

CLYTEMNESTRA'S BREAST

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the myth of Clytemnestra's death as portrayed variously in tragedy by Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, with the goal of illustrating how each playwright used the core elements of that myth for the particular purposes of a given play. Within that general framework, I pay particular attention to the newly added but vivid detail whereby Clytemnestra bares her breast to Orestes just as he is poised to plunge the knife, a detail that then resonates not only through the plays but also in Greek artwork.¹ I argue that the skeletal outlines of the myth left each playwright with substantial freedom address to vary the murder scene, and that the distinctive ways each addressed Clytemnestra's baring of her breast provide important keys to how a given play might be interpreted.

Keywords: Clytemnestra, breast, death, tragedy

Introduction

This article has two parts: first, an effort to determine what in fact are the core elements of the Clytemnestra myth; and second, an examination of its



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See generally Goldman 1910.

variations in four plays, Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*, Sophocles' *Electra*, and Euripides' *Electra* and *Orestes*. My point of departure is that finding the core elements of a given myth, in this case that concerning Clytemnestra's murder, is not easy at all. It is not, for example, as though one were dealing with the story of Cain killing Abel, where the basic facts are related in a single, identifiable text upon which an artist might build variations. Given the difficulty of identifying what might have been the commonly understood elements of the story of Clytemnestra's death by the time these four plays were written, my further thesis is that very little constrained the playwrights, either because those elements were vague or unknown, or because even if known, the facts were sparse.

My conclusion, concisely stated, will be that Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides were substantially free in their portrayals of Clytemnestra's death from underlying constraints imposed by any previously existing texts; and that any variations that we do find may well arise more from the playwrights' responses to one another than to anything else. In particular, I conclude that a given dramatist's inclusion or not of the detail of Clytemnestra's baring of her breast is an important key to interpreting any individual play: where she does so, Orestes is not ultimately dissuaded from killing her, but his action effectively imports selected aspects of the mythic background of the Atreids' history of murder and adultery; and where she does not do so, the killing is seen to be more that of a regicide's just execution, independent of the Atreids' tangled history. And by the end of the cycle, with Euripides' *Orestes*, the varied portrayals of the matricide may have afforded fifth-century Athens a fresh means of examining justifications for retributive killings found in the mythic substrate.

The Clytemnestra of Myth

Aristotle provides a relevant guideline to poets who might find themselves inspired to build on received myths. He states that such a poet should not 'destroy the myths that have been received by tradition ... for instance, Clytemnestra being killed by Orestes ...'.² When dealing with an event such

² Arist. *Poet.* 1453b22-24: τοὺς μὲν οὖν παρειλημμένους μύθους λύειν οὐκ ἔστιν, λέγω δὲ οἷον τὴν Κλυταιμῆστραν ἀποθανοῦσαν ὑπὸ τοῦ Ὀρέστου (Unless otherwise stated, translations are my own). I recognize that Aristotle uses the term 'myth' in a technical sense: λέγω γὰρ μῦθον τοῦτον τὴν σύνθεσιν τῶν πραγμάτων, something like 'the placing together of the facts/events'. *Ibid.* 1450a4-5. But for our purposes, that still requires that we discover what such 'facts' the playwright already had at hand. See Bednarowski 2015:181 (discussing extent to which a playwright was expected to conform to a previous "treatment of his mythical subject matter").

as murder, it may be useful to think of this as discovering the elements of the crime, or what a lawyer might call the 'nucleus of operative facts' without which there is no crime. Another way of thinking about this is to try to identify the 'who, what, where, when and why' that would be used in a properly written opening paragraph of a news article about the murder. With respect to Clytemnestra, however, I have found such elements highly elusive. Aristotle's pithy reference to her having been killed by Orestes suggests the existence of some ancient, agreed source. But if there is one, it has escaped my research.

Aristotle himself does not identify a source for the Clytemnestra 'tradition'. We start by examining Homer, but it turns out that he never refers to Clytemnestra's murder. While she does appear in the *Odyssey*, it is principally as Aegisthus' lover. Even there, Homer's focus is on Aegisthus as regicide, with Orestes as his killer in revenge. The context is a cautionary tale about what might be the situation on Odysseus' return to Ithaca, should Penelope have proved unfaithful and the throne have been usurped. And even though Homer highlights Orestes' revenge killing of Aegisthus, he nowhere refers to Orestes taking revenge on his mother Clytemnestra. It further appears that the mythic tradition the poets received (to use Aristotle's framework) was that Agamemnon was killed by *Aegisthus*, not Clytemnestra.³ Yet unless she was directly involved in Agamemnon's murder, it is difficult to understand how there could be any purported justification for Orestes killing her in revenge.⁴

It is true that in two similar passages both Athena and Menelaus suggest that as Aegisthus' 'bedmate', Clytemnestra was in on the 'trap' to kill Agamemnon.⁵ But again, in neither place is it stated that Clytemnestra *herself* committed the actual deed; and Menelaus is only reporting what he was told by the Old Man of the Sea, who actually focuses on Aegisthus as the guilty party.⁶ Moreover, the Homeric references to Clytemnestra having a 'decent mind' that enabled her to resist Aegisthus' sexual advances for some period of time suggest minimal guilt and make her less the monster than the woman later encountered in the plays.⁷

Even Agamemnon's telling of the tale in Hades does not add much as to culpability. To be sure, he accuses his wife of some complicity in the murder,

³ Hom. *Od.* 1.36 (Zeus), 1.299-300 (Athena), 3.194-95 (Nestor).

⁴ Detailed review of this material is plainly beyond the scope of this article, but see generally March 1987; Olson 1990.

⁵ Hom. *Od.* 3.234-35 (Athena) (ἢ ἐλθὼν ἀπολέσθαι ἐφέστιος, ὡς Ἄγαμέμνων/ ὤλεθ' ὑπ' Αἰγίσθοιο δόλω καὶ ἧς ἀλόχοιο); 4.90-91 (Menelaus) (τεῖός μοι ἀδελφεὸν ἄλλος ἔπεφνε/ λάθρη, ἀνωϊστί, δόλω οὐλομένης ἀλόχοιο); cf. Aesch. *Ag.*

⁶ Hom. *Od.* 4.512-37.

⁷ *Ibid.* 3.265-66 (Nestor).

but he states clearly that it was ‘Aegisthus who killed me’.⁸ And the fact that Agamemnon expressly accuses Clytemnestra of killing Cassandra⁹ makes it clear that had Clytemnestra *also* struck him, he would have said so. Instead, he says only that she ‘plotted’ his death.¹⁰ While there is also a passing, and I think ambiguous, passage whereby Agamemnon in Hades suggests that Clytemnestra was involved in the actual killing,¹¹ when read in harmony with the numerous passages I have cited, it may simply be a shorthand claim that he views her as equally traitorous with Aegisthus. In short, nothing in Homer reliably *requires* that Clytemnestra herself had killed Agamemnon. Yet in the tragedies, the ‘core fact’ purporting to justify Orestes’ matricide is said to be Clytemnestra’s own murderous deed.

Note that there is also nothing in Homer about Orestes killing his mother, which is the essential fact that drives the tragic portrayals. Homer being silent, by the time we get to the fifth century what do we know of Clytemnestra having been murdered by Orestes? Not much it would seem. We do know from a fragment of Hesiod (as we also knew from Homer) that she was Agamemnon’s wife and the adulterous bedmate of Aegisthus. That at least gives us the ‘who’ of our imaginary news story. Examining the Hesiod text as well as a fragment of Stesichorus, Jennifer March reads Clytemnestra as a co-murderer with Agamemnon, but only in the sense of being what Homer had already shown her to be: a ‘joint partner-in-crime’.¹² With respect to the death of Agamemnon, it is instructive that the only text March suggests places more immediate guilt on Clytemnestra is Pindar’s *Pythian 11*, which was written well after Homer and not long before Aeschylus. But even there the text does not clearly assign a physical role to Clytemnestra, but only says that Clytemnestra ‘dispatched Cassandra ... to Acheron’s shadowy shore, accompanied by the spirit of Agamemnon’.¹³ The question in *Pythian 11* focuses more on her motivation than her physical action, i.e., was Clytemnestra moved to participate – in whatever way she did – in the killing of Agamemnon by a desire to avenge the death of Iphigenia, or by her corrupted sexual relationship with Aegisthus?¹⁴

The value of *Pythian 11* therefore lies not in providing a definitive answer to Clytemnestra’s motivation for participating in some way in the death of Agamemnon – some reason that might have justified killing him or not – but

⁸ Ibid. 11.409.

⁹ Ibid. 11.421-23.

¹⁰ Ibid. 11.429-430; 14.96-7.

¹¹ Ibid. 14.199-200: οὐχ ὡς Τυνδαρέου κούρη κακὰ μήσατο ἔργα/ κουρίδιον κτείνασα πόσιν

¹² March 1987:88-91.

¹³ Verity 2007:84.

¹⁴ March 1987:91-2.

rather in the very ambiguity of her motivations, an ambiguity which itself may constitute an aspect of the Clytemnestra myth. Second, and more importantly, *Pythian 11* does contain a clear reference to the one 'core fact' of the myth that most immediately concerns us: *ματέρα θῆκέ τ' Αἴγισθον ἐν φοναίς*.¹⁵ Yet if this is the source for Aristotle's guideline for the poetic imagination, it seems quite late to be much of a binding 'tradition' to which a poet might adhere.

Clytemnestra in the Tragedies

Pindar's presentation of the simple fact of the matricide is therefore at the heart of whatever mythical construct the tragedians had to work with.¹⁶ Whether the Athenian audience knew more about any surrounding elements of the matricide is of course unknown to us.¹⁷ But if we are to take Aristotle at his word, then it is immediately apparent that the 'who, what, where, when and why' of the pre-existing myth was barely a limit on the tragedians at all. First, they were free to portray Clytemnestra as having an active and physical role in the murder of Agamemnon.¹⁸ Second – and again to use the terms of our imaginary news story – the tragedians worked from the merest 'who' (Orestes) and 'what' (he killed Clytemnestra), beyond

¹⁵ Pind. *Pyth.* 11.36-7: '[H]e killed his mother and struck Aegisthus down in a pool of blood'. (Verity 2007 tr.).

¹⁶ I am not asserting that Pindar invented the matricide, only that this seems to be the first we know of it. Pindar may have adhered to some prior source in that regard, but one would think that the intensity of such a myth would have made it known to Homer. Either way, in this context I give no weight to Apollodorus' statement that Orestes 'killed both his mother and Aegisthus', Apollodorus 1976:274, because he had the benefit of both Pindar and the tragedians in compiling his summaries.

¹⁷ There is evidence, however, that 'the majority of the [Athenian] audience had a bottom-line theatrical competence' and were quite adept at 'recogniz[ing] and appreciate[ing] theatrical allusions.' Jendza 2015:462n32.

¹⁸ It is beyond the scope of this article to examine whether justice codes in Homeric times assigned equal guilt, and equal punishment, to co-conspirators along with those who acted in furtherance of the conspiracy. One doubts that there was any uniform νόμος or θέμις on the subject. However, it is interesting to consider whether in the setting of fifth-century Athens, with the development of the law courts, one of the points being made by Aeschylus, at least, by changing Agamemnon's actual killer from Aegisthus to Clytemnestra, was that Clytemnestra should be treated from a punishment perspective *as though* she had herself plunged the sword into her husband, whether she personally did so or not. See also Allan 2013 (discussing the role of the law courts as an evolved means for obtaining revenge in the face of family dishonor).

which they were free to arrive at their own variations as to the time, place, and reasons for Clytemnestra's death.

As indicated at the outset, I am focusing not simply on the actual murder but on the moment when Clytemnestra bares her breast to Orestes. Aeschylus paints a vivid scene in his *Choephoroi*:

ἐπίσχες, ὦ παῖ, τόνδε δ' αἶδεσαι, τέκνον,
μαστόν, πρὸς ᾧ σὺ πολλὰ δὴ βρίζων ἄμα
οὔλοισιν ἐξήμελξας εὐτραφὲς γάλα.¹⁹

Orestes is apparently stopped short and turns to his otherwise silent comrade Pylades with a critical deliberative subjunctive: Πυλάδη, τί δράσω; μητέρ' αἰδεσθῶ κτανεῖν;²⁰ Pylades encourages him to proceed, by reference to Apollo's oracle.²¹ There is nothing in any prior iterations of the myth that requires her breast-baring. But the action *must* have recalled to the audience Hecuba's baring of her breast to Hector in a plea to retreat from battling Achilles:

Ἔκτορ τέκνον ἐμὸν τάδε τ' αἶδεο καί μ' ἐλέησον
αὐτήν, εἴ ποτέ τοι λαθικηδέα μαζὸν ἐπέσχον.²²

In the first instance, 'shame' is invoked by both texts. Moreover, both men are addressed as τέκνον. In both it is the breast or breasts (τάδε) that are meant to provoke a response. We do not know whether Hector hesitated at all, as does Orestes, but we do know that in neither case is the once-suckled son persuaded to alter his course. However, in the one instance, Hector is of course not attacking his mother: it is *his* life she fears for, not her own, and it would perhaps have been unheroic for Hector to yield to her in such a setting. Regardless, the audience would have been likely to contrast the two women, as well as to compare the two sons.²³

With respect to Clytemnestra, since she was seeking to save her own life, what is the point being made by Aeschylus? First, it seems that we are asked to take Clytemnestra more or less at her word: whatever her crimes, she bore and suckled Orestes and he owes her that debt, such that to kill her

¹⁹ Aesch. *Cho.* 896-98.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 899.

²¹ *Ibid.* 900-02.

²² Hom. *Il.* 12.82-83. Whether there is any mythic support for Jocasta's 'last appeal, a mother's breast', as referred to in Eur. *Phoen.* 1567-69 (E. P. Coleridge, tr.), is unclear, as there does not appear to be any other source for this imagery.

²³ These relationships are more fully explored in O'Neill 1998:216-29.

would be to transgress some natural order.²⁴ At most, he must defer to someone else to punish her.²⁵ This plain meaning cannot be ignored, and certainly an important tension in the play is that between Orestes' duty to avenge his father's murder and the impending vengeance of the Furies for his matricide. But we also cannot necessarily take Clytemnestra at her word. For one thing, there is some lack of clarity about how much of a wet nurse she was. Thus, the Nurse character is the one who earlier asserts that she took Orestes under her care and suckled him, virtually from the moment of birth.²⁶ If so, then Clytemnestra is cynically playing on Orestes' possible ignorance of who his wet nurse actually was.

Some light is shed on this question when we look at Clytemnestra's snake dream, which in addition to the Hecuba reference is another important intertextual element in the breast imagery of the play. The Chorus thus tells Orestes that his mother has dreamt of a serpent to which she gave birth and to which 'she herself proffered her breast to suckle'.²⁷ This exchange comes not very long before Orestes' confrontation with his mother; and he has clearly identified himself with the snake.²⁸ Orestes must at least *think* that his mother nursed him, or else there would be no meaning to his statement καὶ μαστὸν ἀμφέχασκ' ἐμὸν θρεπτήριον.²⁹

The breast-proffer not only has an important series of links within the play itself, but also to the same fragment of Stesichorus examined by Marsh, in which Clytemnestra's dream is also described:

τᾷ δὲ δράκων ἐδόκησε μολεῖν κάρα βεβρωτωμένος ἄκρον,
ἐκ δ' ἄρα τοῦ βασιλεὺς Πλεισθενίδας ἐφάνη.³⁰

²⁴ For an examination of these general themes, see Lebeck 1971:123-30.

²⁵ In a sense, this is also the point made by her own father Tyndareus in *Orestes* when he tells Orestes that he always had the option of having Clytemnestra arrested and tried for murder. Eur. *Or.* 496-506.

²⁶ Aesch. *Cho.* 750: ὄν ἐξέθρηψα μητρόθεν δεδεγμένη. Cf. Hom. *Od.* 19.353-55 (Odysseus' nurse); see also Marshall 2017:189-90.

²⁷ Aesch. *Cho.* 531: αὐτὴ προσέσχε μαστὸν ἐν τῶνείρατι.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 549-50.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 545. Whether Clytemnestra uses her breast in an effort to manipulate Orestes' emotions or not, I think that Vickers 1973:405 goes too far when he dismisses Clytemnestra's appeal to Orestes as 'laughable' on the theory that she was no nurse to him at all. The debate over her credibility was similarly explored in Whallon 1958:271-75 (asserting that Clytemnestra's words 'have a majestic falseness').

³⁰ Stesich. fr. 219 ('She dreamed a serpent came, with a bloody wound on the crown of its head; and out of that appeared a king of Pleisthenes' line'.) (M. L. West, tr.).

The passage itself is not clear as to ‘whether the Pleisthenid king is the snake or the offspring of the snake [and thus] whether the Pleisthenid king is Agamemnon or Orestes’.³¹ But as David Campbell points out, ‘the point of the dream was that a Pleisthenid, not a son of Aegisthus, must succeed Aegisthus on the throne’.³² If this fragment was known to the fifth-century audience, then its reappearance in *Choephoroi* might well have called to mind the entire question of Pleisthenid succession.³³

It is quite possible that Aeschylus lifted the image of Hecuba’s bared breast from the *Iliad* and combined it with the bitten breast in Stesichorus’ snake dream to forge a new link between Clytemnestra’s baring of her breast and the entire history of the House of Atreus. But why? Here are some possibilities. In the first instance, this allows Aeschylus to provide us with an immediate contrast between Clytemnestra’s motivations and Hecuba’s nobility, thus undermining potential sympathy for Clytemnestra. Second, by appropriating the imagery from Stesichorus, Aeschylus imports the Atreids’ family history and its recurrent horrors.³⁴ He has, moreover, prepared for this with a series of references beginning with the invocations of the murder of Thyestes’ children, including express references to the Pleisthenids.³⁵ Indeed, Aeschylus had already established a broad justification for Orestes’ revenge killing of Clytemnestra as the requirement of Justice that ‘bloody blow pays bloody blow’.³⁶ By having Clytemnestra bare her breast at the ultimate moment in a scene that calls to mind Stesichorus’ allusions to the family line, Aeschylus thus provides a ‘why’ for both the matricide and the concurrent killing of Aegisthus: each functioned as a revenge for the murder of Agamemnon, which was itself a *double*

³¹ See O’Neill 1998:223. The general use of ‘snake’ imagery in the plays would itself be the topic for a separate study, and of course such studies have been done. See, e.g., Borthwick 1967; Heath 1999.

³² Campbell 1982:259. Campbell also speculates that Stesichorus, not Aeschylus, was the innovator of Clytemnestra as Agamemnon’s sole killer. *Ibid.*

³³ It is unclear why Aeschylus focuses on Pleisthenes rather than Atreus. It is only in some versions of the Atreid stories that Pleisthenes is shown to be the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus, with Atreus being shown as the grandfather who raised them when Pleisthenes died young; and yet in other versions Atreus is himself the father, there being no Pleisthenes. But the net result is the same: we must consider the family history.

³⁴ See generally Gagné 2013:394-445.

³⁵ See Aesch. *Ag.* 1095-97, 1217-18, 1569, 1590-1602.

³⁶ Aesch. *Cho.* 312-13 in Meineck 1998:81; Loney 2011:343-49; cf. Arist. *Rh.* 1367a20-23: καὶ τὸ τοὺς ἐχθροὺς τιμωρεῖσθαι καὶ μὴ καταλλάττεσθαι: τὸ τε γὰρ ἀνταποδιδόναι δίκαιον, τὸ δὲ δίκαιον καλόν, καὶ ἀνδρείου τὸ μὴ ἡττᾶσθαι.

revenge, first on the part of Clytemnestra for the killing of Iphigenia and second on the part of Aegisthus for the murder of Thyestes' children.³⁷

While Aeschylus thus adhered to a somewhat symmetrical balancing of one bloody deed being answered by another, Sophocles in his *Electra* took a less global approach. Notably, there are no Furies that pursue any killers, and Orestes' killing of his mother is not laden with the kind of bloody imagery that is laced throughout the *Oresteia*. Rather, the play essentially provides the opportunity to examine Electra as co-actor with her brother at the murder scene. As for any mythic constraints, Homer knows nothing of Electra; there is no such child in his texts. So again, if we wish to consider the extent to which any limitations were imposed by a mythic substrate, Sophocles wrote on a substantially clean slate. He would, at the same time, have been highly familiar with Aeschylus' trilogy.³⁸ Therefore, to the extent that Sophocles wrote in response not to a set of facts 'received by tradition' but to Aeschylus' recent poetry, it is important to see how he chose to address the actual murder. What we find most notably is that there is no breast baring scene at all. Instead, Clytemnestra cries offstage to Orestes, who is also with her offstage: ὦ τέκνον τέκνον, οἴκτιρε τὴν τεκοῦσάν.³⁹ While

³⁷ Going even further, Aeschylus elsewhere has Clytemnestra suggest that she acted as 'an alastor, an avenger, of Thyestes' feast' (Bednarowski 2015:198, citing Aesch. Ag. 1497-1504). Examination of the entire Tantalid history and its links to these murders is also beyond the scope of this article, but the audience is presumed to have it in mind, including perhaps its variations. Just to take one example, in some versions of the Tantalid myths, Aegisthus was born to Thyestes by the rape of his own daughter Pelopia. See Apollodorus 1976:233. If so, then incest as well as adultery enters the picture. Moreover, while various texts do assume that Atreus fathered both Agamemnon and Menelaus by Aerope (Eur. Or. 17-18; Eur. Hel. 391-92), it is at least conceivable that one of them was born of the adulterous union of Thyestes and Aerope without Atreus necessarily being aware. Indeed, the inability to determine patrilineage is *precisely* the evil that justified a husband's murder of the adulterer, at least if caught in the act. See Lys. 1.31. There might thus have been a doubt about either Agamemnon's or Menelaus' parentage by Atreus. If so, then we can imagine that at a deep level – one admittedly not stated in the texts but which could have been latent in the minds of Athenians familiar not only with the Orestes myths but also the incest horrors of Oedipus – when Orestes killed Aegisthus he unwittingly murdered not a first cousin once removed, but his uncle. My point is not to demonstrate that this was the case but rather to stress the emotional tensions inherent in the Atreid family strife.

³⁸ There is a question whether Sophocles' *Electra* predates Euripides' *Electra* or vice versa, the answer to which would affect my analysis of any intertextuality among the plays. It is unclear that anyone is in a position definitively to resolve this and I have therefore opted for the traditional position that Sophocles wrote first.

³⁹ Soph. El. 1410.

Sophocles does give Clytemnestra the same τέκνον summons that is found both on Hecuba's lips in Homer and on her own in Aeschylus, here she begs for mercy rather than appealing to any sense of 'shame'.⁴⁰ This is a subtle but interesting shift, as Sophocles implicitly removes the suggestion that the murder would even *be* a source of shame, or might give rise to pollution. And in fact, for all that appears in this play, it does not.

Moreover, Sophocles does not provide a response from Orestes to Clytemnestra's cry, let alone any appeal to his comrade Pylades for guidance. Instead, it appears that only Electra and the Chorus are onstage at the time. The focus is therefore all on Electra as she calls back scornfully to Orestes that Clytemnestra deserves no mercy because she showed none to Agamemnon.⁴¹ Electra then brutally finishes off the scene with her own exhortation to Orestes to strike Clytemnestra with yet a second blow: παῖσον, εἰ σθένεις, διπλῆν.⁴² Unlike Orestes in *Choephoroi*, Electra is not one to hesitate. To the extent that Sophocles therefore wished to add a dimension of hate that seemed lacking in *Choephoroi*, he does so in the person of Electra.

Hence the motivation to kill – the 'why' in our hypothetical journalist's mind – is contrasted with that in *Choephoroi* by the very absence of the ancient family history.⁴³ Indeed, we are given little in the way of motivation on the part of Orestes, whose character seems flat, but much as to Electra's motivating hatred.⁴⁴ Sophocles must (if Aristotle is correct) adhere to the one core fact that it is Orestes who kills Clytemnestra. Yet he adds his own gloss to the myth by suggesting that it was Electra's hatred that made the murder possible.

This is not, then, a killing approved by Apollo, or required by an ancient code of retribution, but that of an abandoned child who, believing her brother to have been killed, broods on her mother's adulterous union and

⁴⁰ Without a reference to 'shame' and thus lacking a clear intertextual reference to Hecuba, the audience would not necessarily have assumed that Clytemnestra revealed her breast. Perhaps this is as reasonable a place as any to note the obvious fact that it is unlikely that any actual breast was revealed onstage. While it does seem that comic body padding may have included protruding breasts, there is no similar evidence for tragedy. Either way, the gender of the actors would have imposed its own limitations. See Taplin 2002:61-62. All that said, the language would have provoked visual imagination.

⁴¹ Soph. *El.* 1411-12.

⁴² *Ibid.* 1415.

⁴³ Apart from the tutor's passing reference to the house of Pelops as a 'house of multiple destructions' in the opening scene (Soph. *El.* 10), that mythic substrate is absent. This itself is arguably a substantial innovation by Sophocles.

⁴⁴ Cf. Lewis 2015:228n40 (noting scholarly debates as to whether Electra's speech is 'immoderate').

even seeks to enlist her sister Chrysothemis in a conspiracy to murder.⁴⁵ That sexually driven hatred is at the root of Electra's passion is made clear by her imprecations against her mother, essentially challenging her as a liar for having claimed that Justice (in requital for the death of Iphigenia) was on her side in killing Agamemnon. Electra asserts instead that her mother killed Agamemnon out of a perverse desire to please her lover Aegisthus.⁴⁶ What is interesting in that regard is that it resonates very nicely with *Pythian 11* which, as noted above, leaves the question of Clytemnestra's motivations for the regicide ambiguous and unresolved.

But if Sophocles' response to the *Oresteia* was almost Homeric in its simplicity – the murder of Agamemnon is resolved by the death of his killer, end of story, regardless of the parties' motivations – Euripides' *Electra* reintroduces with a vengeance (as it were) both the underlying myths alluded to by Aeschylus and the sexual frustration suggested by Sophocles. Again, focusing here on the actual murder, Euripides brings back the breast-baring scene, varying Aeschylus' portrayal by using Orestes' rather than Clytemnestra's words, uttered as he describes himself killing her. What is most remarkable is the renewed focus on Clytemnestra as *mother*: not only does Orestes describe how she 'threw aside her dress ... showing her breast there in the midst of death', but he dwells on the image of her legs spread open as she sank dying to the earth, 'the legs which I was born through'.⁴⁷

The impact on Orestes of the sight of Clytemnestra's breast (and perhaps more, depending on what is meant by ἔξω πέπλων ἔβαλεν) is an imagined recollection of his birth. The result is similar to what it was in *Choephoroi*: hesitation. But this time it is not Pylades who provides him with the resolve to press on, but rather Electra. While not 'destroying' the mythic fact of Orestes stabbing Clytemnestra, Euripides was now poetically free to add the novel touch of Electra grabbing the sword and joining him in the deed!⁴⁸ Why add this detail? First, Electra has her own reasons for the murder: her mother and her mother's lover have forced her into an unconsummated

⁴⁵ Soph. *El.* 947-57.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 558-62.

⁴⁷ Eur. *El.* 1206-09 in Vermeule 1959:264. The baring of the breast may add another element towards understanding the matricide: Orestes' possible anger at the sight of his mother's breast because of the concurrent image it may have conjured of her adultery with Aegisthus. There are limited sources on the extent to which the ancient Greeks found women's breasts to be sexually arousing, with Menelaus' reaction on seeing Helen's as perhaps the best example. Ar. *Lys.* 155-6 (ὁ γῶν Μενέλαος τὰς Ἑλένας τὰ μᾶλά πα/ γυμνᾶς παραϊδὼν ἐξέβαλ', οἰῶ, τὸ ξίφος). Either way, it is difficult to believe that there was *no* sexually charged element in Clytemnestra's action.

⁴⁸ Eur. *El.*, 1224-25.

marriage with a poor farmer. She not only lives out the fate of her name as an ‘unbedded’ one, but from all that appears she is unwashed and unbeddable. Indeed, her mother, at whose instance she finds herself in this condition, mocks her to her face with what an ugly mess she is.⁴⁹ So for her part, perhaps in part from sexual jealousy, Electra rages at what she calls her mother’s whoredom and – contrary to the impression in Homer that Clytemnestra resisted Aegisthus’ advances – asserts that her mother fairly jumped at them.⁵⁰ Electra’s mocking has an additional resonance with and contrast to the plaintive breast baring scene in *Choephoroi*, in that Euripides has introduced the detail that Clytemnestra has borne children to Aegisthus. She might thus have been a lactating mother at the time, something she alleges Electra would never become.⁵¹ What was therefore only implicit in Sophocles – a daughter’s jealousy of her mother – now surfaces clearly in Euripides.

Second, by Electra joining in the murder the House is strangely unified again. This itself is a motivation, another ‘why’ to our news story. In effect, it is the whole House that must avenge its wrongs, not one member, thus ‘ending [the] family’s great disasters’.⁵² The result, however, is also shared doom.⁵³

In my view, however, Euripides’ *Electra* does not fully explore the impact of the family history on the children as an impulse to murder, nor does it fully elaborate on the impact on Orestes of seeing Clytemnestra’s breast. But Euripides revisited themes he only began to touch upon in *Electra* in the last of the matricide plays, *Orestes*. There he expands not only on Electra’s sexual ragings in his own prior play, but also on the hatred first explored by Sophocles as well as on the larger dooms earlier examined by Aeschylus. In short, by the time he wrote *Orestes*, Euripides had all these prior texts to work with, limited (in Aristotle’s formulation) merely by the sparse ‘who’ and ‘what’ of the myth.

I read *Orestes* as Euripides now posing the ultimate question: whether what appears to be a series of curse-driven murders among the Tantalids can ever come to an end. Put differently, the play asks the aporetic question whether there can be any final resolution of the conflicts and pollution in the family, or whether the pollution defies any means of purification, human or divine. While the murder of Clytemnestra has already occurred by the

⁴⁹ Ibid. 1107-08.

⁵⁰ Compare ibid. 1060-90 with Hom. *Od.* 3.265-66 (Nestor).

⁵¹ Eur. *El.* 60-63; see also Soph. *El.* 589-90. See Marshall 2017:193.

⁵² Eur. *El.*, 1232. See Gagné 2013.

⁵³ Eur. *El.* 1305-07. It is true that Electra’s doom is only exile from Argos, while Orestes must be purged at Athens; but it is nevertheless an innovation for them to share the burden.

time the play begins, the Chorus' description of the event provides a clue to the answer:

ὦ μέλεος, ματρὸς ὄτ' ἐκ
 χρυσεοπηγήτων φαρέων
 μαστὸν ὑπερτέλλοντ' ἔσιδῶν
 σφάγιον ἔθετο μάτέρα, πατρώ-
 ων παθέων ἀμοιβάν.⁵⁴

According to the Chorus, Orestes therefore 'sacrificed' his mother upon seeing her breast, presumably revealed in supplication to him. This is an entirely new gloss on the murder of Clytemnestra, which in the other plays has been seen in justice/revenge/jealousy terms. But what can Euripides mean? For one thing, I believe there is an intertextual reference to Clytemnestra's alleged justification in the *Oresteia* for killing Agamemnon as an equivalent propitiation for his sacrifice of Iphigenia.⁵⁵ If that is the reference, then Euripides forces us to consider the matricide within the broader framework of Greek sacrificial systems. A detailed discussion of μίαισμα and related terms such as νόσος is beyond the scope of this article, but for purposes of this analysis the central concern is the old 'law that spilled blood soaking the ground demands blood in return'.⁵⁶ When the 'spilled blood soaking the ground' is that of a family member, his or her kin might take justice into their own hands by killing the murderer themselves. In all events, murders that were not avenged brought the wrath of the avenging Furies against the murderer, until he or she was either killed or was purged of guilt by means of a substitutionary, animal sacrifice.⁵⁷

The central dilemma of the Clytemnestra cycle is that while Orestes was arguably justified in killing his father's killer, the fact that Agamemnon's killer was *also* Orestes' mother brought on him the seemingly un purgeable wrath of the Furies as avengers of her death, or of the Law as secular judge. And indeed, in Euripides' version, both Orestes and Electra are condemned to death by a corrupted Assembly. Lacking the help of the gods or a fair justice system of men, Orestes now finds himself outside the reach of any hope. It is here that the play reaches its climax from my perspective:

⁵⁴ Eur. *Or.* 839-43.

⁵⁵ Aesch. *Ag.* 1500-04; see also *ibid.* 1214 (Cassandra's prophecy of vengeance for the Thyestean Feast).

⁵⁶ Aesch. *Cho.* 400-01, in Meineck 1998:85.

⁵⁷ See, e.g., Bates 1911; Zeitlin 1965; Zeitlin 1966; Parker 1983; Visser, 1984; Sidwell 1996; Henrichs 2000; Gagné 2013; Allan 2013; see also Harrison 1927.

Pylades says, in effect, ‘the gods aren’t in charge and the city isn’t in charge, we are; so here’s my plan ‘Ελένην κτάνωμεν’.⁵⁸

What is remarkable about Pylades’ ‘plan’ is that it is couched in sacrificial language. Thus, when Orestes asks how they will kill Helen, Pylades answers, σφάζαντες.⁵⁹ But there is no basis for any ‘sacrifice’ of Helen even under the old system of vengeance killing. While Clytemnestra could couch her murder of Agamemnon in ritual terms,⁶⁰ as could Cassandra;⁶¹ while the Chorus describes Orestes’ murder of Clytemnestra in similar language;⁶² while Orestes’ killing of Aegisthus is gruesomely resonant of animal sacrifice;⁶³ while Electra metaphorically ‘fram[es] her mother’s murder at the outset as a sacrifice with baskets raised and ready knife’;⁶⁴ and while Electra goes so far as to describe herself and Orestes as having been made sacrificial victims by Apollo,⁶⁵ no such terms make *any* sense with respect to Helen, who murdered no one and thus on no theory incurred the risk of retributive murder.

Why then does Euripides give such a phrase to Pylades? I submit that he does so to signify the emptiness of sacrificial language, or at least its loss of sacramental meaning when applied to the killing of a person rather than a beast. Euripides thus casts doubt on the validity of sacrificial justifications not only in his own play, but by further implication by Aeschylus in *his* play. In other words, we now have reason to doubt that Orestes was *either* polluted for killing his mother or justified for avenging his father, in the way that the legitimacy of revenge killing might have been framed in an earlier time.⁶⁶

Euripides thereby makes the case that purported justifications for murder as a necessary means of purifying a family of μίαισμα arising out of prior murders (think of the mythic history thus relied on by Aeschylus) are false justifications. Indeed, in *Orestes* the ‘payback’ of one murder for another murder does *not* result in purification – quite the opposite, in fact. For all that appears, the successive troubles/murders referred to in the play are simply that: an observed succession or sequence, without any necessary implication of causality, inevitability, or justification.

⁵⁸ Eur. *Or.*, 1105.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 1106-07. See CGL s.v. σφάζω; LSJ s.v. σφάζω; see also Straus 2018 (analyzing the nature and use of sacrificial language in Aristophanes’ *Birds*).

⁶⁰ Aesch. *Ag.* 1056, 1433, 1500-04.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* 1118, 1219-22.

⁶² Eur. *Or.* 842-43.

⁶³ Eur. *El.* 841-43; see Worman 2015:89-91.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 91.

⁶⁵ Eur. *Or.* 191-92.

⁶⁶ Allan 2013:595; see generally Dover 1974.

Conclusion

As suggested at the outset, the Clytemnestra plays are more a response to one another than to any core elements of ancient myth. Indeed, the core elements are few. I focused on the presence or absence of the newly added detail of Clytemnestra's baring of her breast as the entry point to this analysis both because it is an apparent innovation by the playwrights, and because of its effectiveness in tying the matricide to past adulteries and murders in the House of Atreus. The varied approaches taken by each playwright to the matricide – whether by focusing more on one character than another, or emphasizing one or another motive for the killing – therefore turn not on the consistent elements of any mythic substrate, but rather on what each made of the themes of adultery, revenge, family conflict and personal guilt inherent in a son's killing of a mother who betrayed her husband's bed then killed him in his bath.

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