The Monstrous Revolution: Tragedy and the Feminine

by

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I. Introduction

How might contemporary readers best approach the absolute strangeness of the ancient, canonical texts of the Western tradition? How might we consider the value of these classical texts in conjunction with our own experience? While many, if not all of these works are the richer for having been read by a plethora of common readers as well as scholars over the centuries, I would like to insist that there is an enormous benefit to taking a personal, intimate approach to their “strangeness.” Anne Carson, in an interview with The Paris Review in 2004, expresses best how we might access these texts: “What’s entrancing about the Greeks is that you get little glimpses of similarity, embedded in unbelievable otherness, in this huge landscape of strange convictions about the world and reactions to life that make no sense at all.” In so charmingly few words, Carson has invited us to consider why the inconceivably long breadth of time between antiquity and our own historical period is not quite so distant as we might think. We cannot help but feel intrigued when we stumble upon a familiar feeling, those “little glimpses of similarity,” felt so long ago, but nonetheless true. Despite the radically different ideologies, such as the steadfast belief in fate and divine intervention, these texts hold essential and transformative ideas and characters that can bring new understanding to our own cultural moment.

When women read texts from the epic and tragic traditions, it can be difficult to identify points of sympathetic comparison with their own experiences. Not necessarily because the women are not present within the texts to be identified with, but that the texts themselves have
often been at the mercy of vigorous discussion concerning their maleness and not much else. According to Nadya Aisenberg, author of *Ordinary Heroines: Transforming the Male Myth*, much of our current cultural trouble with identifying the “female heroine” stems from “heroic codes” that appeared early in Western culture (11). While I take issue with the problematic notion of a singular or essential “female heroine” in the reading that follows, Aisenberg is right to suggest that patriarchal codes have left us with the idea of the “hero” as solely a male conception, “because these heroes come to us from core texts in our education, we absorb them uncritically, store them in our unconscious.” The “unconscious” acceptance of these male characters as our only protagonists sets a dangerous precedent for our perceptions of the women who stand beside them, often overshadowing their importance. This is not to suggest that there has been no scholarship on the women of ancient Greek literature, and at least some of it will make an appearance in this thesis, but I do plan to argue that it is the inhuman, villainous qualities of many of these female characters that have been found lacking in adequate interpretation. The task set by *Ordinary Heroines* is inarguably admirable; Aisenberg is resolute in her notion of women as creators of their own image, and while she is correct in suggesting that women be “masters of their own destinies,” so to speak, her claim that there is “little help in canonical history” (13) denies the complexity and power of many women within the ancient Greek literary canon.

The women I plan to discuss are often overlooked as the potential “heroines” Aisenberg describes because many of them fail to meet traditionally accepted modes of moral behavior. Euripides’ Medea may carry the weight of his play more so than any other female character within canonical literature of the period, which is undeniably impressive, but she also murders her children, so she is inevitably dismissed from the “running.” In other words, despite critical
infamy of Medea’s power, she does not infiltrate our unconscious in the same way that masculine heroes have. Clytemnestra, another murderess, despite her frequent refutation of unjust and potentially oppressive masculine rule, is also difficult to sympathize with given our understandable distaste for betrayal and murder. These characters, while by no means perfect examples of emulative behavior, are representative of a far more pertinent, contrarian stance to the patriarchal norm. I have no plans to argue for Medea and Clytemnestra as the female equivalents of the heroic male arc in Western literature, rather, they will be discussed as distinctly anti-patriarchal, revolutionary forces. If the journey of the heroic male begins with (among other things) an “emphasis upon physical courage, the hero’s position as separate from his society, the premise of a god-given destiny—the hero as savior,” then where does the journey of their female counterparts begin? In the epic poetry of Homer and the tragedies of Aeschylus and Euripides, the female narratives frequently begin in pain. Women are often found grieving, whether it be for themselves or their family members; many of these women begin and end in sorrow, their lives a tragic web of fate that they are helpless to prevent despite their roles as the “weavers” of their communities. The idea of the “tragic,” so far as it will be discussed here, will frequently move beyond the traditional conventions of the genre. Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, Euripides’ *Bacchae* and *Medea*, while recognizably tragic in form, also evoke the tragic in its more contemporary, ideological sense. “In everyday and more specialized contexts,” explain Helene Foley and Jean Howard in their introduction to a 2014 special issue of *PMLA*, “tragedy is a powerful term that can serve as a veil concealing difficult truths or as a lever of critique” (618). To consider tragedy as nothing more than “something sad” (617) is to lose a crucial lens with which we might expose the “roots” of any number of deeply ingrained hegemonic codes (not
unlike Aisenberg’s contention that “heroes” and “core texts in our education” leave their impressions “in our unconscious”).

Beginning with a brief discussion of the “male myth” as proposed by Nadya Aisenberg, as well as a comparison with its female counterparts, I plan to explore these women and all of their self-ascribed wretchedness. In adopting or reclaiming the derogatory language often attributed to these women (that has, undoubtedly, followed the female sex into the present), I will then turn to the birth of the tragic in their frightening, overwhelming physicality that has informed the characterization of villainous female archetypes that we have been made to witness (and often condemn) over and over again. And while readers might have been quick to denounce their “monstrousness” in the past, I hope to suggest that it is these deformities, both in physical form as well as in behavior, that play a major role in our conception of tragedy as one of “transition” (Eagleton 143) for female characters in ancient and contemporary literature.

II. The “Male Myth” vs. the “Female Myth” in Ancient Greek Literature

In order to illuminate the extent to which readings of classical epic and drama have often overlooked the agency of female characters, I will establish a masculine baseline from which the female experience will inevitably diverge. Traditionally, men have been written as the “active” agents of the epic tradition, while women have played the role of the “passive” entity that must wait, observe, and be acted upon (presumably by the masculine or divine agent). In all fairness, an unsurprising assessment given the unfortunate antiquated blending of biology and superstition, both of which I will return to at a later time in this thesis. Regardless, as Nadya Aisenberg has so adamantly argued, “In the past, the hero dominated the heroine; in both life and literature, men were the active figures and women followed them…” (13). I would additionally suggest that in the case of the classic texts upon which I will be focusing, the women are rarely
given the choice of “following,” rather, they must wait and weave at their looms. Or, alternatively, simply be taken away, as Paris will suggest to Hector in Book 3 of the Iliad, “That one of us who wins and is proved stronger, let him / take the possessions fairly and the woman, and lead her homeward” (Homer, trans. Lattimore 3.71-72). Given what Paris has implied here, women are “led” to their appropriate destination, as “possessions” won “fairly” by male heroes, and consequently make no decisions of their own about where they will go or even whom they might “follow.” Interestingly enough, this same phrase is repeated about 20 lines later, which deprives female characters of the possibility of achieving nostos or “homecoming,” a veritable birthright of the masculine hero in this period and within this genre.

Similarly the notion of kleos or “glory,” yet another staple of the epic genre, is an expectation of the male experience that does not extend to the female. This has never been conveyed quite so explicitly as it has within Homer’s Odyssey, when Odysseus’ son Telémakhos is baited by one of Penelope’s many suitors into leaving Ithaka in order to obtain the same kleos that his father had achieved in the Trojan War, “She makes a name for herself, / but you can feel the loss it means for you” (Homer, trans. Fitzgerald 133-134). While it is quite likely that the suitor simply attempts to rid Ithaka of Telémakhos in order to obtain an easier path to Penelope, the suitor nevertheless knows precisely how to provoke Odysseus’ son, namely the unspoken, gendered competition between him and his mother. It is the duty, arguably the birthright of Telémakhos that he follows in his father’s footsteps; the possibility that Penelope achieves kleos rather than Telémakhos doing so appears unthinkable within this text. We might note, however, that contemporary audiences would be far more likely to recognize Penelope’s name than Telémakhos’. Penelope is the penultimate weaver, the exemplar of the faithful wife, and no woman embodies “the discourse of absence” (Barthes 13-14) in quite the same way that
Penelope does. This is not to say that Penelope lacks in richness of character, for there is much to say of her presence in *The Odyssey* and beyond that challenges the stereotypical “passiveness” of the female in ancient Greek literature; however, in terms of identifying female characters that come toe-to-toe with some of our more famous and “active” male protagonists, Penelope falls short in her steadfast refusal to move from her place within the home. I would argue that it is Helen, “…for whose sake many Achaians / lost their lives” (Homer, trans. Lattimore 2.161-162), who comprises the clearest tragic female counterpart (in multiple respects) of the infamous Achilles.

Achilles has often been lauded for his heroic complexity. More than an exceptional warrior, he is a sensitive and cerebral hero with a tragic awareness of his own mortality. The *Iliad* is a story willed into being by the power of Achilles’ wrath, which is often read as being divinely inflicted upon the Greek and Trojan armies. In the Lattimore translation (1951) of Homer’s *Iliad* we see, “Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilleus…” (1.59), in the Fagles translation (1998), “Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles, / murderous, doomed…” (1.1-2), and finally in a recent translation by Peter Green (2015), “Wrath, goddess, sing of Achilles Peleus’ son’s / calamitous wrath…” (1.1-2). There can be no denying Achilles’ central place in the *Iliad*, a text which has defined countless generations of readers, both establishing and perpetuating standards of masculinized behavior that persist within our collective unconscious. As Aisenberg has established, “…the Hero has nonetheless been our culture’s central symbol” (11), the capitalization of “hero” denoting the importance our culture has placed upon an archetypal figure established in the character of Achilles as well as others. As I previously mentioned, much of Achilles’ fame in classical studies can be attributed to his tragic journey: that Achilles is aware of his fate, but nevertheless makes the decision to pursue his
destiny regardless of the fact that he will die if he faces Hector on the battlefield. And while Achilles certainly expresses grief about this truth, the poem nonetheless endorses the sacrifice of his young life in exchange for the immortality that fame will offer. I would like to suggest that Helen faces a similar dilemma, albeit in a far more derogatory fashion, and it is here where the tragic genre and the feminine begin to coalesce.

“Yes,” Thetis bemoans to her sisters, “I gave birth to a flawless, mighty son… / the splendor of heroes, and he shot up like a young branch, / like a fine tree I reared him—the orchard’s crowning glory” (Homer, trans. Fagles 18.64-66). Achilles’ mother describes him as the perfect human specimen, a “flawless” hero, practically gifted to the world. Homer similarly describes Helen, “the loveliest daughter Priam ever bred” (Homer, trans. Fagles 3.149), her beauty so great that it causes war, and yet her life is in no way comparable to that of Achilles’ own in terms of heroic infamy. In her self-accusatory speech to Hector in Book 6, she expresses a morbid wish that she had been killed at birth rather than be permitted to grow into the woman she has become:

Oh how I wish
that first day my mother brought me into the light
some black whirlwind had rushed me out to the mountains
or into the surf where the roaring breakers crash and drag
and the waves had swept me off before all this had happened!
(Homer, trans. Fagles 6.409-413)

In comparing their brief birth narratives, the poem suggests that certain lives (or tragedies) will be prioritized over others – in this case, the “beauty” of Achilles despite being potentially equal to or even surpassing the beauty of Helen, does not face the same degree of harshness that Helen bestows upon herself in the face of similar, physical greatness. What is most thrilling about these two characters, however, is the way the poem represents their simultaneous awareness of and powerlessness to prevent their tragic fates.
As I referenced above by way of three different translations, the Ἰλιαδ opens with the rage (mênis) of Achilles and the countless lives lost to that rage. The Lattimore translation, “Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus’ son Achilleus / and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the / Achaians, / hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades” (Homer, trans. Lattimore 1.1-3), similarly expressed in both the Fagles and Green translations, makes it quite clear that it is Achilles’ wrath that “hurled” the “multitudes” to their deaths. And while Achilles’ rage prolongs the Trojan War, it is famously Helen who bears the brunt of the blame. In Athena’s message to Odysseus in Book 2, she explicitly names Helen as the root of devastation:

Will you all hurl yourselves into your benched ships and take flight homeward to the beloved land of your fathers, and would you thus leave to Priam and to the Trojans Helen of Argos, to glory over, for whose sake many Achaians lost their lives in Troy far from their own native country?
(Homer, trans. Lattimore 2.174-178)

If both Helen and Achilles are responsible for loss of life, why does Achilles’ action drive an entire epic, while Helen’s character appears almost parenthetical to it? In a final point of comparison, I would like to turn to the idea that both Achilles and Helen are aware of their fates but helpless to change them, reinforcing two crucial arguments: (1) That both characters present a similar complexity. Achilles’ physical feats in battle should in no way undermine or be considered greater than Helen’s domestic experience, and (2) that female identity, in this classic work of Western literature, is rooted in a tragic paradox. As we will continue to see in later Greek drama, heavily influenced by the epics, there is a constant back-and-forth in tragedy, a question of whose “tale of woe” is more worthy of our attention, and for decades that prioritization has almost exclusively fallen to the male experience. If the characters of Helen and Achilles introduce a paradox at the heart of their tragic tales, we must begin to consider tragedy
not “as a condition but rather as an explanatory structure that makes sense of the paradoxes inherent in action” (Leonard 163).

Achilles’ awareness of his tragic fate is self-evident; it appears explicitly within the text and leaves readers dismayed at his dreadful circumstances:

But Thetis answered, warning through her tears, “You’re doomed to a short life, my son, from all you say! For hard on the heels of Hector’s death your death Must come at once—”
“Then let me die at once”—Achilles burst out, despairing—“since it was not my fate to save my dearest comrade from his death!” (Homer, trans. Fagles 18.110-115)

And several lines later, “For my own death, I’ll meet it freely—whenever Zeus / and the other deathless gods would like to bring it on!” (Homer, trans. Fagles 18.137-138). Achilles is a true Hero, unafraid of the death that awaits him; it is the glory in battle and the vengeance he will take upon Hector that makes the lack of concern for his own death significant. For Helen’s own part, the awareness of her fate, as well as the fates of all involved, is less explicit, but introduces a powerful feminine trope that will appear in many texts to follow. In Book 3 of the Iliad, Iris, messenger of the gods, comes upon Helen in her room “…weaving a growing web, a dark red folding robe, / working into the weft the endless bloody struggles / stallion-breaking Trojans and Argives armed in bronze / had suffered all for her at the god of battle’s hands” (Homer, trans. Fagles 3.151-154). Like Penelope and Andromache, Helen is also a weaver, a creature who, in the absence of the active man, “…gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction” (Barthes 14).

Barthes argues that women are burdened with the responsibility of time: she tells the “fiction” of the piece because “she has time to do so;” her role is that of waiting, and what else is there to do but weave? It is a sedentary life, but it is also one of enormous power in the sense that weavers have an understanding of the action that the actors themselves cannot know (excepting the
character of Achilles). What establishes Helen as a tragic figure is the combination of her omnipotence as well as her helplessness; shortly after we come upon her weaving, her heart is suddenly, forcibly “filled […] with yearning” (Homer, trans. Fagles 3.168), and she rushes from the loom. It is only in a later episode between Helen and Hector in Book 6, in which Helen not only blasphemes her own character but reinforces her awareness of her fate (as well as the fate of others), that the “bitch” makes an appearance, the “wretched” woman who will ultimately reappear in later Greek tragedies. But whereas Helen’s derogations of herself may seem genuine, the “wretched” women I will soon discuss seem to take pleasure in their nasty, monstrous roles, turning the myth of the passive woman on its head.

III. Self-Recrimination and Monstrous Beginnings in Helen and Beyond

As an earlier prototype of later, fleshtier tragic females, Helen plays an important role in recognizing the way feminine identity is intimately bound up with the tragic in both ancient and contemporary cultures. Clytemnestra and Medea will be characters of a more pronounced physicality; they will not hesitate to condemn themselves just as Helen did, but their hands will be far bloodier and their guiltiness less ambiguous. Helen serves my purposes in the inarguably abrasive reproach of her own femininity, a moment of self-chastisement that, as argued by Ruby Blondell, “renders her more dangerous” (14). Ultimately, however, Helen will fail to rise to the revolutionary occasion that tragedy presents in the same way that later figures will attempt. While Helen undoubtedly disrupts the traditional narrative of the female in her speech, she is also deeply embedded “in the glory of heroic warfare” (Blondell 28), and, in doing so, she merely perpetuates a narrative defined by heroic, masculine conventions. As we will see in later comparisons between Clytemnestra and Medea, it is the moments of decidedly inhuman
transgressions (committed with a self-conscious awareness) that will disrupt the narrative in surprising ways.

Helen’s self-ascribed “bitchiness” as it appears within Book 6 of the *Iliad*, “‘My dear brother, / dear to me, bitch that I am’” (Homer, trans. Fagles 407-408), is paradoxical in that this self-description serves as both a moment of empowerment as well as defamatory verbal confirmation for all those who would speak against her as the typically duplicitous female. As some of the older men in Priam’s counsel reflect in Book 3, regardless of how beautiful she is, Helen has brought untold “grief” into their lives, and they would rather she depart (Homer, trans. Lattimore 3.160). After her reproachful speech at 6.343, Hector denies her entreaties for rest, largely because he suspects her of attempting to seduce him, preventing him (and perhaps other men) from fulfilling their Heroic destinies. Despite being saddled with the role of scapegoat, Helen’s brief moment of explicit agency in Book 6 gives readers a glimpse of the type of female character that will appear in later tragedies. As Ruby Blondell has persuasively suggested in her essay, “‘Bitch That I Am’: Self-Blame and Self-Assertion in the *Iliad,*” Helen’s naming of herself is empowering because it gives her the opportunity to claim her own role within a narrative that frequently prevents women from doing so. She does not require condemnation from her male counterparts in order to similarly identify herself. Regardless of whether or not she sees her wickedness as ennobling or culturally productive, which I will later argue is essential to fulfilling the task of this argument, the importance of this episode stems from Helen’s momentary separation from her objectified state within the text:

Menelaus, and the Greeks generally, can afford to objectify her, since the justice of their cause depends on treating her as a stolen object that should be returned.
Indeed, they cannot afford not to do so, since any acknowledgement of her agency risks complicating that simple model of justice. (Blondell 5)

Blondell’s refutation of a “simple model of justice” challenges the tragic prioritization of male-gendered experience. Despite the obvious reality of the fact that men and women experience moments of tragedy, it is often the male literary experience that is treated with a greater sense of importance, since patriarchal conceptions of justice have always been considered the default model of moral correctness. As the relationship between Helen and Achilles demonstrates, Achilles is renowned as an archetypal hero; his pain is conventionally valorized, while Helen must relegate herself to the status of “bitch, a horrible mischief-maker” (Homer, trans. Green 128.344). Helen’s “bitchiness,” as well as the conception of the term in contemporary representations, should no longer be confined to a strict set of moral guidelines that have become defined by skewed and antiquated constructions of gender identity. Helen complicates the patriarchal narrative of the “bitchy” female by disrupting a moral order established by a traditionally masculine way of thinking. Her self-assertion weakens a remorseful stance of her own character as she fails to “affirm [...] behavioral norms” as dictated by the predominant gender (Blondell 11).

Euripides’ Medea is similarly aware of the negative perceptions of her sex, “Of everything that is alive and has a mind, we women are / the most wretched [emphasis added] creatures” (Euripides, trans. Morwood 230-231), and again a few lines later, “How wretched [emphasis added] I am, ruined, utterly ruined” (278). Given the various and multitudinous instances of female self-chastisement, how might we reconsider the way in which we read the female? Certainly Helen makes a veiled suggestion that women identify themselves before any outward observers attempt to do so for them (whether that identification is derogatory or not), in
which case the beginnings of a potentially monstrous identity become one in the same with the conception of the female. Indeed, Margrit Shildrick, author of *Embodying the Monster*, will make an explicit connection between monstrosity and blame, helpfully identifying both Helen and her contemporaries as scapegoated (as well as monstrous) figures:

There is plentiful archival evidence of the destruction or persecution of those considered monstrous, and certainly the monster has often functioned as a scapegoat, carrying the taint of all that must be excluded in order to secure the ideal of an untroubled order. (3)

Given their reproductive capability, women are often depicted as emotional weigh-stations in addition to physical ones. If they can grow, carry, and give birth, is there any question as to what they *cannot* carry? If the default position of the male character is one of active seeking, and the woman is a patient beast of burden awaiting his return, why *not* assign blame for other failings we might not wish to identify within ourselves? In Shildrick’s language, then, the notion of monsters as “carrying the taint of all” becomes especially apt, and it is precisely what Helen has been made to bear since her inception. With this extraordinarily heavy burden placed upon the shoulders of one sex, the rage we see briefly reflected in Helen’s speech at Book 6 comes as an unsurprising consequence. Even Helen’s sister Clytemnestra in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* will observe the disproportionate blame and anger associated with Helen’s reputation:

Oh stop whining.
And why get angry at Helen?
As if she singlehandedly destroyed those multitudes of men.
As if she alone made this wound in us.” (Aeschylus, trans. Carson 1105-1110)

The tragedy that Clytemnestra observes in her reprimand of the Chorus is that of the “unnecessary” kind. As Miriam Leonard will stipulate in *Tragic Modernities*, “The tragedy of
modernity is the recognition of the persistence of suffering in the knowledge that suffering is unnecessary” (12). *Agamemnon* is obviously a pre-modern text, but Clytemnestra’s shrewd scolding of the Chorus, that the scapegoating of Helen is merely part of a larger method of avoidance (“As if she alone / made this wound in us”), places female experience within an ideologically tragic scope.

Despite the aggressiveness with which Helen treats herself, we are denied the pleasure of observing that same rage directed towards others. While Helen focused her ire almost exclusively inwards, Clytemnestra speaks plainly, often praising herself while censuring others (as seen above). Her confidence in both herself and her gender disassociates her from Helen’s self-immolation and brings us one step closer to Medea in both word and deed. Of course, the end of *Agamemnon* does not leave the audience wondering whether or not Clytemnestra is the guilty party, since she revels in the defeat of her husband. Despite the lack of ambiguity (at least as far as her guiltiness is concerned) as the play comes to an end, *Agamemnon* perpetuates the notion of the female as being inherently deceptive before and after the king’s murder. In point of fact, while Clytemnestra might drop the axe, she does so offstage; the audience is not privy to her violent action. And Aegisthus, despite having only a few lines, explicitly reminds us that the role of the deceiver is relegated to the woman, “That was because the deception was clearly a / woman’s role” (Aeschylus, trans. Collard 1636-1637). Clytemnestra may not be considered a “‘beautiful evil’” (King 27) in the same way that Helen is, but they are portrayed as being similarly deceptive thanks to their femaleness. According to Margrit Shildrick, the birth of girls was considered “the most common form of deformity” (12), highlighting an inevitable condemnation of the female based on biological qualities. Medical queries of the ancient Greek
period would play an influential role in determining the destiny of the literary female, establishing a link between physical as well as behavioral monstrosities.

IV. The Existential Threat of the Female Body in Ancient Greek Tragedy

In keeping with the portrayal of the duplicitously designed female, their use of language, as we see through both Helen and Clytemnestra, is equally untrustworthy. According to Helen King, author of *Hippocrates’ Woman: Reading the Female Body in Ancient Greece*, medical thinkers of the period had believed there to be a physical connection between the wombs of the female sex (a famously unknown and unsettling place) with her throat and mouth, “…the major anatomical feature distinguishing women from men is the existence of a *hodos*, a route extending from the orifices of the head to the vagina; woman has ‘an uninterrupted vagina from nostrils to womb’” (King 28). As ridiculous as this concept might appear to contemporary readers, ancient Greek literature (epic and tragedy alike) confirms a sustained belief in this depiction of female anatomy. The Chorus of Furies in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* confess to a strength inherent within their “breath,” suggesting a dangerous power lurking within their bodies, waiting to be unleashed onto their enemies (notably men), “All my force is in my breath, / and all my rancour” (Aeschylus, trans. Collard 840-841). The use of “breath” and “rancour” makes the sinister association between female “breath” (a product of their physical being) and malevolent deed all the more explicit. Using the myth of Pandora as a means of measuring the Hippocratic understanding of the female body, King constructs a portrait of the female as a collection of “raw materials,” made with the express purpose of deceiving the male sex:

In *Works and Days*, as well as being ‘like’ a beautiful virgin, Pandora is described through two images which suggest the reality that is ‘inside’ and which share a
strong reproductive message: she is constructed by the gods with ‘the mind of a bitch’ and ravenous ‘insides’ (gastêr). (24)

The use of the term “bitch” should remind us of Helen’s abuse of her own character in the *Iliad*, the internalized hatred of the female by the female indicative of an especially crafty exploitation of biological ignorance. And as Anne Carson will argue in her essay “The Gender of Sound,” oppression of the female body was not isolated to flesh and blood, but to messy, vocal resonances as well as carefully articulated language.

Just as King established Pandora as “two images” composed of physical beauty easily detected by the human eye, but with dark, tricky “insides,” Carson suggests that sound acts in a similarly deceptive way, especially as it works in ancient Greek tragedy. Consider for example how Clytemnestra’s use of language is regarded throughout Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. In one of the few instances in which she is praised for her speech, it is only because she speaks “like a prudent man” (Aeschylus, trans. Collard 351), otherwise, she “ranges beyond her boundary” (Aeschylus, trans. Collard 485), her vocal dissemination of information is considered an inappropriate crossing of gendered ability and privilege on the civilized (as defined by masculinist sensibilities) stage. In the *Libation Bearers*, the second play in Aeschylus’ tragic cycle, immediately following Orestes’ appreciation for “clarity” in conversation between two men, Clytemnestra appears, as if offering a personified contrast between “clarity” and chaos, “…a man speaks to another / man with confidence and reveals his meaning with clarity. / The door opens, and CLYTEMNESTRA appears; she has attendants” (Aeschylus, trans. Collard 665-667). Unlike spoken conversation between men, female speech is muddled with lies and confusion, prompting the “civilizing hand of man” to regulate women bodily as well as vocally. As Carson boldly claims, “Putting a door on the female mouth has been an important project of patriarchal
culture from antiquity to the present day. Its chief tactic is an ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder and death” (121).

When Clytemnestra ambiguously suggests that men blame Helen for the calamity of war as if she were the penetrating source of a “wound” in humanity, she fails to specify precisely what that metaphorical site of discomfort is supposed to represent. I would like to suggest that the very existence of the female, whether she opens her mouth or not, acts as a living reminder of a permanent “wound” in the psyche of human beings; an awareness of mortality and other physical vulnerabilities we would rather not confront. In a study by Jamie Goldenberg, author of “The Body Stripped Down: An Existential Account of the Threat Posed by the Physical Body,” the bodies of women are especially alarming, as they “play a more obvious role in reproduction (i.e., women menstruate, lactate, and bear children)” (226). In this way, the voice of women, from the way it sounds to the words it might form, acting as externalized proof of “ravenous ‘insides,’” must be regulated, as if “civilized” man seizing control of a seemingly tangible representation of natural forces (i.e., the “raw material” of the female body) might realistically be avoided. While Miriam Leonard’s approach to understanding modern tragedy is defined by the idea of “unnecessary pain,” Terry Eagleton insists that what we might initially consider to be “meaningless” is actually purposeful in nature. When Clytemnestra’s plea for understanding is left vague and unexplained, the blame placed on Helen’s shoulders does feel unnecessary, but when we consider the unsettling timeline of patriarchal approaches to understanding and explaining female biology, tragic associations with the female becomes far more malicious and less meaningless.

Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia, an expression of purposeful violence that acts as a catalyst for both the Trojan War as well as Clytemnestra’s vengeance narrative, is
an effective example of how suppression of the female is “systematic” in its approach to regulating reproductive ability as well as voice:

Her prayers and cries of Father! Her young life
they reckoned at zero,
those warloving captains.
Her father said a prayer and bid them seize her
high above the altar like a goat
with her face to the ground and her robes pouring around her.
And on her lovely mouth—
to check the cry that would have cursed his house—
he fixed a bridle. (Aeschylus, trans. Carson 164-173)

The relevance of Agamemnon’s muffling of Iphigenia’s wordless cries (“he fixed a bridle”) as well as her potential curse should be fairly obvious. The reasoning behind the suppression of Iphigenia’s voice is two-fold: (1) Iphigenia does not need words in order to be considered a threat; a “disorderly and uncontrolled outflow of sound” (Carson 126) is just as threatening as a carefully worded curse. “As Aristotle says, any animal can make noises to register pleasure or pain. But what differentiates man from beast, and civilization from the wilderness, is the use of rationally articulated speech: logos” (Carson 128). If the body indeed poses a threat to existential stability, then the otherworldly cries associated with the female within the tragic realm needs to be “bridled” or the comfort that highly regulated civilizations offer will begin to breakdown. (2) If Iphigenia’s unarticulated cries do begin to form coherent speech, the threat becomes even direr. The “raw emotion” of tragic lamentation is bad enough, but if she adopts the language of her oppressors as a means of dismantling their power, that of “his / house,” as Agamemnon worries above, the need to suppress her cries becomes even more urgent. As the head of his household, which often represents a smaller microcosm of the civilized state in which the
household operates, it is Agamemnon’s responsibility to hold Iphigenia’s tongue (or “bridle” it, as the case may be). And while modern readers might find a father’s apparent lack of sympathy for his daughter’s cries to be reprehensible, there is the unfortunate reality of contextual “medical” knowledge to take into consideration.

Despite Clytemnestra’s impassioned claims for her connection with as well as ownership of her daughter, “my most beloved, my birthpang, my own” (Aeschylus, trans. Carson 1069), ancient Greek knowledge of reproduction did not associate a “‘female seed’” with the creation of the child, “the female contributed merely ‘matter,’ and a place in which the seed could grow” (King 10). The relevant “seed” in the reproductive equation betwixt a man and a woman being that of the vital male “ingredient.” Regardless of the fact that Clytemnestra carried Iphigenia to term and expended very real energy delivering her, the apparent uselessness of the “female seed” in the production of her existence renders Clytemnestra’s claims to power over her life (and therefore protection of her) disturbingly irrelevant. Clytemnestra’s fervent defense of her protective and later, vengeful, role as the mother of her child throughout the Oresteia renders her a force of disruption in the sense that she defies a ridiculous and oppressive system of belief established by patriarchal modes of thought. Unfortunately, her revolutionary tactics are momentary, as she will ultimately lose her daughter to Agamemnon’s ownership of her (Iphigenia’s) body and then die at the hands of her son, Orestes. The sacrifice of Iphigenia as well as, arguably, the sacrifice of Clytemnestra for the sake of maintaining Greek law in Eumenides is also highly motivated by the workings of the female body. These sacrificial examples should feel “unnecessary” in the sense that women cannot help the fact of their biological processes, but it is systematic (as Eagleton suggests in his denunciation of tragedy as
an expression of meaningless or unnecessary pain) in the exploitation of those processes for the sake of masculine control.

Ironically, while there still seems to be a degree of discomfort with the topic of female menstruation, at least in Western discourse, medical writers of the Classical period considered it to be an “expected” part of the embodied female experience, “except in pregnancy or when very young or very old; prolonged absence of bleeding is sufficiently exceptional that it is noted, and is seen as the cause of symptoms elsewhere in the body” (King 31). And while none of the epics or tragedies discussed in this thesis will make explicit reference to menstruation, it is relevant to my purposes due to the ancient Greek connection between menstrual and sacrificial blood. In addition to the disturbing Aristotelian image equating menstrual blood with “‘that of a freshly slaughtered beast’” (King 90), Helen King goes on to suggest that other female bodily fluids perpetuated the idea of women as creatures biologically formed in order to be sacrificed:

For example, a dangerous discharge is ‘like the juice of roasted meat;’ abnormal lochia are ‘like water in which bloody meat has been washed’ and do not clot and, supporting the theory that lochial blood is only unused in menstrual blood, abnormal menses can be described in almost identical terms. These descriptions of lochia, menses and pathological discharges could be read as support for the proposal that the sacrificial analogy requires no further explanation; sacrifice, like the preparation and cooking of meat, is merely an aspect of ancient life in which blood is naturally encountered. (King 91)

Given the relationship between menstruation and sacrifice, the description of Iphigenia being held “above the altar like a goat,” should be considered with an even greater significance. The equation drawn between the sacrifice of an animal and the murder of Iphigenia suggests an
inevitability of female bloodshed that is both “meaningless,” in the sense that women cannot help the reality of their biological workings, and also expected, or systematically determined, due to the masculine conception and regulation of medical knowledge devoted to understanding the female body.

Why then is the concept of monstrousness so essential in discussions of women within the tragic realm? As King will forebodingly conclude in her discussion of menstruation and sacrifice, “…only woman, by her origin and nature, is comparable to the first sacrificial victim. She bleeds, and her blood is evidence of the fundamentally different quality of her flesh, reminding us that she is unlike man in her creation and her structure” (97). While logically we might now consider this to be a dramatized falsehood perpetuated by the patriarchy in order to exert control over the female other, the suggestion that there is a “fundamentally different quality” of female flesh, as well as the fact that she is “unlike man,” begs the question of what she is instead. The visceral, upsetting imagery of a thin-necked Iphigenia being held over an altar like a goat, her mouth “bridled” as if she were a horse, identifies a societally regulated vulnerability of the female experience that demands the presence of the monster in order to both acknowledge and fortify those same weaknesses. Indeed, for all of Medea’s monstrous qualities, as I will soon discuss in depth, she acknowledges the inherent vulnerability of the female, noting that “…a woman is a delicate creature” (Euripides, trans. Morwood 927).

V. “Becoming-Woman,” Becoming-Monster

I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the fact that reading the monstrous female in ancient Greek tragedy is not especially surprising. The relationship between inhuman entities and female characters within the texts that I have already mentioned does not develop in the subtlest of ways, but I do plan to discuss this trope using a specific theoretical lens, that of
“becoming-animal,” introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in 1987. The theory in question is notoriously convoluted and difficult to navigate in any one way, which is part of the reason why it is so appealing. There would seem to be a general consensus within the academic community that the application of this theory often evolves with the unique nature of the material being used (in this case ancient Greek tragedy), and I plan to approach Deleuze and Guattari in a similar fashion here. The notion of “becoming-animal,” as explained by Steve Baker in “What Does Becoming-Animal Look Like?” should be understood as an “aesthetic project” (89); in other words, when they introduce terms like “alliance,” “demonic animals,” “propagation by epidemic,” and the like, there is no suggestion on the part of the authors that we suddenly re-consider the nature of our reality in this decidedly magical and confounding fashion. Rather, as Baker suggests, “becoming-animal” should be considered an artistic endeavor, a way of interpreting literature and art that we might then apply to our understanding of the complex ways in which our cultures operate.

With this in mind, I would like to briefly explain the way in which it will be used for the sake of this argument and in relation to these particular texts and characters. First and foremost, and as it relates most readily to this thesis, “becoming-animal” is a relevant theory because it can be used as a means of dismantling hegemonic forces in any given society. According to Deleuze and Guattari, “becomings-animal” involve “minoritarian groups, or groups that are oppressed, prohibited, in revolt, or always on the fringe of recognized institutions” (45). The otherworldly, imaginative representatives of the “becomings-animal” will act as “a rupture with […] central institutions” (45). As I have already begun to discuss in this thesis, the primary texts in question, namely Aeschylus’ Oresteia, as well as Euripides’ Bacchae and Medea, have contributed a certain kind of female character to the Western canon that has questioned and will continue to
question the efficacy of “recognized institutions.” The way in which they embody this question (and then proceed to answer it) is by way of monstrousness, both behaviorally and bodily.

Another crucial component of understanding “becoming-animal” within the context of this argument is the idea of “multiplicity,” as well as the notion that “becoming” is always a verb. It is important to remember that the “becoming” should never actually reach a conclusion (if something does in fact “become,” it has failed); rather, the animal in question (or in this case, the monstrous female) is always in flux. In order to act as effective disruptions of the status quo, the women I plan to discuss, as examples of this process, will never arrive at their ending.

As Deleuze and Guattari have defined it, “A becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, a population, a peopling, in short, a multiplicity” (39). As an embodied representation of the “becoming-animal,” the mythology of the ancient Greek Furies, or Erinyes, are most appropriate, and they appear frequently as well as enticingly within the ancient Greek literary canon. While the Furies do appear within the works of Homer, I will be discussing them as they appear in the works of Aeschylus, specifically within the Oresteia. The most vivid description of their appearance occurs in Eumenides, the final play within the Oresteia, as a “band” of inhuman (but inarguably female) creatures:

In front of
This man an amazing band is asleep, of women, sitting on the chairs—no, I do not mean women, but Gorgons; but on the other hand I can’t compare them to Gorgon-figures. I did see those in a painting once before, carrying off Phineus’ banquet; these however have no wings to be seen; and they are black, utterly revolting in their manner, snoring out a breath which is unapproachable, while their eyes run with a loathsome fluid. Clothing of this form is not right to be brought near gods’ images or into men’s houses. (Aeschylus, trans. Collard 45-55)

Not only does this particular verse include the exact same word used by Deleuze and Guattari, that of a “band,” but it also emphasizes a blurriness between forms that “becoming” will insist
upon. The speaker believes them to be women, but almost immediately rescinds their gendered identification for a lack of explicit signification of the female sex, “Gorgons; but on the other hand I can’t compare them to Gorgon-figures.” The “loath- / some fluid” that runs from their eyes is also comparable to the same bodily fluids that Helen King mentions in *Hippocrates’ Woman*, that of uniquely feminine discharges that encouraged an association between women and the necessity of “sacrificial” (i.e., murderous) acts. While the end of the *Oresteia* will disappointingly harness the might of the Furies for the sake of civilized law, they are undeniably fearsome and powerful creatures. The fluid is “loathsome,” a term that we typically associate with the negative, yet their appearance to Orestes at the end of the *Libation Bearers* ignites within him a “sudden terror” that compels him to flee. In the same episode, Orestes observes a “multiplying” (Aeschylus, trans. Collard 1057) of the Furies, a suggestion that the inhuman female exists beyond a singularity of self that we generally experience.

The multiplicity of the Furies is an overtly literary moment within the various texts in which they appear; frequently described as “beings” that we might envision as appearing visually distinct from a human woman like Clytemnestra. While Clytemnestra’s *behavior* is certainly monstrous, we would probably be unable to draw that same conclusion from her appearance alone. Clytemnestra is metaphorically referred to as a mythological beast, namely “Skylla” (Aeschylus, trans. Carson 925), but she would have appeared on stage as any other human woman. Regardless of her mundane physical appearance, I would suggest that the literal multiplicity of self established by the Furies in *Eumenides* is relevant to the human female by way of her reproductive ability. Perhaps this represents another fearsome quality of the female sex, the idea that the woman may not always be of one mind, but two – another example of supposedly stable identities becoming blurred. As Margrit Shildrick suggests, the disarming
effect of the monster is the various ways in which it reveals “a much deeper uncertainty and vulnerability of the self” (17). In addition to acting as lived reminders of the finite nature of our physical selves (i.e., birth, death, and other forms of physical change); the pregnant female body also suggests a potential fusing of two minds; another deceptive quality that Pandora’s lovely outsides and “ravenous ‘insides’” cautioned ancient (male) medicinal practitioners. Pregnancy being at once a vulnerability as well as a strength, the sharing of two selves as depicted within the body of the female requires a monstrous lens in order to “embody those things which an ordered and limited life must try, and finally fail, to abject” (Shildrick 5).

Digressing from the literally monstrous female as suggested by the presence of the Furies, I will now discuss behavioral monstrosity associated exclusively with the female, and how their structural representation in Euripides’ Bacchae acts as both a metaphorical monstrousness and a successful depiction of the chaotic downfall of an otherwise civilized space in the wake of female “passions” (Euripides, trans. Arrowsmith 642). While the Bacchae offers a very rich opportunity to discuss the potential for a female-oriented revolution from oppression in various forms, it will be, ultimately, a failure of “becoming” as explained by Deleuze and Guattari. The “mob-like” mentality of the play’s women (yet another example of “multiplicity”), their animal-like behavior, and the destruction of Pentheus’ carefully cultivated city-state establishes the play as a kind of red-herring as far as the objectives for this thesis are concerned. Despite my own perceptions of the play as a failure in this particular case, it needs to be included for the ways in which it will better help define the success of Medea in Euripides’ other tragedy of the same name. The reason the Bacchae is the least effective play in its portrayal of monstrous, and therefore potentially revolutionary, women, lies most readily in their non-consensual participation in their monstrosity. Agave, Ino, and Autonoë do not choose to abandon
the city for the wilderness of the mountains; Agave does not tear apart Pentheus because she
knows that it is her son, rather, the women are “stung […] with frenzy” (Euripides, trans.
Arrowsmith 32) by an intervening god. Dionysus, a male deity, casts the spell under which they
fall, ultimately obscuring their agency in potentially transgressive behaviors.

In much the same way Agamemnon fears for the efficacy of his house (“…the lips in her
beautiful face / were curbed to suppress / any word making the house accursed…”), Pentheus
worries for the stability of his carefully regulated city. Pentheus’ belief that order will be restored
if the women are locked safely away (Euripides, trans. Arrowsmith 226-232) betrays a lack of
confidence in his ability to rule a subject that has already been defined as unruly by nature. The
very fact that the play includes an episode in which a building devoted to law and order (i.e., the
prison in which Dionysus is housed) literally collapses affirms a patriarchal anxiety concerning
household, and therefore societal, stability. Even recognizing the loss of Cadmus’ male heirs,
which will foreshadow Medea’s murder of her own children, weakens the longevity of the
patrilineal order and momentarily re-considers feminine participation in the rearing of children
within public and private spheres. Of course, Agave murders Pentheus with no awareness of the
fact; she believes that she has torn apart a fearsome lion, but in her participation (however
ignorant of the truth it might be) of his death, she becomes both his creator and destroyer
simultaneously. Cadmus’ explicit use of the word “heir” after Pentheus’ death should remind
audiences that what has occurred within the Bacchae is just as political as it is personal – the loss
of a familial line (governed by patriarchal convention) bodes ill for the clear delineations of
order that those traditions have long established.

Before the truth of Pentheus’ murder is revealed to Agave, she has a brief, shining
moment of pride in her kill:
What are they worth,
your boastings now and all that uselessness
your armor is, since we, with our bare hands,
capture this quarry and tore its bleeding body
limb from limb? (Euripides, trans. Arrowsmith 1206-1209)

Her critique of male “boasting” could easily be read as a criticism of epic convention, suggesting that there was an awareness of male fragility even in the age of Euripides; certainly, Agave herself boasts in this very moment, aligning her with Helen in the sense that she also becomes embedded “in the glory of heroic warfare” (Blondell 28). The one moment of this speech in which I would have to insist that Agave succeeds is in her comparison between man-made weapons as opposed to bare hands, affirming female otherness and connection with nature, as well as suggesting that representations of female aggression are entirely distinct from that of the male. In this way, the worry that the socially acceptable female “heroine” simply embodies traits of masculine heroism in the sexed body of a woman becomes irrelevant. Agave boasts, which is a convention of masculine heroism within the epic tradition, but she also bemoans the idea of “civilized” warfare by boasting about the use of her hands as effective weapons. Ultimately, however, the play does end with Agave’s unimaginable grief at having murdered her child, and she is punished for her momentary (and illusory) vengeance narrative in the same way that Clytemnestra’s son goes unpunished for her murder. As Eva Figes suggests in *Tragedy and Social Revolution*, “women are not allowed to take revenge, because revenge implies not only courage, but rights” (133). If women were to successfully participate in a vengeance narrative—that is, if they: (1) Identify an injustice, (2) carry out their vengeance, and (3) go unpunished in the course of carrying out that vengeance—then the “accepted framework of ethics” (Figes 135) would come undone. As we will soon see, it is Euripides’ Medea who will ultimately participate in the vengeance cycle in an inarguably monstrous and unexpected way.
VI. Tragedy and Revolution in Euripides’ *Medea*

*Medea* is not an especially deceptive text; unlike the archetypal, misleading female we have come to expect in ancient Greek literature, Medea never deceives her audience, and she does little to conceal her distaste for the world in which she lives. While the works I have been discussing have been interpreted in an almost exclusively textual sense, the revolutionary qualities of *Medea* are intimately related to the way in which it has been performed on stage. As Margaret Reynolds has already comprehensively established in her essay, “Performing *Medea*; or, Why is Medea a Woman?” the way in which *Medea* is performed is perhaps one of the most subversive aspects of this particular tragedy. Both textually and as a performance, *Medea* is the cumulative tragedy that will bring this particular argument to fruition, an infamous Euripidean work that has so elegantly blended the multiplicity of discourses that I have attempted to disseminate within this thesis. As I have already concluded in my discussion of Euripides’ *Bacchae*, the failure of Agave’s monstrosity is directly attributed to her lack of agency, and as Terry Eagleton argues in *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic*, impactful tragedy can never be “performed” accidentally (for threat of ineffectiveness), “But accident is also a threat to tragedy because the agent ceases to be the source of her own action, lapsing instead into ignoble passivity. The refusal of accident, the necessary immanence of tragedy, and the self-affirmation of the agent, are closely allied conceptions” (124).

Unlike Agave, who is made villainous against her will by Dionysus, Medea willfully admits to her monstrous intentions. Before Medea is given a chance to speak, her Nurse suggests that she “hates her children and feels no joy in seeing / them” (Euripides, trans. Morwood 36-37), which we might initially consider to be a revelation of character from an unreliable source. We have no real understanding of Medea’s character at this point in the play, and to condemn her
as a mother that “hates her children” is particularly harsh. Perhaps we should refrain from our judgments of her as both a woman and mother until she herself has spoken? Of course, as soon as Medea does speak, she confirms the Nurse’s fears, albeit with a bit more complexity than she (the Nurse) might have initially led us to believe. “For I shall kill the children,” Medea vows, “my own ones. Nobody is going to take them away from me” (791-793). It is important to note, however, that despite her affirmations of the Nurse’s concern, Medea does not claim to “hate” her children, only that she must be the one to kill them. This is not to say that a lack of explicitly hateful vocabulary should persuade us to forgive or even necessarily understand her actions, but that her plans for the murder of her sons are perhaps more complicated than mindless hatred:

Ah, Ah, do not, my heart, do not do this. [...] 
There’s no alternative—they must 
die. And since they must, I who gave them birth shall kill them. [...] 
Give your right hands, children, give them to your mother 
to kiss. O dearest of hands, dearest of lips to me, o children, 
so noble in appearance and so beautiful, may you find joy— 
but elsewhere. [...] 
And I know what evil deeds I am about 
to do, but my fury against Jason is stronger than my counsels of softness, and it is fury that leads to the greatest evils 
for mankind. (Euripides, trans. Morwood 1057-1081)

Medea’s counseling of her own heart is particularly meaningful, as it suggests a conflict within that prevents us from condemning her as an unthinking beast, incapable of feeling and motivated only by her hatred of Jason and perhaps a desire for reclaiming her lost power. Agave takes pride in her violence, but she believes that violence to have been perpetrated against an inhuman beast, not her own child. Medea’s explicit recognition of the fact that it is her children that she will murder is essential to executing the task of tragedy in the way that Eagleton suggests.

“Give / your right hands, children,” Medea implores, “give them to your mother / to kiss. O dearest of hands, / dearest of lips to me, o children, / so noble in appearance and so beautiful.”
As long as women are denied recognition in their roles as active contributors (and not “merely ‘matter’”) in the creation of their own children, they will remain in a state of “deliberate suppression” (King 24). If they continue to be seen as inactive participants in the perpetuation of the human species, then their place inside the house will remain of a permanent and oppressive nature. Medea’s explicit reference to her children’s bodies acts in direct opposition to the idea that they be physically disassociated from her. Her desire to re-establish physical contact with her children refuses to let the audience forget that at one point in time, Medea’s children existed within her womb. However much “medicine” and history might demand that the connection between women and their offspring be severed for the sake of maintaining patriarchal order, Medea’s touching of their flesh (whether in love or violence) disrupts that control. Additionally, after their murder, the implication that she must “bury them with these / my hands” (Euripides, trans. Morwood 1379-1380), not only recalling Agave’s “with our bare hands,” in reference to the tearing apart of Pentheus, preserves a physical connection between a mother and her children that will exist beyond death and perhaps even after her departure from the text.

In a reiteration of patriarchal anxiety over their potential loss of heirs and therefore household and state, Jason’s wish, that “The human race / should produce children from some other source and a / female sex should not exist” (Euripides, trans. Morwood 573-575), wonderfully condenses the patriarchal concern that Helen King’s Hippocrates’ Woman attempts to expose. Jason’s narcissistic desire that men be able to “spread their seed” without the threat of womanhood hanging overhead helpfully dismisses an elaborate (and false) patriarchal narrative that insists upon control of the feminine as somehow being carried out for the good of all. Medea

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1 Perhaps even reminding us of Roland Barthes’ theory of the “discourse of absence” mentioned earlier in this thesis, “Woman is sedentary, Man hunts, journeys; Woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises)” (13-14).
makes reference to the “falling” of the house multiple times throughout the text, and as I have already established, with the mention of the house comes a host of larger implications (namely that of the “house” as a representation of society at large). “…May the house fall in ruin,” (Euripides, trans. Morwood 115), she chants in the opening verses of the play, and again at line 608, “Yes, and I am a curse to your house too.” Whereas Agamemnon “bridled” the mouth of his daughter in order to prevent her from cursing his house and family, here Medea speaks in a decidedly unbridled fashion. In point of fact, Iphigenia never actually admits to planning a curse upon Agamemnon or his house, he just assumes that she will and takes preventative measures. Medea, in a bold act of self-recrimination (reminiscent of Helen and Clytemnestra), both speaks in and embodies “the curse” (“I am a curse…”) in an attempt to enact household ruination. This becomes visually apparent in an operatic production of Medea as described by Reynolds, “The climactic scenes in Act III are set on a mountainside with a temple in the background, so that the temple represents the civilization that Medea will overthrow, as she has already torn down a torch from the altar in Act II, and as she will destroy both temple and city, leaving them in flames as she makes her escape” (132).

The symbolic power inherent in the disruption of an altar in Act II is similarly troublesome to the traditional female narrative of “sacrificial lamb” given their biological natures (i.e., menstruation). Additionally, her claims that she “shall institute a holy festival and sacred rites” (Euripides, trans. Morwood 1382) in order to recoup the loss of her children, could be considered an attempt to restore control of ritualism in a way that had only ever been relegated to the masculine sphere. As Helen King suggests, women are rendered sacrificial by the fact of their reproductive functions:
I would argue that their exclusion from this act, within the context of their general inclusion in sacrifice, forms part of a wider system of classification of male and female, in which women do not perform culturally significant acts which involve shedding the blood of others (war, sacrifice, butchery), and that it can be extended to the way in which female anatomy and physiology are said to work. (93)

To a certain extent, Medea’s insistence upon clinging to the notion of ritual is problematic in that it perpetuates an established code of masculinity (that of sacrifice and ritual as a necessary component of maintaining order), all the same, Medea’s identification of ritual as a solely masculine endeavor, as well as the attempted reversal of it as an unfeminine activity, supports the idea of Medea as a potentially revolutionary agent.

The final and perhaps most intriguing way in which Medea acts as a revolutionary force for change within the tragic sphere is in its depiction of a female character who exists in a seemingly perpetual state of “becoming.” According to Margaret Reynolds, when Medea identifies herself on stage, she does so exclusively to the audience, “she is not speaking to Jason or to Creusa or Creon. They are silent, irrelevant, offstage” (139). Within the theatrical space, and in brief moments of direct interaction between Medea and her audience, she is brought into being, and she is allowed to “perform herself” (Reynolds 139). In our recognition of Medea, as well as in our complicity with her crimes, we “belong to her, become [emphasis added] her” (140). In so doing, perhaps we, as potential forms of “becoming” fail, in the sense that we might temporarily embody her throughout the time in which she appears on stage, but as a character that will literally remove herself from the stage, the narrative, and ultimately, the confines of our imagination, Medea is a monstrous female that exists in a state of impermanence. Before she “flies off in her chariot” (Euripides, trans. Morwood 1416), Jason refers to himself in a uniquely
tragi-feminine way, “Alas, I long to kiss my children’s dear lips, / poor wretch that I am” (1399-1400). If we might briefly recall the words of Helen, Clytemnestra, and Medea herself, woman, according to the male narrative in which they have been made to participate, is of the especially wretched kind. “Of everything that is alive and has a mind, we women are / the most wretched creatures” (Euripides, trans. Morwood 230-231). Jason’s reference to himself as a “wretch” is a briefly satisfying moment in which the gendered roles have become completely reversed. Like Agave, Clytemnestra, Helen, Medea, and the rest, Medea ends with an intense moment of grief. And if Medea were to operate in the same way that Aeschylus’ Oresteia concludes, with the release of Orestes (at the expense of justice for Clytemnestra) and the taming of the Furies, perhaps Jason’s grief would only be momentary; if only Medea’s chariot were shot out of the sky and his grief could be replaced with the satisfaction of a vengeance cycle completed in his favor, but alas, Medea does indeed escape, and Jason will remain embedded in his feminized grief.

Zeus on Olympus dispenses many things
and the gods bring many things to pass against our expectation.
What we thought would happen remains unfulfilled,
while the god has found a way to accomplish the unexpected.
And that is what has happened here. (Euripides, trans. Morwood 1416-1421)

In reading Medea as a text of movement, we can observe how the concluding language is notable, specifically words such as “against our expec- / tation,” “unfulfilled,” and “unex- / pected.” Quoting Rachel Bowlby in Tragic Modernities, Miriam Leonard suggests that we consider tragedy beyond the scope of “ideology” or “theory,” and perhaps instead as a “mythology,” because “unlike ‘ideology’ or ‘theory,’ the word implies a narrative movement of telling and retelling that at once sustains and changes the likely fabulous ideas and stories in circulation” (124). If we allow Medea to become the transgressive female narrative from which
future creations and interpretations of the literary female spring, then we do so with the hope that her own nostos will be one of unpredictability and created in defiance of fate or expectation.

**VII. Conclusion**

Soon after Jason realizes that Medea has murdered his children, she is very quick to mock his pain. “You are still a novice in grief,” she chides, “Wait till you grow old” (Euripides, trans. Morwood 1397). While Jason certainly appears to be more genuinely grieved at the loss of his sons than Agamemnon at the sacrifice of his own daughter, Medea’s complete lack of sympathy for Jason’s grief poses an interesting problem in the wake of this discussion. Do we read this as another instance in which Medea participates too enthusiastically in “the glory of heroic warfare” (Blondell 28)? A case in which the woman has adopted certain codes of masculinity that only serve to perpetuate damaging patriarchal standards? In one instance, I could easily interpret her mockery of Jason’s pain as a denouncement of male vulnerability, reinforcing the notion that men are not allowed (for fear of being seen as weak) to feel or betray strong emotion. However, given Medea’s follow-up pronouncement, “Wait till you grow old,” I would prefer to consider the implication that Jason simply does not bear the historic weight of grief in the same way that Medea (as a woman) has. In other words, the grief that Jason claims to feel in this moment, however legitimate, is isolated to this singular episode (i.e., the loss of his sons). Medea’s suggestion that Jason is a “novice in grief” would seem to imply that she is an expert in it. Perhaps what Medea might lead us to believe is that certain nuances of what grief is or what it might suggest (on a grand scale of human experience) comes with a fair amount of gendered involvement governed by systemic patriarchy.

In Terry Eagleton’s discussion of tragic modernity in *Sweet Violence*, he makes the rather discouraging suggestion that the way in which the so-called civilized world operates is
unchangeable and absolute, “It is proving rather more feasible in our age to alter certain genetic structures than it is to tamper with capitalism or patriarchy” (xiii). Indeed, in my discussions of female oppression within this thesis, I have attempted to establish the sense of a “long-game” of masculine control over the female, in body as well as in mind. I would have to agree with Eagleton that, at times, it certainly does not feel at all “feasible” to disrupt destructive forces that we have been able to identify, but have no way of realistically dissolving. In an age of seemingly unlimited knowledge, it would seem as if people are better informed of these kinds of “forces” more so than ever before, but it is hard to remain hopeful when change fails to occur as quickly as we might like. In this way, tragedy might be one of the better solutions to the question of how exactly we might “tamper” with greater effectiveness. As quoted by Raymond Williams in *Modern Tragedy*, “Since the time of the French Revolution, the idea of tragedy can be seen as in different ways a response to a culture in conscious change and movement” (62). Again, I find it important to emphasize that tragedy is discussed here as a literary device used in tandem with its ideological implications. This thesis began with the hope that ancient Greek literature held the promise of potentially re-interpreting the feminine narrative of the Western tradition (within the literary realm and beyond). And if we should choose to define the female narrative by way of tragic convention, we might then be able to adopt its revolutionary associations for women as well as men.

As I concluded in my discussion of *Medea*, one of the more crucial details of this particular tragedy is its emphasis upon the narrative (both in character as well as in plot) remaining “unfinished.” Certainly, given the fact of the ostensibly complete tragic cycle of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*, the lack of a proper ending in the way we have come to expect in a culture dependent upon the comfort of linearity and a sense of completion is nowhere to be found.
Similarly, if we recall other examples of monstrous females (i.e., Clytemnestra and Agave) that have been brought to question, despite being included within narratives that might fail to support this particular convention, their inhuman qualities of boundary-crossing blurriness perpetuate this same notion of “becoming” as characters unto themselves. While I would never wish to suggest that we continue to define the female literary experience by way of suffering alone, I would argue for accepting the historical reality of suffering as a beginning from which new narratives (free from patriarchal convention) must inevitably stem. In quoting Harold Schweizer, Eagleton argues, “the very word ‘suffering’ suggests narrative and temporality, and hence the possibility of a positive conclusion” (Eagleton 36). If the definitive female narrative has become intertwined with the tragic, then we might better reimagine it as infinitely unfinished and flushed with potential. As suggested by Miriam Leonard, in the wake of tragic circumstance comes the desire to start again, “The sense of ‘beginning anew’ was intimately related to the quest for a new human narrative” (14). In other words, even when it might seem as if the ordered, civilized world (i.e., patriarchal) has determined the fate of women, or even men, whether that be by way of biology or language, the power of women’s roles within tragedy is in their active defiance of such circumstances.
Works Cited


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