

Subconscious motivations and conscious triggers of Clytemnestra in Agamemnon



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From its first performance in Ancient Greece several centuries ago to present day, Aeschylus's *Agamemnon* remains a quintessential example of the definitive Greek tragedy, continually captivating audiences with its progressive depiction of feminine complexity. In the play, women are represented by the anti heroine, Queen Clytemnestra of Mycenae, who in the climax of the first act, vindictively murders the titular King Agamemnon. While psychoanalytical and archetypal criticisms differ in regards to what desire inherently drives the character to murder her husband (power and freedom, or revenge) both identify that Clytemnestra is driven primarily by pre-existing subconscious desires (centered on her identity) that are only 'realised and awakened' by conscious life events, specifically, the death of her daughter Iphigenia.

Although the term 'femme fatale' was not coined until the twentieth century, literary history has been continually blessed with images of strong women who use their sensuality to skillfully manipulate those around them. Clytemnestra, protagonist of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, is one such example. As Sneed writes, Aeschylus's anti heroine 'embodies every characteristic of a classic femme fatale' by 'avoiding traditional romance and domesticity.' Even before her initial appearance, the watchman describes his queen as 'a woman in passionate heart and man in strength of purpose'. The chorus also joins in, stating that the character 'is a woman with no fear of the husband' and who speaks 'as wisely as a prudent man'. The awed, wary and even fearful tones in which supporting male characters describe the protagonist demonstrate the extent of which Clytemnestra disfigures typical 'womanly behaviour', with her cunning, intelligence and strength of purpose, thus

justifying her femme fatalistic classification. By looking at other literary characters with the same archetype, the subconscious workings of Clytemnestra's own character can be revealed. Femme fatale character arcs generally revolve around a pursuit of freedom, dominance and empowerment, achieved by eliminating figures that restrict them. Given this, Sneed concludes that Clytemnestra's inherent motivation is her subconscious desire for power.

This is not the only motivation that has been brought forward by literary critics. Alsop paints Clytemnestra as a vindictive individual seeking retribution for the gradual destruction of her identity by her husband. Again, the expositional speech of the chorus provides evidence for this particular motivation. The old men of Argos are heard calling their queen an ' architect of vengeance', and a ' mother' of ' child-avenging fury'. Clytemnestra herself also betrays her grief in her dialogue. In her return speech, she compares the king to a tyrannous ' Zeus' who ' tramples the bitter virgin grape', alluding to the daughter he trampled in his war conquest. Additionally, her own justification of the murder: ' he sacrificed his own child, she whom I bore,' evokes strong emotional images of a devastated, grieving mother robbed of her motherhood and maternal identity.

On a more psychosexually charged note, Alsop also suggests that Clytemnestra's unconscious ' male' personality, also desires justice. This notion is also implied as she describes her husband's mistress Cassandra , who lies dead beside him as someone who '... has brought for my bed an added relish of delight.' For Clytemnestra, Cassandra represents the unfair double standards of men and women regarding infidelity. Despite being in <https://assignbuster.com/subconscious-motivations-and-conscious-triggers-of-clytemnestra-in-agamemnon/>

the same position of power as her husband, Clytemnestra was condemned for taking a lover and forced to deny her affair, while he was celebrated and rewarded with an object to commit adultery with. Thus, it can be ultimately concluded that she was driven to murder both for the repression/theft of her subconscious and conscious identities.

Despite the obvious differences in what the two critiques believe to be Clytemnestra's primary subconscious motives, both authors agree that without a conscious world event, these dormant desires would never have gained the ambition to reach action and cite the sacrifice of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's daughter by the latter, to be this igniting event. The name Iphigenia is never explicitly mentioned by any of the main characters. However, the brutal nature of her death is constantly alluded to leading up to the events of Agamemnon's murder. The earliest occurrence of this is by the Chorus, who recounts the young girl's final moments: '...the bridle chokes her voice...saffron robes pouring over the sand...glance like arrows showering/wounding every murderer through with pity.'. While the act of war sacrifice would be common in pre-democratic Greece, the vivid, melancholic passages strike the audience in the same way that they impact the anti heroine, causing them to better understand and sympathise with her subsequent action.

The resounding effects of Iphigenia's demise are depicted in the entirety of The Oresteia's first act, Agamemnon, which takes place ten years from the sacrifice. Clytemnestra is depicted to have shifted from an insignificant maternal figure to a hardened, independent woman, capable of running a kingdom in her husband's absence. In addition to this, her vengeance has <https://assignbuster.com/subconscious-motivations-and-conscious-triggers-of-clytemnestra-in-agamemnon/>

become intelligent—and she is able to recognise that patience is a necessary burden in exacting a perfect revenge. According to Sneed, this increased intelligence is awakened following the development of the protagonist's animus (male identity), from one who simply craves physical power, to one that craves social power. This notion is indicated in her actions following the return of her husband to Argos, in which she utilises ' Agamemnon's patriarchal sense of value' in her deception. By playing the part of the typical ' submissive and modest', ' simpering' ' coy wife', Clytemnestra demonstrates the patience required to exact the perfect revenge. In a similar way, Alsop also recognises that following the event, Clytemnestra exhibits a change in mentality. The murder of her daughter causes a ' realisation' of her identity's continual repression, and also presents a means of which she can consciously, justify her later immoral action. This idea is demonstrated in her dialogue following the death of Agamemnon, in which she states that the late king was a ' man who did her (me) wrong'. The quote presented highlights that while Iphigenia's death causes the heroine grief, and allowed her to become the woman she was required to be, the event was not what she was truly avenging.

Regardless of what motives ultimately drove her to murder, Aeschylus' brilliant characterization of the Clytemnestra as both an avenger and villain can be ambivalently interpreted in two ways. It is possible that he wrote the character of with misogynistic intent to reflect Athenian attitudes and horrify his audience, something he was renown for. This has been put forward by several scholars who cite that common Athenian attitudes of the time would have ' shuddered' at the homicidal tendencies of a woman and consider her

mad. This is reflected in the chorus' attitudes to the murder of their king. More radically, the author was an early feminist who believed that the complexity of such a woman could cause reflection of the traditional gender role of women in society. This is supported in her character's unrepressed ambition and drive, and also in the admiration of the strength of her character by the male characters surrounding her. Given the admirable strength of the character, the latter seems more potent as a plausible explanation. The given evidence above demonstrate that Aeschylus did not wish to present women as perfect, angelic beings or submissive vassals of men as they were traditionally portrayed in art. Rather, he chooses to depict them as average humans— capable of possessing inherent flaws and intimate desires, and acting on them as their male counterparts do.

In the end, both critiques presented above are correct in their recognition and analysis of Clytemnestra's possible motives for liberating action. However, to give one particular desire precedence over another then corrupts Aeschylus' supposed intention. That is, to portray women as intrinsically complex human beings, equal to men. Given this, it is not possible to discern a single motive as the sole drive of Clytemnestra's ambition without damaging her utter complexity. It is more fitting to say that the character was driven to murder by a myriad of reasons that cannot fully be comprehended by anyone other than Aeschylus himself.