

## Women and Bloodshed in Ancient Greek Tragedy in Their Socio-Political Contexts

This paper seeks to investigate what it is that makes a woman “woman-like” in ancient Greece through an examination of the use of bloodshed in ancient Greek tragedy as it reflects the social and political role of women in ancient Greek societies. Previous scholarship has noted the different ways in which women met their tragic end in ancient Greek tragedy, particularly comparing death by knife with death by noose, a mode of death that appears so often in ancient Greek tragedy, it feels like an “obsession” (Cantarella 1985). From this follows an argument for a sense of masculinity reflected in Clytemnestra’s use of the knife to stab her husband, Agamemnon, and the enslaved Trojan priestess Cassandra, to their deaths (Loraux 1991).

Clytemnestra is described as a “man-minded woman” (γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον), standing out for her seizure of power from the absent Agamemnon and her violent mode of killing (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 11). I use the examples of Clytemnestra and Cassandra as the focus of my analysis, looking at the description of the two characters, especially as Agamemnon and Cassandra are stabbed to death. I argue that, in Clytemnestra’s case, the bloodshed that results from her mode of killing does much of the work in masculinizing her. In my examination of the treatment of Cassandra, I argue that her bloody death is, in part, a reflection of her foreignness.

As I proceed with my analysis, I bring in the examples of two other sacrificial figures in ancient Greek tragedy, Polyxena and Iphigeneia. Dido, who appears in Roman epic, is also brought in to highlight the socio-political treatment of women who shed blood in ancient literature. I look at these figures as points of comparison between Clytemnestra and Cassandra. In comparing these characters against each other, I use previous scholarship that looks at the “barbarization” of various figures in ancient Greek tragedy (Segal 1990). I argue that the deaths

of Polyxena, Cassandra, and Dido are written such that the violence of their deaths is tied up to their non-Greek identities. I also look at the various agents of death: Polyxena and Dido are, to some extent, the agents of their own deaths, whereas Cassandra and Iphigeneia are murdered at the hands of others. Here I draw on scholarship that examines the feminization of suicide in ancient Greek tragedy (Loraux 1991).

In each of these cases, the presence of bloodshed in these women's actions and deaths is used to other them and portray them as markedly different than the ideal ancient Greek woman. I use historical accounts of ancient Greek women's active participation in warfare, as well as their passive participation in ritual sacrifice to contextualize my analysis of bloodshed in ancient Greek tragedy. I look at arguments that women participated only in the preparation work of ritual sacrifice, rather than the slaughter of sacrificial victims itself (Osborne 1993). These historical accounts are compared with the depictions of Clytemnestra, Cassandra, Polyxena, and Iphigeneia as a means of juxtaposing the ideal Greek woman with these characters, who are made subversive and different through bloodshed.

I conclude with the argument that the depiction of bloodshed and death of women in ancient Greek tragedy serves to reinforce and perpetuate popular beliefs regarding the roles, values, and behavior of the ideal ancient Greek woman. The use of "othering" women who killed with or died by bloodshed contributes to a broader cultural understanding of an idealized "femininity" that women could express. These depictions also had social and political ramifications, limiting women to those activities that societal beliefs dictated they be suited for, such as ritual sacrifice.

## Bibliography

Cantarella, Eva. 1985. "Dangling Virgins: Myth, Ritual and the Place of Women in Ancient Greece." *Poetics Today* 6, no. 1/2: 91–101.

Loraux, Nicole. 1991. *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Osborne, Robin. 1993. "Women and Sacrifice in Classical Greece." *The Classical Quarterly* 43, no. 2: 392–405.

Segal, Charles. 1990. "Violence and the Other: Greek, Female, and Barbarian in Euripides' Hecuba." *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 120: 109–131.