



MONTCLAIR STATE
UNIVERSITY

Montclair State University
**Montclair State University Digital
Commons**

Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects

1-2020

Euripides : Suppliant to the Divine Feminine

Liz Amato
Montclair State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Amato, Liz, "Euripides : Suppliant to the Divine Feminine" (2020). *Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects*. 333.

<https://digitalcommons.montclair.edu/etd/333>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Montclair State University Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses, Dissertations and Culminating Projects by an authorized administrator of Montclair State University Digital Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@montclair.edu.

Abstract

The Euripidean tragedies *Hippolytus*, *The Bacchae* and *The Medea* present us with female characters who have sacred and profound interactions with the gods. These women have powerful ritualistic abilities that move the tragic action. Similarly, Euripides' versions of *Hecuba* and *Electra* present us with dynamic female characters who derive their agency from the religio-judicial need for cosmic atonement. It is up to these heroines to uphold the sacred laws decreed by the gods. Why does Euripides empower these females with such direct means of divination? Arguably, Euripides felt it necessary to use these deistic feminine connections to destroy the titular male characters. The tragedian's implication is clear: divine feminine power supersedes patriarchal power. This divine power is inherent in all women and it compels them act on behalf of cosmic necessity. The importance of Medea's, Phaedra's and Agave's respective spiritual connections shows us the crucial role that women played in ancient religious worship. And the spiritually authoritative power that Hecuba and Electra wield shows how ancient religious worship and political clout were inseparable.

These females, through the power of divine association, are able to challenge the status quo. Powerful as they are, we cannot definitively say that they reflect Euripides' personal attitude towards women. We can say, however, that he created characters worthy of respect. They are a class of humans who play essential roles in society—they are not dismissible. As Helene Foley posits, “tragic female representations challenge the male failure to maintain binary balance in society” (9). If the archaic male was inclined to follow the advice of the Pythia, it makes sense that these “fictive female” voices would resonate with the classical male audience.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

Euripides: Suppliant to the Divine Feminine

by

Liz Amato

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

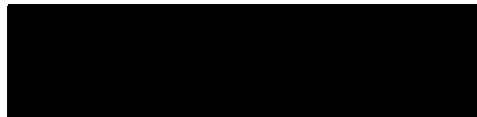
Master of Arts

January 2020

College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Thesis Committee:

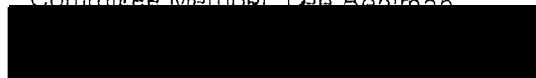
Department: English



Thesis Sponsor: Naomi Liebler



Committee Member: Lee Bohman



Committee Member: Meghan Robison

EURIPIDES: SUPPLIANT TO THE DIVINE FEMININE

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of the Arts

by

LIZ AMATO

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2020

Copyright c 2020 by Liz Amato. All rights reserved.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not have been possible without the support of my husband, Nick Saracco, my mother, Patricia McCullough, and my son, Christopher Amato. Thank you all for your encouragement—and patience—throughout this long academic journey. I would also like to thank Dr. Naomi Liebler for her guidance and valuable criticism. She has been a great mentor whose wisdom I cherish. Many thanks, also, to Dr. Lee Behlman and Dr. Meghan Robison. Their diversified perspectives helped to make this a more comprehensive study than I could have ever imagined. It has been an honor to work with such esteemed members of the Montclair faculty.

--Liz Amato, December 2019.

Table of Contents

1. Thesis Text pp. 7-61
2. Bibliography pp. 62-65

Euripides: Suppliant to the Divine Feminine

The Euripidean tragedies *Hippolytus*, *The Bacchae* and *The Medea* present us with female characters who have sacred and profound interactions with the gods. These women have powerful ritualistic abilities that move the tragic action. Similarly, Euripides' versions of *Hecuba* and *Electra* present us with dynamic female characters who derive their agency from the religio-judicial need for cosmic atonement. It is up to these heroines to uphold the sacred laws decreed by the gods. Why does Euripides empower these females with such direct means of divination? Arguably, Euripides felt it necessary to use these deistic feminine connections to destroy the titular male characters. The tragedian's implication is clear: divine feminine power supersedes patriarchal power. This divine power is inherent in all women and it compels them act on behalf of cosmic necessity. The importance of Medea's, Phaedra's and Agave's respective spiritual connections shows us the crucial role that women played in ancient religious worship. And the spiritually authoritative power that Hecuba and Electra wield shows how ancient religious worship and political clout were inseparable.

In order to understand the power of the feminine, we need to move past rudimentary generalizations of classical Greek society. It was patriarchal. Historically-speaking, men dominated this culture. The Greek city-states were constantly at war. We should not let this militaristic image influence our impression of the role of the female in this ancient society. Women held important hierarchal positions that were as esteemed as the warrior class. Ancient Greece was first and foremost a religious society. Walter Burkert tells us that "the roles offered by ritual are manifold and complex Through them, society is articulated" (258). The male polis may have fought the wars and ran the government, but they did so only after seeking the

counsel of the female Pythia at Delphi (Cline 175). “Divination,” says Kurt Cline, “has always been a special province of the divine feminine” (167). Euripides, too, believed that some rites of initiation could be conducted only by women (Jackman). Moreover, Euripides lived at a time when intellectuals sought “a purer concept of god,” and a stronger “spiritual element” in their religious practices (Burkert 316-18). He goes on to note that the tragedian’s plays fought against “naïve anthropomorphism” (317). If we, then, examine Euripides’ plays in this ideological context, we can see why they are extraordinarily focused on ritual. And we can see why it is necessary for the female characters to have direct deistic connections. It is only through them that “a purer concept of god” can be found.

The deistic connections between the female characters and the gods most likely served several ideological purposes. Ruth Padel notes that “the period during which Athenian tragedy flourished was the period of Athens’ imperial control over other Greek states” (4). This imperial control was not a time of stability, however. All of these plays were written and produced during the time of the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), when “Greek civilization was undergoing the greatest of its upheavals from which it never fully recovered” (Kott 229). “Euripides,” says Helene Foley, wrote many plays that focused on “suppliancy,” and “the aftermath of war” in order to advocate for “civic order” (290). The hubris of imperialism and the tragedy of war surely influenced the dramatist’s work. Padel believes that “a fictive female voice can most sharply express the pain and resentment against” an “apparently unjust system” (16). Foley posits that “tragic female representations challenge the male failure to maintain binary balance in society” (9). Is it the role of these females, then, to restore the cosmic world order through their spiritual agency? These females, through the power of divine association, are able to challenge the status quo. Powerful as they are, we cannot definitively say that they reflect Euripides’

personal attitude towards women. We can say, however, that he created characters worthy of respect. They are a class of humans who play essential roles in society—they are not dismissible. They have the divine authority to admonish the “male failure to maintain binary balance” (9). If the archaic male was inclined to follow the advice of the Pythia, it makes sense that these “fictive female” voices would resonate with the classical male audience.

Agave

Perhaps no other play directly implicates imperialism and advocates for a godlier world order than *The Bacchae* does. In his introduction to *The Bacchae* translator William Arrowsmith tells us that the tragic action in the play converges on the word *sophia*, which he broadly defines as a moral type of wisdom (145). The word, he tells us, “implies a firm awareness of one’s own nature and therefore of one’s place in the scheme of things” (145). This is, perhaps, an axiomatic precept as it applies to Dionysus—he is a god with omniscient capabilities. Pentheus, the hubristic prince, lacks *sophia*—his myopic view of “the scheme of things” leads to his destruction. But how is this precept applicable to the *Bacchae*? Euripides gives these crazed women titular agency for a reason: they have an inherent power. By “nature” they are procreators. This gives them—at the same time—a divine connection to the unexplainable, and a definite role “in the scheme of things.” As Foley tells us, tragic women are able to precipitate “the activity of forces beyond male control” (11). They are the physical reminders of the underlying power of divine nature.

In the patriarchal society that was ancient Greece, women were not citizens and had few legal rights. Foley notes that “women married young and ideally did not choose their spouse, manage their dowries, divorce without the approval of their kin, or conduct financial transactions” (8). However, she continues, in ancient Athens, women did “play a significant role

in Athenian culture as reproducers of children,” and “as participants in public and private religious rituals and festivals” (4). The importance of religious ritual in ancient Greek society should not be underestimated. Burkert tells us that “the usability of gods and sanctuaries, in short, religion, was here the foundation of the entire organization of state, law, and commercial life” (254). We can imagine, then, that if religion was “the foundation” of the state, and women were an essential component of this religious foundation, the perception of women as creators of life would not be secular. Their specific act of giving birth was a physical mystery that necessitated a mystical explanation. Giulia Sissa tells us that Greek doctors’ interest in the “anatomy, physiology, and above all pathology of women derived from the value and purpose ascribed to procreation,” for “they were convinced that for a woman health was identical with fertility and maternity” (44). Padel adds, “Men perceived women’s physical functions as polluting to themselves” (5). This physical pollution allowed them to worship chthonic deities men found “dangerous,” she tells us (5). These chthonic cults were given “central functions” in “state cults” because of their association with the polluted acts of birth and death (6).

We can see how the “central functions” of women instigate the tragic action in *The Bacchae*. Maternal discord is manifestly evident at the beginning of the play. Dionysus, son of Semele and Zeus, is in Thebes for maternal retribution—the kingdom refuses to acknowledge his divine conception, and because of this, Pentheus, heir to the throne, will not establish a cult for the women to worship him (25-40). The Chorus sings a psalm of praise for Dionysus, applauding his proper reverence for the maternal divine. “Blessèd are they who keep the rite of Cybele the Mother,” they chant, in praise of his respect for the chthonic Phrygian mother of the gods (78). They go on to set the record straight by exalting the very visceral birth of Dionysus:

So his mother bore him once

in labor bitter; lightening-struck
 forced by fire that flared from Zeus,
 consumed, she died, untimely torn,
 in childbed dead by blow of light!
 Of light the son was born! (88-93)

We can see, in Dionysus' creation story, that the Chorus feels the need to validate the divinity of the deity's birth. At the same time, when they tell us "his mother bore him . . . in labor bitter," they are invoking the very *human* aspects of a divine Caesarean birth that make the event, essentially-speaking, a tangible spectacle. Additionally, Semele's death "in childbed" creates a dark association between birth and death. Out of her tragedy, however, comes "light," into which "the son was born." Or, more precisely, out of mortal female sacrifice comes a god. Jan Kott notes that "the basic Dionysian myth . . . tells about the passion, death and resurrection of the divine child" (196). And after his divine "creation, fertility comes only from a new union of heaven and earth" (198).

Pentheus' failure to recognize the god's divine birth curtails the possibility of any such "union." We meet the young royal as he returns from a trip outside of the kingdom. He has just been made aware that a god is sending the women in the city into "mock ecstasies" and he becomes enraged (219). He enacts his own form of maternal retribution when he tells us he will hunt his "own mother" down, in order to stop the madness affecting the women (229). The tragedian offers us stark contrasts. Dionysus seeks retribution for his mother's murder, while Pentheus intends on *killing* his. We entered the play with songs of maternal reverence; we quickly despond into callous thoughts of matricide. Pentheus' disdain for Dionysus is easy to discern—he is playing the part of the political reactionary who sees the need restore order to his

kingdom. But he wastes no time condemning his mother. We will never know Euripides' full intentions in the creation of such a character, but the fact that he has this male character endorse matricide is extremely harsh. The Chorus makes it clearly known how despicable the young king is, as they lament Dionysus' incarceration. Pentheus, they sneer, has been "born of the breed of Earth,"

spawned by the dragon, whelped by Earth!

Inhuman, a rabid beast,

a giant in wildness raging,

storming, defying the children of heaven.

He has threatened me with bonds

though my body is bound to god. (541-546)

The Chorus' derision of Pentheus' birth contrasts the divine birth of Dionysus. The Maenads' insults offer an interesting picture of the progenitor of Pentheus' evil. The fact that he is "born of the breed of Earth" severely implicates "Earth" as a contemptible breeding ground. "Earth" is base—he has been "spawned," and "whelped" by this most unspiritual habitat. He is "inhuman," and "a rabid beast." He is unnatural. But how does this work, causally? As a mortal, he deserves such derision for his sacrilege. Also, the Maenads are speaking from an ecstatic perspective; they can identify, in their god-induced haze, a mortal whose mother failed him ritualistically. Agave did not allow the ethereal to enter her life. Because of this, Pentheus' birth can be seen as sacrilege. So when they say he is "born of the breed of the Earth," they are insinuating that his existence has never been sanctified in the heavens. They can deride Pentheus' threat because they know their place in the spiritual scheme of things—their bodies *are* "bound to god."

Pentheus will pay the price for this sacrilege. Dionysus casts a spell on the king and dresses him as a Maenad so he can ambush the bacchanalian festival. The image of the deluded young man in female attire mockingly exaggerates his aggressive masculinity. But Dionysus' intention is not merely to create a laughable example. The god clearly orchestrates a scene of maternal retribution. "You will be carried home" (967), he tells the king, "cradled in your mother's arms" (968). The god creates a scene of horrific atonement—Agave is only able to nurture Pentheus after she destroys him. The fact that Dionysus conceived of such a plan leads us to believe that this maternal ritual—this need to have Agave cradle her *dead* son—is a necessary step of retribution for Semele who could *not* cradle hers. But it also serves as a visual realignment of the hierarchy in its metaphorical depiction of a broken leader. Agave, in her spiritual capitulation to the sanctified maternal, has the power to destroy the kingdom.

Agave is the first one to see Pentheus perched on the branch of a fir tree. She leads the call to capture him.

Maenads, make a circle

About the trunk and grip it with your hands.

Unless we take this climbing beast, he will reveal

The secrets of the god. (1106-09)

So begins the ritual that leads to filicide. The women form a "circle" around the tree and "grip" the "trunk" in their "hands." We can infer that the "trunk" is symbolic of male genitalia. The feminine "circle" encloses his masculinity. The phallic gesture not only physically emasculates the man, but destroys his power to create. While this scene may appear absurd to a twenty-first century audience, the audience of Euripides' day would have found these actions more familiar. Burkert notes that there were several festivals in Ancient Greece that "rigorously exclud[ed] all

men” (242). And some of these festivals—the Thesmophoria particularly—included processions where women donned “giant false phalloi,” and staged “obscene” demonstrations (104).

Disturbing as this spectacle may have been to the male population, it was viewed as a necessary ritual that “amped up the antagonism between the sexes,” allowing for a “release” (104-5). It was the female citizens’ religious right to exclude men from these festivals (104). Pentheus’ presence is a threat because he is a male trying to interfere in a sacredly ordained female ritual. His disdain for this pious festival would be considered blasphemous (73). “The secrets of the god” are for those who have been properly initiated.

And so Agave, “Like a priestess with her victim, fell upon him / first” (1113-5). This is not an embellished simile. Pentheus must be sacrificed. Agave is acting on divine orders. The ritual that follows is ghastly. As Kott tells us, the ritual of *sparagmos* is one that repeats itself through history (194).

Women are the priestesses. They tear bodies to pieces and partake of the raw flesh. The sacrificial victim is always a male. . . . Sacral cannibalism found in the Dionysian myths [is] its most cruel and dramatic expression. (199)

Perhaps there is no scene more cruel in all of Greek tragedy than Pentheus’ brutal murder. As Agave starts to rip him apart “he touched her cheeks, screaming,”

‘No, no, Mother! I am Pentheus,
your own son, the child you bore to Echion!
Pity me, spare me Mother! I have done a wrong,
but do not kill your own son for my offense.’ (1118-21)

In his desperate plea to his mother, Pentheus, tragically, has attained *sophia*. Gone is his myopic view—he can now see how he fits into “the scheme of things.” Approaching death is his prompt

to appreciate the divine feminine. He regresses into a childlike state, realizing the only human being who has the capacity to save him is his mother. Like a baby seeking security, “he touched her cheeks,” trying to establish a physical connection. He reminds her of their procreative bond, crying, I am “the child you bore.” Pentheus’ appeals to Agave’s maternal sensibilities show his vulnerability as a man in limbo between life and death. As Padel attests, it is Agave’s role to act as intermediary between the “polluted acts of birth and death.” His plea for “pity” is interestingly qualified. While he admits to committing “a wrong,” he tries to separate that transgression from their familial bond. “Do not kill your own son,” he tells her, “for my offense.” We can see, in his epiphany, that he finally recognizes that the Dionysian bond trumps the maternal one. If he had properly revered both Agave and Semele, he would not be the victim of sacrifice. “As a dramatist, Euripides’ purpose is to describe ancient myth in realistic and vivid terms,” says Mary Lefkowitz (“Impiety and ‘Atheism’” 75). “And his lesson, if anything, as in other Greek religious ritual, is to do honour to the gods and, in the process, to remind men of their mortal limitations” (75). Fittingly, Pentheus succumbs to his “mortal limitations” at the hands of the one responsible for his mortal creation.

This “realistic and vivid[ly]” macabre scene was most likely meant to scare law-makers. Agave’s Dionysian enchantment serves two purposes: it ritualistically atones for the sacrilege of Pentheus, and it destroys the hubristic patriarchal prince. It is likely, as Kott has noted, that Theban tragedy is an artistic reflection of the fifth century Athenian political crises. “*The Bacchae*,” he tells us, was written in the third decade of the Peloponnesian War; less than two years after its first performance, Athens fell” (229). It was “first produced in Athens in 406 or 405 B.C., after Euripides’s death” (228). The play, he believes, “is the tragedy of the madness of Greece, the madness of rulers and of people” (229). We can reasonably infer that Pentheus’

heretical role was intended to deliver a stern warning to the Athenian leaders by putting the fear of god in its polis. The chaos of plague and the Peloponnesian War had wreaked havoc in Athens. Thucydides describes this unrest, telling us that there was no “fear of gods or law of man” to “restrain” the male populace (*The History of the Peloponnesian War* bk. 2, ch. 7).

But Agave’s role as murdering mother should not be underappreciated. It is up to her to restore the spiritual order of things, however gruesome. It was she, after all, who committed the *first* act of sacrilege against Semele, and she is the creator of Pentheus. She did not properly revere the divine mother. It is fitting that she and her sisters are the first women to go mad under the Dionysian spell—their late reformation is ironically redemptive; with their enlightened perspective comes the knowledge that they must destroy the kingdom. Padel tells us that when women emerge from their hidden lives it “often” indicates “a sense of something wrong within; within not only themselves, but society” (15). The Athenian audience of the fifth century BC would likely view this heinous combination of child murder and patriarchal ruin as essential in the spiritual order of things. As Cline notes, “the lyric drama is presented for the people of Greece who integrate its mythemes and magic into their cultural perspective” (180). The “madness” Kott points to would have to be resolved via some form of ritual in a society that, as Burkert notes, saw no separation of religion and state. It is fitting that we are forced to develop a sense of pathos for Pentheus at the end. He, at least, is allowed to die. Agave suffers a worse fate for her sacrilege. She must kill her son to atone for the death of Semele. She ruins the kingdom of Thebes and is forced into exile. Nicole Loraux’s sensitive observation helps us appreciate just how tragic *The Bacchae* is. No one, she tells us, suffers a crueler fate in tragedy than “triumphant or heartbroken queens” (*Mothers in Mourning* 38). “They are always wounded in their motherhood” (38). Terry Eagleton notes that when we contemplate Pentheus’ and Agave’s

suffering, we “feel their misery ourselves” and this “makes us enjoy feeling it” and “makes us want to put them through further pain” (173). Agave receives retribution for both her and her son’s heresy, but only after she is forced to endure the most horrific tragic circumstances a mother could bear.

As Agave, in her delusion, carries down her son’s head on her thyrsus, she tells the Chorus that “The Maenads’ call me ‘Agave the blest’” (1180). We are reminded of the Chorus’ prayer in the introduction that hailed blessings upon Cybele and Semele. Agave’s pronouncement mocks this earlier reverence for the maternal. It also shows the brutality of Dionysus’ idea of divine *feminine* punishment. But the Chorus do not revel in Agave’s skewed epiphany. The Maenads allow her to remain in her state of ecstasy to mock her newfound convictions.

AGAVE. Happy was the hunting

CHORUS. Happy indeed.

AGAVE. Then share my glory, share the feast. (1183-5)

By prolonging her state of *enthousiasmos*, or divine possession, they prolong the tragedy (“Enthusiasm”). Their responses are deliberately evasive so as not to reveal the irony of her proclamations. They are “happy indeed” that Agave finds such pleasure in her quarry. They also realize the need to allow Agave the rite of *sparagmos*; this “feast” of her dead son’s carcass brings closure to the ritual. Kott endorses Eliade’s belief that “the Chorus in *The Bacchae*, as in an initiation rite, discovers the *tremendum*—the ‘almost simultaneous revelation of the sacred, of death and of sexuality’” (qtd. in Kott 203). So as Agave ingests the male corpus into her female being she ceremoniously ends her son’s life—and the action mimics the passage out of her body

he experienced at birth. Her actions of murder and feast are simultaneously abhorrent and sacred.

Agave is devastated at her gruesome act when Cadmus awakens her from her delusion. She and her father are overcome when Dionysus appears and tells them of “the sufferings in store for them” (1325). He implicates the appropriateness of having Agave commit the tragic crime. Pentheus, he tells them, “has rightly perished by the hands / of those who should the least of all have murdered him” (1325). The “those” he speaks of are Agave and her sisters, of course—Pentheus’ aunts. But we can also infer that this is a direct condemnation of Agave, specifically. “The hands” that cared for the king are the ones that must kill him—the actions of the mother are the most insufferable. Had she followed the path of maternal suppliancy and *enthousiasmos*, she would not have to murder her son. When male characters fail to “stay within the cultural limits,” says Foley, tragic female characters “often make a radical intrusion into the breach, either to expose and challenge the failure, or to heal it with transcendent sacrificial and other religious gestures” (10). Agave’s “sacrificial” gesture leads her to exile. As she looks upon the dismembered corpse of Pentheus, she can only cry, “O my child, what hands will give you proper care / unless with my own hands I lift my curse?” (1335). We pity Agave, in her anguished state of bewilderment. She is a banished murderess, fated to live out a tortured existence; she makes the ultimate sacrifice by killing her creation.

Phaedra

Hippolytus, like *The Bacchae*, begins with a divine prologue that calls for female sacrifice. Aphrodite is angry with Hippolytus, as he has failed to properly revere her by living an ascetic, chaste existence. Her intricate plan to kill the prince requires the sacrifice of Phaedra.

“Renowned shall Phaedra be in her death, but none the less / die she must,” the goddess informs us (47). Like Agave, Phaedra must play the role of human intermediary with the divine who suffers to atone for the patriarchy. She orchestrates her own self-sacrifice to atone for the sacrilege of a young prince. Unlike Agave, Phaedra is able to escape a wretched future through suicide. In her self-murder, she finds renown. Women, says Padel, held “ritual presidency over . . . transitional experiences,” such as “dying and birth, which are perceived [by men] as passages in and out of darkness” (5). Phaedra’s decision to seek passage into this darkness is cleansing act of sanctification to atone for her egregious actions—she cannot exist in such a licentious polluted state. Furthermore, her ability to navigate the dark unknown gives her divine agency. From her ethereal perch she is able to restructure the patriarchy.

When we meet Hippolytus, we can see why Aphrodite feels slighted. As he enters the shrine to Artemis, the Olympian goddess of the hunt, he and his Chorus of huntsmen sing the praises of the virgin goddess:

Hail, Maiden Daughter of Zeus and Leto!

Dweller in the spacious sky!

Maid of the Mighty Father! (62-4)

This is reminiscent of the prologue of *The Bacchae*, where the maenads sing similar praises for the revered mothers Cybele and Semele. Their praises celebrate creation. In *Hippolytus*, we have a chorus of male blessings celebrating the “Maiden” virgin. Figuratively speaking, this is a celebration of stagnation—virgins are not creators. That Hippolytus can happily ascribe to Artemis the role of “Maid,” or maiden, to “the Mighty Father” shows his preference for this non-sexual familial dynamic. It also demonstrates his male-ordered world view, where he feels comfortable demarcating Artemis—in all her powers of ethereality—as a “Maid.” It is not long

before we learn just how oddly anti-sexual the young prince truly is. As he lays garlands at the foot of his goddess's statue, he praises her purity, elaborating the great care he has taken in plucking the flowers from her "inviolable Meadow" (77). This "Meadow" is not open to shepherds or reapers, only those, he says:

in whose very soul the seed
of Chastity toward all things alike
nature has deeply rooted, they alone
may gather flowers there! the wicked may not. (80-4)

Again, the young prince sings the praises of a chaste world view. Artemis' "sexlessness," says Anne Carson, "reminds him of his own chastity; he idolizes it" (165). But what is a "seed of Chastity"? A "seed" is a unit of reproduction. We cannot ignore the impossibility of Hippolytus' logic. If we maintain a chaste "nature" "toward all things alike," then "nature" will perish. The "flowers" he has "plucked" are products of *some* sort of creation—worldly or otherworldly. The act of plucking flowers is metaphorically sexual—we can infer that Euripides intentionally has the young prince perform such an action to display his sexual ignorance. He is, in fact, violating this "inviolable Meadow" by destroying its pristine fauna. His fanatical reverence of this virgin splendor violates his mortal role as male progenitor.

When we first meet Phaedra, we learn that she, too, fanatically reveres a god. She, however, is a severely distressed devotee. Her Nurse tries to console her and understand her pain. The trusty attendant wonders aloud whether, "it would need to be a mighty prophet / to tell which of the Gods mischievously / jerks you from your true course and thwarts your wits" (236-38). Phaedra is despondent, as she tells her:

O, I am miserable! What is this I've done?

Where have I strayed from the highway of good sense?

I was mad. It was the madness sent from some God

That caused my fall. (239-42)

Unlike Hippolytus, Phaedra knows the role she is meant to play. Because she is a female, she can see the ominous outcome of her dilemma; she refers to her “fall” in the past tense. She recognizes her susceptibility to be driven “mad” by the gods. Yet she accepts blame, wondering “where” *she* has “strayed from the highway of good sense.” There is clarity in her madness. Hippolytus, in his ascetic penchant for the pristine, is also lacking “good sense.” Unlike Phaedra, he has no intuition. When questioned by his servant why he doesn’t offer “even / a word of salutation” (98-9) for Aphrodite, the prince answers “I worship her—but from a long way off, / for I am chaste” (102-3). We can see that Hippolytus’ ideas as to what constitutes proper “worship” are misogynistic in his disdain for what is devoutly sexual. His “chaste” fanaticism is exaggerated. And though he understands Artemis’ powerful agency as an Olympian, he manages to establish a dynamic to suit his chauvinistic, superior world view—he can revere her but only as a sexually innocent “maiden.” That he chooses to worship her “from a long way off” shows his repulsion at the female sex. Lefkowitz posits that Hippolytus’ “wronging of Aphrodite, does not consist simply in his not having paid due respect, by placing a wreath on her statue, as he did for his patron Artemis; he must also acknowledge her power by submitting to the demands of sexuality” (“‘Impiety’ and ‘Atheism’” 76).

Like *The Bacchae*, *Hippolytus* requires atonement through divine female ritual. As Phaedra languishes, the Chorus reports “she has eaten no bread / and her body is pure and fasting” (134-5). Burkert tells us that fasting was part of the Thesmophoria festival. The second day of the chthonic celebration was called *nesteia*:

The women stay in seclusion with the goddess [Demeter]; without tables and chairs, they make themselves a bed on the ground from withies [willows] and other plants supposed to have an anaphrodisiac effect. The mood is gloomy . . . the fasting finally comes to an end with sacrifices . . .” (243-4)

Fasting was a means to achieve purity. Like the women who celebrated the Thesmophoria, Phaedra prepares herself for sacrifice, though she be the victim. We have yet to learn the cause of her inner turmoil. We can infer that she, like the women at Thesmophoria, is in need of purification. And so we move on to the next step of the ritual: supplication. The Nurse begs her mistress to reveal her misery:

PHAEDRA. You will kill me. My honor lies in silence.

NURSE. And then you will hide this honor, though I beseech you?

PHAEDRA. Yes, for I seek to win good out of shame.

NURSE. Where honor is, speech will make you more honorable.

PHAEDRA. O God, let go my hand and go away!

NURSE. No, for you have not given me what you should.

PHAEDRA. I yield. Your suppliant hand compels my reverence. (329-335)

And so the poor queen must reveal her illicit sexual desire for her stepson. While the sins of the queen are abhorrent, it is necessary that they be revealed. Phaedra’s honor cannot lie “in silence,” obviously—if she were to kill herself for reasons unknown, honor would not necessarily be bestowed on this action. But the dialogue between the Nurse and Phaedra reveals a deeper complicity. Once the Nurse takes Phaedra’s hand, the queen succumbs. They both know Phaedra has “not given” the Nurse “what [she] should.” Though she begs of the Nurse to let go of her hand, we can see the futility of her refusal. The “suppliant hand” offered by the

Nurse forms a bond that, we can infer, is an essential step of supplication. It is a physical connection that requires Phaedra's confession. She must "yield." Burkert notes that this final stage of the supplication ritual created "a basis for mutual understanding and trust" (254). This allows Phaedra to bravely reveal her dilemma and achieve her martyrdom.

The Nurse is rightly aghast when Phaedra admits her love of Hippolytus. The queen's trusted lady laments:

This is my death.

Women, this is past bearing. I'll not bear

life after this. (352-4)

Here we see, again, a female character whose existence is defined in terms of the "transitional experiences" of "dying and birth," as Padel notes (5). It is not enough for the Nurse to wish for her "death" after hearing Phaedra's torrid confession. The queen's deviant sexual desires affect her servant's sexuality—her powers of procreation must suffer. Euripides uses two definitions of the word "bear" to exaggerate its feminine connotations. When the Nurse tells the Chorus that Phaedra's admission "is past bearing," she is telling them she cannot mentally withstand the revelation. When she quickly adds that she will "not bear / life after this," she is telling them she cannot physically withstand the revelation. The fact that the Nurse's procreative functions should be physically damaged by Phaedra's revelation reminds us of the Athenian male view postulated by Sissa. The locus of her suffering is emblematic of her "value and purpose" as a procreator (44). Sissa tells us that ancient physicians "were convinced that for a woman health was identical with fertility and maternity" (44.)

If the "value and purpose" of women is to procreate, we can view Hippolytus' celibacy as a practice that purposely negates his role in the natural order of things. While Aphrodite's

motive may appear to be singularly vindictive, we can infer there is a larger purpose to this tragedy. Phaedra, in her delirious misery, is well-aware of her sexual nature. Though she calls Aphrodite “a torturer” (446) she understands that “from her everything, / that is, is born” (449). So Hippolytus’ failure to revere Aphrodite is a failure to revere the divine order of mankind. Phaedra admits that she “strayed from the highway of good sense” in her worship of the goddess. Her torturous lovesick state leads her to commit suicide. While Cypris’ spell may appear to be the death knell for Phaedra, that wasn’t likely the case for the female classical audience. The love goddess was immensely popular in Euripides’ time. As Sarah Johnston notes, the importance of the myth in the everyday life of the people should not be underestimated (56). “Each myth contributed to a completely furnished and credible story world” (56). Dionysus and Aphrodite’s acts of retribution were believable stories to this audience, which would, says Johnston, “subsequently break off pieces” of the narrative “to use as a situation demanded—pieces that still refracted the authority and allure of the whole” (56). Proof of their importance can be found on papyri from Roman Egypt that contain spells and incantations magicians wrote for particular gods: “We find . . . a great many names of characters who appear in Greek myths. Sometimes, these belong to gods who are asked to help the practitioner and who are given some sort of cult in return—Hermes, Hecate and Eros, for example,” says Johnston (56). Many of the papyri have spells that are directed at Aphrodite, the Charities, and the Horai:

The appearance of the Horai and the Charites alongside Aphrodite replicates literary and artistic scenes in which two or more of these goddesses cluster around Aphrodite or another goddess in order to dress and adorn her—for example, before Aphrodite sets out for Mount Ida, where she will seduce Anchises in the Homeric *Hymn to Aphrodite*. In this spell again, then, we might say that we have

a *mise en scène* that borrows credibility and authority from the well-established story world of Greek mythic narrative—a scene that earlier authors and artists had already made canonically familiar. (59)

This ancient female populace, who actively revered Aphrodite and formulated incantations based on “mythic narratives” is likely, then, to have empathized with Phaedra’s dilemma. They also understood that the goddess’s acts of “seduction” in these “mythic narratives”—whether it be a spell on Anchises, Phaedra, or any other unsuspecting character—are deceptive and oftentimes cruel. The pitiless goddess incapacitates Phaedra, turning her into a delirious suffering captive. The state of torment in which she exists casts a deeper shadow over Phaedra’s transgression. Everyone understood the risks when they sought the help of Aphrodite.

There is no question that those who avoided her, however, had it worse. Hippolytus ultimately pays for his aversion to the goddess. D.J. Schenker notes that “in Hippolytus’ rage against women and the constraints of biological necessity . . . we have further suggestions that Hippolytus places himself . . . outside the range of the normally human” (7). Monica Cyrino suggests that all of Aphrodite’s male mortal victims will “experience the pathological effects of eros as damage done (or soon to be done) to him by a stronger, especially divine, female figure” (227). It is easy to believe that the self-righteous prince sees himself “outside the range of the normally human.” He brazenly disrespects Aphrodite. “The pathological effects of eros” that he suffers results from his naïve adoration of Artemis, who makes no effort to save him. While it is obvious that Aphrodite is the “divine female” ultimately responsible for Hippolytus’ demise, it is important to remember she does not work alone. Phaedra is the “divine, female *figure*” whose sacrifice destroys the patriarchy; it is her sacred action that operates “outside the range of the normally human.”

Theseus is devastated when he returns home from Delphi to find that his wife has hanged herself. He calls out to her in his anguish:

You are like a bird that has vanished out of my hand.

You have made a quick leap out of my arms

Into the land of Death. (828-30)

Theseus' simile may at first seem to be an innocent comparison. Life is like a "bird" that can flutter quickly away at any given time. But this reflection suggests something more resonantly psychological. When he refers to Phaedra as "a bird" in his "hand," he establishes a powerful masculine dynamic that relegates her to the status of a meek creature under his control.

Interestingly, this dynamic also reveals a certain dissonance that Theseus shares with the Greek male populace who were not able to understand women. Phaedra is a "bird," or a creature, to whom he cannot relate, whose motives cannot be deciphered. And so she vanishes or unexpectedly "leaps away" from him. Theseus' comparison, then, is axiomatic of the binaries at work: it establishes a powerful male dynamic that is also powerless. He concedes that she has an inherent agency that allows her to vanish without explanation. So Phaedra flies "Into the land of Death," navigating terrain that is, according to Padel, easily traversed by women.

Phaedra's final ritualistic act "Into the land of Death" is metamorphic. Her suicide is a transitional experience that bequeaths upon her the role of "divine female figure." Suicide, says Loraux, was a common means of death for women in tragedy (*Tragic Ways* 9). Hanging, she tells us, was a "hideous death" (9). Hanging, also, was closely associated with flight, which allows us to further consider Theseus' "bird" comparison. "Phaedra," says Loraux, "is a bird of ill omen" (18-9). In the Greek language, when women hang themselves the word *aiōra* is used (18). This word, says the author, "evokes a double image of a corpse hanging in the air and of its

movement, a gentle swaying” (17). When women commit suicide by throwing themselves at or on something, the word *aiōrēma* is used, as if the airborne woman is taking flight like a bird (18). The word “signifies both the swaying of the hanged woman and the soaring flight” of the woman who “throws herself to her death” (18). Most importantly, says Loraux, “these wives . . . show in their propensity for flight a kind of natural rapport with the beyond” (19). So, in her suicide, Phaedra cements her rapport with the great beyond. She becomes the “divine female figure” whose death, as Cyrino notes, severely alters the patriarchy by killing the blood heir to the throne. Moreover, we must also consider the mythological significance of birds in ancient Greek culture. Burkert describes artifacts that show mad dances of women with a small figure floating in the air next to them (40). It is possible that the floating figure represented a goddess who was drawn into “a state of ecstasy” due to “the dancing of the women” (40). The scholar also notes that the flights of birds were religiously interpreted as omens in Greek culture (110).

As Hippolytus lay dying, Artemis promises that he, too, will be renowned. “Unwedded maids . . . will cut their hair in your honor,” she tells him (1425).

And when young girls sing songs, they will not forget you,
 your name will not be left unmentioned,
 nor Phaedra’s love for you remain unsung. (1428-30)

In the end, Hippolytus’ legacy depends on the reverence of “young girls.” Artemis’ assurance that his “name will not be left unmentioned” may be intended as comfort to the dying prince. It is questionable, however, if the reverence of “young girls” is the kind of praise Hippolytus would desire, considering his disdain for what is inherently feminine. Her last decree offers a fitting final thought for the celibate zealot. He must accept that “Phaedra’s love for” him will not “remain unsung.” There is no escaping Phaedra’s passion, even in death.

Medea

The lovesick Troezen queen may be a powerful posthumous force, but she is no match for the lethal embodiment of passion that is Medea. In the beginning of *The Medea*, the Nurse presents us with a formidable warning: “There’s hatred everywhere, Love is diseased,” she tells us (16). Jason’s decision to leave her mistress is not a wise one. “Medea is slighted” (20), she laments, and “she calls upon the gods to witness / What sort of return Jason has made to her love” (22-3). These words resonate beyond the tragic entertainment we are about to witness. We are, in fact, being swept into the anxious patriarchal underbelly of classical Greek society that advocated for, as Padel notes, the “social control” of women (4). Medea cannot be controlled. Metaphorically, she poses a plague-like threat to the health of the greater society. Sissa tells us that “Euripides said,” and “Plutarch repeated” the idea that “the Greeks . . . considered female diseases to be obscene and occult” (50). We can infer, then, that when the Nurse tells us “love is diseased,” she is not speaking of the soured love that exists solely between Jason and Medea, but the diseased love emanating from *inside* the slighted queen. It is a pandemic that will spread across the kingdom. The fact that her uncontrollable passions are able to infest the kingdom show us that Medea cannot be controlled. Furthermore, she has agency to call on the gods. By doing so, she challenges Jason’s authority, and establishes her own. Unlike Agave and Phaedra, she has not been driven mad by a god; she is not a pawn. It is *she* who petitions the Olympians.

“Obscene” and “occult” are two terms that are useful when contemplating the character of Medea. She is a practitioner of the occult, and her character is driven to obscene measures. “Magic must be seen as the origin of religion, since acts which seek to achieve a given goal in an unclear but direct way are magical,” notes Burkert (55). This definition of magic can help us understand her character. If “magic” is the “origin of religion,” we can see how Medea is

symbolically imbued with a kind of autonomous divine power. She does not need to be driven mad by an Olympian; she is, in fact, the *procreator* of their divine power. It is here that we can draw an interesting parallel with Euripides *Ion*. In this play, the tragedian delves into the creation myth of ancient Greek civilization that revered Gaia, mother earth, as the creator of mankind (Cline 176). When Apollo “battles with the snake,” Python, Gaia’s son, we see the “shift from female-centered to patriarchal cultures” (176). The fact that Euripides acknowledges a “female-centered” creational mythology in *Ion* is important. Like Gaia, Medea is an originator—her power is pre-Olympian, and pre-patriarchal. Like Gaia, too, she is a scorned, powerful mother. So, when the Nurse delivers her dire warning about her slighted mistress, it is helpful to recall the dramatist’s reverence for the maternal in *The Bacchae*, where Dionysus celebrates the sacred procreators Cybele and Semele. Medea, like these sacred mothers, deserves respect—her character is derived from a creational mythology. But the Nurse, in her warning reverence, is not celebrating the queen’s power to *create*—her worries focus on Medea’s power to *destroy*. The contrast of these characters is emblematic of the roles women play in the passages of life and death.

Medea’s magical powers and secret motives can be explained from a physiological perspective. Sissa explains that a women’s anatomy, according to classical Greek thought, made them more susceptible to divine possession: “Female anatomy, mainly the vagina, which allows access to the womb, was considered a valuable opening in the female body, one that men lacked. Ancient Greeks saw the female as sponge-like, ‘porous’” (49). Padel elaborates, explaining “daemoniac possession” came through “erotic entry,” or, essentially, through the dark recesses of her physical being (3). These dark recesses gave “women” the potential to “threaten male order”

(3). This physical association with darkness is elaborated metaphorically, giving supreme spiritual agency to females in literature to “persecute the mind,” Padel notes (4).

As a perceived magician, Medea is easily able to “persecute the minds” of her fellow characters. Kott believes that Medea, as “sorceress and lover” is the “personification of black Eros” (224). Medea is furtively able to keep the “dark recesses” of her character hidden. Euripides exaggerates the mystery surrounding her character by branding her a “stranger” from the onset. By labeling her a “stranger,” the playwright taps into the negative connotations associated with foreigners. We can see this at the very beginning when the Nurse describes her royal mistress. She clearly states that she is not able to recognize Medea’s true identity. “She is a strange woman,” she tells us, who “betrayed” (44) her homeland “when she came away with / A man who now is determined to dishonor her” (33-4). It is important to understand the definition of *xeînos* in the characterization of Medea. *Xeînos* is the Greek word for both stranger and foreigner (“Xeînos”). Both connotations certainly apply to this elusive character. She is both temperamentally strange and exotic in the foreign sense—she comes from the distant Black Sea city of Colchis, not Corinth. Though she’s lived among the people of Corinth during her marriage to Jason, the fact that even her most confident friend refers to her as “strange” shows that she is not clearly considered a member of their society. Additionally, the fact that she has “betrayed” her homeland means she is a woman without a home; she is the archetypal other, and worthy of distrust.

The Nurse’s anxious description of Medea show us that even the strongest allies could not be trusted. This tension interestingly reflects the real tension that existed between Athens and Sparta at the beginning of the Peloponnesian War. In *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides allows a Corinthian character to express these anxieties as he warns the complacent

Spartans of the immanency of an Athenian invasion: “you alone wait till the power of an enemy is becoming twice its original size, instead of crushing it in its infancy” (bk. 1, ch. 3). These same words of warning could have easily been issued to the fictive kingdom of Corinth as they wait to see how the jilted queen will handle her divorce. Charles Segal keenly observes that the Greeks were “concerned . . . with the objective place of an act in the world, its relation to the human order of house and city or the divine order of the cosmos” (qtd. in Lardinois 642). These concerns are all played out in this tragedy. The Nurse tells us she is “afraid” Medea will commit a “dreadful” act (37). The slighted queen has the divine order to destroy “the human order of house and city.” There is a great emphasis in Greek literature to demarcate a character’s “house and city.” It was a necessary tool in understanding the individual and their potential. Herodotus’ ethnographies further exemplify this ideal. They “were a useful tool in helping the Greeks to define their own character and notion of themselves,” says John Marincola in his Introduction to *The Histories* (xv). So, Medea’s “betrayal” of her homeland does more than just destroy her association with Colchis: it makes her essentially unidentifiable as a Corinthian.

This is not to say that the Nurse—or any of the other characters in the play for that matter—is not aware of her reputation. But when we examine the dialogue in the play, we see they are *all* purposefully blinded to her inherent identity—the divine magical identity that allows her to act outside of all sources of human reason. Creon finds it particularly difficult to send her into exile. “I am afraid of you You are a clever woman, versed in evil arts,” he acknowledges (281, 285). Though he recognizes Medea’s cleverness and prowess for “evil arts,” he falls short of acting on her deadly potential. Indeed, he feels the better decision is to give her a day to find a new home so she may find a new “house and city” for herself and her children. “Even now I know that I am making a mistake,” he tells her, in his acquiescence (350). We can

see how the various meanings of *xeînos* allow her to remain elusive and unpredictable—why would Creon trust a strange foreigner? When the Nurse says “she is a strange woman,” it is a concession to what is unknown. By this utterance, the Nurse is essentially asking “Who knows who she really is?” Creon, in the role of the wary patriarch, finds her “clever” and is “afraid of” her. But the key element here, that moves this tragedy forward, is Euripides’ ability to keep the characters focused on Jason’s current transgressions, not those of Medea’s past. The Nurse remains Medea’s advocate, and even Creon’s decision to relent is caused by his obligation to help this woman who is suffering from marital trauma.

The Chorus is particularly enraptured with Medea’s plight. As women, they relate to her female predicament. She is a woman scorned and Jason is anathema. They plead with the Nurse to see her, and assure the faithful servant that their “willingness to help will never / Be wanting to [our] friends” (178-9). Their empathy shows that they have a deluded sense of kinship with the queen, and an inability to recognize her hidden motives. To call Medea a friend is gesture that is both compassionate and desperate. It is compassionate in its attempt to form some kind of solidarity with the queen. But they are blinded, in their feminine comradery. They seek justice for the woman who has been “dispossessed” from her current “home” (444-5). They are Corinthian women, after all. “This passion of hers moves to something great,” they say fearfully, at the closing of their rumination (184). Again, their ignorance is apparent in their resoundingly vague language. “Something great” is purposefully unidentifiable. This momentarily opaque pronoun, and indefinite adjective, shows that they cannot conceptualize her potential. Euripides’ ability to keep Jason’s transgressions in the forefront allows the Chorus to play the part of dubious spectators, listening to Medea’s self-praise, as she plots her revenge: “Go forward to the dreadful act” (403), she rallies herself, “You have the skill”:

What is more, you were born a woman
 And women, though most helpless in doing good deeds,
 Are of every evil the cleverest of contrivers. (407-9)

Though they are witness to Medea's "dreadful" intention, and self-admission as an "evil" contriver, they remain steadfast in their support: "It is the thoughts of *men* that are deceitful, / *Their* pledges that are loose," they concede, hyperbolic in their stressed derision of "*men*" and "*their*" (414-5). This purposeful exaggeration clearly delineates their *hamartia*—they must choose sides with the scorned *woman*. But we must see this as a dilemma, as they are *Corinthian*. Their loyalty should be to their "house and city." This ideal, by default, should negate any thought of forming an alliance with Medea. Why, then, do they abandon their patriarchal support of the leader of Corinth to support Medea? They do so not only because they empathize with her marital situation; as females, they are drawn into her mystery. Like the maenads in *The Bacchae*, and the worshipers of Aphrodite, the Chorus are enraptured with a powerful entity who holds their kingdom hostage. As Padel notes, the classical "male perception" saw the "female aptitude for monitoring passage out of or into darkness" directly "linked with a supposed female aptitude for making contact with what is polluting" (5). They cannot help but align themselves with Medea, because they have the "aptitude for making contact with what is polluting." When they hear Medea say "women are most helpless in doing good deeds," and then extol women for their "evil" abilities as "contrivers," we can infer that the Chorus tacitly agrees with these summations—they know (as creations of a male tragedian) they are physiologically prone to daemonic possession. Though they may not be aware of exactly *how* "evil" the acts of Medea will be, they stay steadfast in their roles as silent accomplices of darkness and all that is polluted. They are complicit in Medea's act of *pharmakos*, to atone for

the failures of the patriarchy. Gruesome as her crimes may be, they are a necessary act of retribution for Jason's transgression. As Foley notes, "if the female uses religious powers to serve household or state, or to mediate between 'nature' and 'culture' as these two terms are defined by a specific text, the result can be positive" (10).

The final tragic action in the play is one that centuries of criticism has found to be, as Foley states, "beyond human judgement" (17). How can Medea kill her children? Here, again, Euripides has the divine female perform a necessary horrific ritual. As Foley notes, Medea "previously viewed the deed as unholy . . . but this knowledge did not deter her; in the monologue she gives divine authority to the murder by describing it as a sacrifice" (250). Yet we want to recoil in horror, and condemn the Colchian sorceress. Let's reconsider what Burkert notes: classical Greek society recognized discord as an inherent part of human and religious existence (54). They valued "the juxtaposition of things threatening and alluring" (54). So, it is not a contradictory view to see Medea as both a loving mother and a vengeful sorceress. Collins echoes Burkert's thinking by noting that when we examine ancient society we must understand that "the boundaries between what is 'natural' and 'supernatural' are much harder to formulate without introducing contemporary biases" (480). When we view Medea's actions outside the lens of our "contemporary biases" we can accept her infanticide as purposeful. We can see why it is necessary. And we can interpret her lament over her need to kill her children as just that: a lament. Her decision is final, but thoughtful:

Poor heart, let them go, have pity upon the children.

If they live with you in Athens they will cheer you.

No! By Hell's avenging furies it shall not be—

This shall never be, that I should suffer my children

To be the prey of my enemies' insolence. (1057-60)

We can see the binaries at play here in Medea's discourse with herself: it appears as if there are two opposing speeches taking place. The first address to the "poor heart" is not in the first person. It is the hypothetical rumination of an outsider: "If they live with *you* in Athens they will cheer *you*," she says (italics mine). This amalgam of second and third person perspectives distances her from the personal first person perspective, hence we have "*the* children" (italics mine) when she speaks hypothetically. She is not trying to convince herself to spare her children; she is objectively assessing their predicament. But the "poor heart" reflection is *rhetorically* maternal and gives the audience the ability to empathize with Medea—she is a *mother*, not a monster. That empathy is quickly retracted when she swiftly returns to the first person with her resounding "No! . . . this shall never be, that *I* should suffer *my* children" (italics mine). With the "I" comes the passion and the possession of the children. Is Medea, then, a vengeful magician or a suffering mother? She is, of course, both.

It is fitting that Jason and Medea are the last two characters left on stage. Jason, stunned by the murder of his children, fiancée, and future father-in-law is in shock:

Now I see it plain, though at the time
 I did not, when I took you from your foreign home
 And brought you to a Greek house, you, an evil thing,
 A traitress to your father and your native land. (1329-32)

The audience is likely perplexed as to why it has taken the revered Greek hero this long to recognize the woman he married. Politically-speaking, we see the fear of the *other* at work. Medea is "foreign" and she has acted as a "traitress" to her "native land." The obvious interpretation is easy: the Greeks believed, as Herodotus and Segal have told us, that one's

identity was firmly established based on the “order” of their “house and city.” But we can also infer, in Jason’s admission, that it is he who is responsible for bringing this “evil thing . . . to a Greek house.” Medea is, interestingly, vindicated in two ways. As a woman scorned, she has her revenge. But more importantly, as a magical being, it is up to her to set right “the divine order of the cosmos.” She rejects Jason’s plea to bury his children: “I will bury them myself” (1378) she tells him, and “establish a holy feast and sacrifice / Each year for ever to atone for the blood guilt” (1382-3). Like Artemis, Medea has the agency to “establish” ritualistic sacrifice. That the “blood guilt” in need of atonement belongs to the children she murdered does not appear implicative of *her* indiscretions; the guilt is Jason’s. As Foley notes, in the end, her “feminine mask gradually slips to reveal . . . a near-goddess, the story of her revenge takes on a pattern typical of divine rather than human action (261). Jennifer March notes that she “becomes utterly inhuman in her gloating over Jason’s loss” (“Euripides the Misogynist?”). And her last action—leaving on the chariot of dragons—reveals “a nature and authority” that those around her “did not recognize” (Foley 261).

Hecuba

Medea is undoubtedly one of Euripides’ most powerful heroines thanks to her ability to escape recognition. Her secrecy allows her to brazenly plot the tragic action that destroys Corinth. It may be argued, however, that the witch from Colchis is not the most formidable heroine in the playwright’s oeuvre. Wretched as she may be, there is no more commanding figure than Hecuba (424 BCE). She challenges Agamemnon, Odysseus and the ghost of Achilles—essentially, she confronts the patriarchal foundation that *is* ancient Greece. It is the former queen of Troy’s role to atone for the neglected rituals and rites of passage trodden on by this ever-powerful trinity of male Greek actors who hold her captive. The play relies on her keen

sense of divine order in the religious-political system that defined this ancient world. *Hecuba* is also an exaggeration of the binaries at play in this world. Burkert notes that many ancient festivals feature “the exchange of sexual roles in mummery” where women would parade around wearing “beards” and carrying “*phalloi*” (259). While Hecuba may not be physically adorned with such male trappings, she is so *rhetorically*. In every exchange she has with the patriarchs, she deferentially refers to them as master. By the end of the play the ironic condescension of her reference is obvious. She blatantly announces her murderous intentions. No Greek hero, living or dead, has the power to stop her.

Hecuba’s ability to commit filicide is motivationally different from the divinely-connected females we have explored thus far. Agave and Medea murder their own progeny. Though Hippolytus is Phaedra’s stepson, it is still her responsibility to atone for his sacrilege. All of their actions are justified out of cruel necessity: They created these corrupt men. It is their sacred responsibility as divinely-connected females to atone for their creations. Hecuba commits murder outside of her family line. Hers is more of a powerful political agency that allows her to destroy a kingdom to which she has no blood ties. There is no question that the Trojan queen, like the other female characters, is axiomatically a mother. Loraux aptly observes that all of these “triumphant or heartbroken queens” “are always wounded in their motherhood,” and she refers to Hecuba as the “paradigm of mourning motherhood” (*Mothers in Mourning* 40, 49). Hecuba inarguably sets the standard for this archetype. As Pollard notes, Hecuba was “described by Euripides as a mother fifty times over,” and was “also a strikingly fertile literary figure, widely cited and imitated” (120). Hecuba is, however, much more than a wretched mother. She is an uncompromising master of the rites of separation as well as birth. Arnold Van Gennep notes that “funeral rites which incorporate the deceased into the world of the dead are most extensively

elaborated and assigned the greatest importance” in ancient society (146). It is exaggeratedly evident from the onset of the play that Hecuba’s matriarchal suffering knows no bounds. She is the penultimate martyr for the rites of birth and death. “Poor mother,” says the ghost of her son Polydorus in the opening prologue, “you must see two corpses, / your two last children, each one dead this day” (45-6). The ghost’s prologue may be an obvious lament for his mother, but it is also a call to action. This is a grievous injustice, that she should lose her “two last children” in a day’s time. Implicitly, the audience realizes that Hecuba must atone for these deaths—this is a society that “assigned the greatest importance” to funeral rites that helped the deceased find passage to the underworld. The audience also realizes that queen must seek justice for these sacrilegious murders. In her hyperbolic martyrdom there is a burgeoning recognition of her potential power.

Hecuba’s physical representation and attributes further exaggerate her potential divine and earthly power. She is often portrayed “with a cloak over her face” (Mossman 255). Van Genneep notes that this custom is meant to “separate” the mourner “from the profane and live only in the sacred world” (168). She is “old and frail,” leaning on her fellow captives for support (Mossman 50). “The frailty . . . contrasts strongly with the physical strength . . . Hecuba commands” later in the play, says Judith Mossman (51). She is further separated “from the profane” by her prophetic abilities. She exemplifies Cline’s observation that “divination has always been a special province of the divine feminine” (167). Hecuba’s opening monody is a prayer to the gods to “beat back” (97) her portentous dream:

I saw a little doe, a dappled doe, torn from between my knees,
cruelly ripped away, mangled by a wolf with blood-red claw! (90-1)

Her vision is one of obvious binaries: the “doe” is vulnerably feminine, the “wolf” is predatorily masculine. It is also evident that the baby animal “torn from between” her “knees” is her child, Polyxena. While this metaphor for the passage of birth is emblematic of motherhood in general, it is an interesting vision for an elderly female to have. Childbirth defines her life, even in her old age. Hecuba recognizes two acts of profanity: the sacrifice of the innocent who is “cruelly ripped away” and the sacrifice of respect for the passage of birth that created the innocent. That the innocent “doe” is “mangled by a wolf with blood-red claw” implicates the wolf in prior acts of murder. His vicious appendage is symbolic of the blood-guilt that stains all of the Achaean patriarchy. His desire to mangle what is obviously weak is a sign of pathology. The egregious murder of the “dappled doe” just beginning its life is senseless. We can infer that this senseless murder, thematically, reflects upon the travesties of war Euripides experienced when he wrote this play in 424 BC.

But the fact that both of Hecuba’s children are murdered for profane reasons allows her to wield a particular divine power from her state of mourning: vengeance. Children who are murdered prior to experiencing their own rites of passage, such as marriage and motherhood, fester in the afterlife, and have “an intense desire for vengeance. Thus, funeral rites . . . have a long-range utility; they help to dispose of eternal enemies of the survivors” (van Gennepe 161). This may explain why Polydorus’ prologue can be interpreted as more than just a lament for his “poor mother”—it is, in fact, a call for action. As Mossman notes,

There is little doubt that a desire for revenge would not necessarily have been condemned by a fifth-century audience; for it is clear that in certain circumstances taking vengeance was positively considered a duty by the Greeks. (169)

Mossman goes on to observe that revenge, in Homer, “is the hero’s privilege up to a point: but there is a strong feeling that a halt must be called, especially when the good of society is at stake” (170). I believe we can understand Hecuba better if we can appreciate how her disparate qualities work to create her power: as a female, she is divinely ordained to aid in the rites of passage that men found nefarious, specifically, the polluted acts of birth and death (Padel 6). But her cosmic power enables her to do more than just sanctify the burials of her children: In her quest for justice, she is able to sanctify the corruption of the patriarchy “for the good of society.” To do so, she must play the role of the divinely connected female and heroic male. She outwits Odysseus, calls out the irreligious request of Achilles’ ghost, and convinces Agamemnon that Polymestor must be held accountable for the murder of Polydorus. She is able to tap into, or espouse the tenets of a common religiously-grounded philosophy held by the likes of Anaxagoras, Diogenes and Socrates, who believed, according to Burkert, that “the human mind was part of the cosmic god” that “rules over everything” (319). This mind, or *nous*, as it was called, was “taken up” by Euripides, who said “the *nous*” guided every man individually:

In his *Trojan Women*, he has Hecabe pray: ‘You who bear the earth and repose on it, whoever you are, difficult to guess and to know, necessity of nature or mind of men—I pray to you: moving in soundless ways you lead the affairs of mortals in accordance with justice.’ (qtd. in Burkert 319)

Hecuba’s ability to appeal to this “cosmic god” of the mind is significant as it broadens her scope of divine contact, adding a complexity to her inherent religious abilities as a woman. When she appeals to this “*nous*” to work “in accordance with justice” she is claiming her stake in creating a world order based on this cosmic logic; she is petitioning to influence the “mind of men.” And we can see, in her first exchange with the crafty mind of the king of Ithaca, that Hecuba is a

proficient actor in the art of mummery. Froma Zeitlin believes it is a mistake to view this exaggerated mimesis as a pure “artifice” of stage performance (84). She believes that “it can . . . represent the larger world outside as it more nearly is, subject to the deceptions, the gaps in knowledge, the tangled necessities, and all the tensions and conflicts of a complex existence” (85). Hecuba can believably be both supplicant and litigator.

Odysseus tells Hecuba that her daughter, Polyxena, must be sacrificed to appease Achilles’ ghost. “Achilles’ son will supervise the rites / and officiate as priest” he tells her (223-4). He then asks Hecuba to accept this necessary rite, by asking for her “resignation” (229). The idea that Hecuba must *resign* connotes that she has a lawful position in this hierarchal system where the religious and the political were inseparable. It is a clever word for Odysseus to use. We may rightly interpret this as a ploy—the Ithacan king is known for his rhetorical skills. He would benefit greatly by allowing her such illusions of importance. But Odysseus’ request is more than hyperbolic flattery. There is a tacit acknowledgement that Hecuba’s approval of the sacrifice is necessary. The wily king realizes that he must appeal to Hecuba’s spiritual and judicial conscience because she had, in the past, provided cosmic refuge for him. In her argument against the sacrifice of her daughter she reminds Odysseus: “You admit yourself you took my hand; / you grasped my cheek and begged for life” (273-4). Hecuba need not don a giant phallus for us to see the blatant reversal of roles in the exchange of the two characters. She is a bold and litigious supplicant who understands that she deserves cosmic and political justice. Her plea to the king is anything but submissive: “You admit,” “you took my hand,” “you . . . begged for life.” This relationship, as Margaret Williamson notes, “between suppliant and supplicated, and that of ξενία (guest-friendship) . . . are based on differentiation and inequality in status” and “involve a change in status, effected by ritual and witnessed by the gods” (“A Woman’s Place in

Euripides”). Hecuba is arguing from a position of the sacrosanct. Her request that Polyxena be spared is a “just demand” of Odysseus for the “debt of life” he owes her (273). This “debt of life” is twofold: as a woman, she can claim a broad physical responsibility for his—and the larger patriarchy’s—existence. As a supplicant, Hecuba has proven herself to be worthy of mercy as his prior benefactor. Tanya Pollard keenly observes that the power of the enslaved queen resonates from her dual dramatic purpose. She was a popular figure even in Shakespeare’s day, and “when she appears in *Titus Andronicus* she serves as a symbol not only of grief, but also of armed vengeance, identified with both justice and satisfaction” (120).

In *Hecuba*, the beleaguered queen and the Chorus of Trojan women are the only actors who understand the injustice of the male powers-that-be. She admonishes Odysseus for the Achaeans faulty decision to sacrifice Polyxena for a selfish ghost:

What in your so-called necessity
requires this brutal murder at a tomb where, by custom,
oxen ought to die? Does the ghost’s thirst for revenge
justify his demand for human slaughter? Polyxena
has done no harm to Achilles. Rather, he should’ve asked
for Helen’s sacrifice, since she destroyed him
by steering him to Troy. (260-6)

The Greeks’ transgressions in this play are numerous. Hecuba rightly derides Odysseus for his careless misunderstanding of the proper “custom” that would normally require the slaughter of oxen. This is not just a misinterpretation of the selfish ghost’s request, it is an egregious action against the human nobility of Polyxena, who has unassailable rights in her status as a virgin and slave. “Virgins play leading roles in many cults,” notes Burkert (78). More importantly, Greek

society depended on ritual for its existence: “It was said that in Athens there was only one day . . . in the year without a festival, and that festivals were cared for with even greater precision than the military campaigns” (256). Hecuba’s defense comes from “ancestral laws that derive their authority from the gods,” notes Foley (276). Additionally, Mossman notes that there was an Athenian law that forbade the “murder of slaves” (112). We should also question why, as Hecuba so cleverly observes, Helen would not be Achilles’ choice for sacrifice. Hecuba’s brazen suggestion is a calculated one. The murder of Helen is logical, as it would directly punish the individual who is arguably most responsible for the Trojan War. We can feel the desire for revenge burning in the queen’s crew. Odysseus’ speech, says Mossman, “lacks the fire and conviction of Hecuba’s” (113).

Hecuba’s role of fiery litigator interestingly reflects the ritualistic role “assigned to older women,” which was to keep “sacred fires” burning in temples (Connelly 43). Her incendiary anger works to stoke her inner spiritual fire, giving her fuel to confront the patriarchy and atone for the wrongful deaths of Polyxena and Polydorus. Like his sister’s, the young prince’s death is another gross violation of the sacred laws that were of paramount importance to this classic culture. “Achilles’ is a demanding ghost,” notes Mossman (179). Moreover, he has a tomb, while Polydorus has none . . . Achilles asks for gifts of men, Polydorus asks for proper burial so he can earn the favour . . . of the gods of the underworld” (179). It may be hard for the contemporary reader to appreciate the severity of these ritualistic breaches, but as Joan Connelly observes, rituals were codified in elaborate detail. In Athens, requirements for “appropriate dress, processional order . . .sacrificial animals” and “punishments for violations of rules” were spelled out clearly (86). Religious officials “were required to swear an oath that they would enforce” the regulations decreed for the rituals (86). Polymestor’s decision to murder the child

for whom he had promised safe haven shows us that there is no differentiation between the sacred and the civic: the murder of the child, and his liminal spiritual state are equally reprehensible. Both actions require reparations.

When she learns of her son's death, Hecuba contemplates the rhetorical strategy she will use to confront Agamemnon. Interestingly, her deliberation happens when the Mycenaean king arrives at her quarters to inquire about Polyxena's funeral plans. She speaks in asides, forcing the king to wait until she has prepared her appeal; she creates a dynamic that brings into question, again, who exactly is the master in this scenario. Cunningly, she clasps his knees and begs him "give me my revenge" (756). Agamemnon accepts her account of what happened to Polydorus without question, but is hesitant to be the perpetrator of revenge on behalf of Hecuba. It is up to the queen, again, to advocate for the sacred laws. "The gods are strong, and over them / there stands the law that governs all," she reminds him (799-800):

and by this law we live,
distinguishing good from evil.

Apply that law
now. For if you flout it, so that those
who murder their own guests or defy the gods
go unpunished, then human justice withers
corrupted at its source. (802-7)

It is significant that it is up to Hecuba to remind the king of the law under which they live. When she tells him that this law distinguishes "good from evil," she is not unlike a teacher passing on rudimentary knowledge to a child. This reminder may seem like a banality, but this condemnation of Agamemnon serves as an indictment of the whole system he has corrupted as

its leader. On a deeper level, we can view this as having stinging implications not only for the king's present dilemma, but for his past violation at the onset of the Trojan War when he chose to "flout" sacred law by spurning "Apollo's priest," leading to the plague that incapacitated the army (*Iliad* 10-13). As a woman, she is able to identify the hubris that stymies his ability to rationalize what is sacred. Polymestor has broken the tenets ascribed to the treatment of guests. But her strongest admonition to the king is her direct order to "apply that law," so that "human justice" can persevere. She both begs and upbraids him. Echoing her words to Odysseus, the enslaved queen tells Agamemnon to "do your duty as a man of honor" (844).

Like Odysseus, Agamemnon is guided by profane concerns and will not act on her behalf. His decision to avoid conflict with Polymestor could be a huge impediment for the enslaved woman. But the king's refusal has no effect on the ability of the queen to facilitate the tragic action. Foley notes that "Agamemnon recognizes the moral authority" of Hecuba's position (272). "Give me your passive support," she demands of him (872). Agamemnon's relegation to passive spectator exemplifies the reversal of roles of the two characters. She tells him that she will enlist the help of captive Trojan women to help her commit murder. Agamemnon's reply to her intention is telling: "Women?" he asks her, "Women overpower men?" (883). His confusion is at first stereotypical: women lack the physical strength of men—that is evident in his retort. But what is more interesting in his response is his failure to see the irony of his dynamic with Hecuba—she is, essentially overpowering him in her demand for revenge. He cannot stop her from committing murder.

The trial for the murder of Polydorus ends the play with the long-awaited retribution that cannot be delivered by the male players. Loraux notes that Hecuba "asks for help from Vengeance itself and from the race of women who united against males in the service of the

mother” (*Mothers in Mourning* 50). It is interesting to note that cosmic “vengeance” is embodied in the female characters of the Furies—in other words, justice requires otherworldly feminine action. Burkert tells us that Hesiod believed that “the oath, even as it is born, is surrounded by Erinyes” whose sole purpose was to ensure it was never broken (252). Polymestor has broken the promise he had made to Hecuba. The Furies are ready to aid the fallen queen, who entraps Polymestor under the pretense of entrusting him with more gold hidden in Troy. Mossman observes that rhetorically, Euripides “allows” Medea “to continue for only a short time after Medea has made up her mind” to murder her children, while Hecuba has “nearly twice as many lines” dedicated “to the final *agon*” (192). It is fair to see Hecuba as the embodiment of the “*nous*” at work seeking “justice” to influence the “mind of men.” This is evident when, for the third-time, Hecuba confronts a member of the patriarchy with the line “I know you for a man of honor” (1004). Her deceptive address persuades Polymestor to agree to have his guards withdraw, leaving him vulnerable (980). Again, we see the binaries at work: as a woman, Hecuba has an “inner darkness” that allows her to act outside the logic of male understanding—she is by physical default a deceitful creature, according to the classical male perspective (Padel 3). But as a purveyor of justice, Hecuba commands a mastery of rhetoric that allows her to act *within* the sensibility of male understanding. Her deceitful tactics are methodologically valid in her pursuit of the truth. Her purpose is opaque to Polymestor, but her polished language is clear.

After the Trojan women have killed Polymestor’s sons the Chorus Leader asks the queen: “Have you felled your Thracian host / and rule him now?” (1048). The metaphor of a “felled” tree reaffirms Hecuba’s powerful influence: the tree is a symbol of the strongly rooted patriarchy. She has essentially emasculated it, cutting the protrusion to the ground. She “rules” not only the blinded Polymestor, but every other branch that came toppling down with the trunk.

Polymestor, in his desperate state, exemplifies Padel's ideas of the classical male's distrust of women. "Neither earth nor ocean / produces a creature as savage and as monstrous / as woman," he tells Agamemnon, during his trial (1181-3). The Thracian king's diatribe against Hecuba is full of derogatory remarks, as he calls her a "bitch" and a "dog" (1265). While he may be vocalizing the male mistrust of women in general, Polymestor's deprecating remarks do little to advance his argument. Interestingly, at the end of the play the Thracian king prophesizes that Hecuba will turn into a dog on her way to Greece. As Mossman notes, dogs are strong predators and figuratively represent "a formidable challenge to patriarchy" (197). They are also "polluted creatures associated with Hecate" (197). While it is difficult to form a concrete interpretation of Euripides' intention here, perhaps Burkert has the best explanation, telling us that metamorphosis notes "a change of roles," and "offers" the individual "immortality" (qtd. in Mossman 200). Carson validates this thinking with her observation that Hecuba's suffering "is off the human scale," and that "there is nowhere for her to go but out of the species" (90).

I think it is fair to add that this metamorphosis can be interpreted as a scathing critique of the patriarchy. Consider Hecuba's final words to Agamemnon, as she ends her case against Polymestor: "if you assist this man, you prove yourself / unjust . . . faithless, evil and corrupt," she warns (1234-5). Help "him now / and we shall say the same is true of you. / But you are my master: I criticize no further" (1236-7). Her words remonstrate not only the corrupt Polymestor, but the potentially "faithless, evil and corrupt" actions of the Mycenaean king, if he sides with his ally. But her most damning threat is a calculated one, aimed at the hubris of her Greek captor: absolving Polymestor will *ruin your reputation*. Foley believes that Hecuba's speech is "rhetorically sophisticated, well reasoned, and directed at larger public as well as private concerns" (273). It is "based on laws and customs . . . that may be envisioned as of interest to the

gods” (273). After such artful rhetoric, it is nearly impossible not to hear the condescension in her feigned subservience: “you are my master: I criticize no further.” Hecuba retreats to her role of captive queen. But if Polymestor’s prophecy comes true, Hecuba will have the ability to escape captivity. As a dog, she will jump ship and find freedom in death. There is no escape for the Achaeans, however, from the realization that they have been outwitted by such a lowly beast.

Electra

Like Hecuba, Electra is motivated by a need to rectify “laws and customs” that are of “interest to the gods.” Shunned by the House of Atreus, the virgin princess lives the life of a poor, saintly martyr, while Clytemnestra and her new husband, Aegisthus, pollute the kingdom with their licentious relationship. Though she and her brother both facilitate the tragic action, Electra is the one who admonishes their mother and orders the hesitant Orestes to murder her. If Hecuba is a symbol of the elder woman who keeps the “sacred fires” burning, we can see Electra as the axiomatic esteemed virgin who lives the pristine life of a maiden safely sheltered in the woods. Burkert tells us that the ancient Greeks’ “demand for purity draws attention to the boundary which separates the sacred from the profane” (77). *Electra* presents us with severe boundaries that allow the virgin exile to avoid pollution in order to perform the sacred rituals necessary to purify the dissolute kingdom.

The exiled princess is married to a poor man who is economically unable to provide for a girl of such high status. It is important to note that the stage directions tell us that Electra and her poor husband live in a *cottage in the countryside*, and *before the house stands an altar to Apollo*. This description creates a clear demarcation between the princess and the corrupt rulers of Argos. More interestingly, it enhances our understanding of Electra’s character. Burkert notes that Greek society mimicked the Olympian deities (258). With this observation in mind, we can

see how this pristine setting mimics that of the environs of the goddess Artemis—sister of Apollo—who lives in the “mountains and meadows” (150). The primeval environment with its meagre dwelling is the very image of asceticism. Adding to the visualization of the purity of nature is the purity of Electra. The Farmer tells us “I rank as a pauper, which blots out all decent blood” (38). And because of this, he tells us:

I never shamed the girl in bed, she is still virgin.

I would feel ugly taking the daughter of a wealthy man

and violating her. I was not bred to such an honor. (44-6)

It is important to note from the onset that the concept of “blood” has a dual meaning in this play. The Farmer’s admission that he lacks “decent blood” is an obvious reference to his lack of noble lineage. But we cannot ignore the idea of “blood” and its connection to Electra’s status as a “virgin.” Burkert observes that the virgin was considered sacred, or *hagnos*, because they have abstained from the “disturbances” of “sexual intercourse, birth, death and especially murder” (78). We can imagine, then, that the Farmer views potential sexual relations with his wife as shameful and “ugly” not only because her father is “a wealthy man” but because—viscerally speaking—he does not want to contaminate the unadulterated blood of a virgin through “intercourse”; it would be both a physical and spiritual violation. His physical concern is clear when he says he “was not bred to such an honor.” This language clearly refers to his sexual potential more so than his aristocratic status.

Visually speaking, Burkert could be describing Electra when he tells us that Artemis is portrayed as “a youthful, lithe figure” with “a girl’s hairstyle” (150). Like the goddess, Euripides presents Electra as a young girl with a “shorn / head” that exaggerates her youthfulness (line 147). The virginal iconography of this character is further exacerbated when we meet the

princess as she enters the scene *carrying a water jar on her head*. Just as Hecuba's veils of mourning metaphorically work to "separate" her "from the profane," Electra's association with this water vessel is a sacred image (Van Gennep 168). Burkert tells us that "the water-carrying maiden with the jug on her head, the *hydrophoros*, is fixed in the iconography of worship," and that these "vessels containing water, *perirranteria*, are set up at the entrances to sanctuaries . . . everyone who enters dips a hand in the vessel and sprinkles himself with water" (76-7). David Raeburn believes the vessel "is a symbol of her self-martyrdom and joy in weeping" (153). The image presents a paradox: as a virgin, it would have been an honor for her to be chosen to carry the vessel for a religious procession; as a poor martyr, carrying the large vessel of water is a metaphorical exaggeration of her larger burden (Burkert 258). It will take an ocean of *perirranteria* to dissolve the sins of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. The princess tells us:

I chose this slavery myself
to demonstrate to the gods Aegisthus' outrageousness—
and cry my pain to Father in the great bright air. (57-9)

Electra's decision to marry a poor man is a self-inflicted form of "slavery." This is the sacrifice she makes for the kingdom. Her violated marriage rites can be interpreted as an affront to "the gods." According to Loraux, "marriage and sacrifice are inextricably joined . . . sacrifices in tragedy illuminate the customary ritual in marriage whereby the virgin passes from one *kyrios* (guardian) to another, from the father who gives her away" (*Tragic Ways* 36). So, while we may at first believe her "cry" to "Father" is a reference to Agamemnon, who has not received the proper rites of burial, the fact that "Father" is capitalized allows us to infer that she is reaching out to Zeus directly to witness the marital sham in which she suffers. Both she and Agamemnon,

who is festering in the afterlife waiting for the proper rites of separation, exist in a state of liminality due to “Aegisthus’ outrageousness.”

Like *Hecuba*, *Electra* is a play that requires female atonement for a variety of transgressions. The estranged princess becomes flagellant in her appeal for the cosmic good. Visually, her short hair more than just recalls the childlike image of Artemis, it is a testament to her unending state of mourning for her murdered father and exiled brother. She tells us she sings the “song of death” (143), constantly strikes “her head” (150), and rips her “throat with sharp / nails” (147-8). Her self-immolation seeks to rectify the large-scale pollution of Argos by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. And it’s easy to imagine her “song of death” is the shrieking *oloyge* (wailing) performed by women at religious ceremonies and funerals (Burkert 258). The fact that Electra’s “song of death,” or *tragoedia*, is a kind of personal dirge, is in itself a transgression. When the Chorus asks her to join the women of Argos for the upcoming “holy feast” (173) for Hera, the princess refuses to leave her state of mourning. While her decision seems forthright—she tells them she is “too sad” (178) to partake in such festivities, her refusal shows us how her virginal rites have been violated. “I am deprived of holy festivals and dances, / I can’t spend time with women since I am a girl” (310-11). This is an implicit indictment of Clytemnestra’s failure as a mother to properly allow her daughter the rites of participation in “holy festivals.” It is important to understand that this is not a superfluous slight. Burkert reminds us of the famous Athenian story of Harmodios, who murdered the tyrant Hipparchus of Athens in 514 BCE “because his [Harmodios’] sister had been refused the role of basket-bearer at the *Panathenaia* festival” (258). Moreover, it is imaginable that at least part of the Athenian audience would have been sympathetic to Electra’s deprivation. Connelly notes that Henderson and Sourvinou-Inwood “have made compelling cases for the presence of women at dramatic performances in Greek

theaters” (4). While there is much ambiguity in Electra’s line about spending “time with women,” as she is “a girl,” I think it is fair to interpret this as an acknowledgement of her state of liminality. Clytemnestra’s disregard for her role as mother has disenfranchised the daughter.

Clytemnestra’s neglect, essentially, keeps Electra from achieving womanhood. Mother and daughter present us with binaries that exaggerate the sacred and the profane in the sexually complex terms that exemplify the patriarchy’s reverence and suspicion of the feminine. Connelly notes that virginity was viewed as a “necessary stage through which girls had to pass on their way to full integration into society” (18). Thematically, as we have seen from the onset, blood lineage is a nuanced term as it applies to royalty and virgin femininity. While Electra admonishes the Chorus for their insistence that she attend the holy festival, it becomes evident that her state of melancholy and physical appearance are not the essential reasons behind her refusal. She reveals her deep-rooted misery to the women:

And I! I in a peasant’s hut
waste my life like melting wax,
.....
while my mother rolls in her bloody bed
and plays at love with another man. (207-11)

Electra is wasting her “life” with the peasant in very physical terms: she is “like melting wax,” which we can interpret to mean she desires some sort of *physical impression*. The fact that her “wax” is “melting” alludes to the unfulfilled burning desire whittling away her chance at womanhood. Clytemnestra, on the other hand, suffers no such injustice. Electra’s comment that her “mother rolls in her bloody bed / and plays at love” has a twinge of envy. Again, the concept of blood is complicated. At first, we see her use of the adjective “bloody” as a reference to guilt

blood—the queen did murder Agamemnon. His blood is figuratively spilled on the marriage bed Clytemnestra is contaminating. But “bloody” is also, again, a very sexually-charged descriptor in that it conjures images of deflowerment. Again, we can interpret this as a jealous observation. The fact that Electra feels her mother “plays at love,” implies both that Clytemnestra’s feelings for Aegisthus are not sincere, and, at the same time, she is still having more fun than the exiled daughter who will never know what adult love is.

When Orestes confronts his sister for the first time, she tells him her “body” is “wasted and dry” (239) and her “wedding” has been “much like death” (247). It is important to note that when she tells Orestes these things, she thinks she is speaking to a stranger, yet much of their exchange is focused on her sexuality. Her state of sexual martyrdom is just as egregious as if she had been killed. Her brother does not hesitate to intimately question her when she tells him that the Farmer “respects” her (223):

ORESTES: Respects? What does your husband understand by “respect”?

ELECTRA: He has never been violent or touched me in my bed.

ORESTES: A vow of chastity? or he finds you unattractive?

ELECTRA: He finds it attractive not to insult my royal blood. (255-59)

This exchange, in its need to clarify the definition of “respect,” shows that Orestes and Electra must confirm that a “boundary” has been maintained, keeping “the sacred [Electra] from the profane [Farmer]” (Burkert 77). More interestingly, we can see that Orestes’ line of questioning locates Electra as a powerless individual—why has *he* decided not to consummate your marriage? he asks. At first, we can interpret this at face value: if the Farmer really wanted to have sexual relations with Electra he could physically overpower her. On a deeper level, this shows the character of Orestes, the exiled son, who is far removed from the tragic circumstance

that Electra is enduring. She has the situation under control. She offers a quick-witted retort to the bewildered stranger, telling him the Farmer “finds it attractive not to insult” her “royal blood.” This retort makes it clear that sexual relations between Electra and the Farmer were never an option; the boundaries between the “sacred” and “profane” has dictated their dynamic from the onset. It is important to note that Electra’s “royal blood” directly refers to her capacity as a procreator—this conversation is about sexual relations in the present tense, as opposed to some imagined royal lineage in the future. Orestes, however, remains oblivious to his sister’s heroic capabilities. He tries to incorporate himself into the tragic action and play the hero. The prince is convinced that the Farmer’s “respect” is derived from a fear that “Orestes” would return to “avenge” her “honor” (260). Electra’s qualified response checks his fanciful thinking: “Afraid of that, yes—he is also decent by nature,” she tells him (261). In this response, again, we see Electra’s dynamic role in the tragic action. She must correct the stranger’s assumptions, and in doing so, she deflates her brother’s attempt at creating a heroic narrative. The Farmer is “decent by nature”; the absent Orestes’ sense of decency is questionable. “How should Orestes play his part if he comes to Argos?” he asks her (274). Believing she is still speaking with a stranger, she freely voices her frustration at her brother’s absence: “If he comes? Ugly talk. The time has long been ripe,” she quips (275). It is evident that Electra has lost confidence in her brother. She has existed in a state of hope for too long; his bewildering prolonged absence has cast an “ugly” reflection on his sense of duty to the family. The fact that Euripides has Orestes question his “part” in the action further draws into question his heroic purpose.

Electra has the conviction and a clear heroic purpose. Revenge, just like in Hecuba, is ultimately the duty of the female. Orestes is only able to set the stage for his return after he has confirmed with Electra that the time is right. Electra tells the stranger that she would “gladly . . .

die in [their] Mother's blood" (281). The visual of this feminine carnage is again very sexual in that it implicates a scene of childbirth. Electra was born in her "Mother's blood"; she envisions a similar passage out of this world. We are reminded of Padel's observations that the passages of birth and death are intertwined and left to the guidance of feminine forces (5). "In Euripides," says Loraux, there is "a language, obscurely addressing the obscure, in which the blood-stained death of *parthenoi* [virgin] is considered as an anomalous and displaced way of transforming virginity into womanhood—as though a throat-cutting equaled a defloration" (*Tragic Ways* 41). While we don't know how Electra would physically die in her imagined battle with Clytemnestra, figuratively, her agency in performing the tragic action makes her a woman. It is not hyperbolic to say for Euripides, Electra must carry out the tragic action against her mother. When she realizes the stranger is her brother, the two plan out the murders of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. "I will be the one to manage my mother's killing," she tells him (647). Her use of the possessive "my" appears purposeful. One interpretation leads us to believe that this revenge is more personal for her—she has endured the shame of the kingdom and her marriage alone. A more nuanced inference leads us to the recognition that Electra's female identity requires her alone to atone for her mother's sins. Clytemnestra must be held accountable for her failures as a *woman*. The ruse that Electra uses to lure her apathetic mother to her meager dwelling is one that relies on feminine guidance: she needs her assistance after childbirth (652).

The murder of Aegisthus is of secondary importance to that of Clytemnestra. As Electra observes the corpse of her dead stepfather, she memorializes his inferiority, telling the dead man: "Every time you walked outdoors in Argos, you heard / these words: 'He's hers'. And never: 'She belongs to him'" (930-31). Like Orestes, Aegisthus is a male character who has existed on the parameters of the debauched kingdom. While he may have been residing in the royal palace,

he never established a patriarchal identity. He “belongs” to Clytemnestra; he has no agency apart from her’s. This mimics Orestes role as exiled son hoping to reclaim his patriarchal identity. His agency, too, “belongs” to Electra. She is the one who orchestrates the tragic action against their mother. As Raeburn notes, “Scholars have seen Orestes as a reluctant hero, driven to matricide by a forcefully vindictive sister” (150). It is not exaggeration to say that if it were up to Orestes, Clytemnestra’s life would be sacrificed. He appears content with just the murder of Aegisthus. “What is our action now toward Mother? Do we kill?” he asks his sister (967). “Don’t tell me pity catches you at the sight of her,” she replies (968). The fact that he has to question their next move shows more than a reluctance on his part—it shows his need for female validation of the act. He recognizes his sister’s inherent duty to assist in the rites of birth and death. It is also likely that fear of cosmic retribution for ritualistic transgression is of concern to him. Perhaps, most tellingly, this line shows that he *still* does not know his role in this drama. That the “sight” of Clytemnestra could evoke feelings of “pity” in the son shows how far removed he has been from her egregious existence. Revenge must be enacted by one who has endured the travesty in Argos.

Electra’s final exchange with her mother extends the distance between the “sacred” and “profane.” This exchange mimics the rite of passage she has been waiting for: she spends “time” with a mature female, which allows her to make the transition from girl to woman. Ironically, however, Euripides creates a coming-of-age moment that mocks the sacred religious festivals Electra has pined for. The lessons of Clytemnestra’s womanhood are irreligious and nonmaternal. As Electra confronts her mother, calling her out for her abandonment, Clytemnestra tries to explain why she left her fatherless. The queen’s response acts as a lesson for her daughter as to what it means to be a sexually active woman:

. . . women are fools for sex, deny it I shall not.
 since this is in our nature, when our husbands choose
 to despise the bed they have, a woman is quite willing
 to imitate her man and find another lover. (1035-38)

Clytemnestra's admission that she is a fool "for sex" stands in stark contrast to the rigid purity of her virginal daughter. It also implicates how *polluted* sexual relations are to the female person: once a woman has sex, the queen seems to imply, there is no abstaining from it. She will "imitate her man," if he is unfaithful and "find another lover." Her justification for disregarding the burial of Agamemnon is *purely* sexual. She admits that king's decision to murder Iphigenia did not cause her to murder the king (1033). The fact that he chose "to despise the bed" he shared with the queen instigated her desire to murder him. This sexual action validates her right to disrespect him in his cosmic turmoil. This is also her reasoning for her maternal neglect. Her sexual needs as a woman are more important than her maternal responsibilities. When she tells Electra that "this is in our nature," we hear words that clearly reflect the classical male misogyny that found women suspect. But Clytemnestra is more than just a polluted female character. The fact that she is inclined to "imitate" a "man" may figuratively explain why she had been able to abandon her role as mother.

Clytemnestra is, however, easily manipulated into playing the maternal part. "Make me the proper sacrifice," Electra asks her, deceptively "I have no knowledge; I have never had a child," (1125). The daughter knows that her mother cannot deny her request for these rites—the ruse would not work if there were any chance of her refusal. But Electra's request is more than just a well-conceived ploy: the "proper sacrifice" is implicatively, of course, the sacrifice of Clytemnestra for Electra. It is long overdue. On a deeper level, when Electra tells her that she

has “no knowledge” how to perform rituals for “a child” we can hear her condemnation of Clytemnestra’s maternal failings. The queen has always been more concerned with her “blond curls” than her children (1069). As Foley notes, Clytemnestra’s main concern is her “reputation,” and she is an “unheroic” woman who has a “moral inadequacy” and “a feminine inability to stand by her convictions” (*Female Acts* 235-6).

Electra suffers from no such “feminine inability.” After they murder their mother, it is up to Electra to allay Orestes’ tears:

Weep greatly, my brother, but I am to blame.

A girl burning in hatred I turned against

the mother who bore me. (1182-4)

Electra’s admission of guilt in the murder is not merely meant to appease the pain her brother is feeling. She accepts “blame” because it was she who “turned against” Clytemnestra; Orestes’ role as avenger was contingent on her need for revenge. Just as in *Hecuba* and *The Medea*, revenge depends on female agency. As “a girl burning in hatred,” Electra, unlike her brother, never viewed matricide as an option. Implicit in her lines is the necessity of the action and the necessity of her part in it. As Padel notes, the classical male believed that women had a “kinship . . . with the darker, polluting side of divinity,” and men “assigned them guardianship” to “make contact, on their behalf, with . . . contaminating objects” (6). The murder of the “polluted” Clytemnestra is inherently relegated to Electra. Ritualistically speaking, we can see how this “girl burning in hatred” manages her transformation into womanhood by eliminating the woman who kept her from maturity.

As the Dioscuri deliver her fate for her role in the murder, Electra learns that she will have to live in exile, and will be allowed to marry her brother’s esteemed friend Pylades (1249-

50). Still, she questions her fate, asking her divine uncles: “what oracle’s voice / ordained I be marked in my mother’s blood?” (1303-4). She cannot escape the blood guilt of her role in her mother’s murder. More implicit in the oracle’s verdict is the maternal association that will plague her existence: she has been “marked” by the blood of Clytemnestra in birth and in death—there is no escaping this association with her mother’s sexuality. So, her transcendence from her role as virgin to that of sexually active married woman is bittersweet. The rite of passage that she has longed for, ironically, is achieved through transgression. The stain of her mother’s blood forces her to cross the boundary from the side of the “sacred” to that of the “profane.” Perhaps the most devastating tragic action in the play is the loss of Electra’s purity. She has, it turns out, made the ultimate sacrifice by becoming martyred in pollution.

Conclusion

Electra’s sacrifice—like that of all the Euripidean tragic females—is tragic because it devastates what is divinely feminine. With their spiritual power comes the burden of martyrdom. All of these heroines suffer in their motherhood, their virginity, or their devotion to Aphrodite. At face value, it may appear this is a mere dramatic device meant to provoke the patriarchal powers-that-be. As Foley hypothesizes, “female characters are doing double duty in these plays, by representing a fictional female position in the tragic family and city and simultaneously serving as a location from which to explore a series of problematic issues that men prefer to approach indirectly” (4). While it is imaginable that these plays were indeed reflective of the social-political turmoil during the Peloponnesian War, it does not answer why Euripides’ male characters were portrayed as inept and sacrilegious. By all known historical accounts, the Greek city-states depended on patriarchal agency. Why not appeal to *their* sense of cosmic justice? Their role as father? Why not provoke them to consider *their* inner strengths to enact change?

Twelve of Euripides' nineteen extant plays feature female protagonists. Why the playwright chose to allow these female characters such powerful agency is a question that defies explanation even in its classical context. Consider Chapter 15 of Aristotle's *Poetics*. In his discussion of characterization, the Greek thinker tells us that one of the "aims" of tragedians is to create "appropriate" characters: "it is *possible* to have a woman manly in character, but it is not appropriate for a woman to be so manly or clever," he recommends (47). This observation, in its need to qualify what is "*possible*," makes one wonder what he thought of the blatantly "clever" Medea and the rhetorically-skilled Hecuba. Let us next consider Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazousai*. The play features a discussion between Euripides and his fictitious male relative. The playwright tells his kin that he fears for his life, as "the women have been plotting against me," because "they say I slander them in my tragedies" (qtd. in March). Euripides' contemporary, says March, is responsible for the prevailing idea that Euripides was a misogynist. The ideologies of Aristotle and Aristophanes complicate our interpretation of Euripides: the philosopher is hesitant to advocate for powerful female characterization, while the comedic playwright seems to believe that Euripides' focus on the feminine is in itself a transgression.

March counters this classical male ideology with an astute yet simple observation: all of these female characters have been "drawn without blame or condemnation" ("Euripides the Misogynist?"). On the contrary, they have been created "instead with clear insight and an intense compassion for their predicament" ("Euripides the Misogynist?"). There is no question that these characters elicit empathy. It would be anachronistic, however, to call the playwright a feminist by any contemporary understanding of the term. Perhaps we may qualify Foley's hypothesis to get a clearer interpretation of his intention: feminine agency allows Euripides "to explore a series of problematic issues that men prefer to approach indirectly," because it is the

inherently religious role of the women to deal with them directly. He is not slandering Medea and Agave by having them kill their offspring; they make the ultimate sacrifice for a just reality. Phaedra is not a licentious being—she is a testament to the importance of eros in the balance of nature. Hecuba is not derogatorily transformed into a hound—she is allowed to escape her imprisonment and join her children in Hades. Electra must murder her mother to atone for centuries of blood guilt in Argos. Their actions are not inappropriate; their reputations are not slandered. These characters are conduits to the divine. It is their duty to atone for male sacrilege through a logically divine appeal to the *nous*. They are players in Euripides' quest for a "purer concept of god."

Works Cited

- Aristotle. *The Poetics*. Translated by Stephen Halliwell, North Carolina UP, 1987.
- Burkert, Walter. *Greek Religion*. Translated by John Raffan, Harvard UP, 1985.
- Carson, Anne. *Grief Lessons: Four Plays by Euripides*. Translated by Anne Carson, NYRB, 2006.
- Cline, Kurt. "The Shaman's Song and Divination in the Epic Tradition." *Anthropology of Consciousness*, vol. 21, no. 2, Sept. 2010, pp. 163-187. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1111/j.1556-3537.2010.01027.x.
- Connelly, Joan Breton. *Portrait of a Priestess*. Princeton UP, 2007.
- Cyrino, Monica Silveira. "'Shame, Danger and Desire': Aphrodite's Power in the Fifth Homeric Hymn." *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, vol. 47, no. 4, 1993, pp. 219–230. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1348308.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*. Blackwell, 2003.
- "Enthusiasm." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/62879. Accessed 13 December 2018.
- Euripides. *Electra*. *Euripides V*. Translated by William Arrowsmith, Chicago UP, 1959, pp.9-66.
- . *Hecuba*. *Euripides II*. Translated by William Arrowsmith, Chicago UP, 1958, pp.71-132.
- . *Hippolytus*. *Euripides I*. Translated by David Grene, Chicago UP, 1955, pp. 163-221.

---. *The Bacchae. Euripides V.* Translated by William Arrowsmith, Chicago UP, 1959, pp.154-220.

---. *The Medea. Euripides I.* Translated by Rex Warner, Chicago UP, 1955. pp. 59-114.

Foley, Helene. *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy.* Princeton UP, 2001.

Herodotus. *The Histories.* Translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt, Penguin, 2001.

Homer. *The Iliad.* Translated by Robert Fagles, Penguin, 1990.

Jackman, Trinity. "Religion, Myth and Ritual in the Greek City-State." Columbia University, 14 Mar. 2008, Columbia University, New York. Lecture.

Johnston, Sarah Iles. "The Authority of Greek Mythic Narratives in the Magical Papyri." *Archiv Für Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 16, no. 1, Nov. 2015, pp. 51-66. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1515/arege-2014-0006.

Kott, Jan. *The Eating of the Gods.* Translated by Boleslaw Taborski and Edward J. Czerwinski, Northwestern UP, 1987.

Lardinois, A. "Characterization through Gnomai in Homer's Iliad." *Mnemosyne*, vol. 53, no. 6, Dec. 2000, pp. 641-661. EBSCOhost, ezproxy.montclair.edu:2048/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=4079259&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

Lefkowitz, Mary R. "'Impiety' and 'Atheism' in Euripides' Dramas." *The Classical Quarterly*, vol. 39, no. 1, 1989, pp. 70–82. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/639242.

---. *Women in Greek Myth.* Johns Hopkins UP, 1990.

- Loraux, Nicole. *Mothers in Mourning*. Translated by Corinne Pache, Cornell UP, 1998.
- Loraux, Nicole. *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*. Translated by Anthony Forster, Harvard UP, 1987.
- March, Jennifer. "Euripides the Misogynist?" *Euripides, Women, and Sexuality*. E-book, Routledge, 1990.
- Mossman, Judith. *Wild Justice: A Study of Euripides' Hecuba*. Clarendon, 1995.
- Padel, Ruth. "Women: Model for Possession by Greek Daemons." *Images of Women in Antiquity*. Routledge, 1993, pp. 3-19.
- Pollard, Tanya. *Greek Tragic Women on Shakespearean Stages*. Oxford UP, 2017.
- Raeburn, David. "The Significance of Stage Properties in Euripides' 'Electra'." *Greece & Rome*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2000, pp. 149–168. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/826930.
- Schenker, D. J. "The Victims of Aphrodite: 'Hippolytus', 1403-1405." *Mnemosyne*, vol. 48, no. 1, 1995, pp. 1–10. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4432450.
- Sissa, Giulia. *Greek Virginity*. Harvard UP, 1990.
- Thucydides. *The History of the Peloponnesian War*. Translated by Richard Crawley, Ebook, Project Gutenberg, 2013.
- van Gennep, Arnold. *The Rites of Passage*. Translated by Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, Chicago UP, 1960.
- "Xeínos." *Wiktionary: The Free Dictionary*, Wikimedia Foundation, 24 October 2019, <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/ξένοϋς>. Accessed 8 November 2019.

Williamson, Margaret. "A Woman's Place in Euripides' *Medea*. *Euripides, Women, and Sexuality*, E-book, Routledge, 1990.

Zeitlin, Froma I. "Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama." *Nothing to Do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in Its Social Context*. Princeton UP, 1990.