

The representation of masculinity and its ability to liberate women in  
'Antigone' by Sophocles and 'Agamemnon' by Aeschylus

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Abstract:

What happens when masculinity is utilised by women in order to overcome patriarchal oppression? In this essay the discussion builds around how the famous female tragic protagonists, Antigone and Clytemnestra, wield traits associated with masculinity to gain agency and power as they strive to liberate themselves from their male oppressors.

In the plays *Antigone* by Sophocles and *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, masculinity is conveyed as having hegemonic power and always exists in antithesis to femininity. In this essay I will explore how masculinity is represented through the female protagonists of these plays. More specifically, how Antigone and Clytemnestra use or embody traits associated with masculinity in their contemporary society, in order to overcome the authority of their patriarchal figures which oppress or injure them. These masculine elements are conveyed by the women through their authoritative language, their escape from the domestic sphere and into the public domain of men, as well as seizing agency and being in control of the plot as well as the actions of other characters in the play.

Antigone conveys masculine characteristics through the lexical field of war. In her opening speech she describes the injustice of leaving her brother unburied using military allusions in the phrase “the doom reserved for enemies/ marches on the ones we love” (12-13). This presents her stance of battle and aggression that is kept throughout the play as she carries out her plan to honour her brother Polynices with funeral rites equal to those of Eteocles. She also portrays herself as willing to die a man’s death which in antiquity meant to die in war: “even if I die in the act, that death will be a glory” (86). She even seems to crave this kind of death as suggested by the exclamatory imperative in the phrase “Give me glory!” (561) echoing a hero’s cry as she challenges Creon to not delay her death any further. Creon also mirrors this language of war and directs it to Antigone, suggesting that she has indeed managed to penetrate through to the realm of men and is now a threat to his rule like any other man: “I am not the man, not now: she is the man/ if this victory goes to her” (541-542). However, through this phrase masculinity’s hierarchical nature is also revealed. As Butler suggests in *Antigone’s Claim*, Antigone assumes “a manhood that cannot be shared” (9), meaning that if she becomes the man, Creon will automatically be displaced from his position and deemed as inferior.

Another way in which Antigone's language can be perceived as masculine is through the contrast created between her and Ismene's language. In the play, Antigone's sister symbolises the paragon of a woman in the ancient world in her submission towards authority as well as her obedience towards the boundaries in which her gender is confined in set by the patriarchy: "Remember we are women" (74), "we must submit in this" (77), "I must obey/ the ones who stand in power" (80). Ismene's words here serve to juxtapose Antigone's masculine energy with the docility expected of women at the time. Thus, Antigone is excluded from the sphere of femininity as her active and aggressive intentions through her words invoke much more male than female associations. As a result, using authoritative language Antigone enters the hegemonic world of men through which she gains the power and agency to achieve her plan.

In Aeschylus' play *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra, like Antigone, also uses the lexical field of war which portrays masculinity through her language. In her rapid exchange with Agamemnon she similarly uses words such as "battle", "yield", "victory", "contest", "winner", "give way" (939-942). At the same time, the pressure and aggression she imposes onto Agamemnon, through the use of stichomythia in this scene, allows her to dominate the conversation, managing to persuade Agamemnon to "go into [his] palace-halls treading over purples" (957), "embroideries" (937) and "rich textiles" (948). Clytemnestra's insistence on Agamemnon to step out of his war vehicle in this scene, "get out of this carriage" (906), and to walk on these elaborate fabrics, seems to imply both Clytemnestra's attempt to diminish Agamemnon's masculine power as well as suggesting that her imposing and dictating language manage to turn the symbols of her domesticity (the fabrics) into a weapon, where the emphasis on the colour of the fabrics, "purples", foreshadows the bloodshed in the death of Agamemnon and his mistress. Falling for her flattery "blest with success" (940) and "you are in fact the winner" (942), Agamemnon reveals a fragile aspect of hegemonic masculinity which implies

a sense of blindness that comes as a denial in losing authority and power. Wanting to avoid gender role conflict as the APA suggests that men experience when they are challenged in “success, power, and competition” (3), Agamemnon chooses to believe his authority remains unchallenged as he comforts himself by putting emphasis on his position of authority: “guardian of my house” (914), “your speech was appropriate for my absence” (915).

Clytemnestra’s masculinity however, is not only portrayed through her own language but through the language that the chorus uses to talk to, or about her throughout the play. These lines which are addressed to Clytemnestra explicitly convey the features (in **bold**) of her speech which portray the masculine characteristics she has adopted: “Lady, you speak **good sense** like a **prudent** man” (351), “We marvel at your tongue, at your **bold** mouth” (1399), “**arrogant** in your talk” (1426). Moreover, not only the style but also the quantity of her speech is evidence of the masculine traits she embodies. Clytemnestra often has long winded speeches and in fact speaks much more than Agamemnon. He even points out that she “drew it out at length” (915) despite the fact that women were often not allowed to appear, let alone to speak in public during those times, no matter their status in society. Thus, by having Clytemnestra’s first speech addressed to the chorus and Agamemnon pointing out the length of the speech, Clytemnestra uses language to remove herself from the silent role of women in the society and to move into the public, a space reserved only for men.

Therefore, another way in which masculinity is represented through these women and is in their attempt to overcome the oppression of patriarchal rule is by physically or symbolically escaping from the private sphere and moving into the public world of men. In *Antigone* this is evident from the first scene as Antigone and Ismene meet outside the palace, “past the gates” (23). In this scene the two sisters are also caught in conflict as to whether or not to keep the act of burial of their brother a secret. Here, Ismene once again serves to contrast Antigone’s state of mind, revealing the antithesis between masculine and feminine behaviour.

Ismene cries, “don’t, at least, blurt this to anyone./ Keep it a secret.” (98-99) while Antigone states, “shout it from the rooftops. I’ll hate you all the more for the silence – tell the world!” (100-101). Thus, Antigone removes herself from the feminine sphere of submissiveness and moves into the outspoken world of the public sphere and continues to do so throughout the play. By rejecting all that a woman represents in this society, she must also therefore reject her sister: “Never share my dying,/ don’t lay claim to what you never touched” (615-617). In addition, in the phrase “Your wisdom appealed to one world – mine, another” (628) Antigone points out the antithesis of the two spheres and differentiates herself from Ismene’s world which is evidently that of femininity. In addition, Antigone not only steps into the public sphere by denying her womanhood, but also establishes herself by expressing her views about the men’s world to the all-male chorus and to the authority, Creon: “These citizens here would all agree, / [*To the CHORUS*] they would praise me too/ if their lips weren’t locked in fear./ [*Pointing to CREON*] Lucky tyrants – the perquisites of power!/ Ruthless power to do and say whatever pleases *them*” (563-567). In these lines Antigone highlights the benefits of authority that can be achieved only by possessing masculine characteristics. The exclamation, as well as the use of the word “lucky” proclaim her desire to wield this power and at the same time portray her in the attempt to procure it by using the outspokenness of a man. As a result, just like Agamemnon, Creon experiences gender role conflict when his authority is challenged, however, he reacts by becoming stubborn and full of pride: “orders/ must be obeyed, large and small,/ right and wrong” (749-751), “I’m not about to prove myself a liar,/ not to my people, no, I’m going to kill her!” (733-734), “rising up against my throne” (601). The repetition of the possessive pronoun ‘my’ in the last two phrases indicate his insecurity over losing his power, and this subsequently is what leads him out of control as he rules with cruelty and indeed proves himself unworthy of being a just authority. Thus, by rejecting femininity - shown through her rejection of her sister and her outspokenness against her male oppressor - Antigone establishes

herself within the male sphere of society and endows herself with power traditionally denied to her gender at the time.

In *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra's entrance into the public world is similarly, if not more starkly portrayed than Antigone's. In her first appearance, Clytemnestra literally crosses the threshold from the private to the public sphere before she even speaks as she "[*appears at the palace-door*]" (557) and "(*coming forward from the door*)" (264) as the chorus addresses her directly. In addition, her first speech is addressed to the public (chorus) (264-267), stating her intent of assertiveness, and discarding her feminine modesty for power. To establish her role within the public sphere of men however, she must also displace Agamemnon from his position of authority, and she does this from their first encounter (855-913). In this speech, Clytemnestra begins by only addressing the chorus and avoids speaking the name of Agamemnon, acknowledging him only through a gesture (*pointing to AGAMEMNON*) (865) and epithets such as "my husband" (865) or even with the more impersonal, "this man" (866). The effect of Agamemnon remaining anonymous in her speech emasculates him as this creates an allusion to the condition of women at the time, and the fact that it was not deemed proper for them to be named in public. Thus, Clytemnestra assumes the role of the *kyrios* of the house and by stepping out, Agamemnon must become inferior and step into the house as the hierarchical system of masculinity demands. In addition, Agamemnon's death within the house and shrouded in fabrics is a symbol of the domestic turning into a distorted battlefield, filled with aggression and violence. This is starkly portrayed as "*women begin to gather up the fabrics in the direction of the door*" (972) an indication that the domestic sphere swallows him up, both because of his emasculation and the menacing symbolism of the distorted house.

Liberated from the domestic sphere, the women strive further to establish their gained power by exercising their agency and thus diverging further from femininity whose energy implies passivity rather than action. Antigone's activeness is emphasised in her own words,

“even if I die in the act, that death will be glory” (86), “I did it. I don’t deny a thing” (492) as well as the people’s words, “such a brutal death for such a glorious action” (778) where the phrases “act” “I did it” and “action” highlight her agency and thus masculine force. In addition, her phrase “I have no love for a friend who loves in words alone” (612), portrays that Antigone appreciates action more than any other of the masculine elements she has adopted, suggesting that agency is the most powerful feature provided through masculinity, and this is why she holds on to it until the end of the play. Despite her fear of death “Oh god, the voice of death. It’s come, it’s here” (1025) and lamentation over her womanhood, “denied my part in the wedding-songs” (906) which bring back some elements of her femininity, by killing herself and removing Creon’s agency in the act of killing her, Antigone maintains her power over the authority which oppresses her.

Even though Antigone keeps her agency until the end, Clytemnestra seems to have much more control over the plot of the play than Antigone does. Masculinity in *Agamemnon* therefore is also represented as the medium through which Clytemnestra gains agency over the actions of other characters and thus over the unfolding of the plot itself. She even describes her “right hand here, a just architect” (1406) after murdering her victims. The use of the word “architect” here accurately describes her whole role in this play, as all actions, delays and inactions fall under her influence. For example, her initial speech in the presence of Agamemnon halts him from climbing down from his carriage, “[CLYTEMNESTRA *appears at the door of the palace; her speech stops AGAMEMNON from dismounting*]” (854) and as the scene continues, her control over his physical movements becomes increasingly evident as she dictates, “get out of this carriage” (905-906), “give way to me willingly. / AGAMEMNON (*beginning to get down*)” (942-943), “*begins walking over fabrics towards the palace-door*” (957). A similar moment where she has full control over a character and by extension the plot, can be found in the final scene where Aegisthus quarrels with the chorus: “(*breaking the silence*

*she has held since AEGISTHUS' entry*). No! No, dearest of men, [...] Go to the house, you esteemed elders" (1653-1657). Here, Clytemnestra stops the action from escalating, and by doing so even brings the play to its close. Once again, using flattery just like with Agamemnon, she persuades Aegisthus with the phrase "In our twin mastery of this house" letting him believe that he also has power over the plot, and so he follows her into the house as if under a spell. Thus, determining Agamemnon's and Aegisthus' actions on stage conveys her full control over them which consequently portrays the elimination of their own agency, signifying Clytemnestra's hegemonic ascent through another of her adopted male associated traits.

Masculinity is thus presented as the medium through which the women in these plays obtain power and agency to carry out their plans. Antigone and Clytemnestra move into the sphere of masculinity because they have the ability to embody or perform, as Butler suggests in *Gender Trouble*, these masculine characteristics. However, the women are able to ascend the staircase of hegemonic masculinity since its hierarchical nature which defines it, is also what makes it fragile. Its fragility appears through the obsession of the ones who wield it over the hegemonic positions which they hold, as their fear of becoming inferior imbues them with pride and stubbornness (in the case of Creon) or blinds them to the truth behind insincere words of flattery (in the case of Agamemnon and Aegisthus) as they relish in their admiration by others. Thus, slipping through these cracks, Antigone and Clytemnestra manage to displace the men in the plays who symbolise patriarchy, through their authoritative language, their escape from the domestic sphere and their achieved agency.

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