

The woman's place. An overview on women in classical antiquity through three exemplar figures: Antigone, Clytemnestra, and Medea

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A woman is wild if she has a mind of her own (Christa Wolf, *Medea*, 1996, 9)

Abstract

This essay discusses the role of women in classical antiquity, using examples embodied in three exemplary figures: Antigone, Clytemnestra, and Medea. The text shows, with examples from the tragedies, that women in classical antiquity were relegated to silence and invisibility, and those who rebelled against these orders were exemplarily punished, many times with death.

Key words: classical antiquity; woman; silence; punishment; Antigone; Clytemnestra; Medea; Iphigenia; Aristotle; Sophocles; Euripides.

Resumo

O ensaio discute o papel da mulher na antiguidade clássica, usando exemplos que aparecem em três figuras exemplares, Antigone, Clytemnestra e Medea. O texto mostra, com exemplos das tragédias, que a mulher na antiguidade clássica era relegada ao silêncio e à invisibilidade, e aquelas que se rebelavam contra estas ordens eram punidas exemplarmente, muitas vezes com a morte.

Palavras-chave: Antiguidade clássica; mulher; silêncio; punição; Antigone; Clytemnestra; Medea; Ifigênia; Aristóteles; Sófocles; Eurípides.



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Antigone And The Body Of Polynices

1. Introduction

“Take them inside the house, attendants. From now on they must be women and not wander unrestrained” (Sophocles, *Antigone* 578-579).¹ With these words, Creon, king of Thebes, sealed his decision to condemn to death Antigone, a young woman and member of the royal family, for transgressing a decree that he, the king and *a man*, had proclaimed². Antigone’s transgression is not simply a violation of a law. Nor is Creon disturbed simply because someone has defied *his* law. It is the gender of ‘this someone’ that infuriated Creon, that is, a woman, whose place is to stay inside the house, and, there, to take care of what was regarded as *womanly* tasks typical to respectable

women: weaving and making clothes, in addition to the expected care for raising children.

“Surely, a husband should be pleased if he marries a wife who knows how to take wool and make clothes, how to share out the spanning work among the female slaves”, we read in Xenophon, *On Household Management* 6.17-10. And, “a woman who travels outside the house” – we are told by the orator Hyperides (*Fragment* 205) – “must be of such an age, that onlookers might ask, not whose wife she is, but whose mother”. Staying at home, not going and walking outside – which would mean ‘wandering unrestrained’ in a man’s eyes – these were among the basic marks defining a woman, or, better, *the* woman’s place in classical antiquity.

“They must be women”, said Creon when commanding the servants to bring inside Antigone and her sister. Being outside is a man’s place; women must be kept out of public view. “For the woman it is more honorable to remain

¹ The above translation is from R. Blondell (*Sophocles. Antigone*, FOCUS, 1998). Unless differently indicated in note, all other translations are my own.

² Although, as we will see, Antigone is the woman that, according to Creon, must not wander unrestrained, Creon uses plural forms (= ‘them’; ‘women’) since at first he will include Antigone’s sister, Ismene, in his condemnation.

indoors than to be outside; for the man it is more disgraceful to remain indoors than to attend to business outside” (Xenophon, *On Household Management* 7. 30).³ The woman’s place was thus that of invisibility.⁴

This paper will provide an overview on the women’s status in classical antiquity as mirrored in ancient Greek literature⁵, by analyzing three exemplary figures: Antigone, Clytemnestra, and Medea. I use here the connotation ‘exemplar’ in a provocative way. Their actions, indeed, are far away from what, to the Ancients’ eyes, would make a woman an ideal model. Yet, it is exactly their failure of the expectations of the men of their time that can be taken as a specimen of the female gender’s condition in the ancient society. In this sense, they are ‘exemplary’.

It is not by accident that I referred to *male* expectations. Indeed, since its beginning our culture has tended to

define women not *per se*, but assuming men as *the* norm of right action, and, as such, serving to control, regulate and *dictate* proper behavior. In ancient Greek literature, women are, in fact, always seen and portrayed in relation to men: fathers, brothers, sons, husbands or lovers, rulers. In this capacity, women who properly satisfy the societal expectations as defined in the men’s perspective are taken as models of virtuous ones.

Besides being invisible, and in order to be invisible, the societal expectations for women were obedience, subjugation, and silence. Indeed, the virtue of a woman, Aristoteles said is “obedience and subordination”; while that of a man is “the courage of command” (*Politics* 1. 1260a20-32). And the philosopher explains also that the difference between husband and wife is “like that of a man’s soul and his body, as the soul is meant to command the arms and legs”.

Invisibility, obedience and subordination are epitomized by the traditional silence to which women were confined, and which was demanded. “Woman, to women silence brings decorum,” so spoke Ajax, in the homonym tragedy by Sophocles (*Ajax* 293), to his wife-concubine Tecmessa who was rightly questioning Ajax’s behavior, and voicing her suspicion about his foolish plan to kill his allies, the sleeping Greeks, in order to avenge his personal honor. Tecmessa is thus reminded her place, that of silence, when she dares to object to his husband instead of submissively listening to, and accepting any of his decisions⁶. To keep

³ Already in the archaic epic of Homer, the *Iliad*, we find such a drastic division of the gender’s spheres: the indoor -business for women; the outside ones, such as war, for men. By these words, for instance, Hector silenced his wife, Andromache, when she attempted to keep him at home, away from the war: “Go to the house and busy yourself with your own tasks, the loom and the distaff, and bid your handmaids ply their work: but the men must see to the fighting...” (6. 491-485).

⁴ An exception to the rule confining women inside the house allowed their appearance at funerals and at some festivals, namely those reserved exclusively to women, such as the Thesmophoria commemorating the goddesses Demeter and Persephone. It is not accidental that even in art, in vase painting, women (respectable women) are portrayed out-of-doors very rarely, except in cemeteries, at wedding processions and, as said, at festivals

⁵ Although by Classical Antiquity we refer to the entire classical world, *i.e.*, ancient Greece and Rome, in this survey I shall focus on the Greek side, for ancient Greek civilization is the very foundation of any western civilization, including the ancient Roman one.

⁶ Other translations of *Ajax* 293 emphasize the misogynist undercurrent of those words. For instance, S. Esposito (*Odysseus at Troy*, FOCUS, 2010, 18 n. 93) using a English proverb, renders: “Woman, women should be

quiet was the behavior that conformed to accepted standards of respectability and morality for the female gender. “And I, disciplined to it, desisted”, is, in fact, the comment of Tecmessa on Ajax’s reproach (*Ajax* 294).

The woman’s place was thus that of silence, too. They must be out of public view, and they must be silent. These features are even more striking if compared to what, in the classical Athenian ideology, was fundamental to citizenship, and constituted the foundation of the well-known democratic Athens: the right to speak, and, precisely, to speak in public, *i.e.*, in public view. *Isegoria* and *Parrhesia* were the two paramount principles governing Athens’ democracy and dealing just with the act of voicing one’s own mind in public. *Isegoria*, meaning “equal right of speech”, referred to the idea that each citizen has an equal right to put forward his views in the assembly *in public*. *Parrhesia*, meaning “outspokenness, speaking openly”, referred to the right of citizens to speak honestly and frankly. Both rights were denied to women – which comes as no surprise given that, across history and cultures, women have been not allowed to exercise any right and any legal, economic and social autonomy.

The negation of *isegoria* and *parrhesia* significantly conveys an annihilation of women’s weight through silence. Yet, women were created equipped with voice, too. In Hesiod’s account for the

creation of Pandora, the first woman ever in the Greek tradition – or, better, the stereotypical prototype of women in the human culture of any time –, we are told that Zeus gave precise instructions about the ‘equipment’ with which she must be provided. Zeus ordered Hermes, one of the gods put in charge in ‘fabricating’ the first woman, to give her ‘the faculty of speech’ (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 80). Interestingly this faculty is given along with “lies, sly stories” (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 78). Although this specific gift is in line with Zeus’ goal behind the creation of Pandora, *that is*, that to punish men giving them a lovely yet ruinous being as partner⁷, out of its context, it however testifies to the lack of weight of women’s words: their place is that of silence; should they speak, they surely cannot speak aright. They basically lie or they disguise the truth at their own benefit.⁸ It is as if to say, their voice – if and when comes out – is not worthy to be listened to, and surely is something to look at with suspicious⁹.

⁷ Hesiod, *Theogony* 570-601; *Work and Days* 53-99.

⁸ A significant echo of this deeply rooted preconception of women’s speaking as meant to lie, deceive, etc., is, indeed, already in the archaic epic poem of Homer, the *Iliad*: in the book 19, when Homer tells of how even Zeus could be victim of delusion, the responsible of that delusion is, by no chance, the goddess Hera, who – the poet specifies – was female. So the line sounds: “Even him [Zeus] Hera, who is female, beguiled in her craftiness” (19.95).

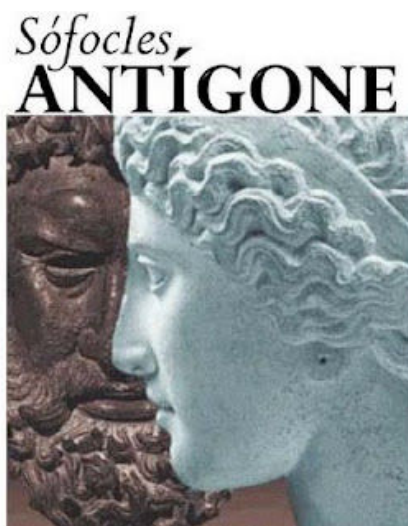
⁹ Indeed, this is testified to by a passage of Euripides, *Medea*: when Medea tries to induce the town’s king, Creon, to take pity over herself and her children, and grant them one more day before being banished, her words are perceived as ‘soothing to listen to’, yet scaring, in some way, as covering bad mind. They provoke the uneasy feeling not to trust the one who utters those words, for “it is easier to guard against a hot-tempered woman than a clever one who keeps silent her own mind” (318-320). Men’s unsatisfiable longing for control seems here to

seen, not heard”; quite strong the online translation by Ian Johnston of Malaspina (University-College, Nanaimo, BC): “Woman, the finest thing that females do is hold their tongues”. In the footstep of Sophocles, Aristotles does not miss the chance to restate that woman’s decency is silence in the passage mentioned above about the women’s virtue of obedience and submission.

In light of this worldview, the women who, for varied reasons, refuse to take on the submissive role traditionally reserved for them, the women who dare to act strongly and independently, that is, dare *not to keep silent*, speaking out, and, thus, stepping outside the boundaries of the traditional gender roles, these women are usually condemned to be seen only as impudent-arrogant, traitors, and liar.

Yet, they are just women that rebel against the traditional gender restrictions by voicing their rights, first of which, the right to refuse to conform to social expectations, above all when those expectations are at the expense of their right to simply preserve family bounds, their right of being a mother, a caring sister, a loved wife, and so forth. Their voice, or their action of voicing their rights, is perceived as a threat to the masculine order; additionally – and maybe foremost – to the masculine identity. They must be thus reduced to silence, since *they must be women*. The women's annihilation through the repression of voicing their rights usually ends up in a physical annihilation, by being killed / condemned to death, or by

give birth to a paradox: the woman's place is that of silence; on occasions, when/if she speaks, one must look at her words with suspicion; yet, if she keeps silent it would be suspicious as well, to a point to feel the expected silence as a threat against which it is difficult to guard oneself! One would be tempted to say that, no matter a woman does and how she behaves, men would always have something to say against.



becoming martyrs themselves. These are the last outcomes of men's attempt to stop women from exceeding their role, and from daring to enter male's role. These women, in fact, become a 'hero-impersonator,' that is, they appropriate prerogatives that are reserved only for men, as that to speak

out; they thus become 'man'.

Antigone, Clytemnestra and Medea are among the best examples of women that dared to make their voice be heard, and they be visible; and, as we will see, such attempts to violate gender roles were fatal to them.

2. Antigone: a daughter, a sister ... a woman

Antigone was the daughter of Oedipus, the one who had the strength to accomplish her daughterly duty by leaving home to assist her father in his wandering in exile from Thebes. In the three tragedies of Sophocles devoted to the myth of Oedipus' family, Antigone appears as a silent child, to whom Oedipus directs his love and last concerns, in *Oedipus Rex*; as a strong and patient attendant of her father in *Oedipus at Colonus*; and as a determinedly affectionate sister in the play entitled after her.

Antigone is defined in relation to men: her father and her brother. She assists Oedipus in exile; when she is traveling outside, in public view, conforms to her daughterly duties, and, as such, it is not perceived as an act of stepping over the gender's boundaries. She is in the service of a man. Differently, in her

‘assistance’ to her dead brother Polyneikes, when she goes outside to plan, and then executes a ritual burial over the corpse of Polyneikes, her action is perceived as a transgression, although caring for his burial is an action in line with her sisterly duty. The reason of this different perception is the existence of a newly decreed edict that would prevent a woman from performing even accepted, and traditionally expected family’s duties.

It is worth it to see the story in some detail. The two sons of Oedipus, Eteokles and Polyneikes, engaged in a war for the succession to the throne of Thebes. Initially, they decided to rule alternatively, one year each; the first turn was granted to Eteokles. After his year of ruling, Eteokles denied to yield the throne to Polyneikes, as they had agreed on. Hence, Polyneikes marched against his brother and his people with outsider allies, to claim his turn. The conflict was solved through personal combats between seven among the bravest of Polyneikes’ army, and seven, of the same stature, of the Thebes’ army, led by Eteokles.¹⁰ The two brothers engaged in a duel and killed one another. The vacant throne was thus occupied by Creon, brother in law and uncle of Oedipus¹¹. He declared Polyneikes traitor – since he marched against his country. He, thus, decreed that Eteokles be buried with all honors, while Polyneikes be left as food for dogs on the street (Euripides, *Phoenissae* 1628-1670; Sophocles’

Antigone 194-206). Whether Polyneikes was a traitor or not is almost an open issue; certainly it is a point that Sophocles does not question. However, in the classical period, dead who might be thought, rightly or wrongly, to have been enemies of the states were denied customary burial rites. Traitors, as well as the so called ‘enemies of war’ (*polemioi*), were categorized as ‘enemies of the state’.¹² Burial rites were viewed not simply as usual, and ordinary practice; they were foremost seen as traditions, customary laws established by the gods, “It was not Zeus” – as Antigone proudly cried in face of Creon – “that published that edict, and not of that kind are the laws which Justice who dwells with the gods below established for men. Nor did I think that your decrees had such a force, that a mortal, as you are, could override the unwritten and unfailing statutes given to us by the gods. For their laws are not for today or yesterday, but for all time, and no man knows when they were first put forth.” (Sophocles, *Antigone* 450-457).

Violation of these traditions meant to fail to honor gods and was a clear act of hybris.¹³ On the other hand, to deprive a person, and foremost a hero, of burial rites was to bring him dishonor, to condemn him to the obscurity of death. *Aikia*, that is, *disgrace* in death, consisting of disfigurement, dismemberment by dogs or birds that would eat and spoil the exposed corpses, was something of which above

¹⁰ This feud between the two brothers, Oedipus’ sons, for the throne over Thebes is dramatized in Aeschylus’ tragedy, *The Seven at Thebes*.

¹¹ As all members of Oedipus’ family, so Creon holds a double status. Since he is the brother of Jocasta, who, in turn, is the mother and then wife of Oedipus, Creon is both to Oedipus: uncle and brother in law. This duplicity is unraveled in Sophocles’ tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*.

¹² Similarly the hero Ajax – as told in the homonym tragedy by Sophocles – accused by the Greek leaders, Menelaus and Agamemnon, as being a traitor and thus enemy of war, was at first denied the burial (Sophocles’ *Ajax* 1051-1090; 1131-1134).

¹³ See, e.g., Sophocles’ *Antigone* 73-77; 450-470; 519; 745; 1072-1073; 1347-1352; *Ajax*, 1129; 1342-1343.

all combat-heroes were afraid.¹⁴ It was one of the most dishonorable things a hero would suffer, and that would bring shame on him, the reason being that the result of the *aikia* was nothing else but the destruction of the hero's identity itself. In the ancient Greek culture, which was a shame-oriented culture, the heroes are what others *see* and *say* of them; it thus become understandable how such a big issue was to preserve the wholeness of the person, the individual identity in death and after death, too. And this could be secured through proper burial rites. In light of this cultural meaning of the burial rites and in the face of their violation, pressing for their observance was a matter of pity, justice and holiness toward gods. And, this was the 'crime' that Antigone, Polyneikes' sister, dared to commit, "a crime of pity", as herself stated (Sophocles, *Antigone* 74). Antigone realized that Creon's treatment reserved for Polyneikes was not in accordance with the "gods' laws", with customary traditions. She thus planned to bury her brother, violating the king's edict. By defending her brother's right to the burial Antigone, also, strongly expressed her obligation to the family ties. "He is my brother" – cried Antigone to her sister Ismene, trying to persuade the latter to help her in burying their brother – "... I'll never be accused of betraying him"

¹⁴ Several passages from Greek Literature, in particular from Homer, attest to the importance of burying body and avoiding *aikia*. In the battlefields, warriors who understood that their time had come would not hesitate to pray to the enemy to let their corpse be buried. When Hector faced Achilles, the Trojan hero, as well as his parents, more than once expressed concerns about the fact that Achilles may deny a proper burial of Hector's body and cause his *aikia* (see, e.g., Homer, *Iliad* 22. 86-89; 336-342).

(Sophocles, *Antigone* 45).¹⁵ It was the duty of female family members to take care of the funeral rites.

Antigone is, however, not simply a sister who rightly defends her brother's rights in the name of laws higher than the man-made edict of the king. She is a woman that takes the initiative to do so against the ruler who, by default, is a man. Indeed, the conflict between Antigone and Creon is not simply that between individual/family rights and state.¹⁶ It is also an issue of woman *versus* man.

As said above, women were supposed to be invisible and silent. But Antigone,

- first, summons her sister outside, in her attempt to obtain her complicity; and also, she herself goes and acts outside, in order to perform – twice – a burial rite over her brother's corpse;
- second, invites her sister to 'speak out and aloud' about her plan: "Alas! Speak out. You will be more hateful still if you stay silent. No, proclaim my plan out loud to all!", replies Antigone to Ismene who tried to caution her, saying: "At least, be sure that you disclose this deed to no one else; conceal it secretly" (Sophocles' *Antigone*, 84-87);
- Third, and more significantly, she herself cries aloud her action and exactly in the face of the

¹⁵ See, also, 73-75; 466-469; 511-523; 900-915.

¹⁶ This is notoriously the reading promoted in particular by the nineteenth-century German philosopher Hegel according to whom the play represents a tragic collision of rights against rights, where Creon symbolizes the interests of state security against an Antigone that, caught up in her personal piety, does not make any effort to understand the political reason and realities that motivate the king.

king. She is a woman who speaks out and aloud in the face of a man. "... did you know", – Creon asked Antigone when she is brought in front of him as responsible for the forbidden burial of Polyneikes, "that an edict had forbidden this?". "I knew it", firmly Antigone admitted, going on proudly stating the justice of her audacity to overstep the law, for it was a man-made law, and not a law proclaimed by Zeus and the gods for all time – as we saw in the lines mentioned above (Sophocles, *Antigone* 450-457).

Creon's subsequent comment offers clear insights on what the woman's place was supposed to be: "This girl knew well how to commit an act of outrage when she first transgressed against the published laws; and here is a second outrage: after doing it to glory in it, exulting in her deed ... It is clear that I am no man, but she is the man, if she can get away with holding power like this" (Sophocles, *Antigone* 480-485). It is evident that what bothers Creon is not simply the violation of his law; it is evident that he perceives the woman as a threat to his power as a man. His comment establishes first a clear association between man and power: a woman that can hold some power is not any more a woman, is a man; and a man that lets a woman get some power is not any more a man. Second, and maybe more importantly, the aspect of the 'power' about which Creon is talking, the power that would deprive him of his masculine identity, and would give Antigone a masculine identity, is that of speaking, meaning – in this specific context – to defend aloud, to firmly stand for one's own deeds, and, more significantly, for the right to perform those specific deeds. All of this was

really unthinkable as womanly behavior. It is clear, to paraphrase Creon, that Antigone is now a man, and, between the two, she is *the* man, since to allow what in the male eyes' must not be allowed to a woman, means to be as weak and powerless as a woman. This is, in the end, the equation that Creon implies with his comment: man = power; woman = powerlessness. Antigone messed up this standardized and socially accepted equation.

Action (that is, taking initiative which, among other things, makes one be visible), and speech (that is, ability to speak out and to argue for one's own action, which also means to grant one a space in the public discourse) are gender-biased traits: they establish a borderline that women are not to overstep. Indeed, the action itself, the initiative consisting, in this specific case, to violate Creon's proclamation, is something that equates Antigone with a man in general. Not by chance, when the guard informed Creon that – contrary to his proclamation – somebody buried the corpse of Polyneikes, the immediate question of Creon is: "What *man* dared to do this deed?" (Sophocles, *Antigone* 248), assuming that the doer cannot but be a man. Then, to speak of it and glorify one's own action through a speech is something that equates Antigone not simply with a man, but namely with a man of authority, a self-confident, audacious man, a man capable of taking on his own responsibilities and fighting for his rights. Antigone is 'such a man', and this oxymoronic combination of male-female identities, which depends on the ancient people's perception of gender role, centers on taking action and speaking aloud of it, and thus fighting for it. *Fighting ...!*

“We must remember”, said Ismene, emblem of a traditional woman, “that we are women, and, as such, not suited to fight with men” (Sophocles, *Antigone* 60-62). Fighting *per se* since ever has been regarded as a man’s task;¹⁷ this only, thus, would turn Antigone into a man. But, what in my opinion is more striking in terms of gender-issue, is the specification “with men”. Since, as we have seen, man is the norm, being woman and thus not fit to fight with men, means to be subjugated to the norm, no matter what. It means to live invisibly and silently, without acting and/or speaking in front of the ‘norm’. Indeed, we saw above that, when Ajax reminded Tecmessa of her place, a place of silence, she desisted and turned silent. And when, in Euripides’ *Trojan Women*, Andromache tried to fight and speak for her motherly right to protect her son, she is immediately reduced to silence and blackmailed into acquiescence to the men’s decision, to ‘the norm’, through a threat targeting her son.¹⁸ Antigone stands in contrast with this worldview. Her behavior cannot but be seen as the *ne plus ultra* of transgression for a woman: taking initiative, speaking out of it, defending and fighting for it means *to fight with men*; it means to undermine the norm which men embody; it means to appropriate distinguishing male hallmarks and thus become a threat to the male identity. A woman who behaves like a man, which means just acting beyond the traditional gender restrictions and social expectations, is seen not simply as destabilizing ‘the

norm’, and thus the social order in both domestic and public life. But, more significantly, she is seen as destabilizing the masculine ego, the masculine identity, the ‘being’ a man. And, with this being intolerable, Antigone will inevitably pay a high price, which – on the other hand – should not come as a surprise if only we think of all women who, throughout history and not long ago, really sacrificed their lives *fighting with men* in the name of women’s rights.

3. Clytemnestra: a mother, a wife ... a woman

In a similar way Clytemnestra, too, is an unconventional woman by the standards of that time. She, too, is seen as one who takes on roles and tasks that belong to man. She is not a woman, so to speak, she turns into a ‘hero-impersonator’, and thus becomes a man. To a closer analysis, the fact itself that to describe the unconventional role of these women one must adopt a label which evokes a male model, is symptomatic that the difference, or we may say, the diversity of these women compared to all the others could not but be perceived in gender terms. It is such a big diversity that it results in an equation of the *diverse* woman with man, that is, in a confusion of genders that destabilizes male self-confidence. And among the unconventional components that determine the diversity of women in gender terms, there is – as seen – the audacity to take initiative, to act, to speak out, to voice one’s own mind and rights, and to fight for them.

The ‘masculine’ side of Clytemnestra is even more stressed than in Antigone given that, in absence of her husband, Clytemnestra took his husband’s royal power and showed decisive leadership skills, something – again – unthinkable for a woman, whose place is not that of

¹⁷ See, above, n. 4.

¹⁸ “For if you say anything to enrage the army, this child will receive neither burial nor rite of mourning for the dead. But if you keep quiet and with composure take your fate, you will not leave his corpse unburied ...” (Euripides, *Trojan Women* 735-739).

command – to recall Aristoteles’ observation – but that of obedience and subjugation.

Clytemnestra was the wife of Agamemnon, one of the two leaders of the Greek expedition against Troy. According to a later tradition, whose traces are to be found in Euripides’ *Iphigeneia in Aulis*,¹⁹ Clytemnestra was forced into marriage with Agamemnon after he had killed her first husband and her son dashing her baby – to paraphrase Euripides’ version – on the ground when he had torn him from her breast with brutal violence. Hence, Clytemnestra’s brothers moved war against Agamemnon, who then coming as suppliant to Clytemnestra’s father, was rescued, and was thus given Clytemnestra as wife. “It was not of my free will,” said Clytemnestra, “but by force that you took me and wed me.” (Euripides’ *Iphigeneia in Aulis* 1148 f.). That of Clytemnestra was not an exception; it was, on the contrary, *the* norm. Usually marriage was a kind of pragmatic social and business arrangement; and, the girl certainly had no say at all about it. “It is my belief – said the heroine Procne in the lost tragedy by Sophocles *Tereus* – that young women in live the sweetest life of all in their fathers’ home. Ignorance always keeps children secure and happy. But when we reach womanhood and some understanding, we are thrust out and sold away... Some go to live with strangers, some with foreigners, some go to joyless homes, some to unfriendly ones. Once a single night has yoked us to our husbands, we are obliged to praise all these things, and consider a happy outcome” (Sophocles, *Fr.* 583 Radt).

¹⁹ See, e.g., ll. 1150 ff. Also, Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca*, Ep. 2.15-16.

Women were treated as items of property, namely a man’s property: first a father’s or brother’s property, then a husband’s one. And once women became the husband’s property, their very first duty, the one for which, in the end, they were ‘worthy’, was to produce heirs. The central importance of this task is shown by the formula used on the occasion of Athenian marriage ceremony, where the bride was given to the husband “for plowing legitimate children”. This instrumental view of women, vividly expressed through an agricultural metaphor, finds an echo in the ancient persuasion that the father, indeed, the one who plants the seed, is the real parent of a child, whereas the mother is *just* the nurse of the newly-sown embryo.²⁰ And that men would look for a wife only for having heirs, is testified to by the frustrated wish of a man, Jason, in front of her wife’s reticence – as we will see – to yield him their sons: “There should have been another way for me to have children – there should be no women! Then, men would not have had any trouble!” As long as women accept to be ‘sold out’ to a husband, without having a word in

²⁰ This is the argument, for instance, used in tragedy to justify Orestes’s murder of his mother, Clytemnestra. In Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* (660-662), for instance, we read: “The mother of what is called her child is not the parent, but the nurse of the newly-sown embryo. The parent is the one who plants the seed, the father. Whereas she, as a stranger for a stranger, preserves the growing plant”; similarly, in Euripides’ *Orestes* (555-556): “My father begot me; your daughter just gave me birth, being the field that received the seed from another; without a father no child would ever be born.” For this view of the woman as just a field capable to receive and preserve man’s seed, thus to give him heirs, it comes as no surprise that, in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, when Ismene tries to persuade Creon not to punish Antigone, reminding him she is his son’s bride-to-be, the king coldly answers: “There are other plots of lands for him to plow” (569).

it, and still silently to give their womb as a field 'for the plowing of legitimate children', men do not have any trouble.

Clytemnestra's story twice, we may say, confirms this sad reality: first, through her own experience as bride; then, as a mother of a 'potential' bride, her daughter Iphigeneia. Clytemnestra at first conformed herself to the societal and cultural expectations of her time, annihilating her person – and that was, in the end, what was expected of women – and being completely subjugated to her husband. "Once I made my pace with you," – said Clytemnestra to Agamemnon upon discovering his evil plan for their daughter Iphigeneia – "you cannot deny I have been a blameless wife to you and your family, chaste in love, an honor to your house ... I bore you a son besides three daughters, of one of whom you are heartlessly depriving me" (Euripides, *Iphigeneia in Aulis*, 1180 ff.). As both bride and mother she is supposed to have no right to say a word; she is just an item of property, and a nurse of seeds which, in turn, are property of the 'real' parent, the father; as such, he can decide of the children's life, alone. This was the reality to which Clytemnestra dared to rebel, dismissing the 'appropriate' womanly behavior she had so far held.

Except for what we are told in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, where Antigone's behavior is still consistent with the time's expectations, we do not have, in the end, any story of Antigone, prior the story of her fighting for her sisterly duties and rights, that would testify to her adherence to the womanly virtues of obedience, and, thus, of invisibility and silence. The case of Clytemnestra seems to be slightly different: her marriage-story and subsequent life with Agamemnon

testify to that adherence. She was expected to be an obedient, loyal wife who would never question 'the norm', whether this would be represented by her father or her husband; and, she was expected to bear children to her husband. She has been an obedient daughter – when still in her father's house; an obedient wife – when she was given to Agamemnon; and a caring, lovely mother – as she showed with Iphigeneia, before what happened to this daughter of hers which causes Clytemnestra to then have a heart of stone.

As Antigone, so Clytemnestra turns into a 'transgressive' woman, that is, in a woman who chose to rebel against traditional gender restrictions, to defend her woman's right as family member – in her case, as mother, a role she dared to claim when praying Agamemnon: "... do not slay your child, *who is also mine*, too..." (Euripides, *Iphigeneia in Aulis* 1206-1208). Clytemnestra's 'fight' is still in the name of the family's rights, and it is consistent with rights that her expected role in the family should give to her: a mother cannot but care for the safety of her children; she has not simply the duty but also the right to protect them. And, love, in its various expressions, is what pushes these women to fight. It is almost ironic that the defense of what is peculiarly 'womanly' turned these women in man!

That the love for her daughter and the subsequent grief for her loss was the driving force of the Clytemnestra's metamorphosis into a man is apparent also in the main play concerning this character in the trilogy *Oresteia* by Aeschylus, and, more specifically, in the first of the three plays, entitled after a man, that is, her husband: *Agamemnon*. And here, in particular,

we witness her turning into a man. The play, to tell it simply and concisely, is about the execution of Clytemnestra's plan of revenge over Agamemnon whom she never forgave for having given priority to the state's honor and safety, that is, to 'political' issues, at the expense of the family. In order to sail to Troy and avenge the dishonor his brother Menelaus suffered at the hand of the Trojan prince Paris, Agamemnon accepted to sacrifice Iphigeneia, deaf to Clytemnestra's prayers and sound words, and depriving her, for the second time, of her child. Since then, Clytemnestra's life-objective was to punish Agamemnon. From an agreeable and faithful wife and lovely mother, she became rebellious, unfaithful, and a cold mother. To success in this transformation, she abandoned the standards and virtues according to which she had so far lived and was expected to live. She stopped to speak and behave like a woman. It is, indeed, significant that, in the play, repeatedly she is referred to as 'speaking and behaving like a man'. She is portrayed as an independent and almost 'professional woman ruling competently the city during her husband's absence. She also ended up organizing a kind of intelligence service – a network of spies and messengers who were in charge to inform her about her husband's return, so that she would be ready for her revenge. And this was something that a man would be able to do. And, she did behave like a man, in the crucial moment of firmly and coldly executing her plan. Like a hero on the battlefield she did not simply courageously killed his enemy, but triumphed on him, boasted of her deed and gloated over the fallen warrior, as to proclaim 'this is my work; I claim it'. In the end, in this 'aloud' proclamation, she did not behave differently from

Antigone. "Here I stand over my work" – said Clytemnestra when disclosed her deed – "Twice I struck him, and with two groans his limbs relaxed. After he had fallen, I dealt him yet a third stroke ..." and – she added a bit later – "I glory in the deed" (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1380-1395).

Killing, as well as fighting, undoubtedly was seen as something that men, and only men, can do; it thus comes as no surprise that when Cassandra, the concubine-slave that Agamemnon brought with himself from Troy, prophesied the death of Agamemnon, the Chorus immediately assumed that only a man can do this, "What *man* – indeed it asked – is that would plot so foul a crime?" (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1251). Accordingly, Aegisthus – the lover of Clytemnestra who plotted with Clytemnestra the murder, but did not take an active part in it – is referred to as a 'woman': "woman that you are, – said the chorus to him – " stayed at home awaiting the return of the men from war... you say the plot was yours, yet lacked the courage to do this deed with your hand, ... but left it to a woman!" (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1625-1645).

As Antigone, Clytemnestra also dared to speak out of her action, to boast and glory, voicing her rights, the right of a mother that without any regard has been deprived of her child, and that now is acting as instrument of justice, "You are testing me" – said Clytemnestra to the Chorus that, obviously, reproached her and her deed – "as if I were a witless woman. But my heart does not flutter, and I say to you who know it well – and whether you wish to praise or to blame me, it is all the same to me. Here is Agamemnon, my husband, now a corpse, *the work of this right hand, a master craftsman of justice*. So stands

the case ... It's I now that you would doom to exile from the land, to the hatred of my people and the execration of the public voice; though then you had nothing to urge against him ... And yet he, valuing no more than if it had been a beast that perished — he sacrificed his own child, she whom I bore with dearest travail ... Is it not he that you should have banished from this land in requital for his polluting deed? No! When you hear what I have done, suddenly you are a stern judge (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1405-1420). With these words Clytemnestra defended her deed. It is the cry of a mother who had been silenced for years; the words spell out the right of a mother that has been forcibly silenced even before *that right* could be somehow expressed. And, as in the case of Antigone, this speaking aright, since coming from a woman, could but be perceived as an 'overbearing speech' (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1426). As in Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Antigone*, men need to remember that 'silence brings ornament to woman', or need to state 'they must be women', they must go / be inside and be quiet, thus perceiving their act of speaking as an 'overbearing' thing, so in this play by Aeschylus, the chorus of old men remarks Clytemnestra's speaking as overbearing.

However, beside the similarities between Antigone and Clytemnestra I have briefly highlighted, it stands to reason to say that the perception of Clytemnestra as a man is indeed ambiguous. This not only does make the case of Clytemnestra even more striking, but it also shed further lights on the 'women's place'. In classical antiquity, so far as we could notice, women's speaking out and voicing their own rights against male expectations are actions that equate them with man in

a way that makes women be perceived as a threat to male authority and identity. As such, those actions must be repressed; they are indeed intolerable and overbearing. And, these women are seen as the 'bad / obnoxious' ones. But, at the beginning of the play *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra is defined by the watchman as "woman *with a man's mind* and a woman's passionate heart" (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 10). The connotation as a man, here, does not convey a negative remark as in general the equation woman with man does in male perspective. And some lines later, Clytemnestra announced the news of the victory of the Greeks in Troy, and thus the imminent return of the Greek army, by using – as herself says – "woman's words" (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 349-350), that is, we may say, words that men would expect from women, when and if they are to speak. To those words, the chorus in response, however, said: "Lady, you speak as wisely *as a prudent man*." (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 351-352). It seems that an equation with men is acceptable as long as what a woman does or speaks about is in line with men's mind, or, better, in line with what was basically considered a man's quality. But, at the same time, if the woman's speaking and acting are not in line with men's mind, they are perceived as a threat; and, the behaving and speaking like a man are perceived not as a quality, but as impudence, outrage, overbearing thing. What is striking is that either way the male is the norm, and women must not transgress it: they are allowed to be, behave and speak wisely *as men do*, but they are not allowed to rebel and speak out their own rights, *as men can do*. And, the women's unexpected act of speaking was, however, the *manly* attribute that man could most not stand, and that most fear if only we think of

the myth of Philomela, Procne and Tereus, where Philomela, after having been raped by Tereus, was subjected to a further atrocity: the rapist cut her tongue out, so that she could tell no one of his crime, she could not dare to speak out her rights against a man.²¹

4. Medea: a lover, a mother child-killer ... a woman

Perhaps Medea is the *ne plus ultra* of the transgressive women, or hero-impersonators, although differently from what happens to Antigone and Clytemnestra, throughout Euripides' play named after her, she is never referred to as speaking or acting as a man. Yet, what she did and said was certainly something nobody would expect from a woman, and everybody would rather expect from a man. It might be possible that her condition as not just a woman, but a foreign/not Greek woman prevailed in the eyes of the ancient people to the point to ascribe the traits that would be intolerable in a woman's behavior, by the societal standards of the time, to her foreign status rather than to unconventional attitudes the woman assumed to stand for her rights and to speak out. Yet, it might be worth noting that whether a woman is seen as behaving like a man or not, a woman who dared to think, to take initiative, to voice her rights – and mostly in defense of family's bounds –



Medea, by Eugène Delacroix

that woman is seen as 'diverse', that is, cannot be understood and accepted as woman. It stands to reason to say that gender and ethnic issues conflate in Medea's case. In both senses her role, as well as that of the other heroines, reflects and shed lights on the role of women in ancient Greek society.

As for the others, so for Medea her personhood, *i.e.*, identity as a person, is defined in relation

to man. Differently from the others, this relation is not completely unambiguous, in that she was not really *the* wife of somebody, namely Jason, since she was not given in marriage to him as according to the conventions of the time. Medea's personhood as defined in relation to Jason would rather include her among the so called 'helper-Maiden' heroines, a variant of the heroine as wife, or mother, or sister of the hero. Their existence is in function of man, in that they assist the hero – father, husband, lover, or brother that he was – in fulfilling his quest. Medea, indeed, helped Jason in his quest of the Golden Fleece. Without her help, he would fail. In reward, Jason promised her to take her with him to Greece as wife. Since then, both called their union 'marriage' (*e.g.*, Euripides, *Medea* 1341, 1388). But, as said, it was not a real marriage. It was rather what we might call a mutual agreement and commitment (or, unofficial marriage), sealed through an oath, an oath that was sworn in gods' name, and that Jason

²¹See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 6. 430-580.

enforced by giving his right hand as a sign of trust (Euripides, *Medea* 21, 496, 899). For this different *status* of Medea in relation to the man for whom she became ‘Medea’, I defined her ‘lover’ in the title, with the term to be taken in a broader meaning.

Undoubtedly Medea perceived and lived her bound with Jason as a marriage if, when felt betrayed, she indulged to a sad consideration on what it meant to be a woman, a wife and a mother in Greek society: “Of all creatures that have breath and sense of judgment, we women are the most unfortunate. First at an excess price we must buy a husband, the master of our bodies – this misfortune is more painful than misfortune. And the outcome of our life's striving depends on this, whether we take a bad or a good husband. For divorce is discreditable for women and yet they cannot deny their husbands ... If after we have made great efforts on these tasks our husbands live with us without feeling the marriage-yoke, our lives are enviable. Otherwise, death is preferable.” (Euripides, *Medea* 230-240). And, emphasizing the vulnerability and subjugation position of women, she added: “A man, whenever he is bored with the company of those in the house, can go elsewhere and thus rids his soul of its boredom. But we, women, must fix our gaze on one person only.” (Euripides, *Medea* 241-243).

What makes Medea turn into a man is Jason's betrayal. Despite the oath sworn in gods' name, and given with his right hand, as soon as he was given an opportunity to improve his social status – to use, here, his arguments – through the marriage with the town's princess, he did not hesitate to abandon Medea, trying even to deprive her of their children. Medea's fighting by words

and facts against this betrayal was something a woman was supposed not to do: they should be quiet, they should accept. Beside showing rhetorical skills, which were supposed only men could develop (e.g., Euripides, *Medea* 522 ff.), Medea took on a warrior role, behaving like a hero on the battlefield in accordance to the values of a warrior society, with the children – what most granted a woman some weight in men's eyes – being the weapon to defeat a man. Medea thus played on the same ground of Jason's game. In accordance to the conventions of the time, as we saw, men were concerned with marriage only to guarantee heirs to themselves, who would continue the descent line, assuring a kind of continued life to the fathers.²² For Jason their children were an instrument to justify his betrayal: a royal marriage would improve their social status. But, the truth was that they would augment his own power, too. For Medea they thus became *the* weapon of her battle and revenge. Cruel that, obviously, it appears, we may say that it was a suffered renouncement of what Medea, too, most valued as a woman, alongside her love for her man.

“Men say” – said Medea in her bitter consideration on women's state – “that we, women, live a life free from danger

²² Indeed, if there was a family-tie that had some value for ancient men, it was the father-son's one. This is testified to by the importance that the genealogical link held in ancient society as mirrored in the Epics by Homer. The son had the responsibility to continue the glory of his father and to behave in a way not to shame the father's lineage. Not by accident, warriors asked each other the genealogy when coming to a personal duel, as to be sure with whom they were about to deal by knowing whose sons each other were. And not by accident, when Achilles meets Odysseus during his descent into the underworld (Homer, *Odyssey*, 11), he asked about his own father and his son, whether he is behaving as a worthy heir of Achilles, renewing and perpetuating his glory and name.

in the house, while they fight with the spear. How wrong they are! I would rather stand three times with a shield in battle than bear a child once!” (Euripides, *Medea* 248-251). Medea is thinking of herself and turning herself into a man by appropriating what by definition is a man’s job (war), paradoxically while praising, in some way, what by definition is a woman’s job (childbirth). To my eyes, that of Medea was to cry out what a woman passed through in giving birth to children, which was always overlooked by men, concerned, that they were, just with having heirs. Medea is standing for the mothers’ rights to be considered and valued also as women *having rights* in that same role (the mother’s role) to which they are confined. This speaking in defense of what was taken for granted contributes to making Medea a transgressive woman. She is stepping over the gender’s boundaries not only since she is appropriating a man’s job, but – and maybe foremost – because she is daring to undermine the preciousness of that job: a warrior at least had a spear and a shield to ward off the enemy; the woman did not have anything to avert the dangers of childbirth.²³

Jason, for his own sake, not only betrayed Medea, accepting to marry the town’s princess, but wanted even to deprive her of their children, to whom – no surprise – he referred as ‘my children’ (e.g., Euripides, *Medea* 550) when speaking to Medea, instead of reasonably saying ‘our children’. And claiming his ‘ownership’, Jason dared

to ask Medea: “What need have you, woman, of children?” – and, continuing – “It benefit me to use future children to benefit those already born. Was this a bad plan?” (Euripides, *Medea* 565-566). These words confirmed the ‘instrumental’ view of women in ancient time, which I have above emphasized, as a machine – to tell this very brutally – of child-producing. No room for love, loyalty, devotion (which is what Medea was fighting for) to both the woman herself and the children. And, the following words by Jason, cannot but confirms this brutal reality: “Mortals should have some other way to beget children, and female race could not exist at all. Then mankind would not have had this misery.” (Euripides, *Medea* 573-575).²⁴

Medea rebelled to this, did not accept to keep quiet and yield to male power. But, entrapped that she was in such a patriarchal society for which a woman was just a plow to sought, she could not but use that patriarchal worldview as weapon to rebel. Indeed, she played the expected ‘woman’ role, *i.e.*, the role of a weak, fearful, condescending person, when she had to deceive her enemy in order to stand for her rights of woman: “We women” – said Medea to Jason when playing on the traditionally dependent position of women – “are, I do not want to say bad creatures, but we are what we are ...” (Euripides, *Medea* 890-891). She then stepped over that expected role, turning into a man, when

²³ There are other passages where Medea uses ‘heroic/warrior’ stances, showing concerns with honor and glory, exactly as a warrior, such as when she expressed determination in moving ‘with force and daring’ against his enemies (394), or when she worries not to become a laughing-stock to her enemies (381-383; 403-405; 797; 1049-1050; 1354-1355)

²⁴ And Hippolytus, the protagonist of another Euripidean tragedy, goes further by saying: “Zeus, why did you establish women in the sun’s light, ... an evil for human beings? If you wanted to propagate the human race, you should not have provided this from women, but mortals should place bronze or iron, or gold in your temples and buy children in exchange for a set value..., and then dwell in their home free, with no women” (Euripides, *Hippolytus*, 616-623).

she planned and executed her revenge, sacrificing what was a pledge of love for her,²⁵ and, in doing so, destroying her own femininity: she killed what the patriarchal society most wanted from a woman, in order to defend the rights of being a woman. She killed her children.

5. A conclusion

Whether or not the women on which this survey is built could carry their battles out in other way than they did, is a matter out of the purpose of this paper. It stands to reason to say they were right in fighting for their and their gender-rights; they were right in voicing their existence and in refusing to yield to expectations that were only for the benefit of men. Yet, as said since the beginning, despite the fairness we see in their fighting, women that dared not to be women according to the societal expectation of that time, were condemned to a ruinous end. Indeed, while Antigone martyrs herself not to compromise her integrity and ethical choice; Clytemnestra, who dared to voice her disregarded rights of mother to such a point to kill a man, her husband, ends up being killed by a man, her son; and, Medea, who dared to react to her man's betrayal, instead of keeping quiet and accepting it, as it was expected, ends up sacrificing what was dearest to her, and her 'lover', *i.e.*, their son, violently annihilating the trait that *par excellence* defined the identity of a woman in ancient time: bearing

children. And, all of them, also, acted 'transgressively', and spoke out in name of family rights: those of a sister, in the case of Antigone; those of a mother, in the case of Clytemnestra; those of a loyal lover and mother, in the case of Medea.

It is striking, we may note, that the rights for which those ancient heroines fought are still gender-biased, in some way, since they are in defense of roles to which, in the end, women were confined, *i.e.*, their role within the family, and not *tout court* within the society. Yet, this could but be the first step for women toward claiming one's own identity within the society, considering the more modern awareness of conflict between traditional-domestic and progressive-civic female role, which is still a gender-biased conflict, in some way, with human mind and perception of women have been slightly changed across centuries.

Still today – I would think it is safe to say – men, generally speaking, would like to have women at home, silent and kept out the public view; while would reserve the 'outside world' for themselves! Perhaps, some of today men would still conveniently agree with the historiographer Thucydides (5th. BC) who stated: "The greatest glory of a woman is to be least talked about among men, whether in praise or blame" (*The Peloponnesian War*, 2. 46). In the end, "nothing new under the sun"!

²⁵ Despite the almost unanimous condemnation of the horror of Medea's decision and action, it was not certainly a decision taken with a light heart; several passages testify to her inner struggle and the subsequent contradiction in which she often fell in her planning. Without justifying her deed with this consideration, it is sadly significant that this ancient woman was, in some way, forced to that action to claim her person, with all rights, in a male dominant society.

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