The Grieving Woman:

A CATALYST FOR GREEK CHAOS
Within the timeless stories of Greek myth and drama, there seems to be an often overlooked battle between the sexes. While it is generally conceded that women did not bear much control in Classical Greece, there still remain constant hints of a threat women posed to men - their emotions. Despite the subjugation women are believed to have endured, they still were considered a source of potential chaos especially when they let their feelings of sorrow and grief run rampant. This is particularly apparent in the plays Agamemnon, Antigone, Medea, and Lysistrata which feature not only strong central female characters, but ones who experience this threatening emotion of grief in varying capacities. With some artistic license at the behalf of the playwrights, it would appear we are intended to sympathize with these female characters and yet witness how their grief, when left unchecked, fuels the events which culminate in the utter chaos to the male patriarchal system of power and control.

To understand the potential origins of this male fear of female grief, one need look no further than Greek mythology regarding the story of Demeter and the rape of her daughter Persephone who was abducted by Hades and taken to the Underworld. After the sun god Helios told Demeter that Hades had taken her away to become his bride, and that this happened with the consent of the girl’s father, Zeus, Demeter deserted Mount Olympus and went to live on earth with the Human race. There she remained, mourning for her daughter, and being the goddess of the harvest would not allow the crops to grow for an entire year. As a result, the human race began to suffer, as did the immortals, for no sacrifices were being made to them. Overcome with sorrow, Demeter vowed she would never set foot again on Olympus and neither would anything ever grow until her daughter was returned. Finally the god Hermes was sent down to the Underworld to tell Hades that he must let Persephone go. But because Persephone had eaten three pomegranate seeds during her captivity, she would have to spend three months of every
year in the Underworld. In her absence, Demeter’s grief continued to bring forth death to the world in the form of winter.¹ As this story tells, it is a woman’s grief that had the potential to subvert the power of even Zeus over mankind, bringing chaos to the otherwise orderly world. Being a part of their mythology, this wariness of feminine grief no doubt reflected attitudes of Greek social culture. However, we must question what the Greeks felt about the grief of women and the role it played.

The Greek were well aware that the suffering of pain and loss was an inevitability in the process of life. However, as Malpas and Lickiss point out in their book *Perspectives on Human Suffering*, suffering was considered regrettable, largely random, and had no redeeming qualities whatsoever. It was not an experience to be admired as it might be within a Christian way of thinking and neither did it ennoble its victim. Observing how good people often suffer, and bad people were known to escape a life of suffering, the Greeks believed there was no apparent providential application. They figured that they were all as individuals very likely to suffer extreme pain at some point in their lives, and the psychological pain of bereavement was ubiquitous in close-knit communities where premature death happened every day and for this they could not begrudge women.² But while it was accepted as an inescapable part of the human condition (male and female alike), suffering and specifically expressions of suffering was something that needed to be prevented or at the very least controlled.

In the funerary oration as recalled by Thucydides, Pericles gives condolence to the families of fallen Athenian soldiers:

Fortunate indeed are they who draw from their lot a death so glorious as that which has caused your morning. I know that this is a hard saying, especially when you will constantly be reminded by seeing in the homes of other’s blessing of which once you also

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² Malpas and Norelle. *Perspectives on Human Suffering*. 156
enjoyed: for grief is not so much for the want of what we have never known, as for the loss of that to which we have been long accustomed.

Here, Thucydides exposes the male sense of order that is the justification of war as a means for Greek men to attain honor and glory in battle. He is also clear in expressing that grief is a natural reaction and one that will be experienced by both parents. However, it is how Pericles specifically addresses women in regards to their grief that is telling of how it is perceived as a potential threat to the Greek patriarchal system.

On the other hand if I must say anything on the subject of female excellence to those of you who will now be in widowhood, it will be all comprised in this brief exhortation. Great will be your glory in not falling short of your natural character and greatest will be hers who is least talked of among the men whether for good or for bad.

Thucydides claims that an ‘excellent’ widow is one who goes unnoticed. She is not permitted to take part or share in the glory that is attained by her deceased kin and neither is she to make any public spectacle of her grief. Rather, she is to be in control of and private with her feelings. Foley explains in her book *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*, that those responding to the grieving kin were meant to offer consolation by urging greater control of grief. In fact, it was not the role of the surviving kin to grieve the fallen Greek soldier at all but that of the professional mourner—one of the few public and professional services allotted to women.

Blundell explains how since they were responsible for washing, anointing and dressing corpses, and for keeping graves tidy and supplied with offerings of food and drink, mourning was seen as an extension of women’s domestic role. But the main burden of mourning expressed both in ritual gesture and in the performance of funerary laments also seems to have fallen on females because they were regarded as the chief sustainers of the bonds which united family

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4 Thucydides. 117.
members even after death as women were seen as intimately associated with the end as well as with the beginning of life.\textsuperscript{6}

Still, the professional mourner would have been more about the celebration of a fallen hero and less about the genuine bereavement of a family member taken before their time. The public funeral appropriated the display of the aristocratic funeral to heroize the city’s military casualties and to suppress the elements of traditional female lament that stressed the cost of death and challenged the heroic values to family and loved ones. Again, any fervent opposition to premature death in the name of honor and glory was an affront to the patriarchal system. But when we examine Greek drama, tragedy allowed citizen men to play this predominantly female role of genuine grief and often put female lamentation into a central, resistant, and even creative role that proved to be the downfall of the male characters.\textsuperscript{7}

In \textit{Agamemnon}, the first installment of Aeschylus’s \textit{Oresteia} trilogy, Clytemnestra, queen of Corinth murders her husband King Agamemnon upon his return from Troy. Her murderous action of stabbing her husband with a sword is considered a distinct masculine act and scholars are often quick to point out how her crime is atypical for the ideal Greek woman. However, it is important to examine how her motive is to avenge the death of her daughter Iphigenia who was sacrificed by Agamemnon in order to acquire a wind that would take his ships to the battle of Troy. However, this was not how the original story went.

According to Homer, when King Agamemnon returned to Athens from the Trojan War, he was murdered by his wife’s lover Aegisthus. By the 5th century BC, we are told that it was the wife herself, Clytemnestra, who did the killing. A change like this one is clearly of some

\textsuperscript{6} Sue Blundell. \textit{Women in Ancient Greece}. 72-3.
\textsuperscript{7} Helene P. Foley. \textit{Female Acts in Greek Tragedy}. 334.
significance particularly where the attitude of women is concerned. It is also important to bear in mind that the nature of Iphigenia's death is yet another alteration to other versions: “Her entreaties and appeals to her father, / … the officers set those at naught; / … she struck each sacrificer with a bolt from her eyes / to move compassion…” In earlier stories, Iphigenia is described as having gone to her death with pious dignity. Here, her death is painted as horrifically against her will. One might question why this alteration was done on part of the playwright if not to force the audience to identify with and support the validity of Clytemnestra’s feminine grief and subsequent killing of her husband, masculine or otherwise. If anything, we are meant to question Agamemnon’s innocence when she states her defense: “…did he not also bring ruin on the house through treachery? / Yes, my child by him which I raised, / the much lamented Iphigenia, / [her father sacrificed] / What his actions deserved he deservedly suffers.”

We can easily understand Clytemnestra's grief as a mother who lost her daughter. Even Thucydides would not have argued that her emotional anguish over the loss of a child was a natural reaction. But in the manner of the Stoics, it was not the feelings of emotional suffering for which Clytemnestra is at fault, but rather her actions and the murder of her husband Agamemnon. While she is permitted to feel pain, her daughter Iphigenia’s death was unfortunate albeit necessary as it served in attaining conquest and glory which was paramount in the life of Greek men.

The fundamental conflict in the Oresteia as McMahon discusses in his article “The Case for Clytemnestra”, is between two orders -the domestic world of Clytemnestra and the heroic

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8 Sue Blundell. Women in Ancient Greece. 16.
10 Aeschylus. 1524-1528.
11 The Stoics believed that one should not concern themselves with what cannot be controlled, but to make one’s own mind move in accordance with the will of the Gods. They stressed that although stars determined the conditions under which we live, we are free to choose how we will act in response to those conditions. David Park. 2005. The Grand Contraption: the world as myth, number and chance. (Princeton: Princeton University Press). 45.
world of the warriors who have been engaged in the Trojan War for ten years. That conflict seems to manifest a natural difference between the ways in which women and men see the world either because of their experience of it or because of the expectations it has imposed on them. Clytemnestra’s grief motivates the murder of her husband which in of itself is a disruption of the Greek patriarchal sense of male dominance. In a moment when he should have been lauded as a hero, he is emasculated by suffering the indignity of being stabbed to death by a woman. But it is not only Agamemnon’s sense of order that has been interrupted but that of their son Orestes.

So pervasive are the mystification of the masculine view of the world that neither Orestes nor his sister, Electra, are able to understand that Clytemnestra has been several times wronged and therefore is rightly entitled to take steps to defend the order she embodies as a mother and to seek revenge on the man who has demeaned it through the dislocations he has inflicted on it. One can understand Orestes’s inattention to his mother’s plight, for he has been brought up in the masculine world where his bran has been carefully washed of any concern other than that of continued the reign of men.

Greek sources often portray kin as keen to exact revenge for dead relatives. However, although kin routinely express grief and anger at the death of a relative, leading to a desire of revenge, Orestes is faced with the conflict that to exact revenge on behalf of his father comes at the cost of killing his mother. Still he is able to do this in the name of reinforcing the male sense of order and dominance. As David Cohen states in Law, Violence, and Community in Classical Athens, men take vengeance because they fear shame and desire to preserve and enhances their honor. They also take vengeance because in such societies it is the only way to deter others from

13 McMahon. “Case for Clytemnestra”. 452.
harming them.\textsuperscript{15} This sense of having to maintain the patriarchy in the face of a defiant grieving woman is significant to yet another of the great Greek tragedies.

The tale of Sophocles’ \textit{Antigone} serves as a continuation of the Oedipus myth, examining how the repercussion of his death affected his daughters. When her brothers vie for the throne of Thebes, both die but with one, Eteocles, being given a noble burial while the other, Polymerizes, is left to rot in the sun at the royal decree of their uncle Creon. Despite the edict being one punishable by death, Antigone defiantly buries her deceased brother. She argues that despite Cleon’s attempt to vilify her brother as an enemy of the city-state: “It was a brother, not a slave, who died. / ... / I cannot share in hatred, but in love.”\textsuperscript{16} Like Clytemnestra before her, Antigone’s grief is specifically in response to the death of a blood relative and while it comes as a disruption to Creon’s sense of order in ruling the city of Thebes, even the playwright seems to defend her actions.

First Creon’s son Haemon warns him, “In the dark corners I have heard them say / how the whole town is grieving for this girl / unjustly doomed, if ever a woman was, / to die in shame for glorious action done.”\textsuperscript{17} This can be interpreted as approval of Antigone’s actions and ergo her grief. This is later affirmed by the chorus lamenting Antigone as she is led to her death: “Yet even in death you will have your fame, / to have gone like a god to your fate, / in living and dying alike.”\textsuperscript{18} Clearly, we are meant to sympathize for Antigone despite her transgressions against the patriarchy. As McMahon states, transgressional myths examine dissenters or protesters; Antigone is probably the most appealing representative of such an individual, for her

\textsuperscript{17} Sophocles. 692-695.
\textsuperscript{18} Sophocles. 834-836.
decision to place family duty over a political expediency has a potential reality which is nearly universal; almost everyone can imagine being in her place.\textsuperscript{19}

In the end, Creon’s sense of order and stately control, like Agamemnon's, is dismantled by Antigone’s disobedience brought on by her grief. Just as Iphigenia's sacrifice is the lynchpin of all that happens to Agamemnon afterwards; Antigone's death is the transcendent culmination of Sophocles’ play. These deaths change the stories in which they are set, transforming the lives around them and force moral reasoning to an extreme confrontation with itself.\textsuperscript{20} In both of these plays, the tragedy comes as a result of women expressing their grief in ways that are incongruent with their male counterparts’ sense of order. In the case of Antigone, it is not only her death, but the death of Creon’s wife Eurydice, another woman who suffers grief due to the death of her son Haemon, which compounds the destruction of Creon’s sense of control. Both defy what Pericles would have considered ‘excellent’ feminine behavior of reigning in their grief in a manner that does not draw attention, either good or bad.

Both of these plays exhibit the grieving actions of a woman who has explicitly lost the bond that is a family member they loved. But what about the bond that is love while the family member lives on? Such seems to be the case with Medea. In the play as told by Euripides, Medea’s husband Jason leaves her when Creon, king of Corinth, offers him his daughter, Glauce. While her husband is not dead, Medea still grieves the loss of their relationship and of Jason’s love and loyalty to her.

Once again, the script seems to draw forth sympathy for Medea having been betrayed and that she is indeed entitled to her grief. When the tutor states, “What man’s not guilty? It’s taken you a long time to learn / that everybody loves himself more than his neighbor. / … / These boys

\textsuperscript{19} McMahon. “Case for Clytemnestra”. 2.
are nothing to their father,”21 he essentially sides with the notion that Jason is at fault. Even the chorus of Corinthian women explicitly say, “...you may be surprised at this- / you [Jason] are acting wrongly in thus abandoning your wife.”22 And even Jason acknowledges, “... naturally a woman / is angry when her husband marries a second wife.”23 But in true tragic fashion, Medea takes her grief to the extreme, murdering both princess Glauce and King Creon as well as her and Jason’s two sons in the ultimate act of revenge.

This act of abhorrent infanticide is one that often causes a great barrier from allowing the audience to sympathize with Medea. As Kmietowicz asserts, we want to believe that infanticide is an act of indifference and apathy -that no woman who could kill her own children ever had the capacity for having truly loved them. This simply isn’t true. Mothers can show intense grief even after having killed their offspring.24 It is also exceptionally interesting to note that according to McKee in his book Why Mothers Kill, studies show that although spousal revenge, or the Medea Syndrome, has repeatedly been identified as a motive for men, there has never been any evidence to support it as a motive for women. Even as recently as 1999, Dube and Hodgins found support for the Medea Syndrome in fathers but not in mothers.25 With this in mind, we must recall that this play and even this character of Medea is one conceived, written, and performed by men. Therefore we must question the authenticity of the feminine sensibilities reflected in Medea and her representation of womanhood as a generalized whole.

Zeitlin argues in her book Playing the Other how a woman is assigned the role of the radical other in that she can be used in this way to examine and reconstruct male behavior and

21 Euripides. 21-22; 85-87.
22 Euripides. 578-579.
23 Euripides. 911-912.
values. This function is underlined by the ritual aspects of Greek theatre. Women literally did not represent themselves in Greek drama, but were impersonated by male actors.\(^{26}\) We have to remember that this was a play written by men and therefore is a projection of a \textit{man} contemplating the harshest revenge \textit{he} would exact, not a woman. Because that projection is applied to a female character it is an example of not only the masculinization of a grieving woman as we have already seen with Clytemnestra and Antigone, but the imagination of the worst thing a man could conceive a spouse doing to her husband. But this undermining of the male sense of order at the behalf of a grieving woman was not just limited to extreme tragedy.

In Aristophanes’ comedy \textit{Lysistrata}, it is once again a woman who disrupts the patriarchal order of control. Fed up with the Peloponnesian war, the heroine rallies together the women of the warring nations to not only go on a sex strike but to take control of the Athenian Acropolis as a means to end the military conflict. When asked by the magistrate what sufferings women contribute to the war she responds:

\begin{quote}
\textit{“We bear more than our fair share, / first of all by giving birth to sons and sending them off to the army- /… / Then, when we ought to be having fun and enjoying our / bloom of youth, we sleep alone because of the campaigns. And to say / no more about our case, it pains me to think of the maidens growing / old in their rooms.”}\(^{27}\)
\end{quote}

What Lysistrata arguably expresses is a grief felt by women for the loss of their sons and, while it masquerades as mere horniness, she also suggests a lamentation for lost husbands. While this is a comedy intended to make us laugh, a woman’s grief for loved ones has once again proven to be the driving force behind the story. While death is not a product of her actions like we normally see in tragedies, her threat of obstructing the male quest for honor and glory as


bolstered by Thucydides is the same. The only difference is Aristophanes questions as to whether this is necessarily a bad thing since the men come to happily accept peace.

It would seem that in both tragedy and comedy, conflicts between male and female characters commonly form the focus of the action. Often a situation is envisaged in which actions performed by male characters provoke an intrusion of a grieving woman into the public arena, a turn of events which involves the assumption by the woman of masculine modes of behavior. This transgression of normal sexual boundaries on the part of the female is sometimes seen to result in partial feminization of the males. Sexual role-reversals of this kind are represented most explicitly in comedy but they are also present in tragedy, although here the emphasis is usually on the female side of the process -on the women’s usurpation of masculine roles rather than adopting it. In the end, the delicate sense of social order as dictated by men comes crashing down, all due to these women who did not suppress their grief in quiet dignity. These playwrights sought to specifically address the power of feminine grief, however justified it may have been, and how it affected the world around them. Indeed, we can surely surmise from the repetition of this theme in Greek literature that they truly believed few things posed so great a threat to men and their orderly world than that of the grieving woman.

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Bibliography


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