

**Compare the portrayal of Clytaemnestra in both Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Electra*. Which portrayal do you think is more effective and why?**

The character of Clytaemnestra is portrayed very differently in both Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Electra*. In *Agamemnon*, we see a very strong female ruler, who is completely absorbed by her passion for vengeance, whereas the figure in *Electra* is far more maternal, and shows a concern for her family and reputation, which was not apparent in Aeschylus' play. This subdued version of Clytaemnestra shows a stark contrast to the fierce and dominant character in *Agamemnon*, however both characters remain fascinating for different reasons.

The Clytaemnestra of *Agamemnon* seems to be fearless of retribution, with an infallible belief in her own righteousness; 'I have no fear that his avenger's tread shall shake this house'. In *Electra*, however, we see a very different character, humbled over the years, and afraid of Orestes, 'I'm terrified...they say he is full of anger for his father's death'. These different reactions to the same topic emphasise how greatly the character of Clytaemnestra differs in each play, from the meek and subdued housewife of *Electra*, to the self-assured and confident murderess of *Agamemnon*.

One explanation for the changes in character of Clytaemnestra in these plays is the timescale in which they are set. The events in *Electra* happen several years after those in *Agamemnon*, and the more mature and calmer Clytaemnestra we see portrayed in Euripides' play could be due to the effect of time on her, and the fact that she has had several years in which to reflect upon her actions and realise the full extent of the crimes that she committed against her husband. In *Electra*, Clytaemnestra states 'how bitterly I regret it now' with regards to the murder she has committed, showing that she has indeed been thinking about the events of the past and repents her actions. This Clytaemnestra is very subdued in comparison to the character portrayed by Aeschylus, and although we can see some evidence of the passion and raw energy that made the character so fascinating in *Agamemnon*, for instance when she attempts to justify her murder of Agamemnon to her daughter; 'why should he not die?' it is clear in *Electra* that Clytaemnestra is to take second stage to her daughter in regards to unhindered fury and a lust for vengeance. This older, wiser Clytaemnestra still remains crucial to the plot, but not as a central character, and is merely a shadow of her former self, the confident, powerful creature who dictated the action of Aeschylus' play.

The style of the two playwrights is a notable difference in the two plays, and the representation of Clytaemnestra varies greatly due to this. Euripides, the more modern of the two tragedists, tended to use sophistic arguments to confound the audiences expectations of a character. With Clytaemnestra, for instance, he decided to move away from her monstrous image the audience would have expected after plays such as *Agamemnon*, and instead portrayed her as a

gentler, maternal figure. This technique was enhanced by the fact that we do not see Clytaemnestra until the second half of the play; only hear about her from Electra. The image portrayed by this character is similar to the one portrayed in *Agamemnon*, so much so as the audience can wonder whether Euripides is intentionally parodying this version of events, as he had done earlier in the play with the recognition scene, a clear parody of *The Libation Bearers*. Aeschylus, a far more traditional playwright, portrays Clytaemnestra in her classic style, as the murderess of her own husband. This portrayal is, however, somewhat sympathetic towards Clytaemnestra, and we can feel some compassion towards her, although this does not excuse her actions. Aeschylus gave the audience a clear moral standpoint in his tragedies, and they are aware through both the use of the chorus, and the play itself, whose side to be on, from a moral perspective. Euripides on the other hand, tended to be deliberately ambiguous, and his treatment of Clytaemnestra is typical of this. The two sides of the woman that are exposed in this play; the ruthless killer of Agamemnon, as seen through the eyes of Electra, and the reformed wife of Aegisthus, as is later portrayed. This use of sophistic techniques in order to confound the audience's expectations is common in the plays of Euripides, and is particularly effective in this portrayal of such a fascinating woman.

The fact that Clytaemnestra is the central character in *Agamemnon* yet only plays a small part in Euripides' *Electra* also accounts for several differences in her character. The Clytaemnestra in *Agamemnon* appears almost constantly throughout the play, and through this we can see the development of her character from the strong wife looking after her husband's estate whilst he is at war: 'Our king and leader absent...our duty pays his due observance to his wife', to the violent mistress who murders her husband without remorse at the end of the play: 'caught by the ruthless falsehood of a wife'. Aeschylus is able to develop his character over a far greater stretch of time than Euripides as, in *Electra*, Clytaemnestra only appears in one scene. The fact that Clytaemnestra is the main protagonist in *Agamemnon* allows us to examine her character to a far greater extent, enabling us to see how obsessed she has become with the idea of vengeance, and the murder of her husband: 'His death the work of my right hand, whose craftsmanship Justice acknowledges'. In *Electra*, the character of Clytaemnestra is not given as much time to develop, and we have to make assumptions on her based on the short dialogue between her and Electra.

Clytaemnestra, who showed such strength as a woman in a man's world in *Agamemnon*, is somewhat subdued in *Electra*. In *Agamemnon*, we are aware that Clytaemnestra takes great pride in her ability to rule over her people as well as a man, and admonishes the Chorus by saying 'You speak as to some thoughtless woman: you are wrong'. Indeed, Clytaemnestra had won praise earlier on in the play from the Watchman, who commented that the Queen 'manoeuvred like a man'. In *Electra*, in contrast to this strong, female leadership, we can see that it is Aegisthus who is in charge of Argos, and Clytaemnestra seems to be afraid of him. She explains to her daughter that she could not stand

up to him, as 'You know his temper'. This contrast can be explained by a number of factors. The passing of time between the setting of the two plays may have subdued Clytaemnestra, who seems now to be content in a more maternal role, attending to her daughter after the birth of her grandchild, and performing the sacred rites needed after a birth. Another explanation for this contrast also lies in the intentions of the playwrights, and the conflict between Aeschylus' traditional approach to the story, and Euripides' wish to challenge and confound his audience.

The setting of the two plays also provides a marked contrast between Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Electra*. The setting of the play in a shack in Euripides' version was very unusual, and emphasises the fact that his tragedy does not conform to the traditional ideas of the story of the House of Atreus. Aeschylus, on the other hand, has set his play within a palace, a 'house of kings', a far more conventional location for a drama. These contrasts set the tone for the differences throughout the play, and this would allow the audience to guess at the nature of the play from the scenery. The setting of *Electra* in a shack emphasises Euripides' wish to confound dramatic expectations of his plays, and also harks back to a simpler, rural time, a golden age, a theme which is also reinforced by the appearance of the peasant, an Euripidean invention which was not featured in any of the previous tragedies on this subject.

One similarity between the Clytaemnestra of *Agamemnon* and the one of *Electra* is their justification of the murder of Agamemnon. In both plays, Clytaemnestra cites the sacrifice of Iphigeneia as the motive for killing her husband. In *Agamemnon*, Clytaemnestra laments that 'My own darling, whom my pain brought forth – he killed her'. A similar argument is used in *Electra* to justify her murder, telling Electra that 'he killed my daughter – why should he not die?'. This is one of the few similarities between the characters, who have otherwise been almost completely altered.

The character of Clytaemnestra is almost completely different in the two tragedies, with many different characteristics and motives. Both Euripides and Aeschylus have created an intriguing character in Clytaemnestra. Aeschylus, however, has, in his portrayal of Clytaemnestra, given us a strong female character, who, in spite of the atrocities she commits, is still capable of evoking the sympathy of an audience, as we see her struggle for acceptance in a male world. It is this strength of character, rather than Euripides' intriguing, yet somewhat weaker Clytaemnestra that is more effective, and it is because of this that she remains the central focus of *Agamemnon*, and a constantly fascinating individual.