

## ABSTRACT

Title of Document: ANIMAL SIMILES AND GENDER IN THE  
*ODYSSEY* AND *ORESTEIA*

Johanna Leah Braff, M.A., 2008

Directed By: Professor Lillian Doherty, Department of  
Classics

This thesis offers an overview of a selection of the animal similes within the *Odyssey* and the *Agamemnon*. I examine the ways in which the animal similes, reverse similes, and overall character portrayal are depicted within each work. I argue that these tools are used in order to reflect the genres of the two works and how neither completely adheres to the expectations of the gender roles, that is, what is expected of the male and female characters. The gender roles are more stable in the *Odyssey* as Penelope relies on her *homophrosune* with Odysseus, while the *Agamemnon* captures the chaos that occurs when the female does not remain within the female sphere.

ANIMAL SIMILES AND GENDER IN THE *ODYSSEY* AND *ORESTEIA*

By

Johanna Leah Braff

Thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
2008

Advisory Committee:  
Professor Lillian Doherty, Chair  
Professor Eva Stehle  
Professor Judith Hallett

© Copyright by  
Johanna Leah Braff  
2008

## Dedication

To my Grandma Nettie, the inspiration and muse behind my endeavors in the Classics.

## Table of Contents

Dedication.....	ii
Table of Contents.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Women in the <i>Odyssey</i> .....	2
Chapter 2: Animal Similes in the <i>Odyssey</i> .....	20
Chapter 3: The <i>Oresteia</i> , Gender and Sexuality.....	32
Chapter 4: Animal Similes in the <i>Agamemnon</i> .....	54
Conclusion.....	73
Bibliography.....	76

## INTRODUCTION

It has long been stated that Homer's works were the main influence for Aeschylus' dramas. According to Athenaeus, Aeschylus often boasted that his "own dramas were portions from Homer's great feast" (Athenaeus viii. 347e). Aeschylus was thus commended for his utilization of the themes set before Homer and the manner in which he emulated and adapted the writings of Homer. Aeschylus widely employed the Homeric language<sup>1</sup>, storylines of Agamemnon and the Trojan war and much more. In addition, Aeschylus emulated the imagery and similes abundant in Homer's epics while simultaneously adapting them to the genre of his work and contemporary audience.

This paper will closely look at the animal similes first in the *Odyssey* and then in the *Agamemnon*. I will focus on the significance of the chosen animals and the characters with whom they are being compared. The emphasis will be placed on the role of the women in each work, the animal similes used for them and the ways in which these comparisons expose the societal roles of the genders. Finally, the two works will be compared to show the ways in which the works differ. Although Homer's epics were central to the production of Aeschylus' drama, Aeschylus' writings expand upon the earlier works and adapt the imagery to suit the genre and contemporary audience. Thus the compared works are similar and yet variant usage.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Sideras, A. (1971) *Aeschylus Homericus*

## CHAPTER ONE: WOMEN IN THE *ODYSSEY*

Penelope's first appearance in the *Odyssey* occurs more than half way through the first book of the epic (1.327). As Phemius, the bard, sings of the Trojan War and the bitter *nostos* of the Achaean heroes, Penelope unexpectedly emerges to quiet the sorrowful song. Although her presence seems to be somewhat out of the norm,

Homer illustrates her adherence to the status and domain of women. τοῦ δ'

ὑπερωϊόθεν φρεσὶ σύνθετο θέσπιν ἀιοιδῆν / κούρη Ἰκαρίοιο, περίφρων Πηνελόπεια·

/ κλίμακα δ' ὑψηλὴν κατεβήσετο οἷο δόμοιο (1.329-330, "Wise Penelope, the

daughter of Icarius, from her upper chamber, heard his (the bard's) divinely-inspired song, and descended the high staircase that was built in her palace") These upper chambers, presumably the "women's quarters", are where Penelope spends the majority of the epic, reappearing from time to time descending from this locale.<sup>2</sup>

These are only speculations as to the freedom and status of the female in the Homeric epics. Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* tell a tale of the Trojan War but the actual societies and time period reflected in the works are unclear. Unlike Aeschylus, (Chapters 3 and 4) little is known of Homer's existence and his culture. His portrayed females encompass the expectations of some society, but it is a mystery whether they reflected the contemporary status of women.

In interpreting Penelope, we have to remember that she is not a real person, but the creation of that presumably male poet, and that the male characters in the poem do not merely surround her but also control the society in which she must operate, thereby dictating the terms under which she must act...the

---

<sup>2</sup> Some examples: 1.229-330, 1.362, 18. 205-207, 19. 53, 19, 601

society portrayed in the poem is designed primarily to promote the interests of the men who control it, and then the poet's primary interest is in celebrating the achievements of his male hero.<sup>3</sup>

Therefore, Homer's focus on the actions and positioning of the females within his epic delineates the ethos of his unidentified society.

Upon descending from her chamber, Penelope remains devoted to her gendered decorum. She appears:

οὐκ οἴη, ἅμα τῆ γε καὶ ἀμφίπολοι δὺ' ἔποντο.  
ἦ δ' ὅτε δὴ μνηστῆρας ἀφίκετο δῖα γυναικῶν,  
στῆ ῥα παρὰ σταθμὸν τέγεος πύκα ποιητοῖο  
ἄντα παρειάων σχομένη λιπαρὰ κρήδεμνα·  
ἀμφίπολος δ' ἄρα οἱ κεδνὴ ἐκάτερθε παρέστη.

She was not at all alone, since two handmaidens followed her.  
And when she, shining of women, arrived among the suitors,  
she stood next to the well-built pillar of the ceiling  
holding her glistening veil in front of her face;  
and a handmaiden was stationed on either side of her.

(1.331-335)

Both in this instance and later in book 16 when she chooses to appear before the suitors (16.65), Penelope veils her face and enters with her "ladies in waiting". De Jong calls Penelope's accompanied state the "'not alone' motif" and stresses that this was a signal of Penelope's chastity.<sup>4</sup> This "rare association with the suitors, her station beside the pillar, her veil, and her constant attendant accentuate Penelope's modesty and chastity"<sup>5</sup>. Through such descriptions, Homer is able to develop the normal order of life in Ithaca and the customary expectations for the genders.

---

<sup>3</sup> Murnaghan (1994) "Reading Penelope", 80-81

<sup>4</sup> De Jong, Irene (2001) *A Narratological Commentary on The Odyssey*. Cambridge University Press, p. 36

<sup>5</sup> Felson-Rubin, Nancy (1994) *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p. 22



Penelope's veiled and attended presence rarely occurs in the story. The heroine predominantly remains upstairs, appearing only when "situation(s) that could be construed as emergencies call her forth".<sup>6</sup> She uses Phemius' song as an emergency situation and is severely reprimanded by her son. Telemachus addresses Penelope saying:

ἀλλ' εἰς οἶκον ἰοῦσα τὰ σ' αὐτῆς ἔργα κόμιζε,  
ἰστόν τ' ἠλακάτην τε, καὶ ἀφμιπόλοισι κέλευε  
ἔργον ἐποίχεσθαι. Μῦθος δ' ἄνδρεςσι μελήσει  
πᾶσι, μάλιστα δ' ἐμοί· τοῦ γὰρ κράτος ἔστ' ἐνὶ οἴκῳ.

Go back into the house and tend to your works,  
the loom and the distaff, and order your handmaidens to ply  
their work also; but the discussion is a care to all men  
and especially me. For mine is the power in the house.  
(1.356-359)

This speech, often seen as Telemachus' coming of age,<sup>7</sup> exposes the proper status of the women within the *oikos*. The female is an inferior being to the male. Even as mother, Penelope must obey her son's commands, remain outside of the male public sphere and return to her women's lodgings.

Throughout the epic, Penelope continues to preserve Odysseus' *oikos* and her customary societal role. Even when her power becomes questionably strong and her *metis* equaling Odysseus', Penelope adheres to the mores through weaving.<sup>8</sup> Spinning and weaving have traditionally been considered to be within the domain of women

---

<sup>6</sup> Katz (1942) 138

<sup>7</sup> For more on Telemachus' adolescence and growth into manhood, see Felson-Rubin, Chapter 4, pp. 68-91

<sup>8</sup> I do not see any purposeful difference between spinning and weaving in the epic and so I shall make no distinction between the two here in my work. For studies on plausible reasoning for the different categories, see Pantelia, Maria C. (1993) "Spinning and Weaving: Ideas of Domestic Order in Homer" *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 114, No. 4, pp. 493-501

and signified the normal order of life and the households.<sup>9</sup> Penelope “engages in an active struggle to maintain th(is) cultural norm”<sup>10</sup> and her fidelity is highlighted by her perpetual presence weaving in the female chambers.

There are multiple references to women and their textile work in the *Odyssey*; Arete, Helen, Calypso, Circe, the women of Alcinous’ palace, in book 7, and the nymphs in Ithaca, in book 13<sup>11</sup>. Although each scene is characterized by a society lacking in domestic stability, Penelope is the only female who upholds the proper customs. The spinning of Arete and Helen shows each of them “as a Homeric housewife”<sup>12</sup> but challenges the Greek ethos with its unquestioned presence in the banquet.<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, Circe and Calypso’s singing at the loom (Circe: 10.136, 11.8, 12.150, Calypso: 7.245, 7.254, 12.449) reveals their resemblance to bards and their ability to bestow the hero with immortality.<sup>14</sup> These comparative references to textile work stress the impropriety of the other women and Penelope’s faithful maintenance of the home.

Odysseus’ travels are filled with encounters with unusually powerful women and societies of inverse social order than that of Ithaca. These contrasting cultures, relationships and characterizations reveal the possibility of gender instability in Ithaca upon Odysseus’ return. Penelope has the ability to become any one of these women during her husband’s absence and threaten the *oikos* and Odysseus’ safe *nostos*.

However, “Penelope does not take inappropriate advantage of her opportunity to

---

<sup>9</sup> Pantelia (1993) 493

<sup>10</sup> Foley (1978) 9

<sup>11</sup> Some instances of weaving: 1.356-9, 2.93-4, 2.103-5, 2.108-9, 5.61-2, 7.104-5, 7.109-111, 10.221-3, 10.226-7, 10.254, 13.107-8, 15.516-7, 19.138-140, 19.148-150, 24.129-130, 23.138-140, 24.144-5

<sup>12</sup> De Jong (2001) 97

<sup>13</sup> Helen: 4.120-136, Arete: 6.51-53, 305-306

<sup>14</sup> Pantelia (1993) 498

wield power in Odysseus' absence; yet to maintain his kingship she must come close as a woman can to doing so".<sup>15</sup> Her decision to remain faithful to her husband separates her from the other women, rewards her virtuousness and neutralizes the gendered positions of the society.

Helen appears as the most realistic woman in the epic and, as a relative of Penelope, she represents the heroine's possible infidelity. The tale begins after the Trojan War with numerous references to Helen's affair. Her presence in book four is seen in a negative light. In comparison to the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* holds Helen more accountable than Paris for their actions.<sup>16</sup> The *Odyssey's* unflattering description of Helen highlights her unhappy marriage and a plausible future for Odysseus.

In book 4, Telemachus arrives at Menelaus' palace during a wedding banquet. Helen appears from her bedchamber, escorted by her attendants, carrying her spinning, in a similar manner to Penelope: ἐκ δ' Ἑλένη θαλάμοιο θυώδεος ὑπορόφοιο/ ἦλυθ' Ἄρτεμιδι χρυσηλακάτω εἰκυῖα. / Τῇ δ' ἄρ' ἄμ' Ἀδρήστη... (4.121-124, "God-loved Helen came out from her fragrant high-roofed bedchamber, looking like Artemis of the golden distaff. And with her, Adreste followed...."). Helen approaches like the exemplar Penelope, but then does not leave the public sphere. She seats herself in the midst of the banquet (4.135) and initiates conversation with her husband.

Helen's audacity to sit amongst the men and address her husband reveals her remarkable position within the *oikos*<sup>17</sup> and her possible political power in Sparta. As

---

<sup>15</sup> Foley (1978) 8

<sup>16</sup> See *Iliad* 3 and 6

<sup>17</sup> Wohl (1993) 32

the scene continues, Helen reveals her lack of feminine decorum. She breaks the rules of *xenia* by revealing Telemachus' name<sup>18</sup>, drugging the men to make them forget their sorrows (4.221) and finally subtly disagreeing with her husband. Her use of drugs is reminiscent of Circe's magical powers and her speech represents her female creative power and the "basically uncontainable nature of this female creativity".<sup>19</sup>

Helen tells of her encounter with Odysseus in Troy during her innocent captivity. She praises her own attributes as she aided Odysseus in keeping his identity secret. Menelaus responds and contests her false image of affability. He recounts her attempt to drag the hidden Achaeans out of the wooden horse by mimicking the voices of their wives. The incongruencies between the tales reveal the domestic problems in Sparta<sup>20</sup> and "touch, on their deepest level, on the problems and dangers in the relationship between husband and wife. They thus work together in important ways to prepare the audience for Odysseus' return to Ithaca, and for his confrontation with the suitors and Penelope there".<sup>21</sup> However, the positioning of Menelaus' speech after his wife's, gives his story greater weight and rejects hers as false.<sup>22</sup>

I agree with Doherty that Helen's story contains her "subversive ambition to revise her own *kleos* and link it with that of Odysseus".<sup>23</sup> This characteristic separates Helen from the heroine Penelope. In her narration, Helen strives for her own *kleos*, while Penelope is unable to imagine possessing fame without her partner.

---

<sup>18</sup> For an example of proper *xenia* see Odysseus' meeting with the Phaeacians in book six.

<sup>19</sup> Wohl (1993) 34

<sup>20</sup> Foley (1987) 18

<sup>21</sup> Olson (1989) 391

<sup>22</sup> Doherty (1995) 86, De Jong (2001) 101

<sup>23</sup> Doherty (1995) 86

When Odysseus appears in Ithaca masked as a beggar he praises Penelope, comparing her fame to that of a prosperous king (19.107-114). She replies:

Ζεῖν', ἧ τοι μὲν ἐμὴν ἀρετὴν εἶδός τε δέμας τε  
ὤλεσαν ἀθάνατοι, ὅτε Ἴλιον εἰσανέβαινον  
Ἀρεγῖοι, μετὰ τοῖσι δ' ἐμὸς πόσις ἦεν Ὀδυσσεύς.  
εἰ κείνός γ' ἔλθων τὸν ἐμὸν βίον ἀμφοπολεύει,  
μειζόν κε κλέος εἶη ἐμὸν καὶ κάλλιον οὔτω.

Stranger, indeed my virtue of form and figure  
The gods destroyed, when the Argives embarked for Troy  
and with them went my husband, Odysseus.  
If that one, coming back, should tend to my life,  
Then my reputation would be more great and splendid...  
(19. 124-128)

The relationship is based on mutual dependence; Penelope does not believe in power without her husband (19.309-316, 325-334). Foley states that this response “to the stranger tacitly reaffirms the traditional relation of subordination between husband and wife, reaffirms the limits of her own power and the particular form necessary for social reproduction on Ithaca”.<sup>24</sup> With Odysseus’ absence, Penelope has the ability to become Helen, betraying her husband and striving for her own *kleos*. However, her refusal to step beyond her role and strive for personal power distinguishes her from Homer’s immoral Helen.

In books seven to thirteen, Odysseus tells the Phaeacians of his experience with Circe, his detainment on Calypso’s island, and finally his spoken and unspoken offers of marriage and immortality from the two. Each of these “dread goddesses” is as Nagler states “a powerfully dangerous and as powerfully helpful female” who encompasses a raw female sexuality.<sup>25</sup> Both females live on islands that are fruitful

---

<sup>24</sup> Foley (1978) 13

<sup>25</sup> Nagler, 146

yet lacking any human inhabitants. This “topography is an expression of the profound (male) association of women with anti-culture and the fear that women in charge of their own sexuality would choose not to procreate”.<sup>26</sup> Circe is able to create her own companions by transforming the sea-travelers into animals, “unmanning” the men and subordinating them to the female power. This somewhat parthenogenic ability shows the disorder of class distinction between animals and humans in the absence of a male head of the household.<sup>27</sup>

In order to protect himself in this feminine society, Odysseus utilizes his masculine antidotes of drugs, words and sex. Hermes instructs him to take a drug that will counteract the effects of Circe’s, to threaten the goddess with a knife, bid her to save the sailors, and then pay her with sex (10.287- 301). Odysseus’ force, as Wohl calls it the “phallic sword”, symbolizes his sexual domination over Circe. Odysseus must reinstate the customary societal roles through his use of male-only strengths. Circe’s supremacy lies only in her sexual allure and Odysseus utilizes this erotic aspect to harness the woman’s powers for his own good.<sup>28</sup>

Odysseus’ visit on Calypso’s island repeats many of the same themes as that on Circe’s. Each goddess detains the hero as a mate on her island, but in the case of Calypso, Odysseus does not wish it so. ἐπεὶ οὐκέτι ἦδανε νύμφη . / ἀλλ’ ἦ τοι νύκτας μὲν ἰαύεσκεν καὶ ἀνάγκη / ἐν σπέσσι γλαφυροῖσι παρ’ οὐκ ἐθέλων ἐθειλόση (5.153-55, “the nymph was no longer pleasing to him. But he unwilling lay alongside her who willed it, throughout the nights, in the hollow caverns, by force”). She offers the

---

<sup>26</sup> Wohl (1993) 24

<sup>27</sup> Wohl (1993) 25

<sup>28</sup> Wohl (1993), 25

hero immortality and thus subordination of male to female, but he refuses. If Odysseus should stay on Calypso's island, he would, in some manner, support the parthenogenic alien societies, make the roles of males secondary, and invert the Greek model. The feminine sexuality of the two goddesses is viewed as destructive to the male hero, to his subsequent return home, and to the vigor of his kingdom.

The last women Odysseus meets on his travels are the the Phaeacians, Arete and Nausicaa. The young princess Nausicaa becomes a paradigm for Penelope in books 18 and 19.<sup>29</sup> She desires the stranger for marriage, rejects the suitors in her own town, and has the ability to ruin the hero and his return home. As a potential obstacle for Odysseus' *nostos*, Nausicaa becomes a threat to Ithaca's safety.

Odysseus' choice to stay with Nausicaa in her society of questionable gender divisions would weaken his masculine power. In marrying the Scherian princess, Odysseus would be altering his rank in society and his notion of gender hierarchy.

Homer depicts Scheria as utopia and as a potential model for Ithaca.<sup>30</sup>

Although Scheria is the most similar to Ithaca in terms of its acts of *xenia* and *nomoi*, the role of the female is arguably different than that in Ithaca. Upon arriving in Scheria, Nausicaa instructs Odysseus to enter the city. She tells him that he will come upon Arete in her customary feminine role: ἡ δ' ἦσται ἐπ' ἐσχάρη ἐν πυρὸς αὐγῆ, / ἠλάκατα στρωφῶσ' ἀλιπόρφυρα, θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι, / κίονι κεκλιμένη· δμῶαὶ δέ οἱ ἦατ' ὄπισθεν (6.305-307, "and she sits beside the hearth, in the firelight, weaving sea-purple yarn on a distaff, a wonder to look at, leaning against the pillar,

---

<sup>29</sup> For more on Nausicaa as a paradigm for Penelope see T. Van Nortwick (1979) "Penelope and Nausicaa" *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 109: 269-276

<sup>30</sup> Wohl (1993) 32 fn. 35

and her maids sit behind her”). As mentioned earlier, Arete’s presence spinning in public is untraditional and an immediate signal of Scheria’s different society.

Nausicaa continues by advising Odysseus:

τὸν παραμειψάμενος μητρὸς ποτὶ γούνασι χεῖρας  
βάλλειν ἡμετέρης, ἵνα νόστιμον ἦμαρ ἴδῃαι  
χαίρων καρπαλίμως, εἰ καὶ μάλα τηλόθεν ἐσσί.  
εἴ κέν τοι κείνη γε φίλα φρονέησ’ ἐνὶ θυμῷ,  
ἐλπωρὴ τοι ἔπειτα φίλους ἰδέειν καὶ ἰκέσθαι  
οἶκον εὐκτίμενον καὶ σὴν ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν.

Go on past him (Alcinous) and then with your arms embrace  
our mother’s knee, so that you might rejoicing swiftly see your home,  
even if you are from very far away.  
For if she has thoughts in her mind that are friendly to you,  
then there is hope that you can see your loved ones and come back  
to your strong-founded home, and to the land of your fathers.  
(6.310-315)

Arete is repeatedly identified by both Athena and Nausicaa as *the* person to grant Odysseus his *nostos* and therefore the person to be supplicated. The strangeness of this is mirrored in Odysseus’ encounters with the Laestrygonians where Odysseus’ men are instructed by the Laestrygonian princess to approach the palace and they immediately come upon the queen (11.100-115).

Athena praises Arete for her *noos*, *timē*, judicial authority, and most of all her authority among the Phaeacians:

..οἱ μὲν ῥα θεὸν ὥς εἰσορόωντες  
δειδέχεται μύθοισιν, ὅτε στείχησ’ ἀνὰ ἄστυ.  
οὐ μὲν γάρ τι νόου γε καὶ αὐτὴ δεύεται ἐσθλοῦ,  
οἴσιν τ’ εὖ φρονέησι καὶ ἀνδράσι νεῖκεα λυεῖ.  
εἴ κέν τοι κείνη γε φίλα φρονέησ’ ἐνὶ θυμῷ,  
ἐλπωρὴ τοι ἔπειτα φίλους ἰδέειν...

(The Phaeacians) look upon her like a god  
and welcome her with speeches when she goes through the city.



For she herself lacks nothing of a good mind.  
She dissolves quarrels, *even among men*, when she favors them.  
So if she has thoughts in her mind that are friendly to you,  
Then there is hope that you can see your loved ones..."  
(7.71-76)

Athena admires Arete for her amazing abilities, although her power in Scheria is unclear. Odysseus is told to supplicate Arete, but it is Alcinous not Arete, who responds to the hero's request. Later, when Arete demands *xenia* for their guest, Alcinous reproaches her (11.352-53) with what Wohl calls "a formulaic phrase for men asserting their threatened authority against women" and "draws attention to Alcinous' weakness and belies his claim that 'his is the power in the community'".<sup>31</sup> In the end, Arete exercises an "unspoken authority", exerting no direct influence over her husband and yet representing a level of female power stronger than that known for a Greek woman.<sup>32</sup> Although Scheria is not a complete gender inversion of the Ithacan norm -- see Clytemnestra and the "dread-goddesses" for this -- its society is an example of what Ithaca and Penelope could become.

Homer depicts the ideological framework for the role of women, especially Penelope, in the *Nekuia*. In book 11, Odysseus travels to the underworld to question Teiresias. The first half of the book contains the "catalogue of women" whom Odysseus encounters. These women, such as Leda, Iphimedeia, Phaedra, Ariadne and Eriphyle, represent the mothers, daughters, wives and rape victims of the heroes in mythology, focusing on the Greek mythic corpus through female characters. It has long been questioned why Homer put such emphasis on the females with whom the audience is to compare Penelope. Upon closer scrutiny, it becomes clear that this

---

<sup>31</sup> Wohl (1993) 31

<sup>32</sup> Wohl (1993) 29-31

collection “points up the importance of women to the heroic, and even cosmic, order and leaves no doubt as to the role they must play in that order”.<sup>33</sup> The most important women in myth are those who submit to male-supremacy rather than rebel. Penelope is making the choice to become one of these important heroines.

Back in Ithaca, Melanthe, Penelope’s handmaid, acts as the antithesis of Penelope. Melanthe executes what in her mistress remains potential<sup>34</sup>, to sleep with or marry the suitors. Homer informs the audience that Melanthe is an unfaithful female: ἀλλ’ ἦ γ’ Εὐρυμάχῳ μισγέσκετο καὶ φιλέεσκεν (18.325, “she used to sleep with Eurymachos, and she was his sweetheart”). Her unethical behavior continues when Odysseus commands the women to return to their weaving and upstairs chambers (paralleling Telemachus’ command to Penelope at 1.366-369). Melanthe does not obey the male’s commands, like Penelope does, and instead responds, twice, to the beggar (18.320-336, 19.65-69). Her rebellious conduct is clearly disdained by Ithacan society and Penelope immediately dissociates herself from her maid, calling her a “bold and shameless bitch” (19.92). By reprimanding Melanthe, Penelope elevates her status of good worth.

The most persistent and paradigmatic tale for Penelope is that of Clytemnestra and the house of Atreus. The story serves as a foil for the larger myth of Odysseus, reading as an alternative to the happy ending. Each character is comparable to one in the tale of Odysseus. In the myth of the house of Atreus, the warlord Agamemnon, attempting to sail to Troy and defeat the Trojans, sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia at Aulis. Upon returning home, with his concubine Cassandra (see Aeschylus’

---

<sup>33</sup> Wohl (1993) 36

<sup>34</sup> Felson-Rubin (1994) 30, 56

*Agamemnon*), he is killed by Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's cousin Aegisthus. As a result, Clytemnestra's own children, Orestes and Electra, take revenge and kill their mother and Aegisthus.

In Odysseus' tale, Odysseus represents a clear parallel to Agamemnon, and Penelope to Clytemnestra. Both men leave their kingdoms in the hands of their wives, making their lives contingent on these marriages. Agamemnon's *nostos* is ruined by his wife's unethical power and he loses his life. Clytemnestra's actions are a paradigm for the potential negative outcome of Penelope's situation. Odysseus must be careful upon returning home. If Penelope marries one of the suitors, who are analogous to Aegisthus, or chooses to take revenge on Odysseus, he, like Agamemnon, will meet his death. Accordingly, if Penelope mimics Clytemnestra, Telemachus must follow in Orestes's footsteps and take revenge.

The drama of the house of Atreus is repeated throughout the epic by narrators as diverse as Zeus, Athena, Phemius, Nestor, Agamemnon and the poet himself.<sup>35</sup> Each story-teller reflects his or her interests, insights and knowledge of the actual story. Homer, on the other hand, utilizes the versions to scare, mislead and excite the audience.<sup>36</sup> In most of the retellings, except for that of Agamemnon, the majority of the culpability is placed upon Aegisthus, while Clytemnestra is exonerated as an innocent bystander.<sup>37</sup>

The risk of similar outcomes between the *Oresteia* and the *Odyssey* is contingent on Penelope's decision. The female is presented the power to decide the

---

<sup>35</sup> 1.35-43, 1. 298-300, 3.193-198, 3.234-235, 3.255-312, 4. 90-92, 512-37, 546-547, 11. 387-89, 409-34, 452-53, 13. 383-384, 24.19-22, 96-97, 199-200

<sup>36</sup> Olson (1990) 57

<sup>37</sup> To name a few: 1.29-43, 1.298-300, 3.254-312, 4.514-37, 11.405-34, etc.

fate of her husband, son and homeland. In Felson-Rubin's *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics*, she maps out Penelope's options and her ignorant control over the plot of the epic.<sup>38</sup> In each case, courtship and marriage, dalliance and infidelity, and patience and cunning, Odysseus' happiness and the societal norms are reliant on the female decision.

The main purpose of the comparison between Penelope and Clytemnestra, is to highlight Penelope's excellence and the stability of the gender hierarchy in Ithaca. "If Penelope, the virtuous wife, represents one pole, the other would have to be Clytemnestra. She is depicted throughout the poem as the obvious opposite to Penelope: both are left to guard the *oikos*, but one preserves it while the other destroys it".<sup>39</sup> Clytemnestra is an example of the destruction that female authority can unleash and the need for a virtuous female to uphold the gender norms.

During Odysseus' travels to the underworld in book 11, he meets the ghost of Agamemnon and learns firsthand the story of the king's death. Agamemnon's presentation of his wife as the main culprit for his death acts as an "argument" function... to warn him (Odysseus)".<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, though, Agamemnon is the only one in the *Odyssey* to blame Clytemnestra for the entirety of the deed. The other characters, even Zeus who does not regard Clytemnestra highly, never emphasize Clytemnestra's involvement in the plot. Agamemnon's voice, therefore, must not be accepted at face value.

Agamemnon concludes the story of his death with a generalization about women. He states that Clytemnestra's behavior has brought shame upon all women,

---

<sup>38</sup> Felson-Rubin (1994) chapter 1

<sup>39</sup> Wohl (1993) 35

<sup>40</sup> De Jong (2001) 288

even those whose acts are virtuous (11.427-34). He advises Odysseus not to tell his wife everything but then corrects himself, saying: ἀλλ' οὐ σοί γ', Ὀδυσεῦ, φόνος ἔσσεται ἔκ γε γυναικός·λίην γὰρ πινυτή τε καὶ εὖ φρεσὶ μήδεα οἶδε /κούρη Ἰκαρίοιο, περίφρων Πηνελόπεια (11.444-446, “And yet you, Odysseus, will never be murdered by your wife. The daughter of Ikarios, circumspect Penelope, is too virtuous and she thinks good plans within her mind”). Stanford defends Agamemnon’s modification as “(for Homer’s purpose) emphasizing the nobility of her [Penelope’s] character”.<sup>41</sup>

At this point in the story, as far as the audience (and Odysseus) knows, Penelope is included among this condemned race of women. Penelope has not yet had the chance to show her trustworthiness and must wait until Odysseus’ return. It is not until the repetition of Agamemnon’s speech in book 24<sup>42</sup>, with the meeting of Amphimedon and Agamemnon, that the true virtue of Penelope becomes clear. Agamemnon praises Odysseus’ wife as virtuous and loyal even when her husband was gone. He predicts the eternity of her fame and then focuses on Clytemnestra, her evil deeds, and her future infamy. By stating that Penelope is noble minded and faithful to Odysseus, Agamemnon no longer presents his fate as an example for Odysseus. Agamemnon’s speech decisively distinguishes Penelope from Clytemnestra. The more Agamemnon praises Penelope, the more he sullies the name of Clytemnestra and the other ill-minded females. Thus a greater dichotomy is established between the virtuous and the adulterous wife.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Stanford (1959) 397, fn 441 ff.

<sup>42</sup> Many scholars question the validity of book 24 and see it as a later inclusion in the original text of Homer’s. I have accepted the epic in its entirety as the original work and will analyze it as such.

<sup>43</sup> Felson-Rubin (1994) 106

Homer's characterization of the other women and societies focuses on the need for gender stability in Ithaca. Each society is an opposite of Odysseus' home and the women represent an inversion of societal roles. Calypso and Circe reveal female domination through parthenogenesis and male subordination. Arete, Helen and Clytemnestra represent female political power and its potentially threatening stance. Each counter-example stresses the *oikos*-based community of Ithaca, Penelope as the ideal for the female role within the *oikos*, and the harmonious union between Odysseus and Penelope.

Odysseus' speech to Nausicaa upon his arrival in Scheria in book 6 has been analyzed by the majority of scholars as a reflection of the marriage between Odysseus and Penelope.

σοὶ δὲ θεοὶ τόσα δοῖεν ὅσα φρεσὶ σῆσι μενοινᾶς,  
ἄνδρα τε καὶ οἶκον καὶ ὁμοφροσύνην ὀπάσειαν  
ἐσθλήν· οὐ μὲν γὰρ τοῦ γε κρεῖσσον καὶ ἄρειον,  
ἢ ὅθ' ὁμοφρονέοντε νοήμασιν οἶκον ἔχητον  
ἄνηρ ἠδὲ γυνή· πόλλ' ἄλγεα δυσμενέεσσι,  
χάρματα δ' εὐμανέτησι· μάλιστα δέ τ' ἔκλυον αὐτοί.

And may the gods give you everything that your heart desires;  
may they give you a husband and home and good like-mindedness,  
for nothing is better than this, more steadfast  
than when a man and wife, possess their home in like-mindedness;  
much grief to the people who hate them  
and pleasure to their well-wishers, and they themselves are especially  
well-famed.

(6.180-185)

The speech explicitly describes the ideal partnership, yet exposes such a marriage as highly unusual.<sup>44</sup> The union must be a mutual bond between male and female in which the male is the dominating partner, although it is not stated as such here. The

---

<sup>44</sup> Bolmarcich (2001) 205

two must share common traits, such as *metis*, have faith in one another, and place their relationship within the public sphere.

Penelope and Odysseus are dependent on each other for the stability of their society and their mutual *kleos*. As a female, Penelope's character is defined exclusively by her relationships with men, in particular Odysseus, Telemachus and the suitors. Odysseus describes their marital bond involving *homophrosune*, a noun used also by Plato and Thucydides, meaning "oneness of mind or thought, unity, concord".<sup>45</sup> However, the word usually refers to a male-male relationship and is only used in this instance by Homer to describe the bond between a man and a woman, thus highlighting the importance of the marriage.<sup>46</sup>

The like-mindedness of the epic's hero and heroine creates a society with well-defined spheres of gender, which is the female agreeing with but never overpowering the male. Penelope and Odysseus share *metis* and cunning. Like her husband, Penelope uses trickery and deceit to protect her family's future. Through weaving, she delays marriage with the unsolicited suitors and maintains her position in the family. Whether Penelope recognizes her husband upon his return home is debatable but can be another example of her *metis*.<sup>47</sup> Her final tests of Odysseus' identity, with the stringing of the bow and bed "trick", reveal her equivalent shrewdness.

---

<sup>45</sup> According to Liddell and Scott

<sup>46</sup> Bolmarcich (2001) 205-206. I will speak more on this topic in chapter 2 when discussing the Lion Similes.

<sup>47</sup> Murnaghan (1987) *Recognition Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey*

However, even with Penelope's exceptional craft and intelligence, what Murnaghan calls the "misogyny"<sup>48</sup> of the poem becomes apparent when Odysseus deliberately excludes his wife from his plot in order to recover his governing role. Although each character is dependent on the other to re-establish the boundaries in Ithaca, Odysseus's position must be superior. Penelope's decision to remain faithful and subordinate to her husband makes Ithaca the paradigm for a Greek society and results in praise of Penelope as the appropriate wife. As Wohl eloquently states it: "the optimistic creation of 'separate but equal' gender roles, the *homophrosune* of marriage is the purified, distant re-echoing of the violent sexual domination over Circe, the divine mandate for Odysseus' supremacy over Calypso, the political marginalization of Arete, the condemnation of Clytemnestra. Penelope's submission is an exemplum in both senses of the word: a copy of dangerous female prototypes and an archetype for future housewives".<sup>49</sup>

In this chapter, I have analyzed the actions of the "other" women in the epic. In each case, the inverted society or inappropriate role of the female reveal Penelope's ability to weaken Odysseus's power and overthrow the gender norms. However, her adherence to the Greek expectations reveals her "like-mindedness" with Odysseus and her faithful position as a perfect wife. In the next chapter, I shall consider the Homeric animal similes and the "inverted simile" of Penelope as a lion. I will question what these similes represent and reflect about the poem and the Ithacan society.

---

<sup>48</sup> Murnaghan (1994) 77

<sup>49</sup> Wohl (1993) 44-45



## CHAPTER 2: ANIMAL SIMILES IN THE *ODYSSEY*

One of the most striking features of the Homeric poems is the wealth of similes and their relation to the narrative themes. Both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* rely heavily on these devices to add color, weight, drama and effect to the story. The *Odyssey* has far fewer comparisons/similes than the *Iliad*; 136 in the former versus 346 in the latter.<sup>50</sup> While those in the *Odyssey* occur more often in speeches, the rare occurrences in this work reveal the employment of each in the epics. According to Lee, in his comparison of the similes in the two works, the *Iliad*'s plethora of comparisons is due to its concentration on fighting and the need for variation in the monotonous war scenes. This somewhat tedious narration is missing from the *Odyssey* because of its varied and enthralling plot.<sup>51</sup>

For the purposes of this paper, I will focus solely on the animal similes, predominantly those found in the *Odyssey*. Although the *Iliad* possesses numerous insightful and weighty comparisons between the heroes and the beasts of the wild, the similes only refer to the male heroes and tend not to reflect the society as a whole. The *Iliad* is a great exhibition of the male strength in the Greek societies but the *Odyssey* reveals the animal aspects within both males and females.

The similes comparing the humans with beasts are copious, occurring in at least 36 of the 136 similes. These instances include characters such as Odysseus, Odysseus' men, Penelope, the Cyclops, Agamemnon, Agamemnon's men, the suitors, the handmaidens, and the gods, comparing them with animals ranging from lions,

---

<sup>50</sup> De Jong (2001) 105

<sup>51</sup> Lee, D.J.N. (1964) *The Similes of the Iliad and the Odyssey compared* (Melbourne), p. 4

sheep, fawns, swine and oxen to octopuses, bats, fish, and birds. In each analogy, the association expresses something about the person's looks, character, sounds, and feelings. These reveal the timidity, strength, fierceness, relentlessness, happiness and sullenness of the hero (or heroine). The similes enhance the characterization of the person while marking crises in the action and depicting otherwise indescribable situations.<sup>52</sup> Though there is no overarching explanation for all of the similes, Lee states that there "are no similes in the *Odyssey* which strike the reader as out of place, irrelevant, far-fetched, or absurd".<sup>53</sup>

At this point, one must ask why Homer used such an abundance of similes that utilize animals and wilderness as comparisons for the epic heroes. Once again, there is no definite reason for such occurrences. According to Lonsdale, the audience enjoyed hearing these naturalistic descriptions of animals and they preferred these over other types of comparisons. "Animals appeal to the familiar and the commonplace, and yet they are veiled in mystery. The animal is at once comprehensible and unknowable".<sup>54</sup> The animals were something that the Greeks encountered and yet could never fully grasp. It is plausible that the beasts reflected the mystery of the human mind, both "comprehensible" and yet "unknowable", and thus were alluring to the Greeks.

The most common animal of comparison in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* is the lion. Homer's fondness for the animal as a parallel to the human mind was obvious from his thirty or more uses of it in the *Iliad* and seven, with some

---

<sup>52</sup> Bassett, Samuel (1921) "The Function of the Homeric Simile", *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 52, 134

<sup>53</sup> Lee (1964) 9

<sup>54</sup> Lonsdale, Steven. H. (1990) *Creatures of Speech. Lion, Herding and Hunting Similes in the Iliad*, 12-13

repetitions, in the *Odyssey*. The lion is used for almost every character, except for Paris (this being no surprise), and is shown attacking, hunting, prowling, and in some cases, protecting his young. The lion, although often seen as “the symbol of superior strength”,<sup>55</sup> encompasses many more characteristics in the Homeric similes. The ferocious animal cares for its young, defends its home, wildly ravages its food, and yet is still cautious and fearful of its enemies in the wild. The lion, like a human, is able to have distinct emotions of joy and anger, and the comparison leads to heightened realism.<sup>56</sup> As a result, the animal perfectly reflects Homer’s characters and the plot of his hero’s *nostos*.

Of the seven lion similes in the *Odyssey*, two are repetitions; five refer to Odysseus and the other two to Penelope and the Cyclops. Hartigan states that “in each of these instances Homer permits us to see Odysseus as he appears to others: a lion in his strength and his courage”.<sup>57</sup> Although this seems to be an easy explanation for the comparisons, I do not believe them to be this simple and straightforward. Odysseus appears as a lion in different scenes, each instance portraying another aspect of the hero, his *nostos*, and his need for Ithaca.

Homer’s first fully developed simile occurs in Menelaus’ prediction to Telemachus of his father’s return to Ithaca and destruction of the suitors.

ὡς δ’ ὀπότεν ἐν ξυλόχῳ ἔλαφος κρατεροῖο λέοντος  
νεβροῦς κοιμήσασα νεηγενέας γαλαθνοῦς  
κνημοῦς ἐξερέησι καὶ ἄγκεα ποιήεντα  
βοσκομένη, ὃ δ’ ἔπειτα ἔην εἰσήλυθεν εὐνήν,  
ἀμφοτέροισι δὲ τοῖσιν ἀεικέα πότμον ἐφῆκεν·

---

<sup>55</sup> Lee (1964) 10

<sup>56</sup> Lonsdale (1990) 46

<sup>57</sup> Hartigan, K. V. (1973) “Animal Similes in Homer and Virgil” *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 21, p. 227

ὥς Ὀδυσσεὺς κείνοισιν ἀεικέα πότμον ἐφήσει.

As when in the lair of a powerful lion, a doe  
Having lulled to sleep her fawns, tender newborns  
Then she wandered out into the foothills and the grassy bends,  
Grazing there, but then the lion came back to his own lair  
And sent forth a shameful destruction on both mother and children;  
So Odysseus will send forth a shameful destruction on these men.  
(4.335-340)

Menelaus' speech represents Odysseus as a powerful lion, Ithaca as his den, and the doe and her fawns as the foolish suitors. Although it is clear that the comparison shows Odysseus as powerful and the suitors as defenseless, the meaning of the fawns has been debated by scholars. Stanford, in his widely accepted commentary on the *Odyssey*, suggests that the simile implies an "unusually incautious doe" while Samuel Butler finds this analysis absurd.<sup>58</sup> It is understandable why a doe might in fact not usually be incautious but the suitors have, as far as we have seen, been repeatedly extremely incautious.

In book 11 of the *Iliad*, Agamemnon in the midst of battle is compared to a lion, and his prey to incautious fawns.

ὥς δὲ λέων ἐλάφοιο ταχεῆς νήπια τέκνα  
ρήϊδίως συνέαξε, λαβῶν κρατεροῖσιν ὀδοῦσιν,  
ἐλθῶν εἰς εὐνήν, ἀπαλόν τέ σφ' ἦτορ ἀπηύρα·  
ἦ δ' εἴ περ τε τύχησι μάλα σχεδόν, οὐ δύναται σφι  
χραιομεῖν· αὐτὴν γάρ μιν ὑπὸ τρόμος αἰνὸς ἰκάνει·  
καρπαλίμως δ' ἦϊξε διὰ δρυμὰ πυκνὰ καὶ ὕλην  
σπεύδουσ' ἰδρώουσα κραταιοῦ θηρὸς ὑφ' ὀρμῆς·

As a swift lion easily fastens on the young children of a deer  
taking them up in his strong teeth,  
upon coming into the lair, he robs them of their tender life;  
And she, the deer, even if she happens to be close by, she is not able to  
help them, for a terrible fear comes upon her;

---

<sup>58</sup> Stanford, *ad loc.*

and she swiftly flies through the thick forest and glen  
hurrying, covered with sweat, in terror of the mighty monster  
(so, no man of the Trojans could help Isos and Antiphos,  
for they were themselves fleeing in panic before the Argives)  
(11.113-119)

In this instance, the simile focuses on Agamemnon's warlike abilities and the comparatively weak position of his enemies. The fawns have in no way been "unusually incautious" but instead have adhered to their innate frailty, an attribute of which the lion takes advantage. The parallel between the similes, Agamemnon's in the *Iliad* and Odysseus' in the *Odyssey*, reveals the relative positions of the characters and therefore the helpless state of the harassed.

To further highlight the weak, incautious, vulnerability of the suitors, Homer compares the young men to helpless animals; twice to fawns (4.335-340, 17.126-131), once to fish (22.384) and once to bats (24.6). Each instance portrays the animals of comparison as doomed and somewhat foolishly inept. Upon annihilating these animal-like suitors, Odysseus scans the house for survivors:

τοὺς δὲ ἶδεν μάλα πάντας ἐν αἵματι καὶ κονίησι  
πεπτεῶτας πολλούς, ὧς τ' ἰχθύας, οὐς θ' ἀλιῆες  
κοῖλον ἐς αἰγιαλὸν πολιῆς ἔκτοσθε θαλάσσης  
δικτύῳ ἐξέρυσαν πολυοπῶ' ...

but he saw them all, the men, in their blood and dust  
lying fallen, like fish, whom the fishermen  
have taken in their net of many holes, and dragged out  
of the grey sea onto the shore.

(22.383-386).

The sketch of the suitors as beached fish has two connotations: "helplessness and unheroicness"<sup>59</sup> and represents the pathos and trapped state of the suitors. The later example of the bats disjointedly flittering about in the depths of their caves holds an

---

<sup>59</sup> De Jong (2001) 540

even more pathetic meaning. As bats choose the farthest corners of the caves, the suitors are pathetically making their way to the depths of the underworld.<sup>60</sup> As well, their inelegant flight highlights their failure to work as a team and beat the ferocious lion.

Menelaus' depiction of Odysseus as a lion is repeated later in the epic by Telemachus when he tells his mother of his meeting with Menelaus (17.124-131). The inclusion of the familiar story both encourages Penelope and reminds the audience of Odysseus' power and future revenge. The simile prepares the audience for the fulfillment of Menelaus' earlier prediction and sets the stage for the last books of the epic. However, nothing highlights the strength of the hero and the fulfillment of the prophecy as much as the lion similes in books 22 and 23.

In book 22, Eurycleia comes upon Odysseus, αἵματι καὶ λύθρῳ πεπαλαγμένον ὥς τε λέοντα, / ὅς ῥά τε βεβρωκῶς βοῶς ἔρχεται ἀγραύλοιο· (22.402-403, "Spattered with blood and battle filth, like a lion who feeding on an ox of the fields, goes covered with blood..."). She later reports her findings to Penelope stating, ἰδοῦσά κε θυμὸν ἰάνθης / αἵματι καὶ λύθρῳ πεπαλαγμένον ὥς τε λέοντα (23.47-48, "Seeing him, you would have rejoiced in your heart, he who was spattered with blood and battle filth, like a lion"). The comparison here reveals Odysseus as the victorious lion, destructive, brave and ruthless in his manner of eating. The depiction of the blood-splattered predator shows the gravity of Odysseus' deed and the manner in which he acted. However, Homer in no way makes any moral

---

<sup>60</sup> De Jong (2001) 567- 568

judgments about the character and the simile must not be seen as a condemnation or veneration of the hero.<sup>61</sup>

These two images vividly recall the somewhat humorous lion simile in book 6 when Nausicaa and her maidens first see the naked Odysseus upon the Scherian shore:

Βῆ δ' ἴμεν ὥς τε λέων ὄρεσίτροφος ἀλκὶ πεποιθώς,  
ὅς τ' εἶσ' ὑόμενος καὶ ἀήμενος, ἐν δέ οἱ ὄσσε  
δαίεται· αὐτὰρ ὁ βουσί μετέρχεται ἢ ὄϊεσσιν  
ἠὲ μετ' ἀγροτέρας ἐλάφους· κέλεται δέ ἐ γαστήρ  
μήλων πειρήσοντα καὶ ἐς πυκινὸν δόμον ἐλθεῖν·  
ὥς Ὀδυσσεὺς κούρησιν εὐπλοκάμοισιν ἔμελλε  
μίξεσθαι, γυμνός περ ἐὼν· χρεῖῳ γὰρ ἴκανε.

And he went, like a mountain-nourished lion, confident in his strength,  
(a lion), he who goes, although being rained on and blown by the  
wind,  
and both of his eyes shine; then he goes after the cattle and sheep  
or after the wild deer; and his stomach calls upon him  
to come into the closely built home and try to attack the flocks.  
So Odysseus intended to mix with the maidens with their hair well-  
arranged  
even though he was naked; for the desire/need was upon him  
(6.130-136)

Here, the young girls misperceive Odysseus as a raging, ravenous lion; he is one which *they* need not fear but which will in fact be threatening as such to the suitors later on. While Nausicaa and her maidens fear the “lion”, “Odysseus’ approach to them is, on the contrary, quite unleonine.”<sup>62</sup> It is necessary to note that the lion, “terrible to behold” and “confident in strength”, is ordered by his belly, unlike the Iliadic lions (such as Sarpedon, 12.299-301) who are led by their “courageous spirits”.

---

<sup>61</sup> Hartigan (1973) 231

<sup>62</sup> Podlecki, Anthony J. (1971) “Some Odyssean Similes”, *Greece and Rome*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ser., Vol. 18, No. 1, p. 83

MaGrath states that this detail serves to highlight the character of Odysseus, but his explanation does not uncover what characteristics it does in fact show. He tells how the unheroic coarseness of the stomach contributes to the anti-charismatic quality of the scene and how Nagler uses this in his own discussion of the transformation of Odysseus into a beggar.<sup>63</sup> I find this explanation however to be somewhat lacking. I prefer to read this scene as one in which focalization fluctuates from the eyes of Odysseus, to those of the maidens and Nausicaa. While Odysseus' stomach at this point is craving to return home and be helped, Nausicaa's soon craves for the visitor to be hungry for her. Both Odysseus and Nausicaa see the character as craving the necessities of humanity and relationships. However, the maidens view the Odyssean lion as craving their maidenhood and threatening their happiness.

There are only two instances within the work in which the lion simile does not refer to Odysseus; these are in book 4 and 9 for Penelope and for the Cyclops. I shall begin with the Cyclops and then focus on the rare animal simile for the female. In book 9, Odysseus and his men enter the cave of the Cyclops, Polyphemus, where six meet their deaths. The Cyclops is repeatedly described as savage and uncivilized. He refrains from *xenia*, neither offering his guests food nor waiting for their names. Instead he demands the guests' names (9.252) and then begins to eat them: ἦσθε δ' ὧς τε λέων ὄρεσίτροφος –οὐδ' ἀπέλειπεν - / ἔγκατά τε σάρκας τε καὶ ὀστέα μυελόντα (9.292-293, "and he, like a mountain-reared lion, not leaving anything behind, ate the entrails, flesh, and the marrowy bones").

---

<sup>63</sup> MaGrath (1982) 207-208



MaGrath calls this the “briefest and most terrifying lion [simile] in Homer.”<sup>64</sup> This lion, devoid of any civility, strength, pride or courage, gorges himself upon the prey. The somewhat unexpected depiction, focalized through Odysseus, of the Cyclops as a lion highlights the differences and similarities between the monster and the hero. He is uncivilized, unreflective, and amoral. As a result, he attacks Odysseus’ men who are reminiscent of puppies, completely defenseless animals with no way to protect themselves or fight back. Although Lonsdale believes that there is no correspondence between the simile and the narrative, and that the simile merely shows the Cyclops’ eating habits,<sup>65</sup> I am inclined to disagree. It would be somewhat abnormal to have the similes hold such meaning in other scenes but none here. I agree with MaGrath that the simile does add to the entire narration by assisting in what he calls the “Progression of the Lion Simile”. The previous similes have only predicted the lion-like actions while the depiction of the Cyclops devouring the men increases the situation from threatening disaster to actual fulfillment. In a similar manner to the earlier depiction of Odysseus, the lion, taking revenge on the helpless suitors (22.383-386), the Cyclops takes revenge on creatures that are weaker and more defenseless than himself. In so doing, Homer shows the abilities of the raging lion and prepares his audience for the imminent destruction of the suitors.

The most unexpected and sole lion simile for Penelope occurs in book four, following the first extended lion simile used by Menelaus for Odysseus. Penelope is depicted sitting in her female chambers brooding over the plight of Telemachus, the suitors’ plot, and her son’s potential destruction upon returning home:

---

<sup>64</sup> MaGrath (1982) 208

<sup>65</sup> Lonsdale (1990) 49

ὅσσα δὲ μερμήριξε λέων ἀνδρῶν ἐν ὀμίλῳ  
δείσας, ὅπποτε μιν δόλιον περὶ κύκλον ἄγωσι,  
τόσσα μιν ὀρμαίνουσιν ἐπήλυθε νήδυμος ὕπνος·

And as much as a lion fearing, in a crowd of men, turns about  
when they have made a treacherous circle about him,  
So she was pondering, when the painless sleep came upon her...  
(4. 791-793)

It is surprising that Penelope should receive such a simile, one usually reserved for men in martial contexts.<sup>66</sup> Yet, as mentioned earlier, one cannot just ignore such similes as naïve or absurd, but must in fact see each as an integral part of the story.<sup>67</sup> The comparison here between a female and a lion, the only such instance in the Homeric epics, offers a more powerful characterization for the female by associating her with her leonine husband.

The repetition of the lion similes in book 4 draws a direct link between Penelope and Odysseus. It “brings the two characters together in the mind of the audience, and associates them both with Telemachus. The lion Odysseus will fight to protect his wife from the suitors, while the cornered lion Penelope, hemmed in by the enemies, anxiously ponders her son’s safety”.<sup>68</sup> Not only do the lion similes equate the husband’s and wife’s concern for the preservation of their *oikos* and their son, but they also link the king and queen of Ithaca, highlighting their *homophrosune* (Chapter 1). “It reminds us how close the unity is between Odysseus, the aggressive lion-avenger, soon to return, and his wife, the lion encircled by its hunters and at a momentary loss; she shares some of his fierce will to live, and the choice of a lion in

---

<sup>66</sup> Moulton, 124

<sup>67</sup> Lee (1964)10

<sup>68</sup> Moulton, 124

the simile suggests that the misfortunes of the royal house are only temporary: the lion can be expected to turn on its hunters and destroy them.”<sup>69</sup>

However, it is important to notice at this point that although the two characters are compared to analogous lions, the similes highlight different strengths and aspects of those being compared. The leonine Odysseus is always depicted as the predator, scaring the maidens and taking revenge on the suitors. The Penelope simile, on the other hand, contains the only victimized lion of the *Odyssey*. Although harassed beasts are not uncommon in the *Iliad*, there is no doublet for this simile in the *Iliad*. The female lion is portrayed as scared and hemmed in by the hunters/ suitors. “This second appearance of the lion simile reinforces the image for the audience and provides a parallel, through antithesis, in Penelope as the passive mate for Odysseus as the active lion...it effectively draws together the separated husband and wife in the world of similes.”<sup>70</sup> Although it is clear that Penelope is less active than Odysseus, it is a bit hyperbolic to say that she is “passive”. While Odysseus physically attacks the enemies, Penelope uses her cunning to ward off the suitors until her husbands return. Penelope shares her husband’s intellectual craft but leaves the actual physical work to the male. Thus, the simile reflects Penelope’s adherence to the societal norms, encompassing power in order to maintain, but never taking advantage of this opportunity to threaten, the masculine stability of the society.<sup>71</sup> I believe that the purpose of the animal similes of Odysseus and Penelope is to reinforce the concept of their *homophrosune* that Odysseus so accurately praises in book 6. In this relationship, the two must have a unity of mind and feeling. At the same time, in

---

<sup>69</sup> Podlecki (1971) 84

<sup>70</sup> Magrath (1982) 206 - 207

<sup>71</sup> Foley (1978) 8-9

order to preserve the status of their kingdom, the male must wield more power than the female to prevent a Clytmnestra-like conclusion.

As mentioned earlier in chapter 1, the term *homophroneo* only refers here in book 6 to a male-female relationship. The related adjective *ὁμόφρων* is used twice in a passage of the *Iliad* which I believe can be taken as an explanation for the recurrence of the lion simile for both genders. In book 22 of the *Iliad*, Achilles refuses Hector's suggestion that the victor of their duel will return the other's body to his friends, stating:

ὥς οὐκ ἔστι λέουσι καὶ ἀνδράσιν ὄρκια πιστά,  
οὐδὲ λύκοι τε καὶ ἄρνες ὁμόφρονα θυμὸν ἔχουσιν,  
ἀλλὰ κακὰ φρονέουσι διαμπερὲς ἀλλήλοισιν,  
ὥς οὐκ ἔστ' ἐμὲ καὶ σὲ φιλήμεναι, οὐδέ τι νῶϊν  
ὄρκια ἔσσουνται,...

Just as trusty oaths are not to be between lions and men,  
Nor do wolves and lambs have a like-minded heart,  
But rather they continuously think evil things against one another,  
Thus is not possible that you and I be friends, nor for us  
Will there be an oath...

(22.262-266)

According to Achilles, he cannot make an oath with Hector because *homophrosune* does not exist between different creatures, especially those that are enemies.

Although it is unclear whether Homer's contemporary Greeks had actually encountered lions or not,<sup>72</sup> it is to be assumed that the Greeks were aware of the hostility that would occur between lions and humans. Therefore, just like lions and men, Greeks and Trojans cannot be friends, nor male and female. If animals that are dissimilar cannot have *homophrosune*, and Odysseus' speech to Nausicaa is the only

---

<sup>72</sup> See Lonsdale, Steven. H. (1990) *Creatures of Speech. Lion, Herding and Hunting Similes in the Iliad*

instance of the noun or the cognate verb used for a relationship between a male and a female, a link between the two characters is necessary and the simile creates one.

Therefore, the lion similes in book 4 reflect the like-mindedness of the characters, the similarity of their animal-like instincts and yet their adherence to the expectations for their genders within the society.

### CHAPTER 3: THE *ORESTEIA*, GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In Athenian culture, during the time of Aeschylus' writing, in the sixth and fifth centuries, women were considered minors and held no political power or financial rights. They were excluded from almost all aspects of the *polis*,<sup>73</sup> remained within the *oikos* under the guardianship of a male and preserved their role in the private sphere of the home.<sup>74</sup> Tragedy, however, portrayed these citizens in a different light. The stories in fifth century drama were dramatized and fictionalized, often set in cities outside of Athens but meant to represent the possible conflicts within the city of Athens itself. They reflected the tension between sexes and the likely societal roles of the genders. The females were often represented as far more powerful and prominent than they were in either contemporary society or prose writing.<sup>75</sup> As a result, the females, often repressed in real society, were given a voice through male actors within the male institution of public tragedy. These powerful characters revealed the potential status of women, the ambivalence of Athenian feelings towards the female "race", and the recurring sexual tension in the cities.

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is a prime example of the powerful conception of women in drama. "Viewed as a gynecocentric document, the *Oresteia* then holds an equally privileged position in any exploration of the Greek image of the female, the definition of her social role and status, her functions and meanings."<sup>76</sup> In this trilogy, the

---

<sup>73</sup> The exception being the religious events.

<sup>74</sup> To see more on the lives of the Athenian women, see: Foley, Helene P. (1981) "The Conception of Women in Athenian Drama", from *Reflections of Women in Antiquity*, Ed. By Helene P. Foley, Gould, John (1980) "Law, Custom and Myth: Aspects of the Social Position of Women in Classical Athens" *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 100, Centenary Issue. Pp. 38-59

<sup>75</sup> Foley (1981), 128

<sup>76</sup> Zeitlin, 150

women, such as Clytemnestra, Cassandra, and Electra, not only partake in the public and political sphere but also speak for themselves, influence men with rhetoric, take action against citizens, and eventually confuse the expectations of the genders. The play revolves around the sexual tensions in Argos, with men acting like women and women like men. The play, influenced by mythology and the writings of Homer, departs from the model of the perfect female wife, Penelope, and the all-powerful winning male, Odysseus. In Aeschylus' work, the returning hero, Agamemnon, does not come home to his happy wife, as Odysseus does. Instead, the hero, with his concubine, meets his death at the hand of a masculine queen and an effeminate cousin. This chapter will look closely at the tension between the genders, their ambiguous spheres, and the notion of the un-Homeric, imperfect society.

For the majority of this chapter, I will focus on the first play of the trilogy, the *Agamemnon*, as Clytemnestra's strength dominates there. I will utilize the entire trilogy as evidence for the unstable nature of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Cassandra, Orestes, and Electra. Each of these characters encompasses the strong and weak aspects of the male and female. Sometimes the women and men are strong and described as men, while at other times their femininity is stressed to highlight their frailty. Let us begin with the most controversial character, Clytemnestra, and then work our way through the trilogy.

Clytemnestra, the most infamous wife of the Greek stage, "embodies the greatest threats to the cultural system of which a wife is capable."<sup>77</sup> The famed mythological character is referenced repeatedly throughout ancient literature, in

---

<sup>77</sup> Foley (2001), 201

Homer's *Odyssey*, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy,<sup>78</sup> Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Electra*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and many more. In each occurrence, she is assigned a different level of blame for her crime. Although she is never cleared of her crime, some works defend her feminine protective acts while others blame her somewhat manly revenge. As shown in chapter 1, Clytemnestra is used as a foil for Penelope in the *Odyssey*, but throughout the epic Agamemnon is the only one who blames her for her actions.<sup>79</sup> According to Zeus and Athena, Clytemnestra was merely tricked by Aegisthus and in her attempts to protect herself and her household she assisted in killing her husband.

Aeschylus' work takes a different approach to the queen's crime. The play opens upon the notification of the hero's return home from Troy, reminding the audience of Penelope and the situation at Ithaca. However, as the audience would have been familiar with the curse of the house of Atreus, there is no real expectation for a Penelope-like character to enter the stage. Instead, the watchman of Argus, waiting for a beacon to announce their king's homecoming, introduces the masculine queen to the audience and prepares them for the duplicitous nature of Clytemnestra.

He "defies gender expectations"<sup>80</sup> by describing Clytemnestra as androgynous, ὧδε γὰρ κρατεῖ / γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον ἐλπίζον κέαρ<sup>81</sup> (Ag. 10-11, "for the male-strength heart of the woman, hoping, rules thus"). The delaying of the subject puts great emphasis on the verb κρατεῖ and thus the strength of the female that will be revealed throughout the work. When the subject is finally revealed on the

---

<sup>78</sup> Note, she is the only character of Aeschylus' trilogy who appears in all THREE of the plays.

<sup>79</sup> Although Odysseus does commiserate with him, 11.437

<sup>80</sup> McClure (1999) 73

<sup>81</sup> The Greek comes from Denniston and Page's text and commentary on Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*



next line, she is unnamed. Instead, her heart is explained as γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον, marking her gender ambiguity through a juxtaposition of male and female terms. The rare adjective ἀνδρόβουλον, seen elsewhere only in Phrynichus *Praeparatio Sophista* p. 31B (possibly coined for this context by Aeschylus<sup>82</sup>), and the uncommon construction of ἐλπίζω without an object, draw attention to the peculiarity of the situation and the character.<sup>83</sup> In addition, the watchman's statement sets the stage for the important aspects in the play; "power, a woman juxtaposed to man and counseling as- or against- a man (woman opposed to man in terms of power), expectation/desire, and a 'heart'."<sup>84</sup>

The heroine, if one might even call her such, is not mentioned by name until the middle of the chorus' first speech, and upon her, perhaps, first entrance upon the stage.<sup>85</sup> Up until this point, she has only been referred to as Agamemnon's queen (25). The chorus addresses her: "But you, lady, / daughter of Tyndareus, Clytemnestra, our queen" (83-84). The appellation emphasizes that it is precisely Clytemnestra's position as the 'daughter of Tyndareus' that made her the queen of Argus.<sup>86</sup> As well, the mention of her lineage focuses on the kinship of Clytemnestra and Helen, and their similar power of adultery and the destruction of many men. Automatically her title reveals her threatening feminine position.

---

<sup>82</sup> Fraenkel, line 11

<sup>83</sup> Goldhill, (1984) *Language, sexuality and narrative in the Oresteia*, 9

<sup>84</sup> Goldhill (1984) 9

<sup>85</sup> See Fraenkel's commentary for different beliefs as to whether or not Clytemnestra does in fact enter the stage at this point. Denniston and Page believe that "the form and content of this address to Clytemnestra strongly and immediately suggest that she is present on the scene. (But) There is nothing... to show at what moment she entered" (line 83) And Fraenkel agrees that a character would never enter a stage for the first time and then leave without ever uttering a word (ad loc)

<sup>86</sup> Goldhill (1984), 17

Although Clytemnestra embodies a powerful masculine mind, the chorus reminds the audience that she is still a female and must be treated as such. They repeatedly derogate her words as unreliable. As the first person to believe and report the watchman's interpretation of the beacon, therefore emphasizing her unexpected female intelligence, Clytemnestra tells the chorus that Troy has fallen. The chorus responds in confusion, "your words escaped my unbelief" (268), and immediately rejects her words as those of a gullible woman, τί γὰρ τὸ πιστόν; ἔστι τῶνδ' ἐσσι τέκμαρ,<sup>87</sup> (272, "For how can it be trusted? Do you have evidence of these?"). "They contrast a masculine concern for truth, expressed by τέκμαρ and the adjective πιστός, with less reliable, and therefore more feminine forms of speech."<sup>88</sup>

In this same scene, the chorus praises Clytemnestra for her respectable position of power in the absence of her husband:

ἦκω σεβίζων σὸν Κλυταιμήστρα κράτος·  
 δίκη γὰρ ἐστὶ φωτὸς ἀρχηγοῦ τίειν  
 γυναῖκ' ἔρημοθέντος ἄρσενος θρόνου·

I have come in reverence of your power, Clytemnestra.  
 For when the throne has been bereft, left empty by, the male,  
 it is just to honor the lady of the chief male.

(258-260)

Similar to the beggar's praise of Penelope in book 20 of the *Odyssey*, the chorus reveres the queen for maintaining the steadiness of the city. The female is expected to act as a temporary replacement for the absent husband, preserve the *kleos* of the *polis*, while maintaining her stereotypical weakness and secondary position of power.

Clytemnestra's acceptance of the chorus' praise, in comparison to Penelope's

---

<sup>87</sup> Greek quotations have been taken from Denniston and Page's text and commentary to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

<sup>88</sup> McClure (1999) 74

rejection of any *kleos* without her husband (as Penelope does, see Chapter 1), reveals her transgression beyond the boundaries of womanhood.

In addition, the chorus accuses her of attempting to understand the male sphere through a female mind. According to them, a female mind which is often too easily persuaded (and perhaps sometimes too negatively persuasive) relies on unreliable evidence:

γυναικὸς αἰχμᾶ̃ πρέπει  
πρὸ τοῦ φανέντος χάριν ξυναινέσαι·  
πιθανὸς ἄγαν ὁ θῆλυς ὄρος ἐπιανέμεται  
ταχύπορος· ἀλλὰ ταχύμορον  
γυναικογήρυτον ὄλλυται κλέος

It is fitting to the spirit of a woman  
To consent before the fact has shown for true.  
The woman's persuadable boundary of the mind  
very quickly spreads abroad; and the short-lived glory  
proclaimed by the woman is destroyed.  
(483-488)

Even though Clytemnestra is the first person to interpret the beacon and begin her sacrifices, her actions are seen as too quick and compulsive. The chorus must remind both the audience and the heroine of her status as a female, one who is expected to be foolish and stereotypically subordinate to the male. There is an apparent tension between the question of female competence and the truth of female speech, which will be debated repeatedly throughout the play.

Clytemnestra, on the other hand, is aware of her femininity and its encumbrance upon her position among the citizens. She berates the chorus for disbelieving her words: ἀλλ' ἦ σ' ἐπιάνέν τις ἄπτερος φάτις (276, "Am I some young

girl, that you find my thoughts so silly?”<sup>89</sup>). ἐπίανεν, a verb usually used metaphorically of the mind and spirit, is used contemptuously here<sup>90</sup> to show Clytemnestra’s vexation with both stereotypes and the chorus. She continues by highlighting her innocence and ignorance simultaneously with her amazing intelligence, stating, “such are the thoughts you hear from me, a woman merely” (347). Fraenkel describes this as remarkable for a woman: “Clytemnestra is probably calling attention to her superior, man-like insight into the nature of human affairs, including her knowledge of the reverence due to the gods, and also her experience of what life is like in the midst of the turmoil of the war.”<sup>91</sup> I agree but believe that her remark is somewhat duplicitous. On one hand, she is showing her man-like insight but on the other hand, she is reminding the audience and chorus that she is still a woman. She seems to play with her gender to be seen as both strong and weak, and later, both innocent and guilty.

Later, however, when it becomes clear that her predictions were correct, she scoffs at those who mocked her and then mimicked her actions by indulging in this γυναικεῖα νόμος (594, “female custom”). She represents herself in both masculine and feminine terms. At first, she portrays herself as acting within feminine norms by her participation in the cry of ὀλοολυγή (587, 594-595). However, she then states that the men followed her in this tradition, suddenly opening the female sphere to both genders and blurring the line between the sexual roles. In addition, in recounting the words of the chorus, she echoes the male words with her female voice. This mocking

---

<sup>89</sup> Translation taken from Richmond Lattimore’s *Aeschylus I: The Oresteia* (ed. David Grene). His translation is very eloquent here and correctly captures the meaning of the text.

<sup>90</sup> Fraenkel, ad loc.

<sup>91</sup> Fraenkel, ad loc

of the chorus reveals her superiority to the males and her powerful knowledge of the future.

Clytemnestra's ability to portray herself as conventionally feminine while speaking through masculine, persuasive rhetoric gives her character duality. An incongruity between her gender and her speech is developed. She is able to persuade and deceive the male chorus through magical, and somewhat masculine, language. She utilizes numerous metaphors which McClure explains "skillfully exploit the ambiguities inherent in language."<sup>92</sup> In the famous carpet scene (905-972), Clytemnestra gains power over the male through convincing speech; she persuades Agamemnon to walk upon the carpet to his death and tricks the chorus into believing she has been a faithful woman.<sup>93</sup>

When Agamemnon scolds Clytemnestra for pushing him to walk upon the carpet, saying οὔτοι γυναικός ἐστιν ἰμείρειν μάχης (940, "it is not for a woman to thirst for battle"), she plays upon his weakness and desire to act the male. With the woman, rather than the man, desiring war, the roles have been reversed. In order to reestablish the gender norms, Agamemnon must push Clytemnestra out of this position and himself partake in the thirst of battle. And so, she succeeds in forcing him to walk the carpet through questioning his manly ego. She addresses him, saying: πιθοῦ, † κράτος μέντοι πάρες γ' † ἐκῶν ἐμοί (943 "be persuaded, give the power to me of your own accord"). The use of πιθοῦ is critical here. Fraenkel states that with this command, Clytemnestra "gives up the arguments which she had

---

<sup>92</sup> McClure (1999) 80

<sup>93</sup> To learn more about Clytemnestra's duplicitous, persuasive, masculine and feminine language, see McClure's *Spoken Like a Woman*. The work gives a great description of the duality of Clytemnestra's language and abilities and I must thank her for greatly influencing this chapter of my thesis.

developed through ever new artifices, and, with more skillful calculation, turns to entreaty. Her dialectics were resisted with quiet determination; the moment she speaks beseechingly Agamemnon gives way.”<sup>94</sup> However, although her new tactic of request persuades Agamemnon, her language actually mocks her husband, forcing him to unknowingly fall under the magical spell of women. The characterization of ‘easily being persuaded’ is the mark of the woman and so its use weakens the masculinity of the hero. Κρατεῖς and ἐκών offer Agamemnon a false sense of power and control over actions. In reality though, through his decision to yield to Clytemnestra, his mastery is in this very moment passing away.<sup>95</sup> Thus, Clytemnestra wins by giving Agamemnon a false sense of authority.

Upon Agamemnon’s entrance home, Clytemnestra paints a false portrait of herself as the perfect wife:

τί γάρ  
 γυναικὶ τούτου φέγγος ἦδιον δρακεῖν  
 ...  
 γυναῖκα πιστὴν δ’ ἐν δόμοις εὖροι μολῶν  
 οἴανπερ οὖν ἔλειπε, δωμάτων κύνα  
 ἐσθλὴν ἐκείνῳ, πολεμίαν τοῖς δυσφροσιν,  
 καὶ τᾶλλ’ ὁμοίαν πάντα, σημαντήριον  
 οὐδὲν διαφθείρασαν ἐν μήκει χρόνου·  
 οὐδ’ οἶδα τέρψιν οὐδ’ ἐπίψογον φάτιν  
 ἄλλου πρὸς ἀνδρὸς μᾶλλον ἢ χαλκοῦ βαφάς

For what  
 light is more sweet for woman to behold than this...

....  
 And may he upon coming home find a wife within his house as true  
 As on the day he left her, watchdog of the house

<sup>94</sup> Fraenkel, ad loc.

<sup>95</sup> Winnington-Ingram, R. P. (1948) “Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena”, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 68., 134

noble to him alone, fierce to his enemies,  
 And such a woman in all her ways as this, who has  
 Not broken the seal upon her in the length of days.  
 With no man else have I known delight, nor any shame  
 Of evil speech, more than I know how to temper bronze.<sup>96</sup>  
 (601-612)

Clytemnestra's use of ambiguity and metaphor here dupes the chorus into believing in her chastity. She claims that she has been a faithful wife, a good watchdog, and unbroken (in terms of chastity). By using *πιστή*, Clytemnestra refers to the sexual control apparent in an Athenian woman's life and the man's dependence on this for his stability in society. However, the use of *σημαντήριο* and *διαφθείρω* destroy this concept of the chaste female, highlighting the violability of the male citizen and the adulterous seduction rampant in Athens.<sup>97</sup> According to McClure, whenever Aeschylus shows Clytemnestra acting as the obedient and loyal wife, he is in fact implying her duplicitous nature.<sup>98</sup> As a result, we are to see her androgynous and twofold persona.

She continues praising her artificial fidelity in her speech to the chorus:

ἄνδρες πολῖται, πρέσβος Ἀργείων τόδε,  
 οὐκ αἰσχυνοῦμαι τοὺς φιλόνορας τρόπους  
 λέξαι πρὸς ὑμᾶς· ἐν χρόνῳ δ' ἀποφθίνει  
 τὸ τάρβος ἀνθρώποισιν·

...

τὸ μὲν γυναῖκα πρῶτον ἄρσενος δίχα  
 ἦσθαι δόμοις ἐρῆμον ἔκπαγλον κακόν...

Citizen men, this august assembly of Argolis,  
 I take no shame to speak aloud before you all  
 The customs/ love I bear of my husband. In time  
 the bashfulness fades for men.

.....

<sup>96</sup> The ambiguous meaning here has induced me to use Lattimore's translation again.

<sup>97</sup> McClure (1999), 77

<sup>98</sup> McClure (1999), 76

with the husband absent, it is evil and a thing of terror when a wife  
Sits in the house forlorn ....

(855-861)

Encrypted in metaphors and innuendos, Clytemnestra describes herself as both genders, “undermining her feminine persona with masculine rhetoric.”<sup>99</sup> Her address to the court of men carries a masculine and somewhat civic air. Since such public speeches or appearances were not normally associated with females, she defies the normal Greek conventions and flaunts the masculinity within herself. In addition, the ambiguity of φιλόνορας, a term used earlier in the play to describe Helen’s sexual misconduct (411) brings to mind the adulterous affair between Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.<sup>100</sup>

The murder of Agamemnon can be seen as the most obvious statement of Clytemnestra’s unfeminine strength. An action usually associated with males and the battlefield is used by a woman on a man. In the subsequent plays, Orestes takes revenge on his mother, killing in the same manner as Clytemnestra has done earlier. Through the parallels, Aeschylus draws attention to Clytemnestra’s masculinity. Clytemnestra, like Orestes, takes revenge with the actions and words of a warrior. However, as we learn, Orestes’ murder is excused while Clytemnestra’s is not. It becomes clear that her departure from the female sphere is not praiseworthy and will not be easily accepted by the chorus and the fifth century audience.

Upon murdering Agamemnon, Clytemnestra at first takes full credit for the action and boasts over the dead.

πειρᾶσθέ μου γυναικὸς ὡς ἀφράσμονος·

---

<sup>99</sup> McClure (1999), 77

<sup>100</sup> McClure (1999), 77-78



ἐγὼ δ' ἀτρέστῳ καρδίᾳ πρὸς εἰδότας  
λέγω· σὺ δ' αἰνεῖν εἴτε με ψέγειν θέλεις,  
ὁμοῖον· οὗτός ἐστιν Ἀγαμέμνων, ἐμός  
πόσις, νεκρὸς δέ, τῆσδε δεξιᾶς χερός  
ἔργον, δικαίας τέκτονος. τάδ' ᾧδ' ἔχει.

You try me out as if I were a woman and vain;  
but I speak before you with a calm heart.  
And you can praise or blame me as you wish,  
it is all the same to me. That man is Agamemnon,  
My husband, and he is dead, the work of this right hand  
a true workman. That's how things stand.

(1401-1406)

Boasting over the deceased body of one's enemy, in the Homeric poems, was considered inappropriate but often acted upon by epic warriors.<sup>101</sup> The chorus obviously objects to this bold and inappropriate boast. "The implication seems to be that in its view this outrageously bold woman, who is not entitled by her sex to such boasts in any case, is boasting over the one man she ought above all to have respected, her domestic partner."<sup>102</sup> Clytemnestra assimilates herself to the male role of a hero, perhaps to replace Agamemnon, and strays from the proper actions of a female.

Clytemnestra continues in her post-murder role, demanding through legal language<sup>103</sup> that the chorus praise or blame her as appropriate to a male: "Let you hear what I have done, and lo, you are a stern judge" (1420-1421). She desires to be tried as a man would, "as a heroic and just (male-style) avenger, not as a woman

---

<sup>101</sup> See *Odyssey* 22.412, Archilochus fragment 134, and Euripides' *Electra* 900-956. For epic occurrences of gloating over the dead, see the *Iliad*

<sup>102</sup> Foley (2001), 212

<sup>103</sup> Women were not usually included in the courts and if they were present they were rarely allowed to speak. See Simon Goldhill (1994) "Representing Democracy: Women at the Great Dionysia," in Robin Osborne and Simon Hornblower, eds., *Ritual, Finance, Politics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 347-69.

using speech inappropriate to her sex about her husband.”<sup>104</sup> The chorus will not accept this request. They cannot look beyond her gender and judge the action on its own. They address her as γόναι (1407), reminding themselves of her status. In addition, although she desires to be treated in the same way as a man, she repeatedly fails to adopt this role by keeping a feminine perspective on the events.<sup>105</sup>

Clytemnestra begins by taking responsibility for her actions and demanding a male-style trial, but later attempts to avoid responsibility for her crime.

αὐχεῖς εἶναι τόδε τοῦργον ἐμὸν  
† μηδ’ ἐπιεχθῆς†  
Ἄγαμεμνονίαν εἶναί μ’ ἄλοχον·  
φανταζόμενος δὲ γυναικὶ νεκροῦ  
τοῦδ’ ὁ παλαιὸς δριμύς ἀλάστωρ  
Ἄτρέως χαλεποῦ θοινατῆρος  
τόνδ’ ἀπέτεισεν  
τέλεον νεαροῖς ἐπιθύσας.

You claim this is my deed  
(Speak of me never)  
that I am the wife of Agamemnon.  
In the shadow of this corpse’s queen  
the old stark avenger (*Alastor*)  
of Atreus for his revel of hate  
got revenge on this man,  
last blood for him having slaughtered his children.  
(1497-1504)

This cryptic speech can be seen as an attempt to either remove the liability or perhaps justify her actions. She asserts that the Alastor of the house appeared, in her form, and took a sacrificial victim, Agamemnon, in payment for the young, the children of Thyestes and possibly even Iphigenia. If interpreted as Clytemnestra’s attempts to remove blame, then she is not an autonomous agent and can in no way be judged as

---

<sup>104</sup> Foley (2001), 212

<sup>105</sup> Foley (2001), 212

comparable to men. By blaming an outside force, Clytemnestra maintains her femininity. As those of a woman overtaken by a *daimonic* force, her actions were thus unintended and unintentionally incorporated within the male sphere.

Yet, many scholars have pointed out that this claim of lack of moral agency is inconsistent with Clytemnestra's previous assertions of responsibility for her crime.<sup>106</sup> Fraenkel states that there is nothing in the text to suggest that Clytemnestra is suddenly aware of the horror of her deed and looking for an excuse<sup>107</sup> and Denniston, Page and I agree with him. I prefer to take Clytemnestra's claim as an attempt to justify her actions. By introducing a *daimon* as the agent, Clytemnestra "begins to undermine in a male-dominated world her earlier claim to the role of a just, autonomous (masculine), heroic avenger, and implicitly to adopt a secondary female role."<sup>108</sup> She portrays herself as the stereotypical Greek woman who would obey the commands of her male guardian, here describing herself as Alastor. She asserts her inferior status perhaps to mock the chorus, free herself from harsh punishment, or win over the chorus and audience.

The exact reasoning for Clytemnestra's actions is greatly debated. She openly blames both Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia (1417) and his infidelity, but these do not seem to be her only reasons. In addition to her anger over Agamemnon's actions, Clytemnestra also retains hatred for her husband which seems to stem from her jealousy of his status as a male. "For she herself is of manly temper, and the dominance of a man is abhorrent to her. Thus, when she kills her husband, it is not

---

<sup>106</sup> See Neuberg, M. 1991. "Clytemnestra and the Alastor: Aesch. Ag. 1467ff." *Quaderni Urbinati di Cultura Classica* 38: 37-68

<sup>107</sup> Fraenkel, ad loc.

<sup>108</sup> Foley (2001) 223

only an act of vengeance, but also a blow struck for her personal liberty.”<sup>109</sup> By killing her husband, she takes over the role of the male while simultaneously proving herself stronger through victory.

It is possible to write endlessly on the androgynous character of Clytemnestra, but for the sake of space, I will end here and briefly touch upon the other characters within the work and their ambiguous gender identities.

Agamemnon’s concubine, the prophetess Cassandra, is frequently addressed as the inversion of Clytemnestra.<sup>110</sup> Where Clytemnestra represents the “deceptive potential of language to disrupt and overturn gender norms, Cassandra may symbolize the opposite function.”<sup>111</sup> Even though a barbarian, she represents the ideal Greek woman. She obeys her male guardian, uses feminine speech and remains silent until addressed. Like Clytemnestra, she exercises the feminine ritual lament and the uncontrolled rhetoric expected of a woman.

However, her character’s gender is not entirely set in stone. While acting the perfect female, she simultaneously encompasses an unexpected masculine strength. Given the curse by Apollo, she is able to foresee the future but no one will believe her.

Her intelligence far exceeds that of a male, placing her above her masculine counterparts. Even as her intelligence boosts her power, her inability to be believed destroys it. Like those of the normal woman, Cassandra’s orations are not given any

---

<sup>109</sup> Winnington-Ingram (1948) 132

<sup>110</sup> McClure (1999) 92, Goldhill (1984) 57-58, Thalmann (1985) 229

<sup>111</sup> McClure (1999) 92

weight and are disregarded by the men. She is unable to enter the male sphere as her presence is overlooked. While she contains this inauspicious power that is potentially dangerous, she is never able to actually threaten the male dominance.

When Cassandra first names Agamemnon as the victim of Clytemnestra's evil plot, the chorus warns her to keep quiet: εὐφημον, ὦ τάλαινα, κοίμησον στόμα (1247 "Wretched woman, put those bitter lips to sleep"). The use of εὐφημον suggests that Cassandra's mention of Agamemnon's death in some way might actually induce the crime.<sup>112</sup> Even the mention of his name whether intended or not was thought to bring about the undesired events. In keeping with her unexpected power, she does not obey the chorus, but in a Clytemnestra-like manner, she speaks back. Although she follows Agamemnon inside, she does not bow down in like manner to the male chorus.

Following Cassandra's death, Clytemnestra speaks of the concubine, calling her "a delicate excitement to [her] bed's delight" (1446-1447, Lattimore). She describes her as a φίλητρον, a term usually reserved for men. Being classified as the male lover, Cassandra becomes the giver rather than the receiver and the assertive one in the bedroom. She becomes a masculine character and the dominant partner. In addition, Cassandra is the only character who does not fall prey to Clytemnestra's persuasive speech. This ability to remain un-persuaded reveals her simultaneously masculine and feminine persona. On the one hand, being easily persuaded is usually seen as a female trait. If Cassandra is able to avoid Clytemnestra's persuasion, she is acting the part of the male. On the other hand, Clytemnestra's spell, due to its erotic

---

<sup>112</sup> McClure (1999) 81

nature, works only on men and so Cassandra, as a female, would not fall under the spell.<sup>113</sup>

In the end, Cassandra's ability to foresee the future does not save her and she is killed. Her presence in the play is due solely to her gender and her status as a prize of warriors, which leads to her death. Her power to overcome Clytemnestra's persuasive speech, to see into the future, to speak back to the chorus, and to be the "man" in the bedroom, in the end do not protect her from her innate femininity. She is destroyed because of her gendered position within society and even her questionable masculinity cannot mask her womanhood.

While Cassandra's gender defines her character and leads to her death, Aegisthus' innate gender is almost ignored and his duality leads to his death. In each instance that Clytemnestra's power is highlighted, Aegisthus' is weakened. By giving Clytemnestra the reins in the relationship, Aegisthus is placed into the position of the woman of the household.

The character of Aegisthus appears towards the end of the *Agamemnon*, following the slaying of Agamemnon and Cassandra. The delayed appearance of the cousin marks his lack of importance in the play. By the time he appears, the audience is already fully aware of Clytemnestra's mastery in the plot. Clytemnestra has already spoken down to her husband, forced him to act in ways he did not desire, and finally used her own hand to kill him. Up until this point, Clytemnestra has been assigned the authority of the household and the main hand in the killing, depriving Aegisthus of any power in the plans.

---

<sup>113</sup> McClure (1999) 93

However, during her defense, Clytemnestra derives her confidence from Aegisthus' loyalty and authority. She builds up the character of Aegisthus and compares his position to that of the fallen hero:

ἕως ἄν αἴθη πῦρ ἐφ' ἐστίας ἐμῆς  
Αἴγισθος, ὥς τὸ πρόσθεν εὖ φρονῶν ἐμοί·  
οὔτος γὰρ ἡμῖν ἀσπίς οὐ μικρὰ θράσους.  
κεῖται γυναικὸς τῆσδ' ὁ λυμαντήριος

While Aegisthus makes the fire shine upon my hearth,  
thus as before, well-disposed toward me;  
For this is our shield not lacking in boldness.  
while he (Agamemnon), destroying this woman, lies dead.  
(1435-1438)

In ascribing to Aegisthus the power of the hearth, Clytemnestra assigns him the position of the legitimate lord of the household.<sup>114</sup> By granting Aegisthus Agamemnon's status in the home, Clytemnestra both builds and weakens the character of Aegisthus. First, he is made powerful by being granted the male power over the *oikos*. However, Clytemnestra undermines this power by calling him the οἰκουρὸς (1626, "the one keeping the home"). This appellation characterizes Aegisthus as somewhat feminine and grants him the female instead of the masculine position in the *oikos*.<sup>115</sup>

As the play continues, Aegisthus' position of power becomes less and less. Upon entering the stage, he boasts to the chorus of his power in the killings. In the beginning he takes full credit for the murder of his cousin and cousin's concubine, but it becomes clear he means his power only in devising the plot against Agamemnon: "It was I, in my right, who wrought this murder.... From afar I laid my hands upon this man, since it was I who pieced together the fell plot" (1604-1609). While

---

<sup>114</sup> Fraenkel, ad loc.

<sup>115</sup> Winnington-Ingram (1942) 132

Clytemnestra is allowed the warrior-like boast of the killing, Aegisthus pathetically grants himself the “brains behind the power”. Automatically, his own boast characterizes himself as the frailer of the pair.

Once the chorus brings up the blame, guilt, and liability for the murderers, Aegisthus further weakens his position by then erasing even his ability to have developed the plot: τὸ γὰρ δολῶσαι πρὸς γυναικὸς ἦν σαφῶς ( 1636, “clearly the deception was the woman’s part”). His assertion that trickery is a woman’s role and that he was only a suspect enemy does not persuade the chorus. He attempts to argue with the chorus but they only respond by calling him a woman (1625) and an adulterer (1626-27). His own speech is neither as persuasive nor as well-controlled as Clytemnestra’s. He lacks any “manipulating skill” which can characterize him as a weak male but also as non-female (as the chorus has shown earlier that women often encompass the power of persuasion).<sup>116</sup>

Aegisthus’ dual characterization is clear from his interactions and the other characters’ portrayals of him. Cassandra sees him as feeble, comparing him to a weak lion,<sup>117</sup> and the chorus repeatedly refers to him as a woman. However, he is still a man. The chorus shows anger at the fact that the female killed Agamemnon rather than the male and thus they still blame Aegisthus as much as Clytemnestra for the killing. “But why why then, coward, could you not have slain your man yourself? Why must it be his wife who killed?” (1643-44). Aegisthus’ inability to act the male does not free him from blame. The chorus still speaks of the murderers in the plural

---

<sup>116</sup> Goldhill (1984) 96-97

<sup>117</sup> See chapter 4 for more on this.



(1648) and due to his masculinity seem somewhat more disturbed by his decision than Clytemnestra's to be a part of the plot.

Aegisthus' subsequent death at the hands of Orestes highlights Aeschylus' desire to maintain the duality of the character. A male, characterized as a female, still must be murdered by a male to preserve his gender. However, even Orestes is characterized as being both male and female. In the *Choëphoroe*, Orestes and his sister Electra take center stage, planning revenge upon their mother and Aegisthus.

At the beginning of the sequel, the disguised Orestes appears at his birthplace and uses *peitho* to gain entrance. He "occupies the same dramatic position as Agamemnon, since he, too, has returned to reclaim his birthright, and he, too, assumes a mixed status in regard to gender."<sup>118</sup> His ability to use *dolos*, something that Aegisthus lacks but Clytemnestra excels in, highlights his somewhat feminine persona. However, according to McClure, Orestes' feminine persuasive ability is distinct from Clytemnestra's. Since Orestes' deployment of such persuasion derives from Apollo, his abilities are somewhat divine and still seen as masculine.<sup>119</sup>

The son of two parents of questionable genders, Orestes commits an act parallel to that of his mother. According to Zeitlin, "Orestes in the second play is the anomalous male, the logical counterpart of the anomalous female, Clytemnestra."<sup>120</sup> As shown earlier, Clytemnestra, as a female, partakes in the male-dominant society and demands the respect given to men. In a similar manner, Orestes, the only male heir to Agamemnon's fortune, directs himself towards the hearth and the domain of

---

<sup>118</sup> McClure (1999) 104

<sup>119</sup> McClure (1999) 104

<sup>120</sup> Zeitlin, "The Dynamics of Misogyny in the Oresteia: Myth and Mythmaking in the Oresteia", 161

the female. By returning home and seeking revenge on his mother, Orestes avoids external, public actions and enters the feminine space of the *oikos*.

Upon Orestes' entrance in the second play of the trilogy, *The Choëphoroe*, he, in disguise, visits his father's grave and grieves as a female should,<sup>121</sup> tearing his hair and leaving it upon the tomb. Not only is the action of pulling one's hair out seen as a female act but whether his hair is that of a male or female is also debated by his sister and the chorus:

Electra: Someone has cut a strand of hair and laid it on the tomb

Chorus: What man? Or was it some deep-waisted girl?

....

Electra: No one could have cut off this hair except for me

(*Choe.* 168-172)

Both Electra and the Chorus seem confused about the source of the hair. It would be abnormal for a male to publicly lament and the hair itself looks somewhat similar to Electra's. Thus, Electra confuses the gender of Orestes by stating the possibility that the hair is from her own female head. Likewise, later when she finds his footprints, she reveals that they "look like mine" (205-211). Again comparing Orestes' features with her own, Electra confuses her gender and Orestes'. In confusing the hairs and footprints with her own, Electra both grants herself masculinity and Orestes femininity.

As I hope to have made clear in this chapter, evidence for the duality of the genders of the characters within the trilogy is abundant and could be a topic for a book in itself. I believe that these will become more apparent in the next chapter through the similes that the characters use for one another.

---

<sup>121</sup> For references of female grieving look back at Cassandra's laments and actions in the *Agamemnon*

## CHAPTER 4: ANIMAL SIMILES IN THE *AGAMEMNON*

The works of Aeschylus are marked with an abundance of images, metaphors and similes. These literary devices utilize the themes of animals, weaving, nets, wrestling and hunting, to name a few. From these numerous fields of images, Aeschylus derives many more concerning animals than any other poet since Homer. In addition, his variety of animals used far exceeds that of Homer<sup>122</sup> and thus becomes an interesting topic of exploration. Hence, this chapter will focus on the field of animal similes within Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and their utilization in the blurring of gender roles and expectations within the play as a whole.

Multiple comparisons to animals are used throughout the trilogy for characters such as Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, Aegisthus, Orestes, and Cassandra. These protagonists are compared to animals such as reptiles, snakes, birds, dogs, lions, spiders, and nightingales. "The attributes used for the comparison are cruelty, cunning, helplessness (as of the nestling), fearlessness, and rarely a good quality as the faithfulness of the house-dog."<sup>123</sup> However, the attributes of males or females are often mixed, the usual animals used for male similes are inverted (and vice-versa), and the animals often represent more than one character and even more than one gender. As a result, the similes reveal the depth of the story, the complication of the genders, and the reality of gender-reversed society of Argos.

The first extended simile of the trilogy occurs in the first chorus of the *Agamemnon*. The chorus begins by telling of the setting forth of the Greek army

---

<sup>122</sup> Keith, Arthur Leslie (1914). *Simile and Metaphor in Greek poetry: From Homer to Aeschylus (A Dissertation)*, 123

<sup>123</sup> Keith, Arthur Leslie (1914) 123

many years ago at the beginning of the Trojan War and continues with a simile of the Atreidae and the Argives:

μεγάλ' ἐκ θυμοῦ κλάζοντες Ἄρη,  
τρόπον αἰγυπιῶν οἷτ' ἐκπατίοις  
ἄλγεσι παίδων ὑπατοὶ λεχέων  
στροφοδινοῦνται  
περύγων ἐρετμοῖσιν ἐρεσσόμενοι,  
δεμνιοτήρη  
πόνον ὀπρταλίχων ὀλέσαντες.<sup>124</sup>  
ὑπατος δ' αἴων ἢ τις Ἀπόλλων  
ἢ Πᾶν ἢ Ζεὺς οἰωνόθροον  
γόνον ὄξυβόαν τῶνδε μετοίκων  
ὑστερόποινον  
πέμπει παραβᾶσαν Ἐρινύν·

Shouting a war-like cry from the heart,  
in the manner of vultures who in extreme  
grief for their young children, high above the nests  
they wheel around  
rowing with their oar-wings,  
having lost the watching  
over the bed toil over their chicks;  
And some one perceiving from above, either some Apollo  
or Pan or Zeus, this screaming  
bird-lament of these sky-guests  
drives late to its mark  
the Fury upon those transgressors.  
(*Ag.* 48-59)

At first glimpse, the simile is meant to refer to the kings, Agamemnon and Menelaus; due to their closeness, one's quarrel is another's as well. Here, Menelaus' high bed has been robbed of Helen, just as vultures who have been robbed of their young, and thus the subjects mourn their loss and launch forth, either in ships or by their own wings, to pursue their lost kin and appeal to the patron gods. The comparison to vultures, according to Headlam, is fitting as "eagles and vultures were notoriously

---

<sup>124</sup> All Greek is taken from Denniston and Page's text and commentary on the *Agamemnon*.

remote and solitary; so of course, from the nature of their high degree, were Kings.”<sup>125</sup> There is no reason to argue with Headlam’s analysis, as a lofty animal such as an eagle would be an expected image for such noteworthy characters as kings.

However, the simile can be understood in another way as well. *παίδων* for the vulture’s children corresponds to the *τέκνα* in the corresponding passage of the *Odyssey* (16.217) from which Aeschylus is drawing his own simile. However, the noun *παῖς* is used no where else in Classical literature for young beasts, and Aeschylus is the first to apply *λέχος* from the human world to the animal,<sup>126</sup> and so transfers the grief to the human sphere making a further connection between the comparison and the thing compared.<sup>127</sup> As well, the plural *παίδων* for Helen has been questioned and thus the plural chicks are seen as referring to either Iphigenia or the children of Thyestes and the plural vultures to either the grieving Clytemnestra or Thyestes.<sup>128</sup> In these readings, the *λέχων* therefore represents the slaughter of the children, which were the products of the marriage bed. And the *γόνον* and *πόνον* *δεμνιοτήρη*, also usually pertaining to the human sphere, conveys the toilsome female job of caring for one’s children, that which would not be a central element in the life of the kings Agamemnon and Menelaus who have been at war during any child’s raising.

The possible readings of this simile are by no means exhaustive and suggest the multivalency of Aeschylus’ writing. The simile conjures up the images of

---

<sup>125</sup> Headlam, W. (1902) “Metaphor, with a Note on Transference of Epithets” *The Classical Review*, Vol. 16, No. 9, p. 436

<sup>126</sup> Heath, John (1999) “Humans and other animals in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*” *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 119, p. 23

<sup>127</sup> Fraenkel, *ad loc.*

<sup>128</sup> Heath (1999) 19

Agamemnon, Menelaus, Helen, Clytemnestra, Iphigenia, Thyestes and his children to different readers, giving the work many different facades. In addition, the ambiguity of the connection between animals and characters also creates a confusion of the gender roles. While the vultures can be Menelaus, Agamemnon or Thyestes, they mourn in a female manner over their young or lost, much like the lamenting analyzed earlier in chapter 3. If the vultures refer to Clytemnestra, Aeschylus is granting the heroine a sense of power usually only fit for kings, thus comparing her abilities to those of a man.

Aeschylus' favorite and most recurring animals of comparison in his trilogy are dogs and lions. Aeschylus utilizes dogs for comparisons to the watchman, Clytemnestra, Cassandra, and the furies, among others. In the beginning of the *Agamemnon*, the watchman speaks of his job, praising and comparing himself to a faithful watchdog (3). According to Rosenmeyer, in his study on Aeschylus and his writings, "the beast in Aeschylus has negative value",<sup>129</sup> but it is clear here that the watchman's words do not support this analysis. Although, Rosenmeyer is correct that beasts rarely encompass positive value in Aeschylus' work, the example of a dog holds both positive and negative value in different circumstances.

Later, when attempting to persuade the chorus of her faithfulness during Agamemnon's absence, Clytemnestra says that she was left as δωμαίων κύνα / ἐσθλήν ἐκείνῳ, πολεμίαν τοῖς δύσφοροσιν (607-608, "a dog of the house good to him, an enemy to his enemies"). Her comparison to a dog reveals her trustworthiness to her husband and her home, much like the watchman in the first scene of the play. Her

---

<sup>129</sup> Rosenmeyer, *The Art of Aeschylus*, p. 138

words here can be seen as both truthful and falsely persuasive. In one sense, she has chosen a loyal dog to show her faithfulness to her home and daughter Iphigenia through the revenge she plans against Agamemnon, her child's killer. In another sense, however, at this point she is still trying to persuade the chorus and Agamemnon that she has stayed a faithful wife in terms of keeping her bedroom bare and not revolting against her husband. Therefore, the picture of the watchdog does not accurately connect to the real Clytemnestra and thus the duality of both the watchdog and the Queen are revealed.

In a similar manner, Clytemnestra's "opposite" Cassandra is also likened to a dog, one keen and able to hunt down the truth about the past (1093, ἔοικεν εὐρις ἡ ξένη κυνὸς δίκην/ εἶναι, ματεύει δ' ὣν ἀνευρήσει φόνον). According to Aeschylus' contemporary writers, εὐρις was one of the qualities included in those essential to a good dog.<sup>130</sup> The dog Cassandra embodies the positive qualities of the animal. Unfortunately, her virtue does not appear to the other characters and instead her dog-like ability to sniff out the truth is ignored and leads to her own death.

Aeschylus' similes involving lions, lionesses and lion cubs occur frequently throughout the *Agamemnon* (and in the overall trilogy). Helen and later Orestes are compared to lion cubs, Menelaus and Agamemnon to lions, Aegisthus to a "weak lion", and finally Clytemnestra to a lioness.

The first use of the lion image occurs in the third stasimon of the *Agamemnon* through the voice of the chorus. After speaking of Helen and Troy, Aeschylus abandons this theme connecting his new thought with οὐτως (718). The comparison

---

<sup>130</sup> Fraenkel, *ad loc.*

seems to be somewhat disconnected from the rest of choral ode and Bernard Knox implies the significance of its position. “The lion cub parable is a separate unity formally marked off from its context, and this, together with its emphatic position, central in the central stasimon of the tragedy, suggests that its meaning is of more than local importance.”<sup>131</sup> The parable is obviously positioned as such for emphasis and as we shall see, its meaning is much more complicated than perhaps it might seem on the surface.

The choral ode begins with a denigration of Helen and her fault in the war. It tells of the destruction of marriage, the entrance of Strife into Troy, and the future grief of the Trojans and their city. The switch however comes with the introduction of οὕτως ἀνὴρ and the following structure of an αἶνος (“story”) like that of Aesop<sup>132</sup>:

ἔθρεψεν δὲ λέοντος ἱ-  
 νιν δόμοις ἀγάλακτον οὐ-  
 τως ἀνὴρ φιλόμαστον,  
 ἐν βιότου προτελείοις  
 ἄμερον, εὐφιλόπαιδα  
 καὶ γεραροῖς ἐπίχαρτον·  
 πολέα δ’ ἔσχ’ ἐν ἀγκάλαις,  
 νεοτρόφου τέκνου δίκαν,  
 φαιδρωπὸς ποτὶ χεῖρα σαί-  
 νων τε γαστρὸς ἀνάγκαις.

Thus a man nourished a lion cub  
 in his home, one that was getting no milk  
 and loving the breast,  
 in the beginning of his life  
 it was civilized, loving children  
 and delightful to the old;  
 and it was frequently in the arms (of humans),  
 like a newly-reared child,

<sup>131</sup> Knox, Bernard M.W. (1952) “The Lion in the House (Agamemnon 717-36 [Murray]” *Classical Philology*, Vol. 47, No. 1, p.17

<sup>132</sup> Fraenkel, *ad loc.*



and joyously fawning towards the arms  
by the needs of its own stomach.  
(717-726)

The condensed and profound simile conjures up many human characters for comparison. Due to its location following Paris' rape of Helen, the lion cub is assumed to represent Helen, and the man who takes it into the house, Paris or even the city of Troy. This interpretation is quite fitting and has been agreed upon by many scholars.<sup>133</sup> According to Denniston and Page, "these lions have been generally misunderstood.... what is being compared is *the lion's career as a whole with the set of circumstances for which Helen was responsible*, not specifically *the lion-cub with Helen herself*".<sup>134</sup> Although the parable can be seen as representing many different people, I do not follow Page's logic here. He finds that Aeschylus misled the audience into thinking the comparison was with Helen but in the overall picture it is not so. Unfortunately, Aeschylus' similes are quite complex and often switch characters or meanings midway and thus Page's analysis is somewhat lacking.

Consonant with the view that the lion cub represents Helen, Helen starts off as innocent, as the cub is ἄμερον ("civilized"). She is adopted by Troy and Paris, who ἔθρεψεν ("nourish") her, and she is happily accepted into the arms of her new family. The portrayal as a lion would in most cases grant the female extra power, but the addition of its age as a lion-cub lessens her control. The phrase ἐν βιότου προτελείῳς has a striking appropriateness to Helen's situation, as the προτελεία ("beginnings or

---

<sup>133</sup> See the early scholarship: Knox (1952), 17; Headlam-Thomason (1938), *The Oresteia of Aeschylus*; Verrall (1904) *Agamemnon*

<sup>134</sup> Denniston and Page (1960) *ad loc.*

preliminaries”) are strictly for ceremonies before the marriage rite.<sup>135</sup> In addition, *προτελεία* carries a sarcastic tone towards the marriage of Helen and Paris as well as the incongruous idea of her being a virgin before her marriage to Paris.<sup>136</sup> The picture of Helen as an innocent, virginal child, conjures up images of Iphigenia and the conventional young female. However, in some sense it represents the women of the *Oresteia* and the evil that is within the beautiful exterior.

The lion cub parable then goes on to tell of the destruction that the grown up lion brings upon the city:

χρονισθεῖς δ’ ἀπέδειξεν ἦ-  
 θος τὸ πρὸς τοκέων· χάριν  
 γὰρ τροφεῦσιν ἀμείβων  
 μηλοφόνοισι (σὺ)ν ἄταις  
 δαῖτ’ ἀκέλευστος ἔτευξεν·  
 αἶματι δ’ οἶκος ἐφύρθη,  
 ἄμαχον ἄλγος οἰκέταις,  
 μέγα σίνος πολυκτόνον·

Grown up, it reveals its  
 temper which it got from its parents;  
 repaying thanks to its nurses  
 even though unmasked, it made a banquet  
 with sheep-slaying ruins;  
 And the home is defiled with blood,  
 an unconquerable grief bears on the inhabitants,  
 a great murderous harm.

(727-734)

The lion cub, Helen, grows up and her presence is destructive to her new family and city, just as Helen’s presence brings about a war on Troy’s own soil. The female suddenly grasps her power and turns against her own caretakers. In an unexpected manner (at least to Greek society, but perhaps not to the *Oresteia*), the captured

<sup>135</sup> See Knox, 17 and Liddell and Scott, *ad loc.*

<sup>136</sup> Knox (1952), 17

woman acquires strength and threatens the stability of the male-dominated state. Suddenly the weak woman, or lion cub, turns into a grown lion, an animal image usually reserved for males and male warriors, thus becoming comparable to man and the male sphere.

Just as the lion cub begins to grow and reveal the nature of its parents, the seventh stanza shows that so too a new hubris appears when an invincible spirit of black ruin enters the house which is similar in manner to its parental *ate* (762-771). The emphasis on the nature of parents and their children, and the reappearance of the same characteristics in both, reveals the central theme of the trilogy: the curse of the house of Atreus and the transmission of evil from a parent to its offspring.<sup>137</sup> Therefore, if the ambiguity of the choral ode is to be accepted, the lion-cub and the ἄνθρωπος can represent many other characters. For example, the man can be Menelaus who did in fact take Helen away and rear her at a young age. Then, the προτελεία might make more sense (and not to be taken as sarcastic) and her growth into harm wreaked on the household might be more readily accepted. In addition, the lion cub can stand for Clytemnestra and the ἄνθρωπος for Agamemnon, the man who took Clytemnestra in and nourished her. In a similar manner to the lion cub, Clytemnestra at first seemed innocent and soon revealed her innate nature and harmed her caretaker.

In his article on the lions in the *Agamemnon*, Knox continues to make a connection between the other instances of lion similes and the ways in which they connect to this first parable. He finds that each lion simile in some way or another

---

<sup>137</sup> Knox (1952) 18

relates to the lion-cub parable and thus each character can in fact represent the lion cub. In the following stasimon, Agamemnon explains how the Greek army at Troy attacked Troy “as a raw flesh eating lion springing over the wall licked up to its fill the royal blood” (827-828) and Knox sees this as parallel to the grown-up lion and thus Agamemnon too can be represented by the lion-cub.<sup>138</sup> However, according to Lebeck, Agamemnon is here calling the Trojan horse a ravening lion which sprang over the walls of Troy.<sup>139</sup> Either way, these connections are a bit strained but are verification of the depth and confusion of Aeschylus’ similes.

The majority of the lion similes appear in Cassandra’s speeches in the later part of the play. Her discourses are filled with likenesses between characters and animals, and the lion similes only make up a small portion of these similes. Her vocalizations are filled with confused gender similes and depictions. We shall begin by focusing on the lion similes and then will look at the other animals and the means in which they reflect upon the personalities of the protagonists.

The Cassandra scene occupies over 250 lines in the *Agamemnon* and although it does not advance the plot or the action of the play it is one of the most gripping and affecting parts of the play.<sup>140</sup> In her “mad-scene” she speaks of the past and predicts the happenings in the home of Atreus. She relates the banquet of Thyestes’ children and the resulting future for the offspring. Through similes and metaphors she prognosticates the killings and the animal-like exploits of Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Orestes, and even Agamemnon. She begins with Aegisthus:

---

<sup>138</sup> Knox (1952) 19

<sup>139</sup> Lebeck, Anne (1971) *The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure*. Harvard University Press, p.50

<sup>140</sup> Schein, Seth L. (1982) “The Cassandra Scene in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*” *Greece and Rome*, Second Series, Vol. 29, No. 1, 11

ἐκ τῶνδε ποινάς φημι βουλεύειν τινά  
λέοντ' ἄναλκιν ἐν λέχει στρωφώμενον  
οἰκουρὸν ὤμὸν τῶ μολόντι δεσπότη  
ἐμῶ·

Because of these I say that punishments are planned by  
a certain weak lion, tumbling about in the bed,  
staying in the home being savage to my master returning  
home;

(Ag. 1223-1226)

The depiction of the cheating Aegisthus as a lion is striking. As shown earlier in chapter 3, the lion Aegisthus is not portrayed in a positive light. Although he is linked with the strong animal, the lion, his lion character possesses none of the estimable or threatening attributes of the animal. In the simile, he lies in wait within the home to take revenge on the returning Agamemnon. However, even before Cassandra uses the lion image, she accuses Aegisthus of merely devising the plan (*ποινάς...βουλεύειν*) rather than doing the actual killing. As such, he takes the traditional female role, the one who devises but is passive and does not act.<sup>141</sup> In addition, the description of his place as *οἰκουρὸν* emphasizes his female position as caretaker of the *oikos*.<sup>142</sup>

Finally, the *λέοντ' ἄναλκιν* (“weak lion”) erases all possible power that the chosen animal has granted to Aegisthus’ character. *ἄναλκις*, a rare word found in Greek literature, occurs only in the *Odyssey*, *Iliad*, *Agamemnon*, Sophocles’ *Electra* and once in Herodotus’ *Histories*.<sup>143</sup> In the majority of these occurrences the adjective is used to highlight the weakness of the characters, women and otherwise.

---

<sup>141</sup> A great example would be Penelope in book 23 of the *Odyssey*. Although previously she has planned the stringing of the bow, etc., she takes no part in the actual revenge upon the suitors.

<sup>142</sup> See chapter 3 for more on this and his subsequent female portrayal.

<sup>143</sup> See Liddell and Scott, *ad loc*.

The *Iliad* shows that the warriors and Aphrodite are feeble in war and the *Odyssey* makes the same point about the suitors and Aegisthus himself.<sup>144</sup> But the depiction of lions as weak would not be expected or normal and “it would be for a Greek one might say an offence against the laws of nature to call a lion – of all creatures - *ἀναλκις*”.<sup>145</sup> According to Philemon fr. 89,<sup>146</sup> all lions were strong. It would therefore be impossible to find upon what grounds Aegisthus could be seen as a lion and thus the occurrence here must be taken as somewhat sarcastic while simultaneously highlighting his somewhat feminine inabilities.

Cassandra continues her rant, applying more animals to more characters. She goes on to prophesy Clytemnestra’s singular hand in killing her husband and the deceitful way in which she will go about this:

οὐκ οἶδεν οἶα γλῶσσα μισητῆς κυνός,  
λέξασα κάκτεινασα φαιδρόνους δίκην,  
ἄτης λαθραίου τεύξεται κακῆ τύχη.  
τοιαῦτα τολμᾷ· θῆλυς ἄρσενος φονεύς  
ἐστίν· τί νιν καλοῦσα δυσφιλὲς δάκος  
τύχοιμι’ ἄν; ἀμφίσβαιναν, ἢ Σκύλλαν τινά  
οἰκοῦσαν ἐν πέτραισι, ναυτίλων βλάβην  
...

He (Agamemnon) does not know of what sort of tongue the hateful bitch has,  
having spoken and having prolonged her pleasantries with cheerful disposition,  
she will come upon secret *Ate* with evil chance.  
She dares such things as these: she is a female murderess of the male;  
Giving her the name of what loathsome animal  
should I hit the mark; serpent, or Skylla  
dwelling among the rocks, harmful to sailors...

<sup>144</sup> *Il.* 2.201, 9.35, 5.331; *Od.* 8.153, 14.126, 3.310

<sup>145</sup> Fraenkel, *ad loc.*

<sup>146</sup> Fraenkel, *ad loc.*: τί ποτε Προμηθεύς, ὄν λέγουσ’ ἡμᾶς πλάσαι καὶ τᾶλλα μάντα ζῶια, τοῖς μὲν θηρίοις ἔδωχ’ ἐκάστωι κατὰ γένος μίαν φύσιν; ἅπαντες οἱ λέοντες εἰσιν ἄλκιμοι· δειλοὶ πάλιν ἐξῆς πάντες εἰσὶν οἱ λαγῶι...

(1228- 1234)

What begins as a small comparison between Aegisthus and an abnormal weak lion turns into a deliberation over which animal captures Clytemnestra's character. As first she is a dog but without any positive attribute. In this case, like the earlier instance of comparison (607-608), a stress is placed on the fact that the dog is female by the adjective *μισσητῆς*. According to Liddell and Scott, although the noun can be either feminine or masculine, the masculine occurs more frequently,<sup>147</sup> and so the emphasis on the femininity of the noun must convey some meaning. In my opinion, the stress on her gender highlights the expected innate nature of women and the evilness of her power. Although Clytemnestra tricks her husband into entering into his death, her trickery is not praiseworthy comparable to that of the Greeks with the Trojan horse or Odysseus' cunning, and thus her power is diminished and seen as evil by her femininity.

Cassandra proves the treachery of Clytemnestra by continuing with her comparisons. First, she uses the adjective *μισσητῆς* for the dog Clytemnestra, a very strong epithet. The adjective meaning 'lewd, hateful, prostitute' carries no worthy meaning and so the dog is not even a mentionable one. Next, she compares Clytemnestra to an *amphisbaena* and *Scylla*, both duplicitous and treacherous "animals". The *amphisbaena* can be translated as more than just a "serpent". According to Campbell, "This was a 'noxious' and 'two headed' snake which could advance (as its name indicated) in either direction and being 'two-mouthed' bite with

---

<sup>147</sup> Liddell and Scott, *ad loc.*

either end. That is, it had, as we say ‘its sting in its tail’.”<sup>148</sup> The description of the beast perfectly matches that of Clytemnestra: a duplicitous human, with a hidden destructive power, like the hidden sting of the beast’s tail. Likewise, Scylla, most notorious for her part in the *Odyssey* when she snatches up the men from the boat (*Od.* 13.224f), is a destructive creature. This beast is female, man-devouring and insidious and a perfect image for the female, male-destroying, treacherous Clytemnestra.

Cassandra’s similes do not stop here, however. After a brief stichomythia with the chorus, Cassandra continues prophesying the destruction of the male animal by the female. Here she includes Agamemnon, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra:

ὄτοτοϊ, Λύκει’ Ἄπολλον, οἷ ἐγὼ ἐγὼ.  
Αὔτη δίπους λέαινα συγκοιμωμένη  
λύκῳ, λεόντος εὐγενοῦς ἀπουσίᾳ,  
κτενεῖ με τὴν τάλαιναν·

Oh Lycean Apollo, ah me ah me.  
This two-footed lioness lying  
with the wolf, in the absence of the noble lion,  
will kill wretched me;

(1257-1260)

Clytemnestra is represented as a lion but once again she is stripped of the powerful status of the lion by being called a λέαινα, or a lioness. The emphasis on her gender highlights her gender instability but simultaneous maintenance of her femininity. Even though she encompasses power beyond that of a woman, Aeschylus and Cassandra do not grant her power beyond that of a female lion. Meanwhile, Agamemnon is described as a male lion. He is ironically bestowed with the powerful

---

<sup>148</sup> Campbell, A.Y. (1935) “Aeschylus Agamemnon 1223-38 and Treacherous Monsters” *The Classical Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 1 p. 30



strength as he is the one who will fall prey to the lioness. However, perhaps the emphasis on the male versus female lion is a foreshadowing of the rest of the trilogy and the conclusion that the male sphere will always dominate over that of the female.

The most interesting comparison however is that of Aegisthus and a wolf. Wolves are not and probably were not seen as peaceful animals. Apollo, as the chief god of the city of Argos,<sup>149</sup> is called upon here (1257) to protect Cassandra and the rest of the citizens from the wolf Aegisthus and his forthcoming actions. Fraenkel points out here that it is worth considering that this is one of those tragic passages where Apollo was invoked against a wide variety of misfortunes, including wolves.<sup>150</sup> Hence, Aegisthus' status as a wolf represents the calamity falling upon the city. Although the wolf is a powerful creature, one must be aware that Aegisthus does not "fill its shoes" so to speak and so his simile is a bit extreme. The wolf, however, was a common animal in oracles and visions from the period of the sixth and fifth century<sup>151</sup> and thus perhaps Cassandra's choice of animals is conforming to the contemporary "mediumistic practice"<sup>152</sup> rather than actually reflecting on a realistic characteristic of the character.

The final simile for Aegisthus occurs at the end of the play with a comparison between him and a cock. The chorus riles up Aegisthus, saying: κόμπασον θαρσῶν, ἀλέκτωρ ὥστε θηλείας πέλας (1671, "Being brave, boast, just like a cock beside a hen"). The hen is obviously Clytemnestra, beside whom Aegisthus is able to boast about the feat which he did not physically take part in. The comparison here is

---

<sup>149</sup> See *Suppl.* 685 and Fraenkel, *ad loc.*

<sup>150</sup> Fraenkel, *ad loc.*, Eckels, R.P. *Greek Wolf-lore* (Philadelphia, 1937) 61

<sup>151</sup> West, Stephanie "Aegisthus the cowardly lion: A note on Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1224" *Mnemosyne*, Vol. LVI, Fasc. 4, (pp. 480-484), p. 482

<sup>152</sup> West, 482

extremely interesting and highlights the main theme of the play: male versus female. Although Clytemnestra did in fact kill her husband, the chorus mocks Aegisthus for taking credit for the female's work. The cock, "the symbol of boastful lechery",<sup>153</sup> is a common animal in Greek proverbs. ἄλεκτωρ, a word foreign to pure Attic Greek, proves that Greeks in those times were much more interested in the fighting-cock than in the laying hen.<sup>154</sup> The portrayal of Aegisthus as a fighting cock illustrates the gender roles of society and Aegisthus' attempts to conform to these. Since he did not do the killing, the chorus mocks him for his attempts to be the male, while really the female has taken the position of the male. However, by keeping Clytemnestra in the position of the hatching hen, they force her into a position of subordinate in the female role to that of the boasting male.

A similar instance occurs earlier in the play during Cassandra's conversation with the chorus. Cassandra warns the listener: ἄπεχε τῆς βοῶς / τὸν ταῦρον (1125-1126, "Keep the bull away from the cow"). The bull (τὸν ταῦρον) obviously symbolizes Agamemnon while the cow (τῆς βοῶς) Clytemnestra. The caveat is interesting though. In keeping with the genders of the characters, the audience assumes that the admonition is to keep the male-animal Agamemnon away from the female-animal Clytemnestra in order that she not be harmed by the male.<sup>155</sup> The forewarning is assembled to fit the expectations of the genders within the society; females should fear the harm of males.

---

<sup>153</sup> Pollard, J.R.T. 1948 "Birds in Aeschylus" *Greece and Rome*, Vol. 17, No. 51, p. 122

<sup>154</sup> Fraenkel, *ad loc.*

<sup>155</sup> See Fraenkel, *ad loc.* for more on this impression.

In keeping with the theme of animals within oracles (as I have just spoken about previously with the portrayal of Aegisthus as a cock), the male and female are appropriately represented here as bull and cow following the tradition of the oracular language.<sup>156</sup> In addition, the reference to Agamemnon as a bull would recall Agamemnon's own words in the *Odyssey* that Aegisthus and Clytemnestra killed him ὡς τις τε κατέκτανε βοῦν ἐπὶ φάτνῃ (9.411, “just as someone kills a bull upon the manger”). By characterizing himself as a bull, Agamemnon (and the chorus in the *Agamemnon*) gives his character dual status as menacing and yet destructible. In his comparisons to a bull in the *Odyssey*, he is portrayed as a powerful character upon whom annihilation has fallen. In a similar manner in the *Agamemnon*, the audience expects the unusually strong animal to be threatening to the harmless cow, but like the Agamemnon in the *Odyssey*, he too will succumb too early to an unfair slaughter. In such a manner, Aeschylus is able to construct double-sided characters both powerful and weak and male and female.

The gender confusion becomes clearer when this animal comparison is linked with a later one for the impending death of Cassandra. In her exchange with the chorus, they pity her and ask how she is able to endure entering upon her death so calmly: πῶς θεηλάτου/ βοὸς δίκην πρὸς βωμὸν εὐτόλμως πατεῖς; (1297-1298, “How can you walk so courageously towards the altar like a bull destined by God to death?”). Suddenly, Cassandra shares the same animal image and the same fate as Agamemnon. She too is to be slaughtered in an unfair manner. By relating Cassandra to a bull, she is given an unexpected amount of power, similar to the

---

<sup>156</sup> Fraenkel, *ad loc.*

manner in which Agamemnon as a bull being slaughtered has some of his power taken away. The gender of the bull is not specified here, due to the two-termination adjective included, perhaps on purpose, to confuse the genders and characters. The importance of the sacrificial animal's willingness to approach the altar balances out the masculine power the animal image grants the female by highlighting the innate female trait to follow the rules and accept the commands of the men.

Cassandra is then compared twice to two different birds. At first, in response to the chorus' outburst, Cassandra explains that she will not avoid the net of death, like a bird does in fear of being caught: οὔτοι δυσσοίζω θάμνον ὡς ὄρνις φόβῳ (1316, "I, bewail the bush, not like a bird in fear"). Once again a common animal in prophecies, oracles and visions is used by Cassandra. Her simile of a bird, a common animal in Aeschylus' works, evokes the first simile in the play with Agamemnon and Menelaus being compared to vultures (*Ag.* 48-59). However, her rejection of the animal imagery and the use of a different kind of bird distinguish her from the usual male imagery, highlighting her femininity. At the same time, though the imagery shows her masculine courage, her lack of fear and her endurance of her fate, like that of an Iliadic warrior. She crosses over the gender lines and becomes on par with the Homeric heroes and warriors.

Following Cassandra's death, Clytemnestra counteracts Cassandra's previous depiction of herself as a masculine bird and reestablishes her feminine status.

Clytemnestra boasts over the dead bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra:

ὁ μὲν γὰρ οὕτως, ἡ δὲ τοι κύκνου δίκην  
τὸν ὕστατον μέλψασα θανάσιμον γόον  
κεῖται φιλήτρῳ τοῦδ'...

For he lies thus, and she, like a swan,  
singing her last lament in death  
she lies as a lover of this man...  
(1444-1446)

Cassandra, the swan, has now been reduced from her previous status of a male hero to that of the conventional female. There was a belief that the swan, a popular bird among females,<sup>157</sup> was said to have sung shortly before it died,<sup>158</sup> and Cassandra does so in a like manner. Cassandra, the swan, laments death and thus remains within the female sphere as seen earlier. Women were expected to partake in the ceremonies of death, mourn the lost and pull their hair. Here, Cassandra's similarity to the swan mourning death highlights her inability to ever completely become one of the male heroes.

The similes and references to animals within the *Agamemnon* alone are abundant and within the *Oresteia* are numerous. Each instance reveals the gender instability of Argos, the duality of the characters, and the inverted status of the society as a whole. Some similes reveal the power of the male or female while others diminish it. Some show the femininity of the males while others show the masculinity of the females, and vice versa. In the end, the similes themselves are compact and filled with references that highlight the overall trilogy and the gender bending and competing within the play.

---

<sup>157</sup> I refer here to the story of Leda and the swan, Zeus. She encompasses the conventional female here who finds the swan a beautiful and enticing animal.

<sup>158</sup> Fraenkel, *ad loc.* refers to Wilamowitz and Plato's *Phaedrus*

## CONCLUSION

Now that the two works have been closely analyzed, we are able to come to some conclusions about the similarities and differences between the two. It is clearly evident that Aeschylus' tragic imagery owes much in general to Homeric poetry. For the initial image where the war cries of Agamemnon and Menelaus at the rape of Helen are compared to those of vultures mourning their lost children (*Agamemnon* 48), many scholars<sup>159</sup> have noted the parallels to similes in the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. In the *Odyssey*, the wailing of Odysseus and Telemachus during their reunion is compared to that of birds mourning their stolen children (16.216-19). The comparison focuses on vultures and the loss of τέκνα, much like that of the *Agamemnon* and the loss of παίδων. Likewise, in the *Iliad*, the shouts of Patroclus and Sarpedon are compared to those of vultures attacking each other (*Iliad* 16.428-30). The parallels between the Homeric and Aeschylean similes are palpable thus allowing for the conclusion that the earlier was the influence for the latter.

These are not the only parallels between the animal similes however. In *Iliad* 11.113-114, Agamemnon is compared to a lion that crushes the offspring of a hind, immediately bringing to mind the lion similes throughout the *Agamemnon* and the ways in which they describe Agamemnon and the other characters. According to Heath, there is no Homeric parallel as close as that of Aeschylus' omen of the eagle and the hare and Homer's multiple portentous birds,<sup>160</sup> thus proving that Aeschylus did in fact derive his imagery from the Homeric motifs.

---

<sup>159</sup> Heath, John 1999. "The Serpents and Sparrows: Homer and the Parodos of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*", *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 49, No. 2, p. 397

<sup>160</sup> Heath (1999), 398. Ex: *Od.* 2.146-7, 15.525-6, 19.538-9, 20.242-3, 22.302, 24.538, *Il.* 13.531, 13.821, 15.690-1, 17.460, 17.674-5, 22.308-10, 24.314-15

However, Aeschylus does slightly alter the Homeric similes, adapting them to his own genre. Firstly, Aeschylus increases the number of similes, through the voices of the chorus, Cassandra, Agamemnon, and Clytemnestra. These similes compare animals with both males *and* females with more frequency than those of Homer, resulting in multifaceted characterizations of both genders. For the most part, Homer's similes are much more positive than Aeschylus', portraying the virtuous deeds of the protagonists while even evoking pity for the less fortunate and less noble characters, such as the suitors. In contrast, Aeschylus' similes often show the negative aspects of the characters, such as Clytemnestra's abandonment of her femininity and Aegisthus' acceptance of his inferiority.

In the end, these differences occur due to the dissimilar eras of authorship and the genres of the works. The epics of Homer acclaim a male hero for his *arête*, *timē* and *kleos*. Although there are multiple female characters in the epic, their presence displays their functionality in assisting the hero's *nostos* and preserving his kingdom. Since the *Odyssey* is placed in an unknown period of time, the roles of the genders is somewhat ambiguous and even unimportant to the overall story. Penelope must remain a faithful wife to protect Odysseus and thus the comparison of a lion and the heroine highlights her ability to protect and remain subservient to the male.

In a differing manner, Aeschylus' work, although set in an era before the beginning of the *Odyssey*, reflects the fifth century city of Athens and the unpredictability of the society as whole. Aeschylus created characters that were paradigms of the human condition.<sup>161</sup> He wanted his dramas to give insight into the

---

<sup>161</sup> Easterling, P.E. 1973. "Presentation of Character in Aeschylus", *Greece and Rome*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ser., Vol. 20, No. 1, p 6

human experience and be relatable to the contemporary audience. At the same time, he amplified the presence of women in society and in some ways challenged the societal norms of gender roles. While women were important to the fifth century society, their authority was stifled by the commanding men and they were excluded from most public affairs. By developing upon popular characters that bend these genders roles, such as Clytemnestra who not only rules during her husband's absence but also kills the male with her own hand, or Aegisthus who allows the female to complete the deed, Aeschylus develops a dramatic society where the delineation of genders is unclear.

Aeschylus utilizes the contemporary transformation of the Athenian society, the stage, and the genre of drama to complete his "gender bending". Using the conventional all-male cast, Aeschylus cast men in the parts of the female characters, illustrating the ambiguity of gender in the play with a gender-ambiguous being. He improves upon this by staging his plays during a period of growth, philosophy and change in Athenian society, therefore revealing a possible unstable future.

In conclusion, the abundance of animal similes throughout Aeschylus' works are credited to the influence of Homer's poetry but do not adhere to the same guidelines. While Homer's similes predominantly focus on the heroic male and the positive attributes of the characters, Aeschylus' reveal the duality of the genders in both male and female, the negative aspects of each protagonist, and the manner in which the genre as a whole confused the gender roles.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bassett, Samuel. 1921. "The Function of the Homeric Simile", *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 52,
- Bolmarcich, Sarah 2001 "Homophrosune in the 'Odyssey'" *Classical Philology*, Vol. 96, No. 3 (Jul. 2001) pp. 205-213
- Campbell, A.Y. (1935) "Aeschylus Agamemnon 1223-38 and Treacherous Monsters" *The Classical Quarterly*, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 25-36
- De Jong, Irene. 2001 *A Narratological Commentary on The Odyssey*. Cambridge University Press
- Denniston, John D. and Page, Denys ed. *Aeschylus: Agamemnon*. Oxford.
- Doherty, Lillian. 1995 "Sirens, Muses and Female Narrators in the *Odyssey*", In *The Distaff Side: Representing the Female in Homer's Odyssey*, ed. Beth Cohen
- Easterling, P.E. 1973. "Presentation of Character in Aeschylus", *Greece and Rome*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ser., Vol. 20, No. 1, pp. 3-19
- Felson-Rubin, Nancy, 1994. *Regarding Penelope: From Character to Poetics*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press
- Foley, Helene P. 1978 "'Reverse Similes' and Sex Roles in the Odyssey" *Arethusa* Vol. 11, 7 – 26  
2001 *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton and Oxford.
- Fraenkel, Eduard ed. with commentary by Fraenkel, *Aeschylus: Agamemnon, Vol. II and III*. Oxford
- Goldhill, Simon 1984 *Language, sexuality and narrative in the Oresteia*, Cambridge University Press
- Greene, D. and Lattimore R., 1959 eds. and trs. *Complete Greek Tragedies I*. Chicago
- Hartigan, K. V. 1973 "He rose like a lion. Animal similes in Homer and Virgil" *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, Vol. 12, pp. 222-244
- Headlam, W. (1902) "Metaphor, with a Note on Transference of Epithets" *The Classical Review*, Vol. 16, No. 9, pp. 434-442

- Heath, John 1999a "Disengangling the Beast: Humans and other animals in Aeschylus' Oresteia" *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 119, pp. 17-47  
 1999b "The Serpents and Sparrows: Homer and the Parodos of Aeschylus' Agamemnon", *The Classical Quarterly*, New Series, Vol. 49, No. 2, pp. 396-407
- Katz, Marilyn A. 1991 *Penelope's Renown: Meaning and Interdeterminacy in The Odyssey*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press
- Keith, Arthur Leslie (1914). *Simile and Metaphor in Greek poetry: From Homer to Aeschylus (A Dissertation)*
- Knox, Bernard M.W. 1952. "The Lion in the House (Agamemnon 717-36 [Murray])" *Classical Philology*, Vol. 47, No. 1, pp. 17-25
- Lebeck, Anne 1971. *The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure*. Harvard University Press
- Lee, D.J.N. 1964. *The Similes of the Iliad and the Odyssey compared*.
- Lonsdale, Steven. H. 1990. *Creatures of Speech. Lion, Herding and Hunting Similes in the Iliad*
- Magrath, William T. 1982. "Progression of the Lion Simile in the *Odyssey*" *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 77, No. 3., pp. 205-212
- McClure, Laura 1999. *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama*. Princeton.
- Moulton, Carroll *Similes in the Homeric Poems*
- Murnaghan, Sheila. 1986. "Penelope's Agnoia: Knowledge, Power, and Gender in the *Odyssey*" In *Rescuing Creusa: New Methodological Approaches to Women in Antiquity*. ed. M. Skinner.  
 1994. "Reading Penelope" In *Epic and Epoch*, ed. S. Oberhelman, Van Kelly, R. J. Golsan.
- Nagler, Michael N. "Dread Goddess Revisited", In *Reading the Odyssey: Selected Interpretive Essays*, ed. S. L. Schein
- Olson, Douglas S. 1990. "The Stories of Agamemnon in Homer's *Odyssey*" *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 120., pp. 57-71  
 1989. "The stories of Helen and Menelaus (*Odyssey* 4.230-89) and the Return of Odysseus" *AJP*, Vol. 110, No. 3, pp. 387-394

- Pantelia, Maria C. 1993. "Spinning and Weaving: Ideas of Domestic Order in Homer" *The American Journal of Philology*, Vol. 114, No. 4, pp. 493-501
- Podlecki, Anthony J. 1971. "Some Odyssean Similes" *Greece and Rome*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ser., Vol. 18, No. 1., pp. 81-90
- Pollard, J.R.T. 1948. "Birds in Aeschylus" *Greece and Rome*, Vol. 17, No. 51 pp. 116-127
- Rosenmeyer, Thomas G. 1982. *The Art of Aeschylus*. University of California Press.
- Schein, Seth L. 1982. "The Cassandra Scene in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*" *Greece and Rome*, Second Series, Vol. 29, No. 1, pp. 11-16
- Stanford, W. B., ed. 1978 *Homer: The Odyssey* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2 vols. London: Macmillan
- West, Stephanie 2003. "Aegisthus the cowardly lion: A note on Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1224" *Mnemosyne*, Vol. LVI, Fasc. 4, pp. 480-484
- <sup>1</sup> Winnington-Ingram, R. P. 1948. "Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, Vol. 68., pp. 130-147
- Wohl, Victoria Josselyn 1993. "Standing by the Stathmos: The Creation of Sexual Ideology in the *Odyssey*" *Arethusa* 26, 19-50
- Zeitlin, Froma I. 1996. "The Dynamics of Misogyny in the *Oresteia*: Myth and Mythmaking in the *Oresteia*" In *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Civilization*, 87- 119. Chicago and London.