemnestra is in subterranean darkness while Agamemnon is sanctified by light.

The confirmation of their opposing positions can be seen in the next line, where Clytemnestra urges Agamemnon to come down to her: "Step down from your height for me." She says this not only because she wants to identify him as belonging to the young ruling gods. Clytemnestra also wants to emphasize his superiority once again so that he forgets about the gods who protect him in the name of his vanity. It is worth noting that she does not encourage him to blaspheme, as she does not worship the same gods as he does. On the contrary, she inclines him to justice, to an act of reckoning. If he walks across the carpet, forgetting his respect for the young gods, he will come directly towards the reckoning for his old sins, thus contributing to the real divine will and, consequently, to justice.

What Clytemnestra says about paying for old sins can be understood even before the speech goes straight to justice. Line 910 reads, "Now may his paths all merge one crimson red." Here Clytemnestra is not only summarizing Agamemnon's life by realizing that if he walks the carpet, he will meet his death; she is also saying that

for every crime he has committed, one reckoning awaits him. It follows, of course, that when in line 911 Clytemnestra speaks of the justice that has brought Agamemnon home, she does not mean the righteousness of his victory at Troy over Paris, but the righteousness of his defeat at Argos before Clytemnestra. She is sure that he must be defeated and killed by her, for he has taken away the right to be here from Iphigenia, and now Clytemnestra must take that right away from Agamemnon.

Also, Clytemnestra has her reasons for believing that Agamemnon's defeat before her will be just. She trusts her vision, which she has had time to formulate in the ten years since the death of her daughter Iphigenia. She says, "sharp thought that outwits sleep," because she believes she is the "sharp thought." In doing so, Clytemnestra believes that she is in union with divine providence. She trusts in the chthonic goddesses who hold allegiance to blood matriarchal vengeance. And she believes that they support her, because "sharp thought" is supported by the gods: "As for the rest, sharp thought that outwits sleep/will work the fated justice the gods keep."

Thus, it becomes apparent that the sly monologue of the weeping wife culminates in a sincerity that sets the scene on the carpet in motion. Clytemnestra demonstrates her faith and trust in justice and divine providence and uses it to influence Agamemnon to bring him to justice. Her trust in the chthonic goddesses strengthens her belief in the rightness of her vision of justice, and so she is determined to kill Agamemnon.

It can be seen how Aeschylus uses the origins of this determination of Clytemnestra to kill Agamemnon to encourage and censure his heroes. In the hierarchical system that Aeschylus draws out in the carpet scene, he places Agamemnon above to encourage his behavior, and he places Clytemnestra below to express disapproval of her desire for revenge. In the midst of the carpet scene, as Clytemnestra puts the final touches to persuading Agamemnon to step onto the carpet, she speculates on the inexhaustibility of the purple reserves in the dark sea and the brightness of the color of Agamemnon's royal robes. By means of the oppositions in lines 958-966 of "Agamemnon", Aeschylus asserts the positions of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon within the hierarchical system of the Oresteia. This hierarchical system, just as Clytemnestra's certainty to kill Agamemnon, is inevitably linked to their affiliation with different gods:

There is the sea. What sun could burn it up?  
From cold dark depths I'll fetch your bright red stain;



your life-warm dye will drench your kingly robes.  
The price, my lord, is high; but with god's help  
we gladly pay. Since when was your house poor?  
How many treasure-vestments would I tread  
if I was told to by some palace oracle,  
if such acts would bring back that precious life?"  
(Aeschylus 958-966)

Here Clytemnestra persuades Agamemnon to walk across the carpet, and he tries to refuse her – their dialogue is in itself a confrontation and opposition of beliefs. This is why the antitheses in Clytemnestra's words are so reminiscent of the verbal argument taking place between her and Agamemnon. For example, in lines 959-960 she contrasts "cold dark depths" with "bright red stain" and "life-warm dye."

Clytemnestra speaks of the "cold dark depths" not only as an inexhaustible source but also as herself. In lines 904-905 she has already defined herself as the low darkness associated with the chthonic goddess Erinyes, and now the darkness of the deep sea seems to be her legitimate metonymy. In contrast, her spouse, Agamemnon, is a "bright red stain," for he is a hero who deserves to wear bright purple. Moreover, Agamemnon obeys the patriarchal law of the young Olympian gods. His devotion to the Olympians elevates him compared to his wife, who is a devotee of the chthonic goddesses. There is an obvious gap between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon: she is at the bottom of the divine hierarchy, while he is at the top. The impact of the difference in their positions will play a role in Athena's trial in the "Eumenides", when Clytemnestra, patronized by the chthonic Erinyes, loses the trial to Orestes, patronized by the young Apollo. The hierarchical opposition demonstrated in Clytemnestra's speech is thus a warning of Clytemnestra's predestined defeat.

It was already determined that Clytemnestra's adherence to the Erinyes predetermines her defeat due to her low position in relation to Agamemnon's adherence to the Olympians. In Clytemnestra's understanding, however, the distance of positions between her and her husband is not hierarchically vertical, but hostilely horizontal. Even though Agamemnon is at the top, she does not consider him superior to her. However, she does consider him to be her equal enemy. By pointing out her position relative to Agamemnon's, Clytemnestra sets herself against him when she speaks of his return – for he has returned to Argos from the war. She sets herself against him because she emphasizes the difference between the life-warm dye and the cold dark depths. She

opposes him because she is as different from him as the dark cold sea is from the bright warm paint. For – again – Clytemnestra honors the chthonic goddesses who embody the darkness of the underworld, while Agamemnon obeys the law of the patriarchal Olympians. They differ in creed, and belonging to different gods determines their positions in the antithesis of Clytemnestra. She is “depths of the sea,” and he is “life-warm dye.” And when Clytemnestra speaks of pulling the dye from the depths, she alienates Agamemnon from herself.

In discussing Clytemnestra as the depths of the sea one can consider the sea as a mother giving birth to a “bright red stain.” In this case, the “cold dark depths” stain the “royal garments” with their child – the blood of their child. “Bright red stain” in the form of Iphigenia is extracted from the “cold dark depths” of Clytemnestra to give color to Agamemnon’s “royal robes.”

From this perspective, the mother-child relationship is matriarchal, for from the very beginning until the forced separation, the child belongs to and is born of the mother. These symbols depicting the primacy of birth and fertility are defined by Clytemnestra’s association with the chthonic Erinyes. Indeed, it is the Erinyes who determine Clytemnestra’s attitude to revenge. Revenge must be blood, that is, life must be given for life. And in this, Clytemnestra spares no red cloth to “bring back that precious life.” She kills Agamemnon for taking away Iphigenia’s right to be “here”, alive and at home.

In the end, it all comes back to the fact that Clytemnestra wants to avenge her daughter. Everything about Clytemnestra is reduced to love for her daughter and hatred for the one who killed her. However, in the tragedy of the Oresteia that follows, it seems as if everyone, including Clytemnestra herself, forgets this.

### *Clytemnestra in “Choephoroi”*

Comparing “Agamemnon” and “Choephoroi”, in the second tragedy Clytemnestra appears to the reader in a completely different light. She transforms from a vengeful, loving mother into an adulterous wife who enslaves her children and tyrannizes the people of Argos. Her daughter Electra, coming to her father’s grave with libations, speaks and calls herself and Orestes sold by Clytemnestra: “We’re beggars now, / as if our mother traded us away.”<sup>8</sup> She also says she lives in slavery and Orestes is in exile.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Aesch. Choephoroi. 132-133, translated by Fagels.

<sup>9</sup> Aesch. Choephoroi. 135-136, translated by Fagels.

It can be assumed that for some reason Clytemnestra singles out Electra, because in “Agamemnon” she does not mention her once, unlike Orestes and Iphigenia, whom she mentions many times. However, the fact that Orestes’ stay at Phocis is called exile seems odd, considering that in “Agamemnon” Clytemnestra explained Orestes’ absence with security concerns. In “Choephoroi”, on the other hand, Orestes’ stay in Phocis is referred to as a sale - this is said by Electra in line 133 and by Orestes in line 912 – in his dialogue with Clytemnestra when he is about to kill her: “You sold me in disgrace – a free man’s so.”<sup>10</sup> What was the reason for the “sale” and what the “price” was is not explained. Just as perplexed as the reader, Clytemnestra asks her son: “What’s the price I charged for you?” Orestes very conveniently waves it off: “That’s too shameful to declare in public.”<sup>11</sup> He does not reveal to the audience the reason why he accuses his mother of “selling out” and neither “Choephoroi” nor the “Eumenides” offer any other reason for Orestes’ absence from Argos than that Clytemnestra voiced in “Agamemnon”. This points to the baselessness of Orestes’ accusation of Clytemnestra’s “selling” him, as well as the theatrical imagery of Clytemnestra’s guilt to her children. Based on the events of “Agamemnon”, Aeschylus has no reason to accuse Clytemnestra of betraying her children, so he artificially creates this reason in “Choephoroi”. However, he does not reveal the essence of this reason, which leaves some questions unanswered. If Clytemnestra did not send her son to Phocis to protect him, what was the purpose of her sending him there? This question is not answered, just as “Choephoroi” and “Eumenides” ignore the reason why Clytemnestra shows cruel indifference to Electra, making her life in the house look like slavery. In both “Choephoroi” and “Eumenides,” Aeschylus deliberately hides Clytemnestra’s true intentions from the audience because they prevent him from making her image reprehensible.

Thus, Aeschylus destructively demonized Clytemnestra’s image in “Choephoroi” compared to “Agamemnon” – her love for her children suddenly disappeared without explanation. In addition to the fact that all the characters in “Choephoroi” seem to forget the existence of Clytemnestra’s love, which was the driving force behind her murder of Agamemnon, Orestes, and Electra are similarly oblivious to Agamemnon’s sins. For example, during her meeting with Orestes at her father’s grave, Electra says that she gives him her love for her father, mother, and sister. She loves him as a father, for the father is dead, she loves him as a mother, for the mother she hates, and she loves him as a sister, for the sister has been murdered. At this Electra mentions the

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<sup>10</sup> Aesch. Choephoroi. 912, translated by Fagels.

<sup>11</sup> Aesch. Choephoroi. 916, translated by Fagels.

murder of Iphigenia and calls it cruel: “Then there’s the love I bore my sister, Iphigenia, that cruel sacrifice.”<sup>12</sup> She knows that Iphigenia was murdered, and she knows the circumstances under which it happened - for she calls Iphigenia a “cruel sacrifice.” However, this does not prevent her from loving the father who made that sacrifice and loving the mother who avenged that sacrifice. Electra simply ignores Agamemnon’s guilt over the death of her beloved sister and does not recognize the sins of her father.

Orestes also does not speak of Agamemnon’s sins and the reason for his murder by Clytemnestra. The only time anyone brings up Agamemnon’s sin is in line 917 when Clytemnestra tries to dissuade Orestes from killing her. “Don’t forget to name your father’s failings, too,” says Clytemnestra.<sup>13</sup> But Orestes again waves off his mother’s words. “Don’t charge him with anything” he says.<sup>14</sup> Agamemnon’s guilt seems to be deliberately ignored in “Choephoroi”, just as Clytemnestra’s love for her children. Aeschylus destroys any justification for Clytemnestra by ignoring them or brushing them aside, and this shows bias towards her. This is because in “Choephoroi”, Aeschylus only accepts a partial perspective of revenge in which Agamemnon’s guilt is glossed over and Clytemnestra’s guilt is exaggerated accordingly.

#### *Rationale for Clytemnestra’s Change*

What might the bias be related to? Pontani suggests that for dramatic effect, Aeschylus excludes other characters from Clytemnestra and Orestes’ relationship, while making Clytemnestra responsible for all the best and worst events in Orestes’ life.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, Aeschylus, unlike Stesichorus, limits the influence of Orestes’ nurse on the plot. According to Stesichorus, to whom the earlier version of the myth of Orestes belongs, Orestes’ nurse saves his life by sacrificing her son. Aeschylus does not include this scene in “Oresteia”, taking the maternal image of Orestes’ nurse aside. This was to prevent outside interference in the relationship between Clytemnestra and Orestes. It can be suggested that for the same reason, Aeschylus may have removed from the lines of Orestes and Electra the mention of Iphigenie’s murderer, as well as the reason for Clytemnestra’s revenge on Agamemnon. By doing this, Aeschylus may have wanted to limit Agamemnon’s interference in the conflict between Orestes and Clytemnestra. This limitation would

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<sup>12</sup> Aesch. Choephoroi. 242-243, translated by Fagles.

<sup>13</sup> Aesch. Choephoroi. 917, translated by Fagles.

<sup>14</sup> Aesch. Choephoroi. 918, translated by Fagles.

<sup>15</sup> Filippomaria Pontani, “Shocks, Lies, and Matricide: Thoughts on Aeschylus” Choephoroi” 653-718, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 103 (1965): 203–33.

emphasize Clytemnestra's influence on the disasters that happened to her children. The urge to limit Agamemnon's interference in the conflict between Orestes and Clytemnestra may explain the reason why Orestes in line 918 refuses to recall the murder of Iphigenia by Agamemnon. It may even explain the reason why Electra calls Orestes' stay at Phocis an exile and Orestes calls it a sale. However, the need for directness in the relationship between Clytemnestra and Orestes, to which Pontani attributes the downplaying of other characters' influence on Orestes' fate, cannot influence Electra. It still doesn't explain why Electra loves her father and hates her mother, and why Clytemnestra in Electra's own words has made her daughter's life "slavery". This establishes the fact that there is a bias against Clytemnestra and that this bias is connected to something deeper than the need for dramatic effect.

In order to determine the cause of this bias, one must first determine the need for it. In the *Eumenides*, after the murder of Clytemnestra, Athena is summoned to try Orestes. The defense of the plaintiff is represented by the Erinyes, the chthonic goddesses, and the defense of the defendant by Apollo, the young Olympian. Both the Erinyes and Apollo are partial. The Erinyes are archaic matriarchal goddesses who assert the superiority of the blood bond of mother and child over non-blood marriage bonds. Apollo is the representative of the new patriarchal gods who asserts the superiority of patriarchal law and the laws of patriarchal marriage. Athena is called upon to judge this judgment because she is androgynous – she is female like Erinyes but masculine like Apollo. Athena is not a direct representative of matriarchy or patriarchy, so her judgment must be impartial. However, the poise of her androgyny is at the same time an obstacle to her judgment because it prevents her from leaning to one side and passing judgment. Therefore, when the members of the Areopagus do not come to a unanimous agreement, she is forced to appeal to her origin as the reason for her partiality: "No mother gave me birth,"<sup>16</sup> and therefore "I cannot set more store by the woman's death."<sup>17</sup> Athena believes she belongs to men more than women, and on the basis, partiality justifies Orestes, thereby judging Clytemnestra wrong. Clytemnestra loses because she is a woman and Orestes wins because he is a man. And so, the conflict ends with the definition of a new bias related to gender.

This could have been foreseen. It was already asserted that the Erinyes were metrically inferior to the Olympian gods. They are in the underworld, while the Olympians are high above the earth. Women's interests are placed below men's because the female order became

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<sup>16</sup> Aesch. *Eumenides*. 936, translated by Fagles.

<sup>17</sup> Aesch. *Eumenides*. 939, translated by Fagles.

obsolete with the arrival of the new gods. Similarly, the matriarchal rule of Clytemnestra in Argos becomes obsolete. Zeitlin notes that Clytemnestra, who began as a responsible woman, ends up a tyrant because she decided to make regency a permanent rule.<sup>18</sup> But it would be more correct to consider that Aeschylus gives Clytemnestra the imperiousness to condemn her and her insubordination to a man. In “Choephoroi”, Aeschylus gives birth to a masculine desire for power in Clytemnestra which suppresses the feminine maternal love in her. Feminine interests become inferior to masculine interests in Clytemnestra herself as she approaches a patriarchal version of herself. In “Choephoroi”, Aeschylus brings Clytemnestra closer to the patriarchal ideal so that she can be judged by patriarchal laws in the “Eumenides”.

It is worth bearing in mind that Aeschylus’ retelling of the Orestes myth was the first in which the murder of Agamemnon was committed directly by Clytemnestra and not by Aegisthus. Homer, Stesichorus, and Nostoi mentioned Aegisthus as the main instigator of Agamemnon’s murder. Aegisthus is only Clytemnestra’s subordinate, her consort. Aeschylus emphasizes Clytemnestra in *The Oresteia* – he relegates Agamemnon and his sins, Orestes’ nurse and his salvation thanks to her, and Aegisthus and his reasons for revenge to the background. Aeschylus does not mention Agamemnon’s sins from “Choephoroi” onwards, not simply to make the relationship between Orestes and Clytemnestra more straightforward, but to turn the conflict of family vendetta into a gynaecocratic problem.<sup>19</sup> Emphasizing Clytemnestra’s culpability in the distress of her children helps Aeschylus to express censure of Clytemnestra’s rebellion and the establishment of female power. Thus, instead of a chronicle of Atrean revenge, the myth of Orestes is transformed by Aeschylus into a story permeated with gender conflicts. For this same reason, Aegisthus’ revenge is relegated to the background – so that his revenge for his father does not overshadow the murder of his spouse, which in the *Eumenides* would have been able to be condemned and censured. And for this purpose, Clytemnestra is transformed from a vengeful mother into an adulterous wife, so that she can be condemned for adultery and disobedience.

## Conclusion

The syntheses in the previous section have proved and indicated the reason for Aeschylus’ need for bias towards Clytemnestra. Aeschylus

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<sup>18</sup> Zeitlin, “THE DYNAMICS OF MISOGYNY: MYTH AND MYTHMAKING IN THE ORESTEIA.”

<sup>19</sup> Zeitlin, “THE DYNAMICS OF MISOGYNY: MYTH AND MYTHMAKING IN THE ORESTEIA.”

stripped Clytemnestra of her love for her children in “Choepori” to make her portrayal more in line with the patriarchal image of a cruel adulterous wife. In “Cheophori” she seems to forget the reason she killed Agamemnon, lest the image of a vengeful mother prevent the censure of her rebellion against her husband and male authority. For the same reason, Aeschylus makes Orestes and Electra not mention or admit their father’s guilt in the murder of Iphigenia. Broadly, Clytemnestra’s change between the tragedies of “Agamemnon” and “Choepori” was driven by the need to censure female authority and the matriarchal vision of justice. In an age of debates about the marginalization of women, the topic of the suppression of female authority can lead to discussions about how contemporary understandings of gender balance and power dynamics are shaped by historical depictions of women in roles of power and rebellion. Studying female figures such as Clytemnestra forces us to confront dominant narratives that often portray women in positions of power as negative or destructive. This paper has presented a valuable reconciliation of Aeschylus’ bias towards the Clytemnestra, allowing us to challenge traditional notions of gender roles and power dynamics, paving the way for more nuanced and inclusive views.

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