

# [The oresteia: nets, deception, and dehumanization](https://assignbuster.com/the-oresteia-nets-deception-and-dehumanization/)

In Aeschylus’ The Oresteia, the motif of nets reoccurs throughout each play–each occurrence having its own meaning. The motif of nets is seen around seventeen times in the Oresteia, thus creating the assumption that all seventeen mentions of “ nets” hold the same definition or value. Although the motif carries a negative connotation in each occurrence because of its ties to deception and manipulation, there is deeper meaning attached to each mention of the motif in The Agamemnon, Libation Bearers, and The Eumenides which symbolizes a greater empowerment for women. Throughout the three plays, nets symbolize several facets of entanglement and deception, both concepts which seem to be gendered as womanly characteristics; however the motif is also used to conceptualize the inevitable grasp of fate while also developing a symbolic and animalistic dynamic between the hunter and the prey–thus provoking the idea that the motif symbolizes an underlying attempt to subvert male dominance in Greek society.

In all three plays, there are instances where the motif of nets is solely used to symbolize the deception and entanglement of men. In lines 1489-1492 of Agamemnon, the chorus sings “ O king, my king, how shall I weep for you? What can I say out of my heart of pity? Caught in this spider’s web you lie.” Regarding the themes of deception and entanglement, the web and net motifs are used interchangeably. By using the word “ web,” the action of entrapping Agamemnon is viewed as feminine since most female spiders spin webs. The sense of deception and manipulation is gendered, identifying women as the arbitrators of men’s tragic fate. This concept is reinforced in line 1015 of the Libation Bearers when Orestes says “ Now I can stand to mourn and speak before this web that killed my father.” Here, Orestes implies that the web is his mother, Clytemnestra, thus assigning a female gender to the motif. These webs and nets are a tool of entrapment–symbolizing authority over, in this case, men. In line 506 of Libation Bearers, Orestes suggests that a fisherman’s net drowns from the weight of the soaked up water. Here, Orestes implies that nets are heavy and difficult to break out of, symbolizing women’s grasp on men in The Oresteia. In line 460 of The Eumenides, Orestes says “ It was my mother of the dark heart, who entangled him in intricate nets and cut him down.” By mentioning both his mother and the “ intricate nets,” Orestes is stating that his mother, through deception and manipulation, was able to entrap Agamemnon and overpower him. The phrase “ cut him down” displays a power dynamic in which the woman is dominant. The traditional power dynamic is further modified through the use of the net motif in all three plays.

The net motif is also used to juxtapose the assumed gender roles in Greek Culture. By using the net motif to describe the entrapped individual as an animal or beast, the perpetrator is taking a position of dominance in this animalistic dynamic between hunter and prey. The hunter–usually being a man–is now a woman, Clytemnestra. In Line 492 of Libation Bearers, Orestes and Electra say “ Think of the casting net that they contrived for you / They caught you like a beast in toils no bronzesmith made.” Here, Electra and Orestes are intentionally angering the dead spirit of Agamemnon by reminding him of his death at the hand of his wife. By comparing Agamemnon to a beast who was caught by a net, the motif creates an image of a hunter trapping its prey. Clytemnestra has caught her prey, thus subverting the initial assumptions about the female gender.

The same power dynamic rooted in the net motif is reinforced in Lines 997-1000 of the “ Libation Bearers” when Orestes says “ what shall I call it and be right, in all eloquence? Trap for an animal or winding sheet for a dead man? Or bath curtain? Since it is a net, robe you could call it, to entangle a man’s feet.” Here, Orestes is describing the tool used by his mother to kill his own father; however, he ascribes several descriptions to the tool. Orestes mentions how the net, or robe, is a trap for an animal–the animal being his father. Again, the traditional power dynamic between the genders is confused because of the opposite gender roles for the hunter and prey. By using the net motif in order to complicate the traditional power dynamic between genders, Clytemnestra is displayed as an authoritative woman who is able to cut down a man like a hunter traps its prey.

The use of nets to symbolize a new power dynamic is also displayed in The Eumenides. In line 110, Clytemnestra says “ Now I watch all these honors trampled into the ground, and he is out and gone away like a hunted fawn so lightly, from the very middle of your nets.” Here, Clytemnestra is talking about The Furies, who are all women. Clytemnestra is urging The Furies to go after Orestes, their prey. The nets, in this case, are not being used in the context of Clytemnestra’s deception, but instead, are being used to describe this female relationship to the hunter-prey dynamic. Orestes is described as a hunted fawn–symbolizing his weakness and juvenile actions. In line 146 of The Eumenides, the chorus says “ The hunted beast has slipped clean from our nets and gone. Sleep defeated me, and I lost my prey.” By identifying the women as the hunters or entrappers and the males as the prey, the net motif allows women to subvert the presumed authority of men. The net motif is primarily ascribed to authoritative women.

The net motif in The Oresteia not only displays how women utilized deception and manipulation in order to entrap men but also displayed how women were able to attain a position of authority through this new hunter-prey dynamic. The uses of the words “ web” and “ net” may hold negative connotations when ascribing the words to specifically women; however, in a time where women were usually treated as wartime gifts, the women in these three plays did what had to be done in order to modify the male-dominant dynamic present in Greek culture. The net motif can be compared to Machiavelli’s statement “ It is better to be feared than to be loved.” Clytemnestra hunted down her prey–choosing to be feared as a dominant woman rather than loved. The fact that The Oresteia displays such dominant woman figures, provokes the question of whether or not the Greek audience–composed of mostly men–were perceiving these women through a misogynistic lens or if the author of these plays purposely introduced these articulate women to express their discomfort in the traditional power dynamic.