

Agamemnon (Monday, August 30, 2021)

Savannah: Quick question when Cassandra is referred to as Agamemnon's mistress, I'm assuming it wasn't as a willing mistress? Or was it?

She was a prize of war, made a slave, not at all willing.

Brandon: "and on this pedestal, these words appear. "I am ozymandius, king of kings, look upon my works ye mighty, and despair"

Pandora: Why did Cassandra not want to get out of the chariot?

She sees that if she enters the house, she will be murdered.

Olivia: I always thought the chorus was supposed to be like an off stage group of people, like a narrator. But the characters interact with the chorus. Just sort of confused on that.

Aeschylus innovated the chorus, making it much more active and in dialogue with the main characters.

Ava: At the begining of the play the watch man is talking, he just says dear gods, but is there a specific one he's speaking or praying to, or was there a god that they believed in that would have been the one to go to?

The Greek gods are numerous, each representative of something and would be invoked depending on the occasion. Like Aphrodite, the goddess of love, or Ares, the god of war. I think here, the watchman is just invoking the gods in general, but once the Chorus enter, they primarily invoke and call upon Zeus, who was the “king” of the gods, or, the “father” god.

Sara M.: Did I understand correctly that Agammenon Sacrificed the daughter that Clyaemnestra 'avenges' because an oracle said it would please the gods to cease a storm?

Yes, Agamemnon sacrificed their eldest daughter and child, Iphigenia, because he was told this would appease the goddess, Artemis, and ensure the Greek army successfully sail for Troy where the war was to be fought.

Abby: What is a chariot? Sorry if this is a stupid question



Brandon: I know that sacrifice and murder were really common, but how cold blooded to sacrifice your own daughter. How did he not see his own death coming?

His own hubris? Believing that it was condoned by the gods? Believing it was okay, after all, because he won the war? Believing Clytemnestra would forgive and forget? Or, she's just a woman, what kind of power would she have to avenge her daughter? All kinds of possible interpretations.

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Luke P: 1. Why is Clytaemnestra compared to a man so often my characters? 2. Does the spiders web also symbolize the net and Agamemnon being trapped?

She is in a position of power, ruling Mycenae for ten years during Agamemnon's absence. She refuses the counsel of the old men of Argos. She is also blatantly cheating on Agamemnon with Aegisthus. In Greek myth/saga, she is often representative of a monstrous woman/bad wife in contrast to Penelope, the faithful and obedient wife of Odysseus. Basically, Clytemnestra oversteps the gender boundaries of what the Greeks viewed to be the proper place of women/wives in a patriarchal society. And yes, the spider's web is a great image alongside the net to symbolize how Clytemnestra is laying a trap for Agamemnon.

Emily: Why were Agamemnon and Aegisthus enemies?

They are cousins—their fathers were brothers who fought over the kingdom of Argos. Thyestes (Aegisthus's father) slept with the wife of Atreus (Agamemnon's father). Atreus exacted revenge by feeding Thyestes's children to him in a cannibalistic feast, and then Thyestes cursed the House of Atreus. As his only surviving child, Aegisthus is bound to vengeance against the House of Atreus. Aegisthus is probably also driven by desire for power, like Clytemnestra.

Joe: So did Clytemnestra marry Agamemnon just to murder him for Iphigenia or was the murder of Iphigenia after they were married?

After they were married. Iphigenia was probably about 15 or 16 years old. Her murder was at the start of the Trojan war and Clytemnestra waited during the ten years of war for Agamemnon to return so she could have her revenge over the death of their daughter.

Josiah: Did Agamemnon ultimately really need to kill his daughter?

All depends on one's perspective. Clytemnestra certainly believes he didn't need to do this, but Agamemnon believes it was necessary to appease Artemis and sail to Troy with favorable winds.

Ashley: Is Cassandra the daughter Agamemnon sacrificed?

Isaac: Why did she insist that Agamemnon walk in on the carpets?

To flatter his pride and ego. The crimson carpets represent the high status of the gods. She is tempting him to believe his victory over Troy elevates him to the status of a god, impervious to fate. Agamemnon falls for it and enters the house without the protection of his men.

Connor: In the end, one of the people become mad with Aegisthus, stating he was a coward and conspiring man, and that he has no power and no man will bow down to him. Yet, both Clytemnestra and himself act as if nothing occurred and walk back into the hall as if they have a right to rule. Is that just a nod to ignorance and corrupted power, or is that actually how quickly power shifts occurred, and how quickly people actually accept matters?

This is a great question! I think for Aeschylus's time, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are representative of tyrants who rule without the consent or will of the people (important for Athenian audiences who believed in principles of democracy not the rule of aristocracy). They

are definitely an example of corrupted power, especially since they take power by killing the king. They also represent violent shifts in power rooted in the old blood feuds, of might over right, vengeance over law. This is a major theme of the trilogy, as Aeschylus showing how a society might progress from violence, war, blood vendettas to law, order, and democracy as instruments of justice and peace.

Luke W: Are there purposeful similarities between Apollo and Agamemnon, since Cassandra is unwilling with both?

That's an interesting insight. Cassandra does not want to be the slave of anyone, man or god; at the same time, she is possessed by her visions, of seeing the truth while never being believed (Apollo's curse for refusing him). Cassandra has certainly been read as a kind of feminist figure, as we'll explore in our reading of Christa Wolf's novel.

Sara: So was Cassandra murdered because of her seeing the murder of Agamenon? Or something else?

Cassandra is viewed by Clytemnestra as an insult. Even if Cassandra is now a slave, she is after all royalty, a princess of Troy. When Clytemnestra invites Cassandra into the house and Cassandra refuses the rituals of hospitality (very important to the Greeks), Clytemnestra is insulted. Beyond that, her reasons are a bit more ambiguous. If Cassandra is a symbol of Agamemnon's power, as the victorious leader of the Greeks, then perhaps killing her is a way to consolidate Clytemnestra's own power. As a speaker of truth, Cassandra might also present a threat to a tyrannical leader or usurper, which is how the Chorus views Clytemnestra. There are various ways of interpreting Clytemnestra's insistence on murdering Cassandra, and many writers have provided different readings.

Zach: I don't really understand why he sacrificed his daughter. it seems unnecessary.

Isaac: I also do not understand why Agamemnon needed to sacrifice his own daughter.

Savannah: So wait Apollo wanted to have sex with Cassandra, she said no and he got mad, but he still protects her?

She is still his priestess, dedicated to his shrine, even though she says she is "yoked" or enslaved by Apollo's whims. The gods look after their devotees. To rape/kill Cassandra is still viewed as an insult to Apollo. Cassandra, however, seems to want to be free of both men and gods. When she discards and shreds her ceremonial priestess robes, she is claiming her own freedom from the god and her office as his priestess. She then goes into the house, willingly accepting her fate but also mourning her own death.

Brandon: greek gods were nuts

Brandon: zeus turned into a goose to impregnate a woman so hera wouldn't see him

Joe: I mean, depending on which story you read that's how medusa came to be

Sara M: Would it have been unheard of to say no to a god like Apollo?

Lots of stories/myths of humans saying no to or resisting a god. Inevitably, they are often punished for this, like Cassandra. The gods do not like to be refused or resisted. The

stories/myths seem to indicate that the gods are tyrannical or selfish but to resist them is to resist one's fate. Aeschylus, I think, is trying to work through this problem. How do humans shape their own free will when they are also ruled by the necessity or will of the gods (or forces more powerful than humans)? This also links to Agamemnon's conflict over killing his daughter at the behest of a god (or larger political expediency of leading the Greeks in war).

Katarina: Why was Clytaemnestra referred to as a man, numerous of times?

Joe: There was a story of medusa where she was raped by Poseidon in the temple of Athena as a bird which outraged Athena because her temple was disgraced by a human so she cursed Medusa to look the way we know her now

This is a great example of a myth, where the gods are insulted by other gods or in conflict with other gods, but it's humans who bear the brunt of punishment. It seems to reflect the Greeks' views of how humans can be powerless or just the pawns of the gods.

Marcela: Does zeus rape her as a swan or does he come out of swan form?

Joe: it's best not to ask questions

Savannah: God powers I guess

Zach: Zeus is the worst

Brandon: many forms, but one god d**k (**please be mindful of language**)

Olivia: I guess when you're Zeus you can just magically do that

Nikki: When the gods approach humans non disguised, do they normally announce themselves as "I am this god" or do they call themselves by another name?

Typically, humans just recognize the deity of the gods. Because they are so different from humans, even when they appear in human form. When we read *Circe* by Madeline Miller, this will return as a theme (the omnipotence and utterly nonhuman/inhuman nature of gods).

Alyssa: Is Cassandra the daughter that Agamemnon sacrificed?

Savannah: No, Cassandra is a Trojan he nabbed

Luke W: No, his daughter is Iphigenia

Sara M: By the way, Did he feed the gods his son as an offering or did they ask for him to make them a meal or something?

Jehan: he invited the gods to a feast, then fed them his son.

Sara M: Just in an act of malice?

Marcela: A lot of cannibalism

Jehan: its weird, some say it was just so he could feed the gods something they have never eaten before.

Yes, Jehan is correct. Tantalus feeds the gods his children as an act of hubris, a matter of pride, showing off, and the gods are horrified by this. Probably not by the cannibalism but Tantalus overreaching in his arrogance.

Richard: After thinking about it for awhile, and intending to not tread on already asked questions, I guess I would ask, especially considering that this play, like Homer's Odyssey, has a lot to do with the Trojan War and the aftereffects with it, why is it often inferred that Homer is most likely not an actual historical figure, whereas the playwrights of this and the Theban Plays are considered to genuinely have been real, historical figures? Is it simply because The Odyssey was passed down via oral storytelling and these were plays? I don't know, I'm curious. Also, I'm just kind of curious as to their obsession with the aftereffects of the Trojan War in their literature, especially considering that the Greek states existed, like, right up to the creation of the Roman Empire, which is a long, long span of time. It seems interesting to be that fascinated with a single war for THAT long a period of time, as if we were talking about the aftereffects of World War II some centuries later.

These are some interesting questions. The simplest way to answer this is that Homer is likely a composite of different bards (not a single author) who orally transmitted the stories through tradition and constant revision. Most scholars do not believe the Iliad and the Odyssey were composed by the same person, but both epic poems share close similarities in language and style. The texts were probably written down sometime between the 8th and 6th centuries BCE. By Aeschylus's time, along with the other Greek tragedians, there was much more of a written rather than oral culture. What we know of classical authorship and surviving texts is really a matter of time, chance, and history (like the fire at library of Alexandria). As for the Trojan War saga, the enduring obsession/interest in this story is probably due to a number of reasons: its blend of history, legend, and myth; its representation of the gods and humans; the themes of war and conflict. In one sense, I suppose, the Trojan War functions as a kind of universal archetype for all wars.

Richard: I think it's [Troy] supposed to be in modern-day Turkey

Richard: Somewhere in Asia Minor.

Yes, that is correct.

Jehan: Why did Agamemnon go to war for his Brother's wife?

Jehan: OR sacrifice his daughter for a war for his Brother's wife?

The myths or legends surrounding Helen and the Trojan War tell how when Helen was to be married, there was a competition amongst the Greek warriors/leaders. She was, after all, the most beautiful woman in the world, a daughter of Zeus. She ended up marrying Menelaus (the brother of Agamemnon) and all the Greek leaders swore an oath that should any man try to abduct or steal Helen from her husband, they would go to war on his behalf. This was intended, I believe, to prevent internal/civil war for the Greeks. Of course, they never accounted for the fact that a foreigner, like Paris of Troy, would abduct Helen (or that Helen might willingly run away, as some versions of the myth suggest). In any case they were bound to go to war to recover Helen.

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Savannah: Why bring Clytemnestra to that [**the sacrifice of Iphigenia**]?

Because Agamemnon tricked her, lying that he was summoning Iphigenia to Aulis (where the Greek army waited to sail) to be married to Achilles. It would only be natural for the mother to accompany her daughter to be married. If Agamemnon forbid Clytemnestra to be there, then she would have suspected something was wrong.

Sara: So he was torn about sacrificing her or no?

Gabrielle: What is the significance of agaemmon killing his daughter?

Jehan: was the sacrifice accepted in Greek society?

Yes, generally, many religious rituals required sacrifice-but by Aeschylus's time, this was limited to animals or votive offerings. Human sacrifice was a remnant from a much older, less "civilized" time, represented in the old myths and sagas.

Ava: Would there have ever been a way for this family to break this so called curse of murder and canibalism or was this part of their fate as part of this family?

This is exactly the problem/question Aeschylus is trying to solve. We get his answer by the end of the third play.

Jehan: This seems close to WW1, where a lot of countries went to war because of assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria.

Jehan: it is through suffering we learn the most, but we can learn without suffering.

Olivia: ^^^

Sara: She killed a righteous king?

Sara: in their eyes

Jehan: She attempts to take power, something only a man used to have.

Savannah: I bet the chorus would be cool with vengeance if Clytemnestra was the one who scarified her daughter and Agamemnon wanted to kill her

Yes! And Clytemnestra accuses the Chorus of this hypocrisy and gendered double standard on p. 162.

Pandora: power was for men and she was a woman so she was compared to men.

Savannah: I know there's no hero/villain but man I kind of have to agree with her

Who is the tragic hero of this play?

Savannah: Cassandra? She gets fated to die for doing nothing wrong really

Luke W: Clytaemnestra for me

Pandora: clymaenestra

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Sara: I mean how much was agamenon really killing his daughter for greed?

Ashley: I have to choose Clytaemnestra

Abby: Clytemnestra

Richard: I would say Clytemnestra

Sami: Clymaenestra is who I would think

Alyssa: Clymaenestra

Jehan: Why did she wait for 10 years, maybe kill him right after the sacrifice?

He went off to war; she waited for him to return at the end of the war.

Josiah: you would think Agamemnon, since its the play is named by him, but it seems Clytemnestra might be another competitor

Connor: Can I pick the daughter? She was sacrificed without a choice, and also is the one who jump started all of these power struggles. She exposed her fathers evil, and also exposed her mothers soon to be monstrous downturn. She herself had a tragic ending, and exposing these corruptions is a heroic act itself, even though unintentional on the daughter's part.

Brandon: I'd say Clytaemnestra, because all she wanted was to avenge her daughter and rid herself of an unfaithful husband

Ashley: She has the right to avenge her daughter (coming from a moms point of view)

Yes, that is her argument. Matriarchal rights. We'll hear more about this in the next two plays.

Savannah: One of the criteria of a tragic hero was being in conflict with the chorus but I think you can sympathize with her for watching her husband kill their daughter for a seemingly pointless war, and I kind of pity her because of that. And she's going to fall soon I'm sure

Zach: I think Clymaenestra because sheh is doing these "questionable" things for justice and he did horrible things for power and glory

Great answer! Yes, she is seeking justice while he is vain and sacrificed their daughter for power, glory, and wealth.

Richard: Agamemnon is barely in the play, and he murdered his own daughter. The play focuses more on Clytemnestra because she's more sympathetic.

I definitely agree with all of you that Clytemnestra is the tragic hero. Aeschylus's sympathies also seem to be with her. She is human, flawed, and faced with a terrible decision that really has no good outcome. Although her ultimate downfall occurs in the second play, by the end of Agamemnon, her hubris is clear: she believes that her murder of Agamemnon is just/justified and that this has put an end to the curse of blood vengeance. She believes violence is an acceptable means to peace, that by taking power through murder she is ensuring a peaceful beginning when really she is just continuing the cycle, passing this problem down to her children, Orestes and Electra, as we'll see in the next play.

The Libation Bearers & The Eumenides (Wednesday, Sep 8, 2021)

Abby: who Is on the cover of the orestia?

I'm not sure, since we may have different editions of the book. If it's the same as the cover image on the website, then I believe that would be one of the Furies.

Savannah: For the Eumenides: Would all this be happening if it was a father killed? Like would the furies still show up and say that was your blood you killed? Or is it 'worse' since the mother carried the child for nine months so killing her is a worse offense? Apollo goes on about how the father is the 'real' blood on Pg. 260 does that support this very thing happening if the genders were flipped?

This is one of the central conflicts in the play. Apollo is loyal to the Father god, Zeus, and is determined to establish Zeus's reign over the old gods/laws. If Orestes had killed Agamemnon, it's unlikely the Furies would be so furious with him, but there may have been some other punishment for patricide. The Furies are far more invested in avenging matricide, since they represent the ancient female deities.

Olivia: I'm still confused as to what the furies are. Are they people? Ghosts? A metaphor?

They are goddesses but could also be read as avenging spirits. And yes, they might also function as metaphor for the old law of blood feuds.

Pandora: Why did Athena give the Furies power when they were acting like children when they didn't win the court hearing?

Athena is careful to show them respect. Even though they didn't win, they still have a great deal of power. Athena, as goddess of wisdom, sees the advantage in using persuasion and promising them reverence in Athens. She transforms their status as the Eumenides—the Kindly Ones—as benevolent goddesses of the hearth/home.

Sara: First off, I misunderstood in The Libation Bearers that Plyades was a woman, so I started out very confused in this one

No, Pylades is a man, Orestes's friend.

Savannah: From last week for the Libation Bearers: On pg. 191 Orestes talks about Apollo's oracle telling him to see this trial through, is that oracle Cassandra speaking from the Great Beyond? Or was it the Seer of Delphi/some other oracle?

That would have been the Pythia, the Oracle of Delphi. Though I do think it an interesting possibility that it might be Cassandra, who was also a priestess of Apollo. However, I think it is Apollo directing the Oracle to urge Orestes to murder Clytemnestra and then have faith in the outcome of the trial. My guess is that Apollo wants vengeance for the murder of Cassandra, but that's just an inference (never actually stated in the play).

Shelby: Are the furies that followed oresties a more conscience kind of thing or is it a real thing that people know about and just oresties can see them.

They are real. Keep in mind, in Greek myth, the gods are as visible and real to humans as other humans. They do however torment Orestes's conscience in the attempt to drive him mad.

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Isaac: What's the deal with the furies? what are they? Are they like demons ghost or gods?

Connor: On the bottom of pages 266 and 267 roughly beginning at lines 790 and 820, the Furies say the same lines I believe word for word. This happens again at the bottoms of page 268 and 269 beginning lines 847 and 879. I just want to clarify, is this supposed to happen or is it a print error? If it is indeed supposed to occur, it as a response too Athene does not always make sense, as the same words are used for two different statements from her, two different times.

As we discussed in class, this is not a typo. The Furies are relentless in their drive to retain their power—vengeance as justice. They are not listening to Athena but forcing their case, making their appeal and insisting on their rights. Athena listens to them and finds a way to appease their anger through reasonable persuasion, offering them a new and different kind of power based on peace and prosperity.

Alyssa: Still a bit confused about what the furies actually are

Brandon: How do the furies work? are they something left over from the "old gods?" eldritch beings, or just some kind of force like karma?

Ava: Since Clytaemnestra's ghost is in this play, did the Greeks believe in other spiritual beings outside of the god/godesses, furies, and ghost?

Yes, they believed in the afterlife, represented by the underworld, which was ruled over by Hades (Zeus's brother). When the Olympians defeated the Titans, Zeus took command of the sky, Poseidon the seas, and Hades the underworld. The underworld is richly imagined by the Greeks in many of their myths and stories. For example, Odysseus must make a journey to the underworld, where he encounters the dead heroes of the Trojan War, like Achilles and Agamemnon (who tells Odysseus of how he was murdered by Clytemnestra). The Greeks strongly believed in the spirits of the dead.

Marcela: I was disappointed by the outcome of Orestes's trial. He admitted to killing his mother, why was he able to walk away a free man?

Because he had Zeus, Apollo, and Athena on his side! They are determined to solidify patriarchal law and order.

Sami: Honestly the furies are really confusing on what they are

Grant: If Athena is this wise and enlightened Goddess then why does she have to enlist the help of 10 mortals to help her decide in the ruling of the "case"?

I think this represents Athena establishing justice through participation of citizens to determine the law and punishments for crimes. It's a symbolic move on Aeschylus's part, illustrating how Athens is a "civilized" city-state moving away from tyranny—the rule of one—to democracy—the rule of many. Athena is trying to model this for the Athenians. If she were the only one to decide the case (though she essentially does as the tie breaker), then she'd be a tyrant—instead she sets up a court of law with a jury that hears both sides and then votes, ultimately resolving things without further bloodshed. Aeschylus is celebrating Athens for its

attempts at founding a democracy while also warning Athens of the dangers of slipping back to the old tribal ways or rules of kings/aristocracy.

Zach: Why was Athena so quick to agree with Apollo that a man is more important than a woman. I know Athena is a very strong and powerful goddess and also very quick to anger. I'm just surprised she would go along with that.

She is the daughter of Zeus, emerging fully born out of his head. She ultimately owes her loyalty to the Father. At the same time, she is trying to convince the Furies to become more benevolent goddesses, “domesticating” them in service to the prosperity of the home, which would be the role of women in a Greek patriarchal society. This is not to say women were believed to be less important than men, only that their place should be in service to husband, family, and a well-run home. Women were viewed as important and central to upholding the family, and women who did so were praised and respected (see Penelope, wife of Odysseus). Thus, Clytemnestra is viewed as monstrous and unfeminine for trying to take the place of Agamemnon. We might even think of Electra as a human version of Athena—she is loyal to her father (the rule of the father); she's also angry at her mother, Clytemnestra, who basically keeps Electra a prisoner. Electra believes Clytemnestra fails her as a mother, since Electra remains unmarried without any of her own power or status, which she would have if she were married. In other words, women can often buy into the gender roles or rules of patriarchy if they believe it benefits them. At least, that would be a more contemporary feminist reading; keep some of this in mind when we read *House of Names*.

Victoria: With Athena agreeing with Apollo that men are more important than women, is that something that was common in that time? The mutual “understanding” that men were held higher than women?

See my answer above.

Joe: So was the entire plot of The Eumenides just a plan by Apollo to save Orestes from the Furies? If that's the case then why haven't the Furies attacked anyone else in that family? Clytemnestra killed out of revenge, so why didn't the Furies attack her?

I think the entire plot was a plan by Aeschylus to illustrate and celebrate the movement from vengeance to justice, violence to peace, chaos to prosperity. The Furies represent matrilineal rights and are on Clytemnestra's side for avenging the murder/sacrifice of her daughter, Iphigenia. Apollo is determined to make a point of humiliating and triumphing over the Furies, and reads as pretty misogynist for contemporary readers, but don't mistake Apollo's point of view with that of Aeschylus. Aeschylus, through Athena's ability to appease the Furies, is more concerned with peaceful resolution, and I think he is far more sympathetic to the Furies. Aeschylus understood, and with a great deal of wisdom, that in creating a new peaceful society, it was still important to keep elements of the old world or belief systems; he believed in balance and an ideal of equity—though not the same as our own contemporary ideals (after all, Athens still had slaves/non-citizens).

Brandon: I thought she was a Lannister. *comedy drums*



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Luke P: The furies what are they, I looked it up and found that they were female chthonic deities of vengeance. What does this mean?

Chthonic translates as "in, under, or beneath the earth", from "earth") and literally means "subterranean", but the word in English describes [deities](#) or spirits of the [underworld](#), especially in the [Ancient Greek religion](#). The Greek word *khthon* is one of several for "earth"; it typically refers to that which is under the earth, rather than the living surface of the land (as [Gaia](#) or 'Ge' does), or the land as territory. (Wikipedia)

In other words, the Furies are goddesses of the underworld—which makes sense if their law is based on vengeance of the dead. Athena transforms them, still of the earth, but now goddesses of fertility, the hearth, the domestic realm.

Ashley: So what is Athena's thoughts on the tied vote that freed Orestes? Clearly the furies are angry but Athena seems to try and calm them down, by saying it's just a tie so he's really not free? I'm confused by that part.

Athena casts the tie-breaking vote that frees and clears Orestes of his crime so that he can return to Mycenae and rule in peace, the curse of the House of Atreus finally at an end. She tries to placate the Furies with the fact that it was a tied vote, that the citizens/jury listened to their side, and at least half supported them. This way, Athena reassures them that it was a fair trial—following the Mean/the middle way—and that they can take on a new role, no longer as the goddesses of vengeance since the laws of justice will henceforth be decided by a democratic trial and not bloodshed.

Jehan: That was a point that I made in my blog. Apollo seems to be fighting a proxy war against furies.

Yes, Jehan, great point! He is fighting the Furies on behalf of Zeus, but Athena finds a more peaceful resolution through persuasion, respect, and logic.

Sara: Did I miss whatever happened to Electra?

Nope, she just disappears in *The Libation Bearers*. Sophocles and Euripides both wrote tragedies exploring Electra's character and role more thoroughly. Aeschylus seems to write her off as just an avenging force to convince Orestes of the need to murder their mother. Again, we'll get a more nuanced depiction of her when we read *House of Names*.

Now that we've discussed them in more detail, who or what do you think the Furies represent?

Pandora: the old gods? they might represent the past transitioning into the future

Hunter: I felt as though they are personified woes idk

Connor: I believe they are the personified version of justice, vengeance, and corrections. Not good or evil necessarily, just the embodiment of correcting wrongdoings.

Savannah: Are they something only women could invoke? It just seems like they way we have been talking the hysterical almost harpy-esque furies would be a woman's version of a curse? I'm hoping they aren't just something a woman could invoke because I don't know how I'd feel about that

Brandon: personification of violence in pursuit of "justice"

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Ava: The furies seem to represent the over looming darkness of this blood feud

Luke W: The furies seem to act like vigilantes, taking justice into their own hands for crimes men have done.

Pandora: I agree Luke

Connor: I do agree with that passage, however, I am curious as to whether or not we should trust how Apollo depicts them. As you stated, Apollo is not an impartial judge, meaning would he not personify the furies to be more evil than they actually are? Especially using words such as vile and dark pits.

Ashley: So does Electra and Orestes just not care about their sister who died and only cares about their father they were blood

Josiah: I feel like a part the furies take is a representation of woman empowerment and how they are depicted as evil because of the time. Like "this idea is false because we believe a man is higher than a woman" is something believed in that time and is seen throughout the play, especially at the end when Athena shows that Orestes' justice was more important because she was avenging his father, rather his mother's blood

Josiah: Is there a bigger significance to the amount of so many representations of justice? Was it a demonstration of how many sides there are or what they are in how people view justice?

Yes, the entire trilogy is concerned with different definitions, rules, beliefs, and practices surrounding justice. This would be a good topic to explore in your blogs!

Christa Wolf, *Cassandra* (Wed, Sep 15, 2021)

Grant: So in Cassandra's refusal to be with a "War Hero" it leads her being another female loss in the war. So now that she is looking back at it does she wish she went with Aeneas and left Troy? Or does she still stand by her values of not being associated with war in a sense? If that makes any sense.

This is a great question and is linked to Wolf's overall anti-war theme as well as her reason for writing Cassandra's story—because it's always the war heroes who are glorified and whose stories are told. We should discuss this more on Monday once we've finished the novel, since we'll have even more insights then.

Sara: I considered the priestess' a lot like nuns, but I thought nuns have to stay celibate and it's obvious that the priestess are not (unless I misunderstand the group of women she was with in those scenes). The priestess' sounded more like slaves. Is this just because they are women, therefore having no rights or whatever?

The priestesses are not equivalent to nuns, since Wolf is grounding the religious offices, rituals, and beliefs in Ancient Greek customs and beliefs. Although we see similarities in gendered hierarchies with Catholicism, we should not impose our own gendered, sexual, or religious identities and roles onto the Greeks. As discussed in class, sexual intercourse was part of the ancient fertility rites, dating back to the Minoan civilization and paleolithic times. Wolf is also exploring a shift from matriarchal-centered goddess worship and/or fertility cults

to patriarchal religions, which notably expanded over time alongside conflicts and disputes over territory. The Trojan War was most likely a dispute over territory and trading/shipping rights in the Dardanelles, as Wolf (and archaeologists) have suggested. Helen seems merely to be an excuse for the war, according to Wolf's version. She is an object to be fought over as a matter of male or national honor, but really, *Cassandra* seems to indicate, it is an economic/territorial dispute. But back to the religious sexual rites, these were considered normal in most societies that worshipped fertility goddesses. Some of the oldest archaeological finds of religious figurines, across many cultures in the paleolithic and ancient periods, were represented by fertility goddesses, such as these:



The *Venus of Willendorf* is a 4.4-inch tall carving discovered in Willendorf, Austria. It is believed to have been crafted between 30,000 and 25,000 BCE, making it one of the world's oldest known works of art.



An 8,000-year-old statuette of what could be a fertility goddess unearthed at a Neolithic site in Turkey



Lotus-Headed Fertility Goddess Lajja Gaurica. 6th century
India (Madhya Pradesh)



This Minoan Mother goddess figurine (around 1600 BC), found in Crete, would have prefigured the Mycenaean and Trojan cultures by about 400 years. Minoan society was heavily influential of the societies living in Ancient Greece and Asia Minor (where Troy is presumed to have been located). You can see the serpent imagery is heavily associated with the goddess (though I'm not sure why there is a cat on top of her head). Wolf is most likely heavily borrowing from Minoan religious rites and iconography, especially in the various prophetic dreams and religious practices of Cassandra's culture.

Savannah: Pg. 3 and 5 Cassandra is given a way to commit suicide, why doesn't she take it? She knows she's going to die anyway, why not on her own terms? Did she not want to mess with fate? I know you were just talking about fate so I'm sorry if I missed you talking about the suicide options already!

We discussed this in class (see below for student responses to this question). For me, I think it's because she's compelled to remain a witness all the way up until her death. She knows death is coming and has no hope of surviving but life is also precious, every moment of it.

Pandora: Helen was never taken? Was it her choice to leave? What caused Cassandra's seizure on page 39?

Helen was taken by Paris, but then he lost her to the Egyptian king who took her from Paris. Wolf is following Euripides' play, *Helen*, as the source text for this part of Helen's myth. At the end of the Trojan War, Helen is eventually reunited with her husband, Menelaus. As discussed in class, Wolf uses this part of the myth to explore the manufacturing of war on the part of the Trojans. Helen is just a "phantom," the Big Lie, behind the war. Cassandra sees they cannot win a war based on such a lie. Cassandra's seizure on p. 39, one of her first, is brought on by her prophetic vision and understanding that so much of the war is based on falsehood, including false prophecies by Calchas, who was told to provide "favorable predictions" in support of the war. It's an instance where Cassandra suddenly sees the ugly truth of her own family and society, something that she had suppressed or turned a blind eye to, so it's ultimately a traumatic moment for her. It's like Cassandra has a physical reaction to the truth; the truth is solid and cannot be denied even though everyone around her both sees the truth and denies it at the same time.

Alyssa: Cassandra mentions her nurse a few times. Is this her nurse specifically Or is this like the families nurse?

Arisbe, the mother of Marpessa, is equivalent to something like the royal wet-nurse or nanny (not a medical nurse, though she does have lots of knowledge of medicinal herbs).

Great Books Zoom Chat

Ava: When Cassandra mentions different peoples weapons, example being Marpessa's silence and Agamemnon's blustering, are these weapons a good and or a bad thing? Are these "weapons" what leads to their ultimate demise? And what would Cassandra's weapon be?

This is a great question! The weapons could be good or bad depending on how one uses them. Silence is an especially strong theme here, as a weapon women can use to protect themselves, but it can harm them if they don't speak out. See my lecture where I talk a lot about the use of silence and speaking in the novel. Cassandra's weapons are her ability to see and speak the truth (though you could argue for other things too), but her weapons are also turned against her because no one in Troy wants to hear the truth. In this sense, Wolf plays with the whole myth of Apollo's curse—that Cassandra would be able to warn her people of the future, but no one would listen, they would call her mad. The irony, in Wolf's version, is that Cassandra eventually realizes everyone sees and knows the same things as her, they are just denying the reality, choosing to believe in propaganda and myth, choosing to conform to the political silencing that is imposed on anyone who speaks out against the war (like Cassandra).

Richard: I was going to ask two questions. One being, though it was already answered, the idea that Wolf's choice of writing this novel and what it had to do with her own time, where she's living in East Germany 40 some years after WWII, yet still paying for it.

Yes, she uses the myth to reflect on her own experiences as a child in Germany during WWII and an adult in East Germany after the war. Much of her work grapples with her past, as a member of the Aryan (Nazi) Youth party (during the war) and a reluctant Stasi informant in the late 1950s, questioning to what extent citizens are complicit with state violence or coerced to conform. Kind of linked to the Greek themes of Fate and chance/choice.

Luke W: Why didn't Cassandra take her own life? Does she not see a difference between murder and suicide, or is she just accepting her fate?

Marcela: You touched on this a little bit when you were speaking on Apollo's relationship with Cassandra. Why is Apollo in love with her, so in love to gift her with the ability to see the truth and visions if she doesn't feel the same way about him?

Above all, the Greek gods love those humans who love and revere them most. They're a pretty egotistical bunch, but basically, they can't exist without the love and faith of humans. Reminds me of Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*. This is explored a lot more in Miller's *Circe*, which we're reading later in the semester. Cassandra is determined to be a priestess of Apollo, so what's not to love from Apollo's perspective if she's someone who wants to dedicate herself to his rites and worship? The problem for Cassandra, though, is she wants to be a priestess to gain power and status (in her family and society) but does not want to submit to the power of Apollo, and thus he curses her.

Abby: When Cassandra talks about Clytemnestra, she seems like she thinks she was so dishonored by the act of her killing her husband. Was she mad?

Not sure I follow the question. Especially since the word, "mad," in Cassandra's case could mean anger or insanity. I think Cassandra actually respects Clytemnestra, she sees themselves as equals (as powerful women). Neither woman has any love for Agamemnon.

Great Books Zoom Chat

Jada: Do you think Wolf is passing the sense of security she felt when relating her life to that as Cassandra's to those who read it as a way to feel the same?

I also need a bit more clarification here. I do think Wolf is relating her life to Cassandra's story, and as a way for many women (or oppressed peoples) to see themselves reflected by Cassandra. We will discuss this much more next week when we read the first essay by Wolf about why she is rewriting Cassandra's narrative and what she hopes to achieve.

Olivia: I just don't understand why she didn't commit suicide. Did she think she was continuing the line of murder? Or did she see that even if she killed herself, Clytemnestra would still kill Agamemnon?

Yes, partly, she knows she has no power to stop Clytemnestra, and I don't think she even wants to, since Cassandra sympathizes with Clytemnestra over the murder of Iphigenia. Perhaps with Cassandra choosing to live and show up in Mycenae, she thinks this might even solidify for Clytemnestra the plan to kill her husband, but Cassandra also sees it would happen either way.

Richard: The second being that, do you think she chose to write this in the way that she did, where past, present, and future (Wolf's time) are all intermingled because of Cassandra being a Seer?

I really like this insight about the temporal structure of the narrative; it does not just reflect how memory works, but as someone who can see the future and has lived through the future that she foresaw (the fall of Troy), Cassandra is simultaneously located in the past, present, and future. And yes, she is present in Wolf's future as Wolf tries to imagine Cassandra's past.

Connor: She had refused to be associated or part of the war, in the sense of being complicit, but even her refusal to be complicit, she still ended up a part of war, a prisoner and made an example of. With that in mind, and that she was prophetic, did she intentionally choose that option to be a type of martyr, or did she believe that her dissociation with war at first, would not come back to haunt her?

This is an interesting question. On one level, I think Wolf is indicating that all members of society are caught up in the war machine; that we cannot escape it. We are complicit or we resist; we are victims or perpetrators, or sometimes in-between. I believe Wolf is asking us to grapple with the moral ambiguities of wartime. I don't know if Cassandra chooses to be a martyr since she ultimately does not want to die for anyone's cause. This is worth returning to next week once we've read the rest of the novel.

Ari: Who chooses the priestess/seer and members of the group? Aside from the gods, is it its own autonomous entity where people are selected from outside of it, or its own sort of role within the society where one can only be born into it?

I think it's a combination. People can be born into it, they can be selected, or they are called to it as a vocation, or they have a prophetic gift (like Cassandra).

Savannah: Just a general comment I am living for all the Agamemnon bashing in this book. It's beautiful

Pandora: agreed

Zach: Did she have an option of just not being a priestess of Apollo after he tried to have sex with her or was she stuck in that role

She has been initiated and dedicated to that role; plus, I don't think she wants to give it up, nor does she feel she has a choice. Even if she was no longer a priestess, she would still have the gift/curse of prophecy. Cassandra also wants this role—she wants the power and status, at first—but then as the war drags on, and she is silenced for speaking out, she wants to escape. Pay attention to the passages where she talks about the caves and the women there, who function as a counter-society to Troy and the official religion, a place of sanctuary where Cassandra can discover an alternative to being a princess and priestess, a different kind of community that is about life, not "killing and dying."

Sara: Apollo gave her the gift/curse of being a prophet but Cassandra mentions their was a night when snakes were licking their ears and it was said they will probably become prophets, so was she always destined to become a prophet and in the same vein, also always destined for everyone to forget that happened with the snakes and not believe her?

Dream imagery throughout the book is important. Mainly Wolf's point is that dreams and prophecies are not solid or one thing but up for multiple interpretations.

Brandon: So, if helen was a myth, a lie, was it just a convenient cassus belli for the greeks to take down troy?

Yup, for both sides. The Greeks believe Troy has Helen and the Trojans know they don't have Helen. Also, as Cassandra notes with the recollection of the three SHIPS (diplomatic trips to Greece), tensions and conflicts leading up to the war had long been brewing. Helen is just an excuse and never the real cause.

Alyssa: Haha yes, I agree Savannah

Marcela: How is their fate determined?

As discussed in class, the Greeks believed fate was determined by the gods, namely the Moirai:

"...any of three goddesses who determined human destinies, and in particular the span of a person's life and his allotment of misery and suffering. Homer speaks of Fate (*moira*) in the singular as an impersonal power and sometimes makes its functions interchangeable with those of the Olympian gods. From the time of the poet Hesiod (8th century BC) on, however, the Fates were personified as three very old women who spin the threads of human destiny. Their names were Clotho (Spinner), Lachesis (Allotter), and Atropos (Inflexible). Clotho spun the "thread" of human fate, Lachesis dispensed it, and Atropos cut the thread (thus determining the individual's moment of death)." (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Fate-Greek-and-Roman-mythology>)

Joe: Following up with what Ari asked, are all seer's people who have been blessed by gods or are these mostly just people who pretend to predict the future for their own benefit?

It seems, in Wolf's novel, that it's a combination of the two. Some are truly gifted, but most are just manipulating smoke and shadows (or animal entrails), telling what people want to hear, or what they are commanded to foretell as part of propaganda and/or political strategy.

Emily: A few people have asked this but I was also curious as to why she didn't commit suicide

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Shelby: when cassandra mentioned her nurse, does she know that cassandra wants to commit suicide. And Cassandra had the chance to so why didn't she.

Janelle: Why exactly is Cassandra referring to Clytemnestra the way she did on pg 9? Does she hate her for what she did or why does she say that she is the woman she thought she was.

As I said earlier, Cassandra does not hate Clytemnestra but partly admires her. Clytemnestra proves that she is far superior to Agamemnon, that she would “not share the throne with this nonentity.” She sympathizes with her, assuming he “treated her vilely while he still controlled her”—in other words, he is despicable, never knowing the true power and strength of Clytemnestra, and a fool for not seeing she would murder him for the death of their daughter. Cassandra says that Clytemnestra “is racked with hatred”—it’s palpable and easily visible when she welcomes him home. Cassandra realizes that because of the kind of woman Clytemnestra is, as someone who will no longer be controlled or insulted by her husband, “that the queen cannot spare my life.” Clytemnestra has no personal animosity toward Cassandra, she is just a symbol of Agamemnon’s insults and disrespect. Cassandra questions, “When did my hatred disappear?”—meaning, unlike Clytemnestra, she is no longer driven by hatred, anger, or revenge; at the end of her life, she is trying to reach some peace within herself and has also learned that hatred is just part of the never-ending cycle of violence.

Josiah: Do you think that Cassandra, being a form of Wolf’s interpretations, is similar or if not the same as the feminism going on nowadays? Does she help in displaying those emotions, thoughts, etc.?

Yes, absolutely! But we will save that for next Wednesday once we’ve finished the book and read the first essay. Do keep this in mind as you keep reading.

Isaac: I was a little confused about the ships, were they war ships? and what was their importance?

The SHIPS were diplomatic missions to Greece (see my answer above to Brandon’s question).

Savannah: Also real quick are they a couple? Marpessa just in love with Cassandra? Or am I misreading their interactions?

No, they are not a couple. Marpessa has grown up with Cassandra, as her childhood friend and then her servant. They do love each other, like family, but it’s also ambivalent, at least more so from Marpessa, considering she is of the lower class and never has as much power as Cassandra. They have a complicated relationship. Marpessa, like her mother Arisbe, does not at all act servile toward Cassandra, often criticizing her or exasperated with Cassandra’s blind privilege, but she is dedicated to her.

So, after looking at the passage on pp. 2-3, why does everyone think Cassandra chooses not to commit suicide?

Savannah: She wants to see how it ends? Wants to see Clytemnestra to know who will kill her?

Pandora: She hasn't seen what she's supposed to see?

Ashley: Didn't she just want to enjoy her best life

Sara: This one was really confusing for me, I think too much of it went right over my head

Great Books Zoom Chat

Connor: I guess maybe then it takes away from her point of not being associated with war? Killing herself to get away from fate when war could have saved her, gives power to war.

Ava: Cassandra wanted to see what would happen, because she had hope that things might change.

Isaac: I think she knows she still has more to do before she dies.

Janelle: That was my same understanding ^^ I feel like she wants to see more of her life before she actually lets go completely.

Josiah: I felt like she also just wanted to see how things played out

Savannah: Is there something maybe that she wants to see herself be right in the end? I can't remember exactly where but she talks about how she'll be proven right eventually and maybe she wants to keep going to be right? Just so she doesn't feel insane because this poor girl is being gaslit constantly and seeing herself be right must be rewarding?

Jehan: I think she wanted her death to be valuable. To mean something.

Ashley: Is that part of the reason why she wants to become a priestess? Even though when she said she's felt emptiness since childhood?

These are all strong answers!

Jehan: What are some decisions or lack of action that she regrets?

That will probably become clearer as we read to the end of the novel. Many of her regrets, though, are linked to the fact that she remained so willfully blind to what was going on in Troy before she began to speak out, or that she wasted so many of the war years not living more fully, not choosing an option other than or outside of war.

Jehan: Did Calchas had prophetic powers from the gods? Cassandra on a later page appears to not believe in Calchas's prophecies. Was Calchas gifted?

No, Cassandra indicates Calchas is a fraud, whose loyalties (and prophecies) are easily bought and only used to advance his own interests. After all, Calchas is the one who convinced Agamemnon that he needed to appease Artemis by sacrificing Iphigenia.

Savannah: Okay so was it normal for priests to sleep with priestesses? Or Panthous just a really gross dude who is just like that with Cassandra

Yeah, he's pretty gross, and Cassandra eventually loathes and rejects him, but as discussed in class, sexual intercourse could be viewed as part of the religious rites. Also, the Trojans are still influenced by more matriarchal religious practices than the Greeks, which Wolf seems to associate with a greater degree of sexual freedom for the women of Troy (as opposed to the Greeks). And, as discussed in class, the Greeks and Trojans have very different norms and mores when it comes to sexual relationships (at least different from our contemporary society). For example, within Greek society there was a class of women referred to as the:

"Hetaira, (Greek: "female companion"), one of a class of professional independent courtesans of ancient Greece who, besides developing physical beauty, cultivated their minds and talents to

a degree far beyond that allowed to the average Attic woman. Usually living fashionably alone, or sometimes two or three together, the hetairai enjoyed an enviable and respected position of wealth and were protected and taxed by the state. Though they were generally foreigners, slaves, or freedwomen, their freedom was greater than that of the married woman, who was bound to seclusion. That their homes were frequented by married men was not censured by society. They were often hired as entertainers for symposia and family sacrifices. The hetairai of Corinth and Athens were especially noted for their outstanding physical and cultural accomplishments." (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/hetaira>)

Sara: So the reason why they would seem like slaves to use is only the aspect of being forced to have sex with these men, otherwise they had respect in society?

I don't think they are forced, at least as Cassandra tells it, they are willing participants because of the religious rite of initiation. The sex would not have been seen as coerced or degrading. In fact, the one time Panthous attempts to force himself on Cassandra, she rejects him and never has sex with him again. This raises important issues, though, because we will see later how the women of Troy, including Cassandra, are subjected to rape as "spoils" of war.

Grant: I think at one point the job had decently high respect for their job but it got degraded by the patriarchy over time.

Yes, sex work was not at all viewed the way we (as a society/culture) view it now (see above).

Christa Wolf, *Cassandra* (Mon, Sep 20, 2021)

Pandora: What happened to Cassandra's faith in the gods?

I think she loses her faith during the course of the war. She sees how the oracles are used by Troy for war propaganda and how the religious rituals and beliefs become twisted in service of human conflicts.

Savannah: Pg. 79 Cassandra says "Apollo, if you do exist after all..." Does she think she got the curse/gift from some other entity? And on 98 she says she's stopped believing in the gods but how does she explain her cure/gift then? Does she think she's gone crazy and she doesn't have a gift/curse? Or am I very much overthinking this

We discussed in class at length how Wolf interprets/rewrites this part of Cassandra's myth—she takes the mythology and gives it more of a realistic representation. Cassandra's gift/curse is interpreted through her dream; also, often when she breaks out in some prophetic speech, it's not really prophecy but her seeing the "truth" of things that others refuse to see or acknowledge. Her madness really stems from the madness of her society. She also feels divided within herself—can she be loyal to her family/Troy while also remaining loyal to her own integrity and morals?

Alyssa: I noticed at the beginning of the novel and at the end where we left off on page 138 us in third person while the rest of the novel is in first person. Why did she do it this way? Was she just trying to emphasize this repetition to show importance for these closing and opening statements ?

Yes, Wolf ties things back to the beginning. We shift from Cassandra's point of view back to Wolf's perspective/present, standing before the Lion Gate at the ruins of Mycenae, as witness to the place where Cassandra died.

Olivia: Maybe I missed it, but what was the whole point of trying to set Polyxena as bait for Achilles? I mean what was going to be gained if they actually did go through with it? How would this have fixed anything?

They believed if they killed Achilles they would win the war; they succeed in killing him but still end up defeated. We discussed at length why this plan/scene is so central to Cassandra's narrative and her realization that she could no longer remain complicit with or silent about her own people's blindness and self-destruction.

Abby: What did wolf mean when she said on page 107 "They asked Apollo to take the baby from her?

They were praying for Apollo to cause Polyxena to abort her pregnancy from Andron. It's a weird scene, since Arisbe, or any other medicinal healer would have known how to expel an unwanted pregnancy without intervention of a god.

Isaac: I think I might be missing something about the role that the gods played in ancient Greece. Why do they fight on the battlefield with humans, and why do they pick certain sides to fight with?

We discussed in class (see below for student answers to this question).

Marcela: What is the significance of the stone lions at the end of the novel?

See my answer above to Alyssa's question. The stone lions are depicted on the Lion Gate entrance to the citadel of Mycenae.

Jehan: When Troilus went into the temple, was he expecting Achilles to let him go? It seems as though Achilles is only called a murderer when he is in the temple.

As discussed in class, yes, Troilus believed the Temple of Apollo would secure sanctuary. Achilles breaks all of these "civilized" rules of war, exposing there is nothing "civilized" in war—its brutality and violence has no bounds (as represented by "Achilles the brute").

Ava: Since this was her fate, would she have been able to change it if she chose to run away with Aeneas or would her fate end up catching back up with her? Was this an inexorable fate or was it subject to change?

I think Cassandra's "fate" is not necessarily to die at the hands of Clytemnestra but that she is fated to bear witness to the truth and her life until the very end. It's against her nature to run away, like Aeneas. She has struggled and worked hard to remain a witness, to not run from the truth.

Grant: I know this may not pertain to Cassandra in the novel but I noticed that while I was doing my resource page that there are different "versions" and more specifically different versions when talking about how she receives the power to tell prophecies. So my question is how does she officially get them does she sleep with Apollo first or not at all?

I don't know if there is an answer to this—the origins of Cassandra's source myth. Myths are passed down over centuries and receive different interpretations and versions based on the storyteller. Kind of the theme of our whole class. 😊

Sara: Pg 138 "The pain will remind us of each other. When we meet later, if there is a later, we will recognize each other." Is this her wondering about an after life? Because at this point she knows how it all ends?

Possibly? I think she is imagining a community of survivors who have a shared narrative of pain and trauma. Even if she knows how it all ends, I always find that Cassandra still clings to the possibility of life and survival (not just an afterlife).

Ashley: So her father disowned her because she didn't speak up of the death of his son Troilus? Or was it because he was murdered in the temple? I feel like he would be more upset over Hector since he was considered the chief hero of the family. Why would she say anything when the people didn't believe her anyways but they were all mad at her? Also, when Hector had the dream of getting "Pushed out of the war womb" was he foreseeing his own death?

To your last question, that's a great interpretation of Hector's dream! Also, "pushed out of the war womb," indicates how his own myth of war hero is born out of his death. Priam ultimately disowns Cassandra because she refuses to agree with or condone their plan to use Polyxena as bait for Achilles (as discussed in class). And it's not just this one instance but years of Cassandra trying to push back and years of Trojan women being silenced and pushed aside during the war. Cassandra also asks herself why she just didn't comply/agree—she cannot remain silent or neutral in the face of corrupt power, even if no one wants to hear her.

Brandon: Did Penthesilea actually exist in greek myth, or was she a creation of the author?

Yes, she is an actual figure of myth, as the leader of the Amazons. We didn't get into discussion of the Amazons in Wolf's novel, but certain questions are raised by Wolf's inclusion of Penthesilea: Wolf represents women who love to wage wars in the character of Penthesilea and the Amazonian warriors. How does she represent these women? Why does Cassandra keep away from these women? How is Cassandra's position and approach to war different from these women's? Do you agree with Wolf's suggestion that such women are mere proxies for patriarchy's worst excesses? (see pp. 117-120)

Layth: I read a little bit about Wolf herself and I'm wondering what prompted her to go see all the real world places that are in the Oresteia and the other greek plays.

We will discuss this Wednesday after reading Wolf's first essay where she writes about her trip to Greece and various inspirations for Cassandra.

Connor: Cassandra, having the prophetic foresight from Apollo, can see what is around her as it relates to time. Being as in same interpretations, this is often a curse, is there hate or disdain for the Gods, or is that not a feeling she would have because it might worsen her situation to be even more out of favor with them?

This is an interesting question. In Wolf's version, Cassandra is not disdainful of the gods, but of how humans have twisted their versions and relationships with the gods.

Great Books Zoom Chat

Olivia: The author makes it seem like Cassandra was just another female casualty of war, but is she? She constantly talks about how Cassandra was feared by many and people from everywhere knew of her powers (even if they didn't believe her). So is she just another casualty? She's not like any other woman, not even her sister.

This is complicated. Yes, Cassandra has a lot of power and status—she often even presents herself as superior to or above other women (part of her hubris/character flaw). In the end, though, she realizes she is no different from other women, that war and patriarchy turn all women into objects, “living statues.”

Sara: End of ph 129 I think, She is talking about her overwhelming pain and it makes sense that she would be in physical pain but I was wondering if it felt like it was mental pain or just the physical pain?

So much of Cassandra’s pain is mental pain—trauma and dissociation, though often accompanied by physical pain (her imprisonment/torture, her rape). She is overwhelmed by the pain of losing her home, her identity, her family, her very sense of wholeness.

Why are the gods so involved in human lives and conflicts?

Savannah: Boredom? They've got nothing to lose and might as well go fight. Need that worship/praise?

Isaac: I think its probably based on who worships them most but im really not sure

Zach: as forms of entertainment?

Olivia: I agree with Savannah ^

Pandora: I was going to say the gods were bored.

Josiah: Does Wolf’s Cassandra seem similar to feminism that is going on around us nowadays? Or was it really only more similar for the time it was created; around the Cold War?

I think Wolf is speaking to the conditions of women’s lives throughout much of history, as part of her feminist critique of patriarchy and war.

Janelle: on pg 117 there is a quote that says “they kill whomever they love, love in order to kill” what is meant by this

I believe this is Panthous criticizing the Amazons. He fears them and their violence (from a patriarchal perspective). He sees them as women out of control, and Cassandra doesn’t seem to agree with his perspective, even though she has trouble with the Amazons—she is trying to understand how both men and women are capable of violence and hatred, that women are not just naturally pacifists. Women can be complicit with the violence of patriarchy and war.

Brandon: well, when half your city dies of the plague one year, and the next you get massive crops.....easiest explanation is fickle gods

Savannah: I guess they think Achilles is the only thing that's really giving the Greeks power? If he's out of the game they'd win or at least a better shot

Abby: They want themselves to always be right

Great Books Zoom Chat

Savannah: Cassandra knows Achilles doesn't have actual interest in women (pg. 83) and is very harsh with them so I think she's calling out using Polyxena because she knows he's not really interested in her?

Discussion of Cassandra's dream about the sun and moon—which shines brighter (p. 87)? Why does Marpessa tell her this “a completely perverted question”?

Sara: Because they are both necessary?

Brandon: no matter how she answers, a god will be pissed

Olivia: Because they both shine bright in their own way? Why compare them?

Pandora: I think its because there's multiple answers based on opinions.

Hunter: Comparison is bad when the gods are the one who created both to begin with

Josiah: Because they each have their own purpose in brightness, one is brighter in its own way

Grant: it's sort of a trick question

Savannah: Also I feel like Cassandra knows how much of a screw up Paris is so why are we trusting him to shoot the arrow?!

Ashley: unethical. Was her vision of Troilus unclear because he was killed in the temple? I thought she mentioned something about it being foggy. Or unclear.

Savannah: Want to get this out to maybe get a response for the discussion archives: I love how Clytemnestra was handled in this book, Cassandra and her bits were really interesting. (Page 42 being sooo intriguing to me) I think if fits with the theme of women being forced to play a part, or to fight each other rather than the patriarchy

I agree with this, Savannah! Clytemnestra, in Cassandra's view, is not a monster but a woman of power playing a role to retain that power. Cassandra sees and respects Clytemnestra (to an extent) and also realizes her murder is impersonal—Clytemnestra isn't jealous of Cassandra, as so many versions of the myth assert, but is trapped by her role. She cannot allow Cassandra to live because this would only weaken her own power. Cassandra doesn't agree with this but sees and accepts the fact of it.

Christa Wolf, *Cassandra* (Wed, Sep 22, 2021)

After reading the first essay by Wolf, what are some reasons for why she felt inspired to write about Cassandra?

Jehan: She saw the similarity between their circumstances.

Savannah: She talks about reading the Oresteia and how Cassandra, "took her captive" (Pg. 144) and I guess it was she also felt like a captive in her own life? Kind of like Cassandra?

Pandora: I think some reasons that wolf felt inspired by Cassandra was that their stories are similar. they are women in wartime or after wartime.

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Alyssa: She could relate to Cassandra and he experiences she was going through.

Ari: Wolf may have felt similarities between her society and Cassandra's society with issues like repression, and it's easier to write about something a person can relate to.

Emily: She felt that she was going through similar experiences and feelings as Cassandra

Brandon: Women in postwar eras tend to suffer, So I imagine she felt connected to Cassandra on some level

Luke W: She probably felt captive in East Germany, especially after all the trouble she went through to go to Greece.

Zach: Wolf saw some aspects In her own while looking at Cassandra's story.

Grant: It seems like the theme of Wolf's life was to stay true to who you are while living in a society of conformity. I think Cassandra had many experiences like this throughout the novel. One example could be that when Apollo was trying to force her to sleep with him and she ultimately refused in a time where women were expected to comply

Savannah: It could also be because she didn't like how "the male poet saw these women" (Pg. 179) and maybe the feminist in her was annoyed on how Clytemnestra and Cassandra were handled and wanted to give them a voice?

Victoria: I thought the same thing that Alyssa said. Wolf could relate to Cassandra she felt a connection

Olivia: Along with Savannah, she says that "three thousand years - melted away. So the gift of prophecy... stood the test of time." Wolf felt personally connected to Cassandra and believed her word true over Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, or even Aeschylus.

Josie: She explained how Cassandra took her captive, like savannah said, but I also think she saw some type of similarity and connection towards her

Connor: I believe she was inspired to write about Cassandra due to the similarity between the political and "war" climates. Christa Wolf grew up after World War Two in East Germany, having to deal with the Cold War tensions and the difficulties of being a female at the time. It paired well with Cassandra who came from a similar war time and political climate of Troy, and being a prisoner of war, but also like Christa, in her life.

Sara: I believe she felt "possessed" by Cassandra because she saw so many things ring similar to her in her own life and using her as her own outlet

Layth: She felt that Cassandra was one of the few women, who during oppression, wasn't afraid to speak out even though no one would listen.

Ava: Wolf was looking for a way to express her feelings from the war and this story was one that she felt connected to. Her having the ability to rewrite this story in her own way and making it her own was her way of coping with the affects of the war.

Pandora: Maybe she felt that Cassandra's voice was silenced and she wanted it to be heard.

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Ava: It almost seemed like she wanted her voice to be heard by anyone who wanted to hear about the impact that war can have on the civilians.

Chloe: I agree, the two seemed to have a similar story which makes sense why there was a connection between them

Luke W: She was part of the socialist party in East Germany and was an informant of the statsi, so you could argue she was part of that issue.

Isaac: I think she saw a part of Cassandra that she related to, and she wanted to know more about her. and maybe she was unsatisfied with the role given to Cassandra in the play, I think she thought Cassandra as a character deserved a larger role

Luke P: She saw the opportunity to write about what she saw in politics and she taught lessons through Cassandra that applied to that.

Jada: It seemed like by relating herself to Cassandra she's bringing light to the subject for their voices to be heard about the lasting traumas

Shelby: Wolf saw similar stories, being held captive in east germany made her feel trapped and controlled and wanted to speak out but she couldn't because nobody would listen like in the writing cassandra was telling people the truth but nobody believed her not even her mother.

Josiah: Along with the sense of being similar to Cassandra and really just the feeling of censorship, I feel like Wolf also wanted to show others of the ideas that an individual may have and that we should not overlook them when it involves a serious problem, such as war.

What does Wolf hope to achieve in rewriting the Cassandra myth?

Abby: Women's rights and what life was like for women back then to show how far we came

Shelby: to let women know they should speak out the truth even if nobody believes them

Ashley: Maybe to give women a little more credit

Zach: Wolf is trying to talk about and spread awareness of women and citizens lost to war

Jada: I think she wants people to understand and realize how long this trauma and objectification have been around. It's not a modern thing that just came about but something that has slowly been trying to be fixed over time.

Olivia: I think she wants to give Cassandra, herself, and many other women a voice in the chaos of the world. Although Cassandra's story is thousands of years old, the basic themes and events are still present in today's society.

Josiah: Oh I guess I kinda accidentally mixed the two questions in my last response but I think she wanted to show that women have more credit than they have been given

Savannah: Give a different perspective? The very last line she's talking about how none of the storytellers ever mentioned this light she sees that she thinks is very important. Perspectives change over time and we owe to ourselves to relook at things

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Alyssa: She wants to be able to speak about these problems, specifically for women, and raise awareness in a way that captures readers attention

Marcela: To personify the myths and make them relatable/applicable to our society.

Ari: Wolf might be trying to introduce a new perspective to the myth, and to inspire change within society itself to be more introspective about issues such as feminism

Emily: She wants other people to hear their experiences to see a different perspective and to speak out about the problems throughout time and how they're still continuing to happen

Sara: She wanted to get a feminime (my goodness spelling is hard) perspective of those stories to show the unfair in some of how things were written like before

Ashley: Not to overlook women and their objections

Janelle: I think she wants to show other women to not be scared and learn from the past. To raise awareness especially for todays society

Grant: I think she felt a draw to Cassandra and she wanted it to be told the "right" way. As Marcella says "to personify" them for her and others in a sense

Pandora: I said this on the last questions but she saw that Cassandra's voice was being silenced and as a woman herself wanted her voice to be heard. And have a voice of a woman's hypothetical point of voice during the time which were over looked.

Ava: Wolf wanted to change how women are seen by connecting to past stories of women and showing the trends. She wants people to start to realize the lack of a voice that women have.

Isaac: I think she wants to give a voice to character that Didn't have one in the play, also giving a voice to women who didn't have one

Luke P: She hopes to make a case for why women's rights she shows that women haven't had rights for thousands of years and something needs to change.

Connor: In rewriting the myth of Cassandra, I believe more perspective was given to women in war and how old literature and culture often overlooked it, yet women were there and important figures as well. They may have been left out in writing as equals to men, but that does not mean they were not figures. Another achievement is a reflection on our modern mistakes. Showing a story of the past and how people got caught up in war, can make the reader pair that with their own circumstances. Helps to avoid the mistakes of the past.

Josie: To show that woman are powerful and that woman deserve more credit, how life was for woman back then and how it was so hard for them, especially because Wolf felt connected to Cassandra.

Layth: It's possible that she wasn't satisfied with Aeschylus's rendition. She wanted more detail and maybe she felt that her story was a perfect fit. She also has a more modern take on life and wants to revamp the story for modern day.

Savannah: In the Oresteia she's just a plot point

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Ashley: I think it's crazy how even royalty got treated that way she was a princess, so not just commoners or slaves

How would you interpret this quotation from Wolf: "Storytelling is humane and achieves humane effects, memory, sympathy, understanding--even when the story is in part a lament for the destruction of one's fathers' home, for the loss of memory, the breakdown of sympathy, the lack of understanding." (p. 173)

Olivia: She's saying that even if the story is sad or depressing or even horrifying, we need to continue to tell that story. Fortunately or unfortunately, those emotions and events are part of what makes us human beings. We all feel those things even if we don't want to.

Josiah: It helps untangle loose thoughts

Savannah: Before written history, it was passed down through oral tradition. Stories are a way to keep memory alive, hell maybe even history itself alive. Making stories universal can connect people with the people of the past?

Marcela: Story telling is important because it's our way of connecting with one another.

Pandora: It helps people to remember the past in the present.

Chloe: Story telling is also a big way that people teach lessons from the past to future generations

Ava: Storytelling has been a form of communication from the very beginning of our existence. It is a form of connecting to others and it is how we pass down advice from one generation to another. Humans tell stories to connect with each other and our pasts.

Zach: Storytelling is a way to spread ideals, keep stories alive, and make sure people learn from histories mistakes.

Sara: Storytelling is important to humanity because knowing how others felt or feel about a situation can be different and is needed to understand sympathy better

Abby: There would be no known history without the primary factors like artifacts and paintings so writing and stories are important

Ashley: It gives us something to believe in or look back on.

Alyssa: Storytelling is a way of communication that has occurred for years and years

Connor: Stories make us who we are. Our lives are stories, made up of intertwining narratives, connections, relationships, plots, drama, etc. Our lives are a living breathing novel. Without stories, we wouldn't truly be living, we would just exist. Existing isn't thriving, just "surviving".

Janelle: I think maybe to not let go of the past. To keep the tradition in good ways or even in bad. It is good to remember things from the past and tell future generations

Josiah: I think she's saying that stories help to explain events, actions, feelings, and/or thoughts into words

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Luke P: She trying to get across that storytelling is a way to get important messages across using real world examples. It shows us different perspectives on an issue when everyone only has their own opinion and perspective based on what they see.

Layth: Story telling is a form of delivering a message or teaching a lesson. It makes it easier to grasp and allows for different perspectives.

Ava: There has always been little fables, which give short entertaining stories that provide an overarching lesson that is buried between the excitement.

Josie: Storytelling is so important because it gives us the understanding of how that person understands the story by trying to explain the story itself. Wolf is basically saying that every story deserves to be told, and whoever tells it can tell it the way that they understood the story, giving everyone who listened a different perspective and point of view.

Isaac: Oral traditions used to be all we had as a form of communication to the future generations, they learned almost everything through stories

At the end of the novel, why does Cassandra say she “cannot love a hero”?

Savannah: I honestly did not get why she was into this guy in the first place but I think it's because Achilles was a 'hero' and maybe Cassandra believes all heroes will end up too 'big for their britches' and become changed from what they started as?

Zach: because heroes propel and continue the cycle of war, which is something Cassandra doesn't want to happen.

Pandora: Because heroes die and she didn't want to see him die.

Grant: I thought this was supposed to mean that she cannot love someone who represents something she so strongly stands against

Marcela: I thought it was because she's rejecting the patriarchy. She doesn't need a man to save her, and she'd rather die instead

Olivia: There is no hero. None of the “heroes” in The Oresteia or The Iliad are true heroes. They raped and stole women and took them as slaves. Achilles is a hero but he was still going to rape Cassandra's sister. No one can truly be a hero.

Abby: SHe wants to save herself and not someone else to save her

Alyssa: She knows that loving a hero will never end well because they risk their lives to be the hero, she also doesn't want to love someone that has such opposite beliefs

Sara: Heros give themselves up for others and in a way don't stand up for themself

Luke W: Because even though she loves him, he is part of something she hates.

Josiah: I thought it was because Hero's often come from negative things, like war, and she since she is anti war she dislikes all aspects of it

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Connor: I believe it has to do with her interpretation of a hero, and what she believes heroes are willing to do. She viewed them a certain way, most likely as willing to go to certain lengths to achieve their goals, like continue war and perpetuate squabbles, which she did not want to be apart of or complicit in. Not loving one was a form of branching off and having her own voice in the matter.

Josie: She didn't want to witness a person that she loved die because they are apart of something she hated

Ava: Cassandra "cannot love a hero", because having a hero means someone has lost. Sometimes heroes allow the power and the fame that they gain from their recognition of their "heroic" act, which leads them to start more conflicts in some cases. Heroes aren't a really great concept when it comes to thinking of war, because this means that so many people have died to allow someone else to gain the recognition.

Luke P: Hero's are based on how many people they kill. She doesn't want to have to rely on someone to protect her. She wants to live in a world where she can live without needing protection. Where there is no ego war.

Isaac: Maybe for Cassandra a hero is someone who personifies the war she hates

Layth: Heroes are put up on a pedestal and are normally the subjects of the plots denouement. This responsibility is possibly something that Cassandra doesn't want to be apart of and would rather end it with what is already destined for her.

Savannah: His dad [Anchises] was the only guy I loved in this play

Brandon: also, from what I understand from greek heroes, they aren't always good people

Pandora: same Savannah

Colm Tóibín, *House of Names* (Wed, Sep 29, 2021)

Sara: I was trying to understand what exactly caused Aegisthus to become imprisoned in the dungeon that Clytemnestra found him in. I understood he had guards killed so instead of a regular prison he was out in that dungeon (at least how I understood it) but what got him to be there captive in the first place?

Refer back to the underlying feud in the House of Atreus. Agamemnon's father, Atreus, murdered the children of his brother, Thyestes. Aegisthus is the remaining son of Thyestes, thus bound to revenge his side of the family, which is probably why he's been held in a dungeon. Aegisthus also seems to exert some powerful charisma and persuasion over his captors, and most obviously with Clytemnestra.

Shelby: Clytemnestra says "a hunger I had come to know too and had come to appreciate" (page 3) in the opening pages. What does the hunger supposed to mean?

I think a hunger for vengeance.

Abby: Why did they put her in that "cell" with the rock over her?

To silence her, punish her for resisting the murder of her daughter, keep her from cursing Agamemnon and the rest of the Greeks before the set sail for Troy.

Olivia: What was with the wailing ladies? Clytemnestra said that there were women screaming at night before someone died. Are these real ladies or just a figment of her imagination?

These were real women who performed an important role in the rites of mourning. Many cultures have had professional mourners, and in Greece, this role could also be linked to the Fates—here, in Tóibín’s version, they might also be a reference to the Furies. Check out this article: <https://www.dw.com/en/professional-mourners-keep-an-ancient-tradition-alive-in-greece/a-55572864>.

Savannah: Two questions: Did Toibin, or even Wolf, face any backlash for their rewriting of these myths? I think you had said Wolf had a little but did Toibin? Sorry if you've gone over this and I forgot! Are there like myth purists who hate rewrites? Was Orestes taken to Iphigenia's sacrifice in the original or was that really mentioned?

No, I think myth is endlessly adaptable; most myth scholars are not myth purists. I'm not sure if Orestes is present at the sacrifice in Euripedes' version, Iphigenia in Aulis. This could be something Tóibín adds in for dramatic effect.

Marcela: What was the point of killing Cassandra? Why not just keep her captive?

Ava: Is there foreshadowing of Clytemnestra's death when she says, "Maybe the smell has entered my body and been welcomed there like an old friend come to visit." ?

This is a great point of interpretation! Yes, perhaps Clytemnestra has embraced too much death. Also, her body that gave life to her children is also a vehicle of her own death at the hands of her children.

Grant: Why did Clytemnestra distance herself from Electra after Iphigenia's death?

Perhaps grieving for Iphigenia and she also doesn't seem to like Electra that much. Later, she realizes she should have kept her daughter closer and made her an ally, provided her comfort and the truth about Agamemnon's role in the murder of her sister.

Layth: Why is Agamemnon so timid to tell his family about the sacrifice? Isn't it for a greater cause?

That's what he tells himself, but he also says it's out of his control. He tricked them with false promise of marriage, which makes him a coward, especially in Clytemnestra's eyes.

Sara: Also thought it seems like a real lapse in judgement to go from "I trust no one ever again" to "yeah,i" I trust this man that's being held captive for murder (I think)"

Ari: Why would Agamemnon come back after sacrificing two of his daughters and have complete trust in Clytemnestra? It was clear she wasn't going to get over it so easily.

His hubris/pride. He is the king, after all, and believes Clytemnestra will just fall in line.

Luke W: I think Cassandra is killed because she is sort of Agamemnon's mistress

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Alyssa: Agamemnon and the men believe in the Gods so much that they're willing to sacrifice Iphigenia. On page 32 Clytemnestra expresses having doubts about it. Did anyone else feel that any of these other characters expressed or didn't express doubts?

This is an interesting question. Is it only Clytemnestra who has lost faith in the gods? Or has everyone lost faith? Are the Greeks willing to sacrifice Iphigenia because they believe Artemis wants this, or is she just a political symbol used to unite the Greek soldiers before battle?

Zach: why did Agamemnon make Clytemnestra watch the death of Iphigenia

Probably to punish her and impress upon her that she has no power.

Savannah: Sara I thought the same thing! I mean I get why she needed to but I was screaming at her to be careful ;-;

Pandora: Why did Agamemnon go to Clytemnestra like he didn't just kill their daughter? In the beginning of the section Clytemnestra says that her daughter was fighting and screaming but later in the sections she was gagged with the cloth, was that the author trying to humanize them?

Iphigenia is gagged because Clytemnestra told her to curse the Greeks for killing her. So, perhaps here is a hint that the Greeks do believe in the gods and the power of curses, which is why they also imprison Clytemnestra. Agamemnon may be seeking absolution or some reassurance from Clytemnestra (but he's kind of an idiot).

Richard: I guess one kinda question I had, though it's a small thing, is why did Agememnon not tell Achilles that he used a promise of his marriage to his daughter as bait? Which kind of puzzled me because Achilles is almost immediately honest with Clytemnestra about it.

Ava: Also, why did they cut Iphigenia's hair before she was sacrificed? Was this common to do? Was it part of the sacrifice ritual?

Yes, it is part of the ritual, to dehumanize her, perhaps. This would be an interesting thing to research—sacrificial rites of humans in ancient Greece.

Chloe: Why was it Iphigenia that had to be sacrificed?

Janelle: What is the meaning of this quote "We are all hungry now. Food merely whets our appetite, it sharpens our teeth; meat makes us ravenous for more meat, as death is ravenous for more death." I also noticed how food in general was constantly mentioned. Is there an significance on that?

Yes, it not only remarks upon the hunger for vengeance, but also the ongoing theme of cannibalism in the House of Atreus and its curse.

Josie: That's what I was thinking too Ava, why did they cut Iphigenia's hair???

Luke W: Is Clytemnestra the only one that doesn't really believe in the gods and their powers?

Ava: I know that Cytemnestra thought that Iphigenia was brought to the camp to marry Achillees and she thought he would break the blood feud, could have Achillees broken the blood feud if given the chance?

Perhaps Clytemnestra believes making a new alliance with a strong warrior will ensure peace and prosperity for the family. New blood to cancel out the old blood? The House of Atreus always seems a bit incestuous to me.

Connor: I'm a little confused as to what Clytemnestra means at the end saying "soon I will make Aegisthus believe that he could have what he wanted". I feel as though a man who murders and spews malice to the peasants, as he did with the weaver, would have a great ego. Her saying this, contradicts him having a huge ego, so I wonder is he just "faking" strength and exuding false confidence, or playing Clytemnestra for pity and her too dirty her hands not his?

I think your reading of Aegisthus is accurate; rather, it's Clytemnestra's character flaw to believe she is still in power and control when she has actually given up all her power to Aegisthus. He is her weapon that will not turn against her and she's too proud to see this.

Pandora: Did she "trust" him as an ally?

Sara: When we meet Orestes in the Oresteia is that him returning from where Aegisthus hid him? Or did Clytemnestra end up sending him away some time after?

No, in the Oresteia, it's Clytemnestra who sent Orestes away. Tóibín is rewriting this detail, partly to show how Aegisthus has taken control of things. He certainly would not want Orestes around to grow up and avenge his father's murder. Clytemnestra (in Tóibín's version) never wanted her son sent away but wanted to raise him into a good leader with her influence.

Chloe: ^^ I was thinking the same, I couldn't really tell if she trusted him or if she just believed that she could use him.

Marcela: Do Orestes, electra, and Iphigenia share the same parents?

Yes, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra.

Abby: she made it seem like longer than 3 days

Sara: I was trying to find out more about Aegisthus and when I googled him I found a site that said Clytemnestra and Agamemnon had a 3rd daughter. Should I just act like I didn't read that?

Ha! The mysterious third daughter, Chrysothemis. She is a character who appears in Sophocles' Electra. She doesn't appear in any other versions of the myth.

Josiah: I thought it was weird how the two themes of death and a sense of hunger came into the beginning of the novel. Was there a significance for them to come into play for Clytemnestra in the beginning?

Yes, definitely significant themes throughout the novel. Death and hunger feed each other.

Jada: ^^I saw the same thing, Sara. I was really confused and I couldn't find any other info about it

Savannah: Another comment for the almighty discussion archive: It's really interesting how different Achilles and Cassandra were written in this one! Achilles was trying to help Iphigenia and was upset his name was being used to trick them and Cassandra was kind of vapid? Almost? Not really given a lot

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character wise. It's just cool seeing different versions of these two. The only consistent thing is Agamemnon sucks and is a coward

Sara: I really enjoyed seeing Agamemnon squirm when confronted by his wife and daughter about her sacrifice. It shows how he realizes its bad but still does it, really showing his obsession for the war (in my opinion)

Savannah: Me too Sara, it was very enjoyable

Pandora: The war was started because troy took Helen, did the greeks know she wasn't with them?

That's just a detail in Christa Wolf's version, but based on Euripides' Helen in Egypt. Helen's presence changes depending on which version of the myth we are reading.

Abby: i feel like tolbins version is very modernized than the other 2 books

Savannah: I think it came out in 2016?

Jehan: house of names answers a lot of questions I had about the myth from the other 2 books. Shows Clytemnestra made a mistake when Aegisthus sent Orestes away and Electra to the dungeon. Clytemnestra wanted to protect her children from her crimes but in the process alienated them from herself.

Abby: Originally published: September 29, 2016

Jehan: Did she try to get back Orestes

Savannah: Thanks Abby!

Connor: This might be a weird question, but following along the lines of a previous question about the idea of myth purists, are Greek myths and characters copyrighted, in the sense of how they are portrayed or written about in any way? Or are Greek myths and character up for free interpretation by authors how they see fit?

Pandora: He is the worst husband: killed daughter, came home with another woman. lol

Savannah: Cassandra is a variable she hasn't prepared for

Sara: ^Yup!

Jehan: house of names was much more closer to current logic than Cassandra and oresteia

Savannah: Now I need to know if there's a book humanizing Agamemnon

As far as I know, not a single one. Everyone pretty much agrees he's despicable.

Isaac: Why did Clytemnestra trust Aegisthus so much, when she didn't trust anyone else?

Pandora: She needed an ally.

Jehan: enemy of my enemy

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Savannah: I wish she hadn't but it makes sense, she couldn't do it alone? Everyone else loves her husband but he doesn't. I know she even thinks at one point that she could have chosen the elder but would that guy be good at killing? Probably not

Pandora: Again, why did they not really care that their father killed their sister?

Savannah: That is the big question Pandora

To be answered by Tóibín later in the novel when Orestes and Electra are reunited...

Colm Tóibín, *House of Names* (Mon, Oct 4, 2021)

Abby: Why was Orestes really kidnapped, like i feel like he knew something was going to happen to him after witnessing his sister be murdered.

We discussed in class how it was Aegisthus who kidnapped Orestes, without Clytemnestra's knowledge or permission. Orestes is an heir to the throne and Aegisthus would not want Agamemnon's only son hanging around reminding everyone that Aegisthus's power was illegitimate.

Savannah: Sorry if this is a silly question but were the wells poisoned for the purpose of killing Aegisthus' men? Or were there bandits or something they were trying to deal with? If it were, how did word spread fast enough for everyone to know to poison the wells?

The practice of poisoning wells was usually to fend off invading armies. The irony is that the invading soldiers are those returning from the Trojan War. Also, yes, it could have been Aegisthus's men pillaging the countryside, terrorizing the people. The point is that the country is in chaos during and after the war, with no clear leadership or safety for the people.

Alyssa: Why does Mitros refuse to share with Orestes (p 138) and Leander what the old woman told him would happen to them in the future time?

I think because he doesn't want Orestes to know how his father was murdered and perhaps trying to keep Orestes safe from his fate. This is ambiguous, though, and left up for us to interpret.

Shelby: Does Electra mourn Iphigenia?

We discussed in class how Electra does mourn for both her sister and father, seeing their reconciled ghosts. At this point, Electra is an outcast because her mother and Aegisthus are in charge, and they keep her powerless. She probably mourns for her father and sister because they represent for her the happiness and security of her childhood.

Pandora: How does two 12 or so year old boys know how to kill grown men? Or where they older when they were taken?

They would have been training from a young age to be warriors, part of the masculine roles for boys of their upper-class status within their culture. Recall how Agamemnon does a lot of sword-play with his son when he's only 7—he expects his heir to become a great warrior.

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Sami: What was with the water being poisoned as Orestes was walking with the guards they had multiple farmers drink the water to test and I couldn't quite figure out why the water was posioned

Connor: I remember you stated that this section of the story was largely based off of Tóibín's own creation, not directly pulled from passed Greek myth as Orestes time alone has been largely untouched in the past. Does this also include the creation of Leander and Mitros? Are they original characters in Tóibín's story or are they actually rooted in prior Greek myths, just represented in a different way by Tóibín?

Yes, the first Orestes section is entirely Tóibín's own creation, part of his aim to provide Orestes with a rich background and complexity of character. Many of the older myths and source texts do not provide this. The Leander character is probably meant to substitute for Orestes' friend, Pylades, in *The Libation Bearers* (who only has one line, reminding Orestes not to go against the command of Apollo). Leander and Mitros allow for more complex characters who influence Orestes as a boy and upon his return to Mycenae.

Zach: Does Clytemnestra know Electra wants her dead?

Probably not. Clytemnestra's own hubris is that she dismisses her daughter, too easily believing the role of silent, submissive daughter that Electra has been playing since Clytemnestra and Aegisthus took control after murdering Agamemnon. Clytemnestra ignores and avoids Electra, partly because she doesn't seem to like her, and partly because she'd have to confront how much she is mistreating her daughter. Of course, this only makes Electra more bitter and vengeful, especially because her mother keeps her from being able to marry or have any power.

Isaac: Why does Mitros refuse to share with Orestes and Leander what the old woman told him would happen to them in the future?

Janelle: I was also going to ask the question about the well. Why is it that they could not drink water from wherever? what was the water being poisoned with.

Richard: Considering that the author is trying to comment on relations in Ireland, does the kidnapping of Orestes have a more modern day context, as in, did things like that happen in Ireland/do happen? Just curious cause as it was happening I kept thinking about the modern context and perspective of the author and what he was trying to get across.

We discussed this a bit in class, but yes, I think Tóibín is making connections to the sectarian violence of the Irish Troubles when he was growing up. The Sinn Fein (IRA) in Northern Ireland (the Catholic faction) were responsible for multiple terrorist acts with many civilians suffering or being affected. Many children were witnesses to or innocent victims of the violence and Orestes seems to represent what happens to a child's innocence when exposed to so much violence from an early age.

Luke P: Which point of view is your personal favorite, I seem to be drawn to Orestes POV.

Personally, I love Electra only because I've always been drawn to her story (even tried to write my own version of her myth many years ago), but I also find Orestes's narrative compelling,

mainly because it humanizes his character for contemporary readers and allows us to empathize with him, which is hard to do in Aeschylus's version.

Grant: why did electra wait for orestes to kill her mother?

She has no power and needs an ally. Plus, as the only male heir, Orestes would have an even greater claim to Mycenae and overthrowing Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Near the end of her narrative section, she tries to set up a possible marriage with Dinos, which would have given her an opportunity to exert some control and raise a rebellion against her mother, but Dinos is oblivious and her mother just laughs at her. She has no choice but to wait for Orestes. Also, think about how much Electra mirrors her mother—biding her time, nursing her fury and need for vengeance, knowing she must rely upon a man to help her kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus—none of this very different from Clytemnestra in her plans to kill Agamemnon.

Marcela: I don't understand why was the old woman so hesitant to share stories about her life. They all lived together, did she not fully trust them to share her personal life?

I think the old woman is too traumatized by the loss of her family, being abandoned by them, sons going off to war. She also seems a bit senile and/or grief-stricken by the violence and is just grateful to have the boys stay with her and protect her.

Ava: Why was Orestes taken away to terrible conditons, because he's techiquly royalty, so why was he taken away and put with kids who were kidnapped?

This was against Clytemnestra's knowledge or wishes. Aegisthus is just trying to get rid of him and doesn't care what happens to him or how he's treated.

Janelle: Also why did Mitros die. I thought he was supposed to die if he left the house they were living in. I know the old lady died and he was after her but was there deaths happening at the same time significant?

Mitros seemed to be pretty weak and sickly. He'd also grown to love and care for the old woman and gives up once she's gone. Both of them dying provides Leander with the impetus for deciding to return to Mycenae, since Mitros and the old woman were the only reasons they stayed there. Leander had promised the old woman they wouldn't abandon her and he keeps his word.

Brandon: this is a lot easier to read and understand. lead and arsenic? maybe mercury/cinnabar?

Marcela: I agree Brandon, I like this book better than the other ones we've read

Sara: Is what Toibin wrote considered 'canon'? Like if someone wrote their own version of how the siblings reacted, does it have just as much pull as this novel? Is there something about this novel that would hold it higher than another?

I'm not sure if we would call the novel itself canonical—that's usually something that happens over time and depends on how a text is received by different generations of readers. House of Names, though, is part of the canon of stories revolving around the Trojan War and Mycenaean sagas. It's hard to say what would make one novel better than other versions. There are a lot out there! Luke W. provides a good answer to this below.

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Savannah: Oh okay so the wells have probably been poisoned for awhile. For some reason I assumed it happened as Orestes was kidnapped

Luke W: Sara I think the main factor is time. Just like Oresteia and other myths, as time goes on (especially hundreds if not thousands of years), we start to consider these stories "canon." Hope that helps.

Ashley: So electra has been holding a grudge since she was 14? Do you think one of the reasons she convinces Orestes to kill her mother and Aegisthus is because he is the only male figure in her life since her mother doesn't allow her to marry? Also, why Toibin wrote the women in first person vs Orestes in 3rd person?

Yes, Ashley! See my answer above.

Olivia: I still don't understand why Electra didn't kill Clytemnestra herself. She gave Orestes the knife, knew she was alone, and made up the entire plan. She could have done it herself...

We'll have to wait to discuss this part of the novel on Wednesday.

Sara: Luke, Yeah thank you. I figured it was something like that but I was still curious enough to still ask

Luke W: Do you think Toibin drew inspiration from the well poisoning conspiracies during the time of the black death?

I have no idea, but that would be an interesting connection, Luke.

Josie: I think someone said it already, but I was wondering why did Electra wait for Orestes to kill her mom? There was time where she could've done the job if she really wanted too

Richard: I kept thinking of "The Sniper" by Liam O'Flaherty throughout the beginning of the Orestes chapter, cause it's really the only story I know of about the Irish Civil War.

Abby: Did orestes become freinds with any of the other boys?

Layth: What prompts orestes to go with leander?

Not sure if you mean when they escape the hostage situation or the decision to return to Mycenae. I think in either instance, Orestes looks up to Leander as a leader, and by the time they're grown, he also loves Leander and feels he has no choice but to return home or he will lose his best friend.

Marcela: I don't think Orestes made friends with anybody else, he was kind of timid. Leander spoke to Orestes first; Orestes only speaks to Mitros because they all escaped together

Josiah: Who was "controlling" Orestes as he is preparing to kill his mother?

Again, we'll discuss this in detail on Wednesday.

Savannah: I was so stressed by all of the conflicts that could have been avoided if people just TALKED

Josiah: I just realized I typed out my question and hadn't sent it 😅

Marcela: Did electra witness the sacrifice, or was she taken to the dungeon beforehand?

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Savannah: Marcela are you talking about her sister's sacrifice?

Ari: Not a question, but the concept of sacrificing people to the gods is still kinda hard to wrap my head around.

Marcela: yea

Connor: This might have been covered already but I would like to ask, does Clytemnestra try and explain to Electra before she killed her father why she wanted to do so? Or did Clytemnestra not tell her because she did not trust her?

That was in Clytemnestra's section, where she says she regrets not explaining in detail to her daughter how Agamemnon was a monster and a coward; she regrets pushing her away in her own grief after Iphigenia's death. And then, they've grown so distant by the time Agamemnon returns, that Clytemnestra probably doesn't trust Electra or maybe she thinks she's trying to protect her. Think about how Aegisthus has come between them; he convinces Clytemnestra that Electra should be kept away when the murder happens. Clytemnestra blindly agrees, believing Electra will just be kept to her rooms; instead Aegisthus throws her into the dungeon for several days, much like how he sends Orestes away to be with the other hostage boys. Basically, Clytemnestra has given too much power to Aegisthus to the point that he is responsible for alienating her from her children (though she's at fault for this too).

Savannah: Electra was left at home for the sacrifice, she was kind of running the house as everyone else went to the "wedding" aka sacrifice

Marcela: That makes sense, thank you savannah

Savannah: Did she intend for the boys to be mistreated like that? Or was she kind of assuming they'd be looked after?

Pandora: Does Electra also blame Clytemnestra for Orestes kidnapping?

I think Electra certainly mistrusts her mother and wouldn't put it past her. And I don't think Clytemnestra intended for any of the boys to be so horribly mistreated. She was using them as hostages to gain some leverage over the leading families/men of Mycenae and probably always intended on them returning at some point. The problem with Clytemnestra, though, is she hands too many things over the Aegisthus to deal with and then turns a blind eye, pretending she has no responsibility. This is partly what infuriates Electra.

Ashley: Yes I asked about the first and third person [choices]

Savannah: I kind of thought it was because the male voice is usually given so Toibin wanted to give the women the first person voice and change the male voice being third person?

Ashley: Is it because Orestes was so young

Pandora: I think because for a lot of myths the women are silent so he gave them a voice.

Ashley: I feel like there was more emotions with the women

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Ava: The first person point of view of Clytemnestra allows us to see more into who she is and her thoughts and feelings, which were never highlighted in the past in the telling of these stories.

Connor: I also took it as kind of a parent voice for Orestes, he does not really understand completely what is happening to him so a first person perspective would have confused us, but this outside third person showed that while it confuses him, we can still decipher what is actually happening narrative wise.