The Power of the Child-bearer in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*

The misogyny of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon*, and the *Oresteia* as a whole, hinges on a masculine anxiety concerning the feminine power of childbirth. Anxiety over the succession of children, their fidelity and their subservience to the father, instigates a cycle of aggression that involves the co-opting of the generative power of childbirth traditionally believed the purview of women. This appropriation of childbirth generally consists of raping women, stealing wives, or, most often, murdering children. The cycle continues with the retaliation of the maligned woman, who takes on some masculine role to avenge herself against the aggressor and reclaim control over children, i.e. murdering her husband and/or his concubine, exercising sexual agency/withdrawing or refusing consent, or breaking from her traditional role as wife. The cycle ends with the patriarchal reassertion of control, a retaliation that involves, in effect, the rewriting of the rules of lineage, power, and the family such that the aggression which began the cycle is legitimated by its end. This internally legitimizing cycle finds expression not only over the course of the *Oresteia* as a whole, but also within individual character arcs and mythological exempla, while yet expanding to reveal tragedy as a poetic medium for legitimizing Athens’ patriarchal society as the drama itself plays its role in the real-world iterations of the very same cycle of misogyny.

Mitchell-Boyask in 2006 suggested a reading of the *Oresteia* that focuses on the interconnection between the marriage and the child:
The two issues of marriage and children are closely intertwined in the *Oresteia*. The death of Iphigenia cripples the marriage of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, and Orestes’s absence is a sign, as Clytemnestra herself implies (877-79), that their union has been severed. Moreover, Thyestes pays for his adulterous acts with the slaughter and consumption of his children, the central horror of Cassandra’s vision (1217-22). The question of the Chorus to Cassandra thus becomes synoptic of this larger breakdown of the relationship between child-rearing and marriage.¹

The fragmentation of the family in the *Agamemnon* merits further exploration, particularly with respect to the power of the wife as bearer of the children which, in Greek thought, clashes with the role of the husband as raiser of the children. The tragedy, as I will argue, capitalizes upon the familiarity of this misogynistic tension between man and woman, a gendered tug-o-war with children at its conceptual and literary center, to simultaneously reflect and resolve that same tension in reality. The cycle previously elaborated serves to conceptualize the interactions between family members and their breakdown to elucidate the social anxieties of Aeschylus and his contemporaries. By first explicating the power of the child in Greek thought and the transferal of that power to the mother, which begins as early as Hesiod’s *Theogony*, I will show how the fear of generative power drives men to co-opt child-bearing in the *Oresteia*, though only after a cycle of sexual violence is consummated with the murder of a wife.

For the purposes of this study, I will use the term “gender” to refer to the societally enforced behaviors and functions assigned to people depending on their biological sex. The

binary terminology in which gender and sex will be discussed does not reflect the plurality of human experience, then or now, but to understand the Athenian anxieties they must be viewed on their own patriarchal terms.

This cycle, as I will show, adheres loosely to the following diagram, allowing for the variation so commonly found in myth.

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Masculine Instigation

Masculine Revision of Lineage  Feminine Retaliation

+Destruction of the Woman
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This diagram is simplified, for, as I will show, cycles occur within cycles, informing and initiating each other and creating a seemingly impenetrable web of gendered violence. To trace the arcs and twists of the bloody, kin-killing cycles we must begin with Hesiod.

**The Power of Children and their Mother**

The gendered dichotomy of Earth/Mother and the Sky/Father that plays out in the *Oresteia* begins in the *Theogony*. The relationship of Gaia and Ouranos is rocky at best, and we can see the first phase of the misogynistic cycle in their interactions in the *Theogony*. Unlike in later iterations of the cycle, Hesiod provides an explicit, emotional motive for the father’s violence against his children:
Since at first their Father, in his soul, hated Briareus, Kottos, and Gyes, he bound them in powerful bondage, jealous as he was of their overwhelming masculinity, looks, and size: and he settled them under the broad-pathed Earth.

Children here have a power which engenders anxiety and even hatred in their father, such that he must return them to the Earth, effectively to the womb. Ouranos’ violent response to this threat, as we shall see, is ultimately ineffective, but nevertheless it initiates a cycle that will be legitimized by its violent end, which will be discussed below. Gaia retaliates through Kronos, whom she enlists to reclaim her generative rights by castrating Ouranos. Kronos himself becomes yet another instigator of a cycle of familial violence and is the first to introduce the devouring of children to the tradition, thus contextualizing all future feasts of children’s flesh as referent to Kronos. For this reason, his cycle merits further exploration.

As we will see with Cassandra, the power of children in Hesiod’s Theogony is embedded in the relation of the child to the future. The father fears the child who crosses the boundary

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2 Theog. 617-20.
3 Text from Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homerica, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.
4 Theog. 147-208.
5 For extensive analysis of the role of Cassandra and prophecy in the Agamemnon, see Pascale-Anne Brault “Playing the Cassandra: prophecies of the feminine in the polis and beyond,” in Bound by the city: Greek tragedy, sexual
between the *oikos* and the *polis,* for it is when they exist outside of a direct hierarchical relationship, when they are equals to their parents at the societal level, that they are the most dangerous. Prophecy, as connection between past, present, and future, acts as the catalyst for the father’s fear of being overthrown, or what I term overthrow anxiety, prompting fathers to act to prevent revolution before the child can leave the home. Kronos’ reaction is to devour his children as they are born, negating Rhea’s right of childbirth. In response, the Titan queen saves Zeus, effectively reclaiming her power of childbirth as well as validating Kronos’ revolution anxiety. Furthermore, Zeus’ revolution satisfies Ouranos’ revenge against both Kronos and Gaia and ultimately legitimizes Ouranos’ masculine supremacy.

The Olympian gods have much more in common with their grandfather than their father. With birds as their symbols and a god of the sky as their king, the Olympians have a strong affinity with Ouranos, and so he makes avengers of them, as Hesiod describes the battle:

\[
\text{ἐξεε δὲ χθών πᾶσα καὶ Ὄκεανοῖο ἑξεθρα}
\]
\[
\text{πόντος τ’ ἄτρυγετος: τοῦς δ’ ἀμφεπε θερμός ἀντιμή}
\]
\[
\text{Τιτῆνας χθονίους, φλόξ δ’ αἰθέρα διὰν Ίκανεν}
\]
\[
\text{ἀσπετος, ὡς τ’ ἀμερὸς καὶ ἱφθίμων περ ἑότων}
\]
\[
\text{αὐγή μαρμαρουσα κεραυνοῦ τε στεροπῆς τε.}
\]
\[
\text{καῦμα δὲ θεσπέσιν κάτεχεν Χάος: εἴσατο δ’ ἄντα}
\]
\[
\text{ὄφθαλμοίσιν ἱδεῖν ἥδ’ οὐασι ὡςαν ἀκούσαι}
\]

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The Earth, the rivers of the Ocean, and the barren sea were all aboil: hot breath was all around the earthborn Titans, flame unutterable reached all the way to the heavenly sky, the gleaming light of the bolt and the thunder strike blinded their eyes, even though they were strong. The awful heat held Chaos: and it was clear for the eyes to see and for the ears to hear the din just as if Gaia and broad Ouranos from above came together: for such a great thud arose as she on the one hand being thrown, and he on the other falling from above: so great was the din of the clashing gods’ strife.

The clash of the gods and the Titans avenges Kronos against Gaia and consummates his cycle. While the passage articulates only a simile, the relation of the crash of the Heavens falling upon the Earth contextualizes the battle between the generations as one between the ethereal and the chthonic, as the poet juxtaposes Τιτῆνας χθονιοὺς with αἰθέρα, and earlier in the battle, Zeus even comes ἀπ’ οὐρανοῦ, “from the sky.” Furthermore, by establishing the celestial gods as rulers, Ouranos legitimizes his past actions through their reign, and Kottos, Gyes, and Briareus,

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7 Theog. 695-705.  
8 Theog. 689.
after helping Zeus overthrow Kronos, are consigned to their place in watching over the defeated Titans, returned to the Earth for good.

Zeus, however, runs into the same issue as his father when he fears that his first wife Metis “cunning” will bear his destroyer. Zeus essentially takes the same devorative measure as Kronos but changes it in one crucial respect—he eats the wife, not the children. Zeus’ cannibalism belies a fear that rests no longer on the children themselves, but on the one who bears them, so he strikes at the root of the problem as he sees her. The cannibalization of Metis is not childless, however, as Athena leaps from Zeus’ head after Metis has been devoured. Cunning Metis by means of her transformation into Athena, goddess of wisdom, becomes more masculine than any other goddess, and fittingly casts the deciding vote in the trial of the Eumenides, for her birth ostensibly did not require a woman. Zeus, through Athena, legitimates his rule and the patriarchy, for by consuming a wife he has nullified her childbearing potential entirely—becoming the bearer of the child himself.

**Lions, Women, and Infants**

The central breakdown of familial relations and the primary cycle of violence in the *Oresteia* takes place between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. The Atreid king instigates this cycle in two ways, in each instance coopting the power of childbirth that Clytemnestra believes to be, at least partially, her own. The first is the sacrifice of Iphigenia, which, just as the murders of children in the *Theogony*, assails the mother’s rights to her children. The second is the capture of Cassandra who as a sex slave gives Agamemnon options for the women by whom he can conceive children, thus undermining Clytemnestra’s childbearing authority in much the same
way as a woman’s adultery undermines the father’s claim to his children. The murder of Iphigenia is necessarily the primary instigation, as Clytemnestra plots her revenge long before Cassandra appears in Argos, and so the implications and causes of this primary instigation are the most important for our purposes of exposing the masculine anxiety at the heart of the gendered violence. Nevertheless, Cassandra’s role, and her own cycle with Apollo, are significant for revealing the role of tragedy as legitimator of gendered violence, and so shall be explored further below. Lastly, the influence of Aegisthus on Clytemnestra, and the cycle which drives him, have bearing on the understanding of the function of children in the polis, and so will be discussed last.

The necessity of Iphigenia’s sacrifice is born, as the chorus narrates, from a miniature cycle of violence against children and the retribution for said violence. Artemis witnesses a scene in which two eagles devour a hare just before childbirth. So offended at the sight of her “father’s winged dogs” (πτανοίσιν κυσί πατρός) she demands a sacrifice to avert the winds and allow the Argives passage to Troy. Though a virgin herself, Artemis is considered the mother of beasts, and so an animal murdered by her father’s birds impinges on her childbearing right. The eagles have disrupted the natural process of reproduction, over which Artemis should have jurisdiction, not Zeus. Artemis retaliates by demanding the childbearing rights of others, in this case, Agamemnon, whom she deems guilty because one of the eagles represents him, and Clytemnestra.

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10 See Aga. 140-5. For Artemis and childbirth, see also Nicole Loreaux, The Experiences of Tiresias: The Feminine and the Greek Man, trans. Paula Wissing, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 30-31. I disagree with Loreaux’s argument that “Tragedy is not a tribune for propaganda” (38). The women of the Oresteia do not “conquer a place in the city,” they are consigned to a role. Their worth is refined only to their service of the man in childbirth.
The chorus explains Agamemnon’s murder of Iphigenia in terms that reveal a masculine anxiety over women, especially those who wander and break from their traditional role as wife, such as Helen.

ён θυσιας, γυναικοποι-
νον πολέμων ἄρωγάν
καὶ προτέλεια ναῶν.\(^{11}\)

And he suffered to become the sacrificer of his daughter, an aid for woman avenging wars and an offering on behalf of the ships.

It is fitting that Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigenia to lead a fleet against Troy to recapture a woman, for his daughter then becomes a martyr for a misogynistic cause, and her death initiates a cycle even as it attempts to bring another cycle, that of Helen, to a definitive close. At the same time, the sacrifice of Iphigenia marks the middle of the cycle of Artemis avenging herself against her father and the Atreidae. The cycles of violence overlap and inform each other, and the cycles within cycles build the sense of a hopeless Gordian knot that needs the sword, preparing for the final murder of the wife that will make the mess right again. And so, with Iphigenia’s sacrifice participating in three cycles—the instigation of Clytemnestra’s cycle, the retaliation of Artemis, and the successful return of Helen—the ubiquity of generative anxiety becomes evident and

\(^{11}\) *Aga.* 224-7.
catalyzes the final matricide which can ostensibly bring the cycle and the anxiety to an end with Clytemnestra’s death.

Clytemnestra elucidates much of her motivation for murder in her post mortem interactions with the chorus. The queen famously calls Iphigenia φιλτάτην ἐμοὶ ὀδὴν, “my most beloved birth pangs,” emphasizing her power in bearing the child by relating her to the physical anatomy and the pains the mother suffered to produce her. Clytemnestra later explicates Iphigenia’s relationship to Agamemnon and the proper punishments he suffers in the underworld for her death:

οὐδὲ γὰρ οὗτος δολίαν ἀτην
οἴκοισιν ἔθηκ’;
ἀλλ’ ἐμὸν ἐκ τοῦ θερ’ ἔρνος ἀερθὲν
τὴν πολυκλαύτην
Ἰφιγένειαν ἀνάξια δράσας
ἄξια πάσχων μηδὲν ἐν Ἄιδου
μεγαλαυχεῖτο, ἔρ νέθηλτῳ
θανάτῳ τείσας ἀπερ ἤρξεν.  

For did this man not bring deceptive destruction upon the house? No, rather having done unworthy things to my much-mourned Iphigenia, my sprout raised because of this man,

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12 Aga. 1416-7. For extensive analysis of the relationship between mother and daughter which Clytemnestra articulates, see Giulia Maria Chesi “The bond of consanguinity between mother and daughter: Agamemnon 1417-1418 and 1525,” Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies, 54:3 (2014), 342-351.
13 Aga. 1523-9.
and as he is suffering worthy things now, let him cry out nothing in the halls of Hades, with death by the sword he paid for what he himself started.

Clytemnestra powerfully, and yet ambiguously, expresses Iphigenia’s relationship to Agamemnon with the phrase ἐκ τοῦ δέ ἐρνος ἀερθέν, which has been variously interpreted. Fraenkel understands it as “conceived from him,” but the literal meaning of “raise up,” as Raeburn and Thomas argue, has merit via its connection to her sacrifice, so I have preserved the ambiguity.\(^{14}\) Iphigenia, given this ambiguity, then stands both as the child raised or conceived by Agamemnon and as his victim, raised up by him in sacrifice.\(^{15}\) The use of agricultural imagery in ἐρνος, and in many other Aeschylean passages, recalls the archetypal cosmic parents, Ouranos and Gaia. Clytemnestra’s use of τείσας mirrors the language of Hesiod’s Gaia who called on her children to strike back against their father with the verb τισαίμεθα, “we would make him pay.”\(^{16}\) Furthermore, Clytemnestra’s rhetorical situating of Agamemnon as the instigator of the cycle mirrors Gaia’s framing of Ouranos: πρότερος γὰρ ἀεικέα μῆσατο ἐργα, “for he was the first to intend shameless deeds.”\(^{17}\) These phrases belong to a discourse of vengeance that connects the Theogony and the Oresteia, a violent language of familial fragmentation that can only be mended with the destruction of the mother, because she not only has the threatening power to bear children, but she also has the power to persuade her children to turn against their father.

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\(^{15}\) For the description of Iphigenia’s sacrifice and the woman’s gaze, see Judith Fletcher, “Exchanging glances: vision and representation in Aeschylus’ ‘Agamemnon’,” Helios 26, no 1 (1999): 11-34.

\(^{16}\) Theog. 165.

\(^{17}\) ib. 166. The parallel, if we accept ἔρξεν, is with πρότερος, but if we accept Fraenkel’s emendation ἔρξεν, the parallel is with ἐργα, but the general sense of the parallel remains, it is the actions of the men that, the women argue, brings their punishment upon themselves.
The generative potential of the woman is terrifying enough, but it is her encroachment on
the domain of raising the children which condemns her to death. Gaia and Rhea both convince
their children to avenge them against their husbands, and so it is not just the crossing of the
boundary between the *oikos* and the *polis* which is the crux of the danger to men, but which
parent is the one to help the child cross, and with which parent the child’s allegiances lie after the
fact.\(^{18}\) In the patriarchal mind, children are intended to be the political and military proxies for
those who raise them, i.e. their fathers, when they leave the home, and the influence of the
mother over her children gives her some agency in the domain of men, an agency which must be
answered and erased.

Furthermore, the *Agamemnon* reveals that the child’s slippage from the traits of the rearer
to those of the bearer is naturally unavoidable, undermining the goal of the *Oresteia* in
consolidating the child under the single parent with a juxtaposition of the τροφής, the raisers, and
the τοκές, the child-bearers:

\[
\text{ἔθρεψεν δὲ λέοντος Ἡ-}
\]
\[
\text{νιν δόμοις ἀγάλακτον οὐ-}
\]
\[
\text{τος ἀνήρ φιλόμαστον,}
\]
\[
\text{ἐν βιότον προτελείους}
\]
\[
\text{ἄμερον, εὐφιλόπαιδα,}
\]
\[
\text{kαὶ γεραροῖς ἐπίχαρτον:}
\]

\(^{18}\) For the transition of the child from the *oikos* to the *polis*, see Simon Goldhill, “The Great Dionysia and Civic
Ideology.” in *Nothing to do with Dionysus?: Athenian drama in its social context*, eds. John J. Winkler and Froma I.
A man thus reared the son of a lion, still longing for its mother’s milk, in his own home, and in the beginning, it was tame, well loved by the children, and a joy for the old men as well; it received much in their arms like a newly-raised child, looking adorably to their feeding hands, a slave to its belly. But having grown up, it revealed its true character, that of its parents; for, repaying thanks to its raisers with sheep-slaying destruction, it unbidden made its feasts. And the house was mixed with blood, an unassailable agony for

\[19\] Aga. 717-736.
the inhabitants, a great, mass-murdering mischief. It was raised beforehand by a god as some sacrificing priest of Destruction for the house.

The child’s character is determined by its birth, not its upbringing, and the animal imagery argues that such is the natural order. The close pairing of τοκέων and τροφεύσαν highlights the quintessential tension that exists between the parent and the foster parent. The Oresteia seeks to consolidate the role of child-bearer with that of child-rearer in the man but cannot do so without the murder of the child-bearer and the co-opting of her role. To apply this logic to the lion’s cub fable, however, not only must the parents be killed, but so must the corrupted child be killed, and should be before it can grow into full strength, because its character is a lost cause from birth.20

The chorus will then apply the fable to Helen coming to Troy, like a lion cub to foster parents doomed by the child they have taken in. And so, wife and child are consolidated into one, their danger is one and the same. Of course, the logic falters, for in Helen’s case, it is the Greek invasion which destroys the house of Priam, but the chorus will frame her as the destroyer with several puns on her name.21 The woman becomes the animalistic past from which men must escape, her understandable retaliation against the masculine theft of child-bearing becomes the justification for that theft and for the crackdown which will forever silence her.

Clytemnestra attempts to legitimate her own actions and put an end to the cycle in a
bargain with the *daimôn* of the house, a spirit which is representative of the cycle itself, but her
pleas are ineffective:

...ὁ δὲ λοιπὸν, ἵντ’
ἐκ τῶνδε δόμων ἄλλην γενεὰν
τρίβειν θανάτοις αὐθένταισι.
κτεάνων τε μέρος βαιόν ἐχούσῃ
πᾶν ἂπόχρη μοι, μανίας μελάθρων
ἀλληλοφόνους ἀφελοῦσῃ.\(^{22}\)

and for the rest of time, going out of this house, Daimôn, [I would like you/I advise you]
to while away another lineage with deaths at the hands of family members. And it is
enough for me to have a small portion of my possessions, having freed the halls from the
madnesses that drive us to kill each other.\(^{23}\)

In her triumph Clytemnestra can see the cycle crashing down upon herself just as
Ouranos falls upon Gaia, and just as the chorus says, κεκόλληται γένος πρὸς ἄτα, “The bloodline
is cemented to destruction.”\(^{24}\) In a patriarchal system, the slightest slippage of the yoke threatens
the whole misogynistic wagon, and so Clytemnestra cannot stand as she does, triumphant, as she

\(^{22}\) *Aga.* 1571-6.

\(^{23}\) Cf. Horace, *Epodes,* XVI, *Altera iam teritur civilibus bellis actas | suis et ipsa Roma viribus ruit,* “Another
generation is worn away with civil wars, and Rome herself falls to ruin by her own power,” in David Mankin ed,
between Epode XVI and the *Agamemnon* seem to go unnoticed in the commentaries of either, and so they merit
further exploration in another piece.

\(^{24}\) *Aga.* 1566.
takes on the masculine and feminine roles, becoming the bearer and raiser herself as she
describes the murder of Agamemnon using imagery reminiscent of Gaia:

οὐτω τὸν αὐτὸν θυμὸν ὅρμαίνει πεσὼν:
cάκφυσιόν ὄξειαν αἵματος σφαγήν
βάλλει μ᾽ ἐρεμὴν ψακάδι φοινίας ὁρόσου,
χαίρουσαν οὐδὲν ἦσσον ἢ διοσδότῳ
γάνει σπορητὸς κάλυκος ἐν λοχεύμασιν.\textsuperscript{25}

Thus, having fallen he gasps out his own soul: and blowing out a sharp slaughter of
blood, with a black shower of sanguine spray he strikes me as I rejoice no less than sown
corn rejoices at Zeus’ glittering droplet in its parturitions from the husk.

Moles rather convincingly argues for an erotic interpretation of these lines, citing a connection
with the \textit{Theogony}’s language of fertility and Earth/Sky gendered dichotomy.\textsuperscript{26} As Clytemnestra
relates herself to corn, the agricultural terminology coincides with the language that Apollo will
later use in \textit{Eumenides}, as σπορητὸς, “sown,” mirrors νεοσπόρου, “newly-sown.”\textsuperscript{27} Clytemnestra
claims both the seed and the sprout for herself, and Agamemnon’s contribution becomes the
simple irrigation of the crop.\textsuperscript{28} Clytemnestra attempts the very same monopolization of child-

\textsuperscript{25} \textit{Aga}. 1388-92.
\textsuperscript{27} My text here is Alan H. Sommerstein’s \textit{Aeschylus: Oresteia, Loeb Classical Library}, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard
University Press, 2014), 659.
\textsuperscript{28} For a discussion of the emasculation of Agamemnon, see Ruth Bardel, “Eunuchizing Agamemnon: Clytemnestra,
Agamemnon and maschalismos,” in \textit{Eunuchs in antiquity and beyond}, eds. Shaun Tougher and Ra’anan Abusch,
bearing of which she will later become the victim. Unfortunately for Clytemnestra, the patriarchal cycle cannot allow her claim to go unanswered.

Orestes’ eventual murder of Clytemnestra in the *Choephoroi* and his absolution in the *Eumenides* end the cycle, and Apollo’s arguments for the erasure of women from parturition legitimize the actions of the husbands that came before. If the woman had no right to her children nor participation in childbirth in the first place, the rape of her childbearing power and the murder of her children fall perfectly under the prerogative of the man. There is, however, one woman who seems at first to exist outside of a cycle, Cassandra.

**Cassandra as Child and Witness of the Feast of Thyestes**

Despite appearing a childless virgin,29 Cassandra, at the moment she is introduced in the *Agamemnon*, has already suffered the masculine revisionism of her own sexually violent cycle. Apollo himself is her instigator, and as Mitchell-Boyask argues, Cassandra is intended to represent Apollo’s bride.30 Cassandra describes her relationship with Apollo in obfuscated, but clearly violent, terms. She calls him a παλαιστής “wrestler,” who breathes his χάρις on her. Kovacs argues for an emendation of lines 1202-1212 that inserts two lacunae, and while the traditional belief is that Cassandra refused Apollo’s seduction, Kovacs asserts that Cassandra would not have been proffered the opportunity to effectively deny Apollo.31 Given Apollo’s history in myth and the track record of men in the cycles so far, Apollo’s violent “wrestling” of

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29 For Cassandra as a virgin, see Paula Arnold Debnar, “The sexual status of Aeschylus’ Cassandra,” *Classical Philology*, 105:2 (2010), 129-145, and Kathryn A. Morgan, “Apollo’s Favorites” *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 35 (1994), 121-143. Morgan argues that Apollo would have allowed Cassandra to exercise consent because he gives other mortals such as Orestes the final say in their decisions elsewhere in Aeschylus. It seems highly unlikely, given the misogyny of the trilogy and of Apollo himself, that Apollo’s positive treatment of a man would have any bearing on his treatment of Cassandra.
Cassandra is difficult to dismiss as anything other than the god in some manner raping her. Nevertheless, it is difficult to reconcile such an interpretation with Cassandra’s admission, ξυναινέσσασα Λοξιάν ἐψευσάμην, “having consented, I deceived Loxian Apollo,” unless we alter the interpretation of the question of the chorus to which she is responding, ἦ καὶ τέκνων εἰς ἔργον ἡλθητήν ὤμοι; “And did you two also go into the work of children together?” The chorus essentially asks whether or not Cassandra and Apollo had procreative sex, to which Cassandra replies both a yes and a no. While it is clear she did agree to it, Cassandra does not clarify in what respect she deceived Apollo, whether it was the ἔργον itself she denied him, or the τέκνων.

Kovacs suggests she procured an abortion after the fact, but it seems possible as well that she simply tricked him into having sex that was not procreative, such as anal sex. Though such an interpretation would be novel, the ambiguity of the text leaves this option available, and the use of gymnastic imagery in παλαιστής reminds of the Athenian homoeroticism which often centers around the gymnasium. Such a reference to male homoeroticism might imply that Cassandra played the role of an ἐρώμενος. Vaginal rape eradicates the woman’s right to exercise her child-bearing power as she chooses, and somehow Cassandra reclaimed this power, whether through abortion or non-procreative sex. In either instance, Apollo attempted to control

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32 Aga. 1208.
33 It is also possible to read the manuscript’s ἡλθητήν νόμῳ (See Raeburn and Thomas, 197, as well as Fraenkel, 555-6). As important as such a change is, referring to custom simply implies that the chorus assumes Apollo would follow regular marriage practice (and the chorus when it comes to Cassandra is consistently naïve), but the essence of the question as it relates to bearing children remains the same.
34 Credit to Steven D. Smith for bringing up this possibility in our reading of the Agamemnon. An imperfect parallel to this interpretation might be found in Carmina Priapea III. 7-8, quod virgo prima cupido dat nocte marito | dum timet alterius vulnus inepta loci, “[give me] that which the maiden gives to her desirous husband on her first night, while she fears the wound of the other side because of her inexperience.” The choice of virgo is interesting here, as it suggests that, while she is indeed married as marito implies, her virginity is in some way preserved by her resort to the pedicatio which the poem will later spell out. Uxor could fit metrically here just as well. Text from Tyler Gau, Evan Hayes, and Stephen Nimis eds, Priapea: Songs for a Phallic God, an Intermediate Latin Reader, (Faenum Publishing, 2017): 5-6.
Cassandra’s child-bearing power, by raping her, and Cassandra reclaimed it by preventing either conception or parturition. Apollo’s punishment then, if we assume his sexual urge at least was satisfied, reveals his true goal. If all she prevented was children, then her punishment reveals that children were Apollo’s goal all along. Cassandra’s narrative cycle finds expression in just these few lines, with little detail. Apollo’s revenge however, and his redrawing of the patriarchy, have also already happened. Cassandra’s curse to never be believed is simultaneously Apollo’s revenge and his revision of the rules of lineage, for by prophesying a violent past and a future which will ultimately end with an Olympian patriarchal order, Cassandra becomes a legitimizing force for that patriarchal end in the present. To better realize her role in legitimizing the actions of men, it will be helpful to understand the role she plays in other cycles.

Though she is the wife figure in her own cycle, Cassandra also plays a murdered child in the narrative cycle centered around Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. In several instances the play infantilizes and others Cassandra by referring to her upbringing in Troy. In one such instance, just before asking about her sexual status, the chorus remarks on her barbarian childhood:

\[ \text{θαυμάζω δὲ σου, | πόντου πέραν τραφείσαν ἄλλοθρον πόλιν | κυρεῖν λέγουσαν ὀσπερ εἰ παρεστάτεις.} \]

“I wonder at you, having been raised across the sea that you turn out to speak about a foreign-tongued city as though you were there.”\textsuperscript{35} The use of τραφείσαν, as we have seen before, signals a discourse about children and their rearing, and so both her foreignness and her youth make her a strange prophet.

In another instance, Cassandra infantilizes herself as she laments her coming death, bringing past and future together:

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Aga.} 1199-1201.
Alas, the marriages, Paris’ marriages, bringing destruction to his family! Alas the ancestral drink of the Scamander! For then, on the one hand, I grew up and was raised, wretched, around your shores, but now, on the other hand, it seems that I will soon be singing at the Cocytus and the banks of the Acheron.

Again, the τροφαῖς reminds of Cassandra’s young age, as she is a child to be killed so that Clytemnestra can reclaim her motherhood. Doyle argues that Cassandra represents the perfected forms of both Clytemnestra as wife and Iphigenia as sacrificial bride, and therefore, by her identification with Iphigenia, she is numbered among the children murdered in the kin-killing cycle as well as a wife to be punished for her crime of resisting the man. The significance of Cassandra as murdered child becomes clear when she reveals the power of children through her own voice:

\(^{36}\) Aga. 1156-61.

μαρτυρίοις γὰρ τοῖς ἐπιπείθομαι:
κλαίομενα τάδε βρέφη σφαγάς,
ὅπτας τε σάρκας πρὸς πατρὸς βεβρωμένας.  #38

For I believe these witnesses: that these infants are crying their slaughters and the boiled
flesh eaten by their father.

This passage is unusual both in its grammar and its interpretation. It seems we must
understand that the infants themselves are the witnesses of μαρτυρίοις, which is a remarkable
crossing of a boundary, from the dative to the accusative of the indirect statement. But
furthermore, such an interpretation grants the crying infants the authority of witnesses in a trial.  #39

These infants have then crossed more than a grammatical boundary but have crossed the
boundary between the οἰκός and the πόλις, between the familial and the civic, to participate in a
trial. Their voices, however, as κλαίομενα suggests, are inarticulate, they lack persuasiveness,
just like Cassandra, whom we have proven falls among the number of murdered children. She,
like them, cries her lamentations to those who cannot understand her, and so on this level, her
prophecy cannot legitimate the patriarchy because of its unintelligibility.

Cassandra, however, does not speak her words into the void, unheard and
unacknowledged, but the audience of the drama hears her and understands her perfectly.  #40 Due to

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#38 Aga. 1095-7.
#40 For tragedy and the feminine, see Froma I. Zeitlin, “Playing the other: theater, theatricality, and the feminine in Greek drama,” in Nothing to do with Dionysus?: Athenian drama in its social context, eds. John J. Winkler and Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton University Pr., 1990), 63-96. Zeitlin explains that tragedy takes part in the feminine in its somatic, theatrical, narrative, and mimetic aspects. Cassandra is thus the feminine embodiment of tragedy itself.
the meta-dramatic nature of her speech, understood only by those outside of the drama, her scene is a fourth wall break, at least in spirit. Through her speak Apollo and Aeschylus directly to the audience, and with those men’s voices she screams that the future will most certainly be male, whatever the past may have been. And given the previous discussion of prophecy as the catalyst for overthrow anxiety by bringing past and future into the present, it is fitting that Cassandra should discuss babies long since dead who will be witnesses in a trial to convict their murderers, facilitated by Cassandra’s extra-narrative voice. The prophetess warns the male audience that their children will bear witness to their crimes against them—if they allow a woman to bring children’s voices to light. And for that reason, she must die as well. Apollo has already delegitimized her voice, but the narrative cycle yet demands her death, for she threatens to give a political voice to the victims of the cycles within cycles, even if only the audience will hear them.

By taking up the song of the children, Cassandra, having suffered one cycle already, will bring a previous cycle, nearly forgotten, to its close. Cassandra’s death is the consummation of Artemis’ cycle. The goddess’ retaliation against Zeus for the killing of her hare has yet gone unpunished, but just as the Hesiodic simile of the crash of Ouranos upon Gaia recontextualizes the Titanomachy as a proxy war between higher powers, so too do Cassandra’s numerous assimilations to the huntress and the bloodhound signal her death as the final defeat for Artemis. As before, the cycle of misogynistic violence demands the destruction of a woman to set the patriarchal world aright, to bring closure to the cycle and to prevent its future iterations, but the preventative revisionism is unsuccessful—the cycle begins again.

Fittingly, it is just before her speech in advocacy of the infant victims of the feast of Thyestes that the chorus likens her to a bloodhound: ἔοικεν εὐρις ἢ ξένη κυνὸς δίκην |
εἶναι, ματεύει ὃν ἀνευρήσει φόνον, “The foreign woman seems to have a good nose, like a
dog, and she is seeking out those whose slaughter she will uncover.”41 In this simile, Cassandra
becomes the animal agent of the divine huntress, simultaneously expanding her role as witness to
feasts of children’s flesh and connecting her with Artemis, goddess of the hunt, who bears
witness to the slaughter of the hare. Cassandra then likens herself to Artemis as she comes
closest to truly breaking the fourth wall:

καὶ μαρτυρεῖτε συνδρόμως ἵγος κακῶν
ῥινηλατοῦσῃ τῶν πάλαι πεπαγμένων.
τὴν γὰρ στέγην τὴν ὑπὲρ ἐκλείπει χορὸς
ξύμφθηγος οὐκ εὐφόρονος: οὐ γὰρ εὐ λέγει.
καὶ μὴν πεπωκός γ’, ὡς θρασύνεσθαι πλέον,
βρότειον αἷμα κῶμος ἐν δόμοις μένει,
δύσπιπτος ἕξω, συγγόνων Ἐρινύων.
ὑμνοῦσι δ’ ὑμνον δόμασιν προσήμεναι
πρώταρχον ἢτην: ἐν μέρει δ’ ἀπέπτυσαν
eὖνάς ἀδέλφου τῷ πατοῦντι δυσμενεῖς.
ἡμαρτον, ἡ θηρῶ τι τοξότης τις ὡς;
ἡ ψευδόμαντίς εἰμι θυροκόπος φλέδων;
ἐκμαρτύρησον προσμόσας τῷ μ’ εἰδέναι
λόγῳ παλαιὰς τὸν ὡς ἀμαρτίας δόμων.42

41 Aga. 1093-4.
42 Aga. 1184-96.
And you, bear witness to me as I sniff out, keeping the pace, the track of evil deeds done long ago. For a chorus never leaves this house, on rhythm but off-key; for it does not sing well. And, indeed, having drunk some already, emboldening itself all the more, the band awaits mortal blood, difficult to send away, the band of the congenital Furies. And as they sit upon the house, they sing a song, and in measure they have spit out the primal doom, hostile towards the man frequenting the bed of his brother. Have I missed the mark? Or am I hunting something like some archer? Or am I a babbling, door-to-door prophet peddling lies? Honor your oath to bear witness that I know, with proof of my word, the ancient failures of this house.\(^43\)

Cassandra’s identification with the archer necessarily reminds the audience both of Apollo and Artemis, but with her use of animal imagery in ἐνῆλατούσῃ, “sniffing out,” she aligns even more closely with Artemis in this passage. Cassandra’s death will be Zeus’ retaliation against Artemis, as he demands a sacrifice of Cassandra in much the same way Artemis demanded Iphigenia. The mention of the πρώταρχον ἀτην brings us back to the feast of Thyestes, of which the infants bore witness in Cassandra’s speech.

Aegisthus, in recounting his own cycle at the end of the tragedy, elides some guilt-laden aspects of the feast of Thyestes, and yet grants some insight into the motivations of men in murdering children. As he forgets his own father’s adultery which began his cycle, Aegisthus claims that Atreus drove out his family ἀμφὶλεκτος ὃν κράτει, “because he was uncertain in his

\(^43\) I have chosen here to read no colon in line 1191, as the sense of spitting out destruction seems better than taking ἐνὰς as the object of ἀπέπτυσαν (especially since the beds are clearly the object of πατούντα), or understanding an implied object. While understanding the πρώταρχον ἄτην as in apposition to ὃς is certainly possible, the spitting would then be left objectless again.
power.”⁴⁴ Aegisthus here, while certainly biased in favor of his father, is not far off the truth. As we have determined, overthrow anxiety instigates the misogynistic cycle, and here Aegisthus gives voice to that overthrow anxiety. The “double speech” of ἀμφίλεκτος contrasted with Aegisthus’ previous ὡς τορῷς φράσας, “to say precisely,” signals not only the duplicitous nature of his own speech, but its simultaneous verity. Aegisthus admits that he lies truths, that the doublespeak is revelatory. Aegisthus’ omission of the sexual nature of the instigation, however, makes Atreus’ vengeance nearly unintelligible, for the king responds to the appropriation of his (and his wife’s) child-bearing rights with a punishment in kind for Thyestes. The overthrow anxiety which Aegisthus makes explicit explains the exile of Aegisthus and Thyestes, a political move motivated by a political fear, but not the murder of his children, which is motivated by an overthrow anxiety tied inextricably to child-bearing.

Atreus’ revenge against Thyestes for sleeping with his wife involves as usual the reclaiming of childbirth. He forces Thyestes to become a Kronos figure who brings destruction upon himself for his own deeds. In order to control children, Kronos eats them, and so his punishment at the hands of Zeus fits his crime, and in forcing Thyestes to play the Kronos, he places the blame squarely on Thyestes’ shoulders and his feast of children’s flesh is simultaneously his punishment and his crime. At the heart of the need to claim the power of children for the patriarch, as has been discussed, is the maintenance of political power, of the hierarchical status quo. Overthrow anxiety drives Atreus, just as it drives Ouranos, Kronos, and Zeus, and the intertwining of children, and the women who birth them, with that overthrow anxiety is exemplified in the feast of Thyestes.

⁴⁴ Aga. 1585.
Conclusion

We have traced the arcs and twists of the knot of violent cycles from Hesiod to Aeschylus. Children have a power, exemplified in Zeus, Kronos, and Ouranos’ children, to dethrone or emasculate their fathers, which engenders overthrow anxiety. In Metis, Clytemnestra, and Cassandra, the power of the child is conflated with the power of the woman to bear the child, and so her destruction is necessary to alleviate overthrow anxiety. Then, with the destruction of the mother comes the revision of the oikos, the consolidation of child-bearing and child-raising in the father. Only with such a revision can the patriarch prevent his children, the lion cubs, from taking after the nature of their birth-parent and wreaking havoc on the polis which brought them in and has, as a father should, reared them. In Cassandra, this revision of the oikos is made manifest in the poetic medium, and as she speaks beyond the narrative, the prophetess reveals tragedy as a cultural revision of lineage in art, participating in the legitimization of real-world cycles of misogynistic violence.

The crux of overthrow anxiety has transferred from the children themselves to their mothers, and as the cycles progress, the power of child-bearing is then safely ensconced in the father. There is, however, a necessary fault in this progression, for it is based on a false premise. Women, at the biological level, are not solely responsible for procreation. Zeus may have solved his overthrow problem simply by not having sex with Metis. Furthermore, Iphigenia’s death could have been prevented, for if Helen’s wandering did not need answering, no sacrifice would be necessary to cross the sea. The tragic cycles assume man to be subject to uncontrollable erotic urges; his very real participatory power in child-bearing is beyond his control, and thus he
subconsciously forfeits that power. There would be little need for rewriting the rules of lineage if
the men took responsibility for their own actions.

And so we see at the literary center not only men who fear their children will overthrow
them, but men who refuse to accept the power they possess in producing those children, for it
would demand of them an admission of guilt. Instead, with tragedy, men create a cycle of victim-
blaming, claiming a power they cannot truly have, a stolen literary veil to protect their fragile
egos.
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