

“Hell Hath No Fury like a Woman Scorned” Is this more apt a description of Medea or of Clytemnestra?

In the two plays *The Agamemnon* and *The Medea*, we are introduced to two very different women with very different problems. We become familiar with a different side of women when we realise the thought processes and actions of both Medea and Clytemnestra. Both women are strong, intelligent women with a great deal of power for revenge against their husbands and their husbands' lovers. Throughout these two works the focus is on the amount of power that both Clytemnestra and Medea possess and their limited ability to use it.

Due to the fact of similarities between authors writing in the same place and time, we often make the mistake of presuming their viewpoints are identical on the given subject. It would be a mistake to expect Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and Euripides' *Medea* to express identical views on the roles of women; each author had a unique way and style of writing and also had different opinions of the fairer sex. The opinions of these two writers on this subject are quite different.

*Agamemnon* is not really about Agamemnon as much as it is about Clytemnestra, his wife. Clytemnestra tells us early on that she has suffered terribly in her life, and mentions the loss of her daughter Iphigenia. Aeschylus is making us sympathize with Clytemnestra. After Agamemnon arrives, Clytemnestra treats him almost like a god, insisting on wrapping him in a huge royal robe as he descends from his chariot. Agamemnon protests that this kind of welcome is unnecessary, but Clytemnestra is insistent, and he finally gives in. Clytemnestra, however, has another motive; she uses the huge robe to make it difficult for him to fight against her; as Clytemnestra later confesses, "Our never-ending, all embracing net, I cast it wide for the royal haul, I coil him round and round in the wealth, the robes of doom". Once trapped, she stabs him three times. By taking the dagger in her hand she, for once, gained control of her destiny. In choosing to take her revenge on her own, she became what men would fear for ages afterward: an empowered woman. The killing of a king is a very public act, and Clytemnestra makes no effort to hide what she has done. Rather, she comes out into the public square outside the palace, bearing the bloodstained robe, and tells the Chorus that she has killed their king, and why. This shows the sheer madness of Clytemnestra and how she will stop at nothing to get her own way. She uses the cunning usually displayed by a man to lure Agamemnon into the bath, and has no shame in doing so.

Aeschylus has created a woman with whom his audience could sympathize, and whose pain felt real to them. He does this by speaking of how Agamemnon sacrificed his own daughter Iphigenia in order to sail well on the way to Troy. Creating a character like this was no small effort, considering the fact that in ancient Greece women were looked upon as slaves; however, we still feel for Clytemnestra after losing her child, and somehow understand why she has killed Agamemnon, if not for the murder of his own daughter then for his returning with his mistress, Cassandra.

Euripides, in writing *Medea*, presents women in a much different way. There is a similarity between Euripides' story and Aeschylus'; both Clytemnestra and Medea are strong, passionate women who commit a horrendous crime. But it is here that the similarity ends. In *Agamemnon*, we understand why Agamemnon did what he did, but

somehow we feel that Clytemnestra was completely justified in planning ten years worth of bitterness against the man who killed her child. And under her circumstances, we completely sympathize with her desire to kill the man who separated her from the daughter she loved. Part of the reason we have so much sympathy for Clytemnestra is that Aeschylus presented her as a tragic character. We feel her pain, and she does not seem insane to us. In the other hand, with Euripides' Medea is the other way round. In the opening speech the Nurse warns us that Medea is dangerous; she is not presented like a suffering creature as much as the wrong woman to mess with. Medea curses her children and talks of killing them, which seems a little extreme at first but soon enough we realise that she is in the right frame of mind to actually do it; she is not a nice woman.

I think the reason why we can forgive Clytemnestra but not Medea is based on the innocence or guilt of their victims. Medea has killed her brother; she kills her husband's new bride; and later she kills her children. One cannot sympathize with these acts; they are all out of proportion to Medea's reasons for doing them; and they clearly show Medea to be out of her mind. Aeschylus would seem to have a much more open view of women, he gives Clytemnestra some credit. Moreover, he makes her sympathetic enough that even his audience would have understood Clytemnestra's view, and excused her one-time intrusion into an area normally reserved for men: seeking vengeance. On the other hand, Euripides seems to fear women, if his characterization of Medea is any indication. Medea is depicted as a strange witch ; she is portrayed as if she were from another planet. She is barbarian, and what we would now call a cold-blooded killer.

Euripides knows that most of the women of his people are not at all like Medea, but he is clearly contemplating what "other" women are like. Because women are not exactly like men, he seems to be saying, they could be capable of doing something horrific like this. Unfortunately, in Athenian society Age, there would seem to have been many people who agreed with Euripides and not with Aeschylus. Women had no legal rights; their function, aside from motherhood, was to see that the home ran smoothly and the lives of their men were secure and comfortable. From this point, what is truly remarkable is that Aeschylus managed to make Clytemnestra sympathetic at all. I think that Euripides had decided to write a play about a woman like no other, one that goes against all normalities of Greek womanhood and one that would leave the mouths of watching Greeks open with shock.

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