

Aeschylus' Revisionist View of Women

As is well known, in Athenian tragedy many women have a much larger and more powerful role than they did in traditional versions of the stories in which they appear. Strong women like Clytemnestra, Medea Electra, Antigone, and Phaedra either had lesser roles or no role at all in earlier versions of their myths. In the plays of Aeschylus, which will be my focus in this paper, in addition to the aggrandizement of women, the playwright seems to have treated women with respect and largely abandoned earlier misogynistic attitudes (Podlecki 1983).

Using these observations as my starting point, I plan to show that in addition Aeschylus reversed Hesiod's view of woman/Pandora in very specific ways. The anti-Pandora features of women in *Prometheus Bound* have been briefly noted (Gagarin 2014: 96-98), but I will briefly give my own understanding of Hesiod and then show that a "revisionist" (anti-Hesiodic) view of women is present in all of Aeschylus' plays.

I do not deny that his plays also provide some support for attributing a criminal nature to women, most explicitly in the first stasimon of the *Choephoroi* with its account of female murders. This account, together with Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon, and the Danaids' murder of all but one of their husbands (portrayed in a later part of the *Suppliants* trilogy) belong firmly in the misogynistic tradition laid out by Hesiod; I will argue, however, that in all the plays taken together, Aeschylus provides far more support for rejecting the Hesiodic view of women.

Hesiod presents woman/Pandora as using her "feminine" features – namely beauty and deceptive, persuasive words – to lure men into marriage where they will burden their husbands with constant demands that drain his resources. Instead of this, in *Prometheus Bound*, Io (the only female individual in the play) is just the opposite: a victim of Zeus' lust who is doing her best to avoid marriage. The only other women in the play, the chorus of Oceanids, sympathize

with Io and express their own fear of becoming the object of Zeus' lust (see Sienkewicz 1984). In Aeschylus' other plays, the chorus of *Suppliant Women*, who are fleeing to escape marriage with their cousins and perhaps to escape marriage altogether, closely resemble Io and the Oceanids. Indeed, their killing of their husbands in a later play may well have been presented as a continuation of their resistance to forced marriage rather than as criminal example of the evils of women. Other female choruses in Aeschylus (on which see Foley 2003: esp. 15-16) also diverge from Hesiod's stereotype. The Choephoroi are slave women and do little besides lament and call for revenge; the women in *Seven against Thebes* actively reject male, military values and advocate security and respect for the gods; and the Furies pursue justice and show no interest in a husband. None of these women is the least bit like Pandora.

Finally, I will consider other women who display Aeschylean, not Hesiodic, features: Cassandra the victim (like Io); Atossa, who dominates all the men with her authority and power but is in no way seductive or deceitful; Athena, who favors men in all things except marriage; Clytemnestra, who presents a full list of grievances (many of them common to married women) to justify her actions. These women conform to no single stereotype like Hesiod's woman/Pandora; rather, they display a wide range of features, almost all of which give lie to the Hesiodic stereotype.

Bibliography

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