

Man's Suppression, Appropriation, and Fear of the Feminine Power

... what does she seem to be? Some water snake, some viper  
whose touch is rot even to him who felt no fang  
strike, by that brutal and wrong daring in her heart.  
-Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers*, Lines 994-6

Clytemnestra's venomous, serpentine imagery in the *Oresteia* reflects on the darker side of femininity and the power a woman has when unbound and free. Her depiction through death and decay shows the primal, feminine prowess that men attempt to keep contained in order to enforce their power over women. The restraints set upon women show that men did not necessarily view them as just weak and controllable, but also deadly and dangerous – like a snake – and that men fear what they might face if that potential is tapped into. Snakes, although viewed as lesser beings, are highly revered and feared by men because of what they can do when provoked and uncontrolled. They are venomous creatures, capable of bringing the largest man to his knees with the smallest bite. Although notoriously known for their venom as a toxin, snakes (and snake-like creatures) have more than just toxicity at their disposal. The etymology behind the word “venomous” explains the relationship between women and snakes, coming from the Latin *venenatus*, “furnished with poison, poisonous, venomous” or “imbued with magical powers.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, the snake imagery depicts the capability of a woman unleashing her venom, her magical powers, and striking those holding her captive. Along with her physical venom, Clytemnestra is stated to have a destructive, rotting touch, capable of stripping away divinity, piety, and life – her magical venom.

The use of snake imagery shows the level of danger that women possessed when sufficiently provoked, which exemplifies the darker side of the duality of a woman – either the

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s. v. 1 and 3

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best or worst thing a man can have, depending on her behavior.<sup>2</sup> Defined as “some lurking danger, suspicious circumstance or person,”<sup>3</sup> snakes have a clear reputation of being cunning and sneaky, spending time in the shadows plotting their strike rather than charging in recklessly. Unlike using a knife or a blunt force to inflict surface damage, snakes typically attack with a fairly trivial bite, in which they inject their venom under the skin, causing detriment from within. Nearly all of the damage one receives from snake venom is received internally, invisible to the ignorant eye. This method involves dedicated time, attachment, and work that a simpler slash and smash method would be lacking; the dedicated time and involvement alone gives a “venomous” murder a certain level of femininity that a more brutal murder would be lacking. By utilizing these venomous feminine tactics as opposed to blunt masculine tactics, women lurk and plot the downfall of their prey over an extended duration – years, in Clytemnestra’s case – and allow their wrath to fester and grow until it can finally be unleashed with the utmost certainty of success.

In a society in which women are highly sexualized and objectified, there comes a point where a woman’s venom can reach such dangerous levels that her touch, sexual touch specifically, is considered deadly. Clytemnestra was said to have been able to expose her prey to her venom simply by means of contact, without the necessity of penetration and injection. By holding in her anger and her venom over several years, it has essentially seeped out of her venom glands and into her body itself, making her an embodiment of toxicity. Clytemnestra was said to have a rotting touch, “causing decay or decomposition,”<sup>4</sup> able to putrefy and eat away at the life of those she sets her hands on. This rotting, corrosive property is accentuated with her process of

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<sup>2</sup> Euripides, *Melanippe Captive*, Fr. 949. G

<sup>3</sup> OED, s. v. 2b.

<sup>4</sup> OED s. v. 1a.

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killing Agamemnon: causing him to proclaim high power and pride, walking on red robes, and boasting of his accomplishments until his hubris was at such a level that his death could nearly be justified in the eyes of the gods. Her “venom” acted acidic, in a way, stripping away Agamemnon’s topmost layers and qualities before finally making the killing strike. Just like an injected venom, this touch-based acidic toxin is more feminine in nature – slower and more punishing than it is brute and crushing, like the wrath of the furies as opposed to the wrath of Zeus.

Clytemnestra’s “rotting touch” consists of more than just corrosive, acidic properties; it consists of magical powers, as hinted with her venomosity, capable of stripping away her prey’s metaphysical protection along with their physical protection. Before Agamemnon’s encounter with the vengeful Clytemnestra, he was deemed a glorious war hero, high in the eyes of the gods and capable of seemingly non-mortal feats. However, with the injection of her venom, Clytemnestra was able to gradually wear down his glory and his honor, weakening her husband until he falls to her final strike. The spraying of his blood upon her body, like a spring shower upon budding flowers, holds a certain arcaneness as well; with witches’ powers being inherently tied in with nature, the absorption of his blood equates to Clytemnestra’s absorption of his powers, effectively consuming her prey as a snake would. The quality of Agamemnon’s blood upon his death shows how detrimental Clytemnestra’s venom was to him, being dark and bitter, unlike the typical bright red blood of heroes.<sup>5</sup> The darkness within his blood represents Clytemnestra’s venom having done its damage; the rancid blood, representative of his weakened life force, poisoned him from the inside out.

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<sup>5</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, edited by David Greene and Richard Lattimore, lines 1390-1392.

Clytemnestra's association as a viper, and the birth of her son Orestes, set up the precedent for a serpentine double standard that separates the masculine and the feminine powers. A viper is defined as a "small, viviparous snake; a venomous, dangerous, or repulsive serpent,"<sup>6</sup> with viviparous referring to the snake's ability to give live birth – a feat seen in many vipers, but not in snakes as whole. This viviparity, the ability to give live birth to a young snake, is precisely how Clytemnestra was able to give birth and breastfeed her son Orestes, who is also seen as a snake-like creature. With the birth of Orestes, Clytemnestra has created a being equally as dangerous as her, in terms of toxicity, venom, and power, yet Orestes does not suffer from the same consequences that she does in respect to his serpentine qualities. Orestes' avoidance of retribution for his serpentine nature shows that, in a society in which feminine individuals are often subject to extreme restrictions, masculine individuals are capable of exerting the same qualities that their feminine counterparts are punished for without punishment.

The accusation of witchcraft upon women is representative of the double standard set up by Clytemnestra and her son, Orestes; when beneficial to men in a patriarchal system, it is justified, but when beneficial to women, it is punished. Like his mother, Orestes is viewed as a snake throughout his appearances in the *Oresteia*, even so far as using his snake-like attributes – sneakiness, cunning, and deception – to kill her. However, unlike Clytemnestra who was ultimately viewed as a wicked murderess whose death was justified and necessary, Orestes was forgiven by the gods and viewed with honor for killing the "vile serpent" that he was born from. Orestes' lack of punishment for utilizing these witch and snake-like abilities comes from the fact that he is a man in a strongly patriarchal society, appropriating the power that he inherited (or, rather, stole) from his mother. Men have long convicted women of witchcraft when they infringe

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<sup>6</sup> OED, s. v. 1a

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on the masculine power, such as the famous American and European witch trials, in which many women who were simply outspoken, knowledgeable, or powerful were punished with false accusations of witchery.

The appropriation of feminine power and punishment of its' source is represented in Athena's transformation of the furies into the Eumenides, the "kindly ones," and forcing them to protect Athens from underground. Although more ambiguous than most masculine/feminine divisions, the relationship between Athena and the Furies is still fairly divided: Athena, born from only Zeus and holding many masculine qualities, serves as the male figure; the Furies, being primal goddesses, associated with snakes, serve as the female witches. Athena's threat of punishment to the furies holds a high level of masculinity as well. She threatens to attack them with the thunderbolt of Zeus, an extremely phallic symbol, if they refuse their submission to her – a technique often used by men when their power is in jeopardy of being infringed upon by women. Like Clytemnestra, the furies were reduced to their gender and had their powers utilized by a male figure upon their defeat; Athena feminized them, clothing them and making them a more "suitable" female figure, softening them so that they would not stand in her way again. The relationship between the goddesses shows a pattern throughout patriarchal societies: use your powers to benefit the man and you are tolerated, use your powers to benefit yourself and you are punished.