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Notes on Women's Responses to Infidelity in

Greek Tragedy

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In a society in which one of the main virtues of a married woman was the obedience to her husband,ⁱ Greek tragedies offer us unusual examples of women's reactions to male infidelity. Those range from female vengeance, an avant-garde feminist action so to speak action, to attempts (coming from both genders) to subdue women's rage and to mislabel their jealousy, and I shall assess several of such instances by examining Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, and Euripides' *Andromache* and *Medea*.

In the first play of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Agamemnon casually introduces his captive Trojan woman, Cassandra, to his wife: "Take this stranger girl within | now and

be kind. The conqueror who uses softly | his power, is watched from far in the kind eyes of God | and this slave's yoke is one no one will wear from choice. | Gift of the host to me, and flower exquisite | from all my many treasures, se attends me here.” (Ag. 950-5).ⁱⁱ

Two points surprise us here: first, the king's request that his wife treat his captive gently and, second, the lack of precision in the language defining the nature of his relationship with Cassandra.ⁱⁱⁱ True, Agamemnon softens the demand that the wife should act benevolently toward the Cassandra – likely his mistress – by invoking a universal principle, namely the innocence of the defeated and the piety of the gentle conquerors, among whom he seems to include Clytemnestra. Whether he is in a sexual relationship with Cassandra is also left diplomatically unspoken, although the fact that he deems her highest among his treasures implies that she may very well be his lover. Following Agamemnon's suggestion, Clytemnestra invites Cassandra into the house and pretends to show kindness (1035-46) even giving her other examples of mythical sufferers (e.g. Heracles 1040-1) who have become slaves – presumably to offer the enslaved woman some solace. She grows increasingly impatient with Cassandra's unresponsiveness to her demands (1047-68) and goes back into the house leaving the prophetess with the chorus. In her defiant speech, after the murders of Agamemnon and Cassandra, Clytemnestra gives the death of Iphigenia as her prime cause for her revenge on her husband (1414-18). However, the queen presents the second corpse, of Cassandra, who “shared his bed” (*xyneunos*, 1443), and, despite the earlier ambiguity in Agamemnon speech, she underscores that the prophetess deserves her fate as a concubine, in a last embrace with her dead husband (1440-7).

Is then marital infidelity yet another reason for Clytemnestra's actions? She certainly implies so, particularly in justifying the killing of Cassandra. But this could not have passed as a valid excuse for the fifth-century Athenian audience; instead it likely reflected male fear of the consequences of uninhibited female power.^{iv} The queen herself has a lover, Aegisthus, she does not seem driven by jealousy, for she does not love her husband, but appears to punish infidelity out of spite and perhaps from a sense of hurt pride.

Another, quite different response to male infidelity occurs in Sophocles' *Trachiniae*, from Deianeira, the wife of Heracles, who appears to be dramatically constructed as the opposite of the Aeschylean Clytemnestra. Faced with a very similar situation, her husband's involvement with a young captive woman, Iole, she adopts a completely different attitude toward the situation. First and foremost, Deianeira loves her husband. The absence of the husband gone to war represents a permanent source of anxiety for the faithful wife, as Deianeira confesses to the chorus,^v while Clytemnestra feigns similar concerns in her 'welcoming' speech to her husband (*Ag.* 855-94). Secondly, Deianeira tries to repress her anger (*thymousthai* 543; *organein*, 554) against her husband whom she considers ill. Her assumption, that his love for another woman comes from illness, which is a very common in Greek culture,^{vi} brings forgiveness.^{vii} Clearly, while Clytemnestra harbored resentment against Agamemnon in Aeschylus' tragedy, Deianeira attempts to argue against her anger on cultural grounds. Heracles did not want to insult her but hurt her,^{viii} because of Eros and his natural desire for another younger girl (*Tr.* 441-4). Most surprisingly, she declares not only that she feels no resentment against the husband but also no resentment against his mistress.^{ix} Deianeira

shows sympathy for Iole prior to knowing that the girl might be her rival (*Tr.* 320-1).^x Afterwards, Deianeira pities the unfortunate captive instead of blaming her (*Tr.* 464-8), thinking about the universal misery of slavery. She, indeed, displays the kind of gentleness toward Iole that Agamemnon instructed Clytemnestra to show toward Cassandra. The audience may have expected Deianeira to want to kill Iole. Instead, Deianeira openly rejects such crimes (*Tr.* 582-83), desiring to surpass her rival only with love-charms (*Tr.* 584).^{xi} Deianeira understands that the anger of a cheated wife should be directed not toward a poor captive woman but toward her husband, as she implies. But social norms seem to discourage a wise woman from feeling anger (*Tr.* 554). However, Deianeira finds the situation unbearable, particularly because she is aging, while her rival is young (543-54), and attempts to recover Heracles' love through magic. Thus, although Deianeira may have been designed by Sophocles as an unexpected variation on a character type, the vengeful cheated wife, she ends up unwillingly murdering her husband by handing him a magic (poisoned without her knowledge) robe. Thus, Deianeira's character conforms to the expectations for a good wife: forgiving her female rival and not blaming her husband, but the desire to recapture her spouse's love leads to disaster. Ironically, then, though trying to abstain from revenge, Deianeira causes the death of Heracles, who dies in a no less sinister way than Agamemnon in the Aeschylean play.

Another fascinating example can be found in Euripides' *Andromache*. Hermione, who is married to Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, talks to Andromache, her husband's lover, with rage.^{xii} She does not disguise her resentment (like Clytemnestra) and does not show forgiveness toward the captive lover of her husband (like Deianeira), but openly plans to take revenge and kill Andromache (162). She believes that her rival

uses magic drugs (*Andr.* 157) to destroy her relationship with Neoptolemus by preventing her from having children (158).^{xiii} Unusually here the captive woman and the new love is older than the wife. Andromache had been married to Hector and had already had a son. Childlessness, indeed, appears to have justified, to a certain extent, the extra-marital affairs.^{xiv} Nevertheless, it may have seemed unnatural for a man to fall in love with the older captive, and, as we have seen in the *Trachiniae*, the opposite was the norm. Hermione ends her speech by forbidding Andromache to bring Trojan polygamy to Sparta, since it is not right for a man to hold the reins of two women if he wants peace at home (177-80). The chorus appears to agree (*Andr.* 181-2): “a woman's heart is a spiteful (*epiphthonon*) thing and |always very hostile (*dysmenes*) to rivals in marriage.”^{xv}

The angry, jealous response of Hermione may seem to us to depict realistically a wife's response to philandering, whereas the previous restraint and noble forgiveness (feigned by Clytemnestra, or expressed by Deianeira) may have been social *desiderata*. Yet, a surprising speech comes from the captive woman in this Euripidean play. Andromache rejects all the accusations. She is in the terrible situation of other tragic captive women: she does not share the bed with Neoptolemus voluntarily (36-8, 390-3); she calls Neoptolemus "master" (25, 30, 391), whereas she refers to Hector as "husband" (227, 456, 523-5); it is not love, but obedience, that prompts Andromache's speech (543-54).^{xvi} Given her plight, Andromache delivers a speech that is puzzling to us in some respects, as she first analyzes Hermione's feelings and, more generally, reflects on female jealousy. Even if a woman marries a bad husband, or a polygamist in Thrace, should she murder the other women with whom he is involved? Revenge of this sort would be shameful and prove women's sexual insatiability (*aplestian*, 218) – and women may

suffer from this worse than men but they hide it decently (*Andr.* 213-21). This point is certainly shocking to us, modern readers. Why would Andromache describe a woman's desire for revenge, coming from jealousy, in terms of sexual greed? Is it because a woman would not want to share her spouse with others? Shouldn't this accusation of excessive sexual appetite apply rather to the man who is not satisfied with only one woman? Andromache adds that she, a model wife, has in fact helped Hector in his love-affairs whenever Aphrodite failed him, and even went so far as to raise his bastard children (*Andr.* 222-5).^{xvii} Andromache probably does not mean that she acted as a pimp for Hector, whose infidelity may be an Euripidean invention,^{xviii} but that it is appropriate for a woman to tolerate her husband's affairs.^{xix} She continues with an excuse well known from Sophoclean *Deianeira*: Hector's falling in love with other women comes from some illness, implying that no shame should be attached to a man's affair, but rather to a woman's jealous response.

A similar reproach to the bizarre accusation brought by Andromache, can be found in another Euripidean tragedy. Jason blames Medea and, more broadly, the female race for its obsession with sex (*Med.* 568-73), when he is the one looking for a new bride. The misreading of a woman's rage over an affair as excessive sexual appetite (Andromache, Jason),^{xx} suggests a peculiar interpretation of women's jealousy in classical Greece. There is an unfair claim that anger pertaining to jealousy and sexual activity are related, when they are not, and that both should be repressed in women. This unfair association equating jealousy with hypersexuality ought to have silenced a woman, who then would accept the situation with docility. This is precisely what Jason believes has happened to Medea. In her second speech to Jason, Medea pretends to have reasoned

with herself and abandoned her anger (*Med.* 874, 878, etc), as it would befit decent women. Cultural expectations probably compel Jason to buy into her argument easily. When Medea acts as if she is about to accept his marriage plans, Jason admits that it is "natural for women to become angry" (*Med.* 909) at first, when men bring home new loves. The implication is that later the cheated women ought to calm down and accept the situation. Later Jason praises Medea for becoming wise (i.e. letting her anger go), as it befits "a woman of self-control" (*Med.* 913).^{xxi}

Why do we find such a strange confusion of concepts between a woman's desire to keep a partner in a monogamous relationship and hypersexuality? Perhaps we ought to seek the answer in the Athenian society. Because of their dominant position in the household and women's isolation from the life of the polis, generally Athenian men would not have had reasons to worry frequently about romantic rivals.^{xxii} Before marriage, proper girls were under the tutelage of their fathers, and afterwards, as wives, they were usually confined to domestic obligations. Under such conditions, husbands would not have commonly worried about marital infidelity.^{xxiii} Sociological studies indicate that institutional measures, such as arranged marriages and supervised courtship, can minimize the types of behavior that can arouse jealousy.^{xxiv} Athenian men seemed to have had fewer occasions to feel and express the emotion than their wives. Sometimes men appear worried about the possibility of losing their wives' affection. For example, Lysias (1.32-3) mentions a law proposing that seducers be more severely punished than the rapists because they damage a woman's soul, snatching her love away from the husband, while the latter harm only her body.^{xxv} Male concerns about their wives' insatiable sexuality surface in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* and *Thesmophoriazusae*.^{xxvi}

However, outside the literary realm, married women were confined to living inside the household, normally in the company of other women, so hardly tempted to commit adultery. Both women's seclusion and harsh laws against adultery make it likely that men's jealousy occurred most commonly outside the highly regulated institution of marriage, in relation to other men or to *hetaerae* (as New Comedy suggests) – in those situations partners could choose other lovers and were not considered a man's property. Jealousy, therefore, appears to have been characterized by a socio-cultural peculiarity: it affected men only in limited social settings and mostly outside marriage. Men may have therefore misinterpreted women's reactions to their infidelity as excessive sexual desire, nagging, and spiteful overreaction.

Interestingly, in all the other tragedies examined, husbands become amorously involved with captive women, except for the *Medea*, in which Jason is moving from one committed relationship to another, with of higher status. Justification for male infidelity often comes from two sources: (1) the innocence of the victim, a war slave and therefore – presumably – unwilling lover (Cassandra, Iole), whom the wife should therefore forgive because of the hardship and (2) from the association of love and illness, which diminishes the man's responsibility in the affair. In society, wives appear to have been supposed to contain the anger provoked by their husbands' affair and, ultimately, repress their jealousy, but tragic models may challenge the expectations. Both Clytemnestra and Medea pretend to go with the expected attitude and feign forgiveness in order to avert suspicion, in order to be able to strike later more freely. Deianeira forces herself to act as expected but accidentally punishes the unfaithful husband. While the ferocious tragic heroines who do not tolerate their partners' infidelity appear to be dramatic projections of

men's fears, tragedies also suggest that commonly women were expected to tolerate infidelity to such a degree that their natural resentment toward their husbands' affairs was misjudged as hypersexuality.

ⁱ For a recent discussion of this, with earlier bibliography, see, for example, Elizabeth Tetlow, *Women, Crime, and Punishment in Ancient Greek Society*, vol. 2 (New York: Continuum, 2004), 107-8

ⁱⁱ For Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* I am using Richard Lattimore's translation, *Aeschylus I. Oresteia* (Chicago: Chicago University Press); otherwise, translations are mine if not specified.

ⁱⁱⁱ Paula Debnar, "The Sexual Status of Aeschylus' Cassandra," *Classical Philology* 105 (2010): 129-45 reviews the overall ambiguities of Cassandra's sexual relationships (not only with Agamemnon but also previously with Apollo, etc) in the play. On Cassandra's ambiguous language, as well as silence, see for example, Simon Goldhill, *Language, Sexuality, Narrative: The Oresteia*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, 78-85.

^{iv} Froma Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996), 87-122 provides the standard discussion.

^v She "nourishes one fear after another" (*Tr.* 27), is afraid that he has not returned (*Tr.* 37); cf . lines 108; 176.

^{vi} Jaqueline de Romilly, "L'excuse de l' invincible amour dans la tragédie grecque", in J. M. Bremer, S. L. Radt, C. J. Ruijgh eds., *Miscellanea tragica in honorem J. K. Kamerbeek*. (Amstelodami: A. Hakkert, 1976), 309-21, examines erotic illness in lyric and tragic Greek poetry.

^{vii} Edith Hall, *Deianeira Deliberates: Precipitate Decision-Making and Trachiniae*, in Goldhill S. and Hall E. (eds.) *Sophocles and the Greek Tragic Tradition*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 69-89 notes Deianeira's effort to deliberate in a broader context of scenes describing women's decision-making in tragedy.

^{viii} Deianeira tries to convince herself that Heracles has not insulted her willingly, apparently in an effort to avoid anger, which arises from a perceived insult according to Aristotle's *Rhetoric*.

^{ix} For Deianeira's gentleness toward Iole, see, for example, Charles Segal, *Tragedy and Civilization: An Interpretation of Sophocles* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 60-108.

^x Virginia Wohl, *Intimate Commerce: Exchange, Gender, and Subjectivity in Greek Tragedy*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 38 proposes that Deianeira explores a different facet of her own self thanks to the silent character Iole.

^{xi} On this as possibly a Sophoclean invention, see Edwin Carawan, "Deianira's Guilt", *Transactions of American Philological Association* 130 (2000): 189-237.

^{xii} Hermione is Spartan, and she specifically contrasts Spartan morals with the promiscuous, polygamous customs of the Trojans (170-80).

^{xiii} Richard Seaford, "Structural Problems of Marriage in Euripides," in Powell *Euripides, Women, and Sexuality* (London/New York: Routledge, 1990), 151-76 offers a useful

survey of various types of marital problems in Euripidean plays, including the *Andromache*. William Allan, *The Andromache and Euripidean Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 167-95 considers marital jealousy and fear of childlessness as the main causes of the conflict between Hermione and Andromache; cf. Christina Vester, “Bigamy and Bastardy, Wives and Concubines: Civic Identity in *Andromache*”, in Cousland J. R. C. and Hume J. R. (eds.) *The Plays of Texts and Fragments. Essays in Honour of Martin Cropp* (Leiden: Brill, 2009) 293-305, particularly 293-6, with bibliography.

^{xiv} Medea, for example, tells she should have had no reason to look for a new love because she bore him sons (*Med.* 490-1).

^{xv} “Spiteful,” *epiphthonon*, could be related to the idea of “selfish spleen,” as David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks. Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature*. Toronto (University of Toronto Press, 2006), 232 puts it, which is often attached to the unsympathetic jealous wife (type Hera and Medea).

^{xvi} As noted by Irene de Jong, “Three Off-Stage Characters in Euripides,” *Mnemosyne* 43 (1990): 1-21, especially 11.

^{xvii} Helene Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 57-106, looks at good concubines contrasted with bad wife in tragedies..

^{xviii} Rosemary Lloyd, *Closer and Closer Apart: Jealousy in Literature* (Ithaca, NY. 1994), 119.

^{xix} Allan 2000, 182.

^{xx} Andromache takes here the male view in dismissing a wife's jealousy is nevertheless suggested by the similarity between these lines to the response of Jason to Medea's worries in the *Medea*.

^{xxi} Christopher Gill, *The Articulation of the Self in Euripides' Hippolytus*, in A. Powell (ed.) *Euripides, Women, and Sexuality* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 76-107 shows that the adjective "wise" is gender specific, meaning in the case of women chaste, or self-controlled.

^{xxii} Women committed adultery too, doubtlessly, and J. Roy, Roy, "An Alternative Sexual Morality for Classical Athens," *Greece and Rome* 44 (1997): 11-22.

Roy (1997) collects the evidence, but that they had fewer occasions than their husbands.

^{xxiii} L. Cohn-Haft, "Divorce in Classical Athens," *Journal of Historical Studies* 115 (1995): 1-14 has shown that marriages were long-lasting in ancient Athens.

^{xxiv} P. N. Stearns, *Jealousy: The Evolution of an Emotion in American History* (New York, 1989).

^{xxv} A convenient list of Athenian laws on marriage and adultery is provided by Mary Lefkowitz and M. B. Fand, *Women's Life in Greece and Rome: A Sourcebook in Translation* (London: Duckworth, 1992), 55-70.

^{xxvi} Kirk Ormand, *Controlling Desires: Sexuality in Ancient Greece and Rome*. (Wesport, Conn: Praeger, 2009), 60-74 emphasizes that Aristophanic comedies reflect male fears regarding female sexuality and revisits the earlier bibliography on the topic.