

In within the context
of power and



In both Sophocles *Antigone* and Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*, masculinity is framed and defined within the context of power and the handler

of this power. Both Creon and Clytemnestra wield power over the political/public realm respectively, and use this to define their own construction of masculinity as a direct contrast to the feminine traits of submissiveness and passivity.

To support this reading of masculinity as the wielding of political power it is prudent to examine the context in which Ancient Greek audiences would read this, and take note of the

authors of both *Antigone* and *The Oresteia* as being male. Laura McClure argues this in her book, *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama*, that

" because adult male citizens were the exclusive possessors of political power

in the classical polis, fifth-century Athenian drama, produced by men and for men, may be regarded in the words of Case, 'as allies in the project of suppressing real women and replacing them with masks of patriarchal production'" (5). To unpack this, because in large part the drama that has been

preserved from Classical Athens was mainly written by men, it is an essential insight into the minds of Athenian men and the expectations that were attached

to notions of masculinity and maleness as operating largely in the public/political sphere. To shed some more light on how power is gendered and regarded as a masculine trait, we need only look at the separation of spheres so evident in *Antigone* and to a lesser extent *The Oresteia*: the *oikos* and the *polis*, or the domestic sphere and the political sphere. Josine Blok argues in her article, "Toward a Choreography of Women's Speech in Classical Athens," that "the separation of the sexes ranked highest. It was sustained by a special and conceptual distinction between public and private spheres" (115). This is important to note as it gives weight to our understanding of masculinity as being inexplicably aligned with power as Adriana Cavarero argues that the political structure "identifies itself with a limited group of free men... that has definitively expelled women from its androcentric sphere" (48). To understand Ancient Greek audience's definition of masculinity is to be mindful of the way in which it is informed by its rejection of femininity and female influence, as the power was held primarily by the men in the political/public sphere and thus is definitively masculine. Blok further supports our understanding of these set distinctions between male and female by pointing out the extent of the constraint present in the *oikos* as

she explains that in Classical Athens " women should not be seen, nor should they speak or be spoken of" (97). To apply this to both The Oresteia and Antigone is prudent as it provides a framework for us to understand why Clytemnestra fluidly slides between her position as a female, and ultimately adopts a masculinised identity in order to utilize the established power in Classical Athens that masculinity affords her for her ends. Whilst also allowing us to recognise how Creon is able to wield his power over the political/public sphere due to his masculine identity.

In Sophocles Antigone, masculinity is positioned through a skewed power dynamic that is defined by its subjugation over women. This is presented early on in the play as Ismene tells Antigone, " we two are women, / so not to fight with men" (61-62), alluding to the inferior position that women played in Theban Society and the re-affirmation of the separate spheres of public and private. This is further cemented by Creon's declaration that " I won't be called weaker than womankind" (680) which points to his understanding of his masculinity and to him the intrinsic ties that

align masculinity with power and dominance, and femininity with subservience

and weakness. For Creon it is unfathomable that a woman could enter the political sphere and challenge him as he proclaims, " no woman rules me while I

live" (525). Creon's use of the word 'woman' as opposed to specifically highlighting Antigone indicates that he sees this feud not as a matter between

the state and the individual but rather as one between men and women. To shed

light on Creon's mindset, John Gould explains that in Classical Athens women

did not have the right to exercise free speech in the

assemblies, which was a hallmark of being a citizen. Neither did they have the

right to vote, to serve on juries, or to own property. And that the woman is incapable of a self-determined act, as almost in law an un-person" (44). Thus

for Creon the very thought that a woman could dominate him in any sense of the

word is one that is unfathomable and a direct threat to his masculinity. His use

of the words " rule" and the finality in the line " while I live" also serves to shed light on his belief that the political sphere is one that is firmly

designated as masculine and that women have no business transgressing the

boundaries laid out during his lifetime. This is perfectly exemplified by Creon's reaction to the news of Polyneices' burial when he angrily exclaims, "What man has dared to do it?"

(248), he incorrectly assumes that this political transgression, could only have been committed by a man. Thus assuming that all acts of political disobedience and transgressions of power are inherently masculine.

Following

on there is no character perhaps other than Creon who embodies this masculinity

we are exploring through power, better than Clytemnestra in The Oresteia as she is forced to "adopt

characteristics of the dominant sex to achieve her goals" (Pomeroy 98).

Clytemnestra

occupies a space in which she is the sole commander of control in her interactions with Agamemnon, and thoroughly emasculates him in order to exercise her power, dominance and adopted masculinity over him. One such instance, is when Clytemnestra greets Agamemnon upon his return with clothes

for him to walk on and he rebukes her stating that it is "embroidered stuffs –

stuff for gossip," (Agamemnon 1012-3). "Do not by woman's methods make me

effeminate ... nor strewing my path with cloths make it invidious ... I tell you honour me as a man." (1015-1020). After stating this, Agamemnon submits to

her desire and is lead into the palace to his slaughter. Agamemnon's easy submission to Clytemnestra is inextricably linked to the fact that he views her as feminine first and thus incapable of murdering or even emasculating him as he states. Thus whilst Clytemnestra's feminine wiles serve to benefit her it is ultimately her fluidity and complete command of her masculine identity which allows her to triumph. This is explained by McClure who states that " Clytemnestra plays the part of a faithful wife before the male chorus, the messenger, and ultimately her husband, but abandons this disguise once she has successfully carried out her plan" (27). This is best seen when she recounts her murder of Agamemnon and states 'Twice I struck him, and with two groans his limbs relaxed...here is Agamemnon, my husband, now a corpse' (Agamemnon 1385-1405). Clytemnestra appears to speak about Agamemnon as if he were an enemy whilst presenting the defence of her actions, reiterating the justifications for the murder on a number of occasions (Lefkowitz 175). Clytemnestra's complete detachment and cold acceptance of the success of her revenge frame her ultimately as masculine as she has achieved ultimate power and dominion over another human being by murdering them and exacting this through revenge which the chorus state is the

duty and act of a man (1643-5). Thus rejecting any attachments of submissiveness or femininity that could be attached to her because of her gender, and ultimately embodying the masculine ideal of command and power which even the chorus begrudgingly admit she has achieved through her revenge.

Moving on from Clytemnestra, it is important that we focus our attention on the Chorus in both *Antigone* and *The Oresteia*,

as the chorus subtly reinforces our accepted definitions of masculinity by aligning masculinity with power and strength and femininity as a direct juxtaposition to this. In *Antigone*, the Chorus' first appear in the play with a narration of "Sun's own radiance" (99) shining on "the man who had come from Argos with all his armor / running now in headlong fear as you shook his bridle free" (106-107). The animalistic imagery

used to compare the warrior coming from Argos with a horse shaking his "bridle

free", serves in aligning masculinity as a forceful, natural energy that's power is entrenched within the natural world and thus timeless and unshakeable

in its position as a constant. The equation of "radiance" with the man from Argos, also serve to make us as readers associate masculinity as something which is light and good and thus not something which we should refute or deem

as a risk to us. It is important to note however, that the chorus would have

consisted entirely of Theban men and thus their vision and ideals of the world

would've aligned with the masculine and patriarchal ideal that we are arguing

in this essay as being a rejection of feminine traits among others. This is easier to see when the chorus describe Ismene with traditionally female characteristics of excessive emotion and beautified grief: " She loves her sister and mourns, / with clouded brow and bloodied cheeks, / tears on her lovely face" (40). There is no allusion to power or strength in the chorus' description of Ismene but rather a sad fragile image of a young woman, a direct

juxtaposition to the strength and animalistic imagery that was used to describe

the man from Argos. This is further emphasised by the chorus' description of the masculine warrior as " screaming shrill, / like an eagle over the land he flew" (111-112). The use of similes to liken the man to a hunting bird only serves in furthering the argument that masculinity for the chorus and for the people in Classical Athens to whom this would have been performed would largely

align masculinity with power, virility and the very act of being and doing.

Where Ismene is described as passive and grief stricken, the chorus' cements

into the audience's head that the masculinity which runs the public sphere is one which rejects these feminine traits and is deeply aligned with the natural

world and thus intrinsically linked as a result of that to power and strength as the natural world is a constant.

Whilst the Chorus in *Antigone* immediately recognize and respond to any traits of masculinity that are displayed by a man, they are not so quick to offer this same description to Clytemnestra and only acquiesce as the play goes on and her role as Agamemnon's successor in his absence is cemented. Yet despite this,

Clytemnestra manages to be recognized instantaneously as having a masculine role by the watchmen who claims she is a, 'woman in passionate heart and man in strength of purpose.' (32-35). This is particularly interesting to note as Sarah Pomeroy states that 'womanly behaviour was characterised then...by submissiveness and modesty' (98), yet Clytemnestra's language is anything but modest as she uses her oratory power to command men. Simon Goldhill supports this as he argues that "Clytemnestra dominates the stage, recounts the most impressive speeches and skillfully manipulates language in order to achieve power. (35)". The significance of Clytemnestra's command of speech as a means of exercising power must not be

understated as McClure elaborates that " to be a citizen meant to participate

actively in the speech of the city, whether in the courts, the Council, the Assembly, or the agora" (8). However, this was only reserved for men, making

Clytemnestra's command of language as a tool of power another way in which she

rejects her feminine traits in order to embrace the power and freedom masculinity affords her to exact her revenge. In Agamemnon's absence Clytemnestra cements her power among her people by adopting masculine traits

and infiltrating the public sphere that was reserved for men, yet the only way

she is able to do this is to shed her feminine traits and become masculinized through her control of language and the success of this is displayed by the chorus' recognition of her as a peer. McClure goes on to support this as she states that " her control of public discursive practices contingent upon her possession of masculine power reflects a profound inversion of gender roles"

(74). The chorus eventually succumb to Clytemnestra's oratory skills and proclaim, " you have spoken like a man and our protector" (261). This validation

of Clytemnestra's oratory skills as being equal to a man cement just how much

she has embodied the masculine identity and just how far removed her masculinity now is from the feminine traits which it is in direct juxtaposition to. Clytemnestra goes on to sustain this relationship with the chorus as

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rather

than speaking with other women, McClure notes that she speaks to the male chorus for the majority of the play and they act as her audience (72). Thus reiterating the positioning of masculinity in *The Oresteia* as being a rejection of submissiveness and femininity,

and rather an embracing of the power that masculinity can afford within the public realm as Clytemnestra uses for her own gain.

In much the same way that Clytemnestra sheds

her feminine identity in order to navigate the social realm of Classical Athens

through adopting a masculinized identity. Characters such as Aegisthus in

The Oresteia and Haimon in *Antigone* are emasculated by Clytemnestra

and Creon respectively as they are deemed to not be masculine enough or reject

the definition of masculinity we have laid out. For Aegisthus, he is described as tending to Clytemnestra's hearth (1435-1436), the ultimate gender reversal

as the hearth lands firmly within the domestic sphere yet Aegisthus is the one

who is commanding it. This only adds to the strength of the masculinity that

Clytemnestra has constructed around her and provides us with a

measurement for

just how emasculated Aegisthus is that he as a Theban man is tending to a

hearth in which we have not seen Clytemnestra described as doing once in the

play. Aegisthus is then repeatedly baited by the chorus who refer to him as a "woman" (1858-1872), due to his cowardly act in allowing Clytemnestra to strike Agamemnon in his stead. This insult is not only repeated by the Chorus but also by Orestes who calls Clytemnestra and Aegisthus "a pair of women – for he is a woman as surely as she." (Libation Bearers 286-287). The fact that Aegisthus' masculinity is being juxtaposed with Clytemnestra is a testament to how emasculated he is as she possesses all the masculine traits which he has failed to show, and the traits which he is left with reduce him to being described as a "woman" as he is not discernible any longer. This cements our reading of masculinity as being a rejection of feminine traits and submissiveness as if we are to take Aegisthus as an example of failed masculinity. It would be fair for our comparison to naturally lead us to Clytemnestra who possesses all the masculine qualities of power, command and lack of submissiveness which Aegisthus fails to show, ultimately placing her in control of the masculine role in the relationship and play.

This relationship is echoed in Antigone as Creon questions Haemon's masculinity once he realises Haemon is a danger

to the

political/public power he holds as a result of Haemon's love for Antigone.

Peter Miller argues that Creon's "tyranny has

undermined the ability of Haimon to claim a social and gendered identity outside the bounds of his regime" (164). Creon's "regime" we can take to

understand here as being his inability to allow women to have any form of control over a man, as he believes that power must be absolute and any form of

submissiveness is a sign of femininity. This is perfectly captured by Creon's subsequent insults laid upon Haimon, in which he refers to him as being on the

"woman's side" (740), for being "weaker than a woman" (746) and a "woman's

salve" (756). It is interesting to note that each insult Creon attaches to Haemon

aligns Haimon with weakness and being submissive. To Creon his masculinity, is

defined by its juxtaposition to femininity and we can conclude that he does not

feel that there is any fluidity between masculinity and femininity. Yet if we are to take Abrams definition of sex and gender to account then, "sex (a person's identification as male or female) is determined by anatomy, gender (masculinity or femininity in personality traits and behavior)

can be largely independent of anatomy, and is a social construction that is

diverse, variable, and dependent on historical circumstances" (113). Creon's definition of masculinity is firmly ensconced in what he feels a man in Classical Athens would have been like and lends strength to Peter Miller's argument that tyranny has produced in Creon a hyper masculinity which prevents him from seeing anything beyond what he defines as masculine. To Creon this would be his political power and the firmly set boundaries between femininity and masculinity which he believes are there in order to sustain societal order.

Thus Haemon's flaunting of Creon's set definition of masculinity only serve to fuel Creon's own hyper-masculinity which manifests itself as a direct rejection of any and all feminine traits.

Summarily both Antigone and The Orestai explore the representation of masculinity through the characters of Creon and Clytemnestra and the ways in which masculinity for both of these characters are undoubtedly tied with the power they derive from it. Within the context of Classical Athens, the masculinity displayed by both Creon and Clytemnestra is hyper masculine at times in order to respond to the shifting power dynamics that occur throughout the plays. Yet ultimately, in both of these masculinity <https://assignbuster.com/in-within-the-context-of-power-and/>

is firmly defined as the rejection of female traits of passivity and submissiveness.