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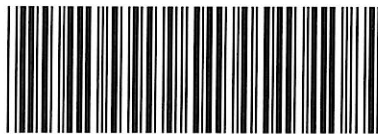
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DOROTHY P. ABRAM

Poisons and Powers in Myths of Demeter and Klytemnestra

INTRODUCTION

The fantasy of the angry, destructive, and poisonous mother is a recurrent theme in ancient Greek mythology and is assumed by many classicists to be a projection of male fears of womanhood and indication of women's oppression in ancient Greek society.¹ Such a position assumes male creation of these tales and women's corresponding derogation and exclusion from participation in a culture characterized by horrific renditions of mature women. If, on the contrary, myth expresses more than projected male fears and fantasies of women and holds some significance to women, what could this meaning be in a mythology that shows the mother as murderer and poisoner? What positive psychological relief and therapy can such a system of beliefs offer to women?

In my work as counselor to survivors of rape,² I have seen such symbolic configurations in women's fantasy and dream life as consequence to rape trauma. It appears to be characteristic of the mental process of healing following a crisis such as rape that return to emotional health is signalled and initiated by fantasies of mastering the very situations in which one was previously helpless and powerless. Often involving dreams of violence and murderous fantasies against one's violator, these fantasies attempt to assert one's will and regain the control that was taken from one's life. Indeed, the mythic cycle of the maiden's rape involves such anger and rage, and is completed with the maiden's return to light and life.

This essay attempts to reconstruct an ancient mythic fantasy from literary images and evidence of botanical lore and practices that, I believe, expresses ancient Greek women's experience of menstruation, marriage, and lactation. Implicit in this analysis is my own assumption that myth articulated and responded to women's psychological traumas in times of transition. The outcome of the myths of Demeter and Klytemnestra suggests that women securely achieved resolution of these sexual crises that typified women's life experiences in ancient Greek society.

The nature of this mythic fantasy is not separate from women's role in an agrarian economy which depends on her subsistence activities within the home. Food and medicinal preparation and management, spinning, dyeing, weaving, and the bearing and rearing of children were women's functions within the domestic sphere and were her unique contributions to the economy of the individual *oikos* and to the community as a whole. Each of these tasks involves powers and skills of transformation and procreativity, particularly in relation to the female body and to plant life that provided the dominant material of their transformative processes.

Angry women in myth, such as Demeter, specifically withhold their generative capabilities on which agriculture depends, and so threaten the life and continuity of human civilization as a whole. Klytemnestra, furthermore, not only withholds her nurturing capacity as mother, but also inverts her maternal identity as benevolent food-producer into a malevolent personality that poisons the victims of her wrath. Anger in the myths of Demeter and Klytemnestra is expressed through botanical imagery associated with feminine secretions, menstrual blood or maternal milk, which provide the means and method for these women to work their will in the family context. The mythic fantasies involving the specific plants at the angry goddesses' disposal are complex, but implicitly convey women's power in an agrarian economy and society.

Since fecundity, procreativity, and nurturance are the primary concerns of an agrarian society, the valued procreative powers of women provided the basis of their social status. The myths reveal that women's attempt to assert their will in times of psychological crisis depends on this socially-valued role. By inverting her life-producing powers to inflict their antithetical, destructive potential, women in myth assert their control over people and processes that threaten psychological devastation. Clearly, such myths serve to formulate and articulate the emotional crises of the goddesses' human counterparts, the ancient Greek women, in a manner that is psychologically validating and reflective of their integral position within the economy of the home and community.

ANCIENT MYTH AND PSYCHOLOGY

The goddess' anger over the male violation of the mother-daughter bond is a pervasive theme in Greek mythology, its tenacity undoubtedly strengthened by a powerful identification of the ancient Greek woman with the goddess. The story of the goddess' rage over this violation takes many forms and was retold in many variations on the basic tale of Demeter's wrath over the rape and loss of her beloved daughter Persephone to Hades, lord of death. Demeter was inconsolable in her grief and anger, and adamant in her refusal to take

part in the community of the gods whose tacit approval allowed the rape of her maiden. During her withdrawal, the goddess plots her revenge in a manner that she finds fitting and appropriate to the crime, drawing on innate powers of her own physiological processes of menstruation and procreation, and their botanical analogues.

This mythic event mirrors the anxiety induced through the separation of mother and child, which was exacerbated by the actual dynamics of the young girl's experience of marriage and sexuality in ancient Greece. Marriage preparations and ceremonies employed symbols and gestures of the myth of Persephone's abduction by Hades. For example, the pomegranate and sweet fruits smashed on the threshold of the groom's house precedes and magically influences the bride's incorporation into her new identity and household, as Persephone herself was incorporated inexorably into her abductor's kingdom through the ingestion of pomegranate seeds.

The psychological effect of transition from maidenhood to the status of wife and mother was profound. The young girl of fourteen years was compelled to give up her dolls and playthings as well as the familiarity and security of her life among her mother, grandmother, and extended family of female relatives within the women's quarters of her childhood home. She was taken from this childhood world to be mated with a man twice her age and to assume the responsibilities of the home and childbearing in the company of his family.³ The myth of Persephone's abduction into death lent a coherence to the mortal bride's own marital experience.

The need for the young bride to adjust to her new position within the home and her new status as adult within the community was complicated, furthermore, by the coincidence of puberty and the onset of menstruation at this time in her life. No distinction was made or deemed necessary between the flowing of menses and the shedding of hymenal blood which was considered to be an induced, or forced, menstrual phase due to the synchronousness of their appearance.⁴

Clearly, the experience of menstruation, marriage, and separation had direct and profound consequences for the psychic well-being of the individual woman and so for the community as a whole whose survival depended on the fertility and procreativity of its population. The implications of these life crises, moreover, extend into the metaphysical realm since the bodily processes of women were believed to participate in the experience of the goddess and were manifest in the cycles of nature and the outcome of agricultural endeavors also. The anger and outrage of the goddess prohibits her participation in her life-sustaining activities and her withdrawal deprives the world of its means of sustenance. Thus, an accord, however tenuous, must be gained in order to insure the continuance of life. The goddess must be given her due. It is through myth that the complexities, dynamics, and limits of this interaction and agreement are revealed.

DEATH, WITHDRAWAL, AND MENSTRUATION

Demeter is famed for her persistent search for her abducted daughter, a search that carries her to the far reaches of the earth and underworld. This theme, however, is a newer version of an older tale of a time when mother and daughter were not split into two bodies and personalities but were dual aspects of a single identity.⁵ In the older tale of abduction, Demeter retreats from divine society in insatiable anger, not over her daughter's rape, but over her own violent experience of unwilling sexual union with a mate similar in personality to the god who is later said to have raped Persephone. In the Arcadian city of Phigaleia, whose difficult access fostered a maintenance of older religious beliefs, the population preserved an ancient story of Demeter's rape by equine Poseidon while she was searching for her lost daughter.⁶ The story relates her subsequent metamorphosis into one of the angry Erinyes, the venomous pack of hellhounds that track down and murder male violators of the ancient rights of motherhood. Demeter, with a monstrous visage of rage and fury, descends into the depths of a cave, the labyrinthine entrails of the maternal earth that pave the dark passageway into death, and refuses to emerge in spite of the pleadings of the gods.

The power of the angry goddess cannot be denied. When the goddess is dishonored, her ancient rites and obligations overlooked, and the sexual experience turned from a loving, ecstatic embrace to rape and illicit bloodshed, she compels all life to participate in her experience of violence and death by withholding the generative and life-promoting powers of the soil. No longer will earth's womb support the growth of edible plants. Famine spreads throughout the world as she turns her vegetative children into toxic plants which sprout from the blood of the ravished earth, thereby forcing humanity to share in the goddess' own transport into death. From the menstrual blood of the ravished earth sprout toxic wildflowers, abortifacients, and emmenagogues that reject the life-quickening power of sexual union by inverting the activity of earth's womb so that it begets death instead of life.

The period of withdrawal of the goddess in anger to an underworld location is a time during which she comes to experience the physiological processes of her own body, the periodicity of her menstrual cycles, and the reproductive capacity of her womb. Rape, the violent possession of the female body by a spirit manifestation of the underworld, marks the maiden's onset of menstruation when she is overwhelmed by forces over which she has little control. Vaginal blood attested to this spiritual violence and so every menstrual phase of the mortal woman was a reenactment of the primordial experience of the goddess.⁷

The violent experience of menstruation hereby introduced the maiden to metaphysical powers that were rooted in the realm of the spiritworld. Menstruation was a physical change that opened psychological borders into

that other world and lent access to powers beyond the realm of ordinary time, space, and reality. It is not surprising, therefore, that the goddess' experience of menstruation appears to play a primary role in the structure and content of the myths and rituals of the ancient art of herbalism and supplied the botanical source of her passage into the other world of death.

MENSTRUATION AND THE ART OF HERBALISM

Menses were called *aphedros*,⁸ "absent from the throne," indicating that menstruation is the impetus for the goddess' angry retreat from life during which time she traditionally travels to the underworld to procur toxic plants. Indeed, the toxic plant is the avatar of the angry, menstruating goddess. The resin of the pine tree, for example, purported to induce intoxication,⁹ was called "the menses of Eileithyia," the epithet of the goddess in her role of midwife.¹⁰

Accordingly, when the mythical Pentheus is strung up on a resinous pine in a ritual mimesis of gestation by maddened women,¹¹ he subsequently is born into death, not life. Prior to the rite, the Erinyes had smeared the tree with the blood of the ravished goddess,¹² enriching the resin's menstrual toxicity, before the pine tree was arched back, like the waning crescent moon,¹³ and the unsuspecting Pentheus propelled to his death. The people of Pentheus' kingdom, recognizing the holiness of this menstrual tree, dyed the wood red and worshipped it as a great divinity.¹⁴

During her menstrual flow, the goddess withdraws to the depths of the underworld to gather plants that flourish in death and partake of death's lethal characteristics. The mythical maiden Helen once picked a "bloodied flower"¹⁵ and was immediately transported to a land beyond the borders of the known world where she was instructed in the subtle art of blending botanical potions to alter and manipulate perception.¹⁶ Medea acts according to the prohibitions typical of a menstrual taboo, withdrawing from her community and abstaining from sexual intercourse, as she embarks on a plant-gathering mission to the far reaches of the world, coordinating her itinerary with the phases of the moon.¹⁷

Demeter's adventures during her solitary wandering revolve around her encounters with a figure who reveals to her the botanical nature of abduction and revenge. The characters she meets in the many tales have different names but they share a common significance for each plays the role of shaman or soul-guide who confides a secret knowledge of regeneration through the cycles of time which is the power inherent in her body rhythms. Each figure appears to derive from an original botanical identity which suggests that manipulation of reality through chemical means is central to the experience of the goddess.

Chrysanthis is one such figure.¹⁸ "The golden flower," as her name suggests, reveals to Demeter the nature of abduction. Another tale is told of the

culmination of Demeter's wandering when she culls and tastes "a smooth, slumbrous poppy that grew on wasteland."¹⁹ She uses the sacred potion to devastate her irreverent host Askalabos, "the gecko-man," by transforming him into his reptilian alter-form, spotted and scarred with the marks of the drink's psychoactive ingredients.²⁰ Elsewhere she is entertained by a shamanistic figure who is renowned for his regular raids into the world of the gods to steal their secrets of immortality. He serves the goddess a brew of death and mortality.²¹

Each soul-guide shares with Demeter the knowledge of sacred floral intoxicants through which she is able to master her menstrual abduction and integrate the experience into her broadened powers of life and death. The goddess shares an insidious identity with the drugs of her discovery; while her interaction with the toxic wildflower provides the means for her mastery over the menstrual rape, her own powers of menstruation lend toxicity to the flower's strength.

Menstrual blood, the sacred plant, and the wandering goddess are equivalent mythologems, appearing in conjunction in myth. The ancient herb-gatherers, for example, poured menstrual blood over the "wandering Mandrake to stop her movement,"²² binding it through the magical properties of female sexual fluids. Moreover, wooden images of Artemis and Hera were bound by the attendants of their sanctuaries with branches of *lygos*,²³ a well-known emmenagogue,²⁴ to secure the figures in their place lest the statues of the goddesses abandon their community to pursue their search elsewhere.

For the ancient herb-gatherers, the culling of the botanical incarnation of the goddess was a dangerous act for it was to murder the goddess, separating the botanical maiden from the mother earth, and invoking the goddess' wrath. Evidently a surrogate was needed to replace the ravished child of the earth and to assuage the goddess' rage. "It is a pious duty to fill in the hole with various cereals as an atonement to the earth," writes Pliny²⁵ in reference to the plant *panakes* and adds that the medicineman Asclepius named his daughter Panacea in honor of this plant which was a known and potent emmenagogue.²⁶ In the gathering of *baaras*, probably an ancient alias for Mandrake, a dog was tied to the base of the plant and was held responsible for the plant's uprooting and murdered as penalty for the crime.²⁷

In order to gather pine resin without fear of metaphysical retribution, the herbalist had to make "atonement to the tree for stealing her menses."²⁸ What was the identity and nature of this gift of atonement that the herb-gatherers offered to the botanical deity for taking her life? Oftentimes it was a surrogate form of the maiden. To touch *baaras* was fatal "unless one happens to bring along with one the self-same root, hanging from one's hand."²⁹ In the gathering of *lygos*, it was necessary to reimburse like with like, and so the abducted plant was replaced with figurines of the maiden goddesses. Images

of the menstrual goddess recurrently are found in the branches of the *lygos*³⁰ shrub.

In Plato's *Phaedrus*,³¹ Socrates and his pupil travel to the site of a famous mythological rape and note that the area is fragrant with the scent of *lygos* and is studded with clay figurines of the Maiden. Although the region is not sloped, Socrates describes their walk as a descent, alluding to a mythic episode of abduction that had occurred there. Furthermore, Socrates swears by the name of Hera, a highly uncharacteristic response by a man who typically employs the names of male divinities in his exclamations,³² because it is the female personality and experience that presides over the religious connotations of the locale.

BODY FLUIDS AND TRANSFORMATION

Demeter's bilious rage over the rape is fuelled by overwhelming feelings of *cholos*,³³ the toxic substance that arises from deep within the recesses of her body and was associated with bitter bilic acids. Bile was believed to be the physiological source of emotional transformation from a balanced and blithe personality to one of melancholy, "black bile," and rage.³⁴

Ancient Greek women had the practice of smearing bitter bile, *cholos*, on their breasts to wean their children away from nursing.³⁵ The shock of the unpleasant taste of *cholos* in anticipation of milk is a powerful juxtaposition that assumes symbolic dimensions in mythology. Achilles, for example, was said to have been nourished on *cholos* instead of milk,³⁶ a nurturance that gave rise to bilious moods that induced him to withdraw to his tent, refusing to participate in the Trojan war because of the loss of a maiden promised to him.³⁷ Yet in the afterlife, Achilles comes to enjoy the positive possibility of *cholos* for he marries the immortal Helen on the Isles of the Blest. The gods gave Helen the sap of the poppy in a potion called *acholos*,³⁸ "without rage," to instruct humanity in the secret workings of this sacred drug.³⁹

The botanical counterpart of *cholos* was the sap of a magical plant; *cholos* was a common name for opium.⁴⁰ The psychoactive opium poppy is an important botanical representation of the dual nature of the goddess, expressing the paradoxical opposition and unity of menstrual toxins and maternal milk. The drug is derived by incising slits in the immature poppy capsule, allowing the latex-like fluid to exude which then is collected and left to dry into opium. This lactating characteristic of poppy gave rise to its association with mammalian species, specifically humans and bovines, who nourish their young through breast-feeding.⁴¹ Although the poppy lactates as the human mother, its milk is intoxicating and capable of inducing altered perceptions and shapeshifting visions of the spiritworld.

Through the effects of opium, life and death lose their distinction. According to ancient science, the gestating embryo, formed by the coagulation of

menstrual blood,⁴² was an unborn symbol of life in death. When, through parturition, the newborn progresses from this limbic personality into light and life, its first bowel movement was called *mekonion*,⁴³ "the opium substance", as evidence of its sojourn in the toxicity of the menstrual womb.

THE DUALITY OF THE GODDESS

The bleeding vagina is an awesome source of power because of its ambivalent potentialities. Medusa, for example, is an incarnation of the poisonous nature of vaginal fluids, yet her blood also has healing properties.⁴⁴ She appears as a second Demeter in her similar rape by Poseidon amid floral intoxicants. Both Demeter⁴⁵ and Medusa⁴⁶ give birth to twins which indicates the dual potential of the mother.

The menstruating goddess is the angry, negative aspect of the generous, beneficent mother. The two manifestations of the goddess are expressed through the antithesis of her body fluids. All feminine secretions are imbued with magical potencies that can poison or cure. Menstrual blood was the toxic, life-denying substance which flows from the goddess' vagina and was opposed to the generative streams of milk from her breasts.

The maternal breast, however, can appear as the nightmarish source of poisonous liquid. Klytemnestra dreams that her son metamorphoses into a snake to suckle at her breast.⁴⁷ The change of the milk-producing breast into the poisonous source is accompanied in myth by the appearance of the serpent in association with the goddess' transformation into her menstrual phase. Characteristic of the poisonous nature of the withdrawn, menstruating goddess, as seen with Demeter at Phigaleia, is the brood of serpents writhing through her plaited hair. The serpent was the chthonic power of the quarter moon, its rib cage composed of 28 multiple crescents,⁴⁸ which periodically arose from the dark, putrescent realm of death to poison and intoxicate its vegetative counterparts with its venomous *cholos*.⁴⁹

The serpent which, as the ancient adage pays witness, "feeds its evil rage on *cholos*,"⁵⁰ metamorphoses the maternal breast and its life-nurturing fluids into the bleeding sexual organ analogous to the menstruating womb. The mythic maiden Harmonia, for example, is heiress to a kingdom that was consecrated by the sacrifice of a divine cow marked with lunar crescents⁵¹ and whose population was generated through the sowing and harvesting of venomous fangs of serpents. As emblem of her underworld heritage, she wears a necklace formed by the draping of the *amphisbaina* serpent, the mythical snake with a hissing head at each end of its body, around her neck, each serpent head resting on one of her nipples.⁵²

The *amphisbaina* was considered to be an internal female structure, connecting the female genitalia to the breasts.⁵³ As such, the snake had the power

to turn maternal milk into menstrual venom and, as a result, transform the beneficent mother into the "mother of death" as was said of Klytemnestra⁵⁴ in her menstrual identity. Klytemnestra was named the raging, infernal mother,⁵⁵ the *amphisbaina*,⁵⁶ and the sorceress of poisonous plants.⁵⁷ She is a variant of Demeter, mourning over the death of her daughter who was murdered by the father. Klytemnestra did not have to retreat to an underworld location to nurse her grief and rage, for the departure of her husband and the men of Mycenae to the war in Troy distanced the men from the women and thus Klytemnestra converted her own kingdom into the goddess' dark, underworld realm of withdrawal to plot her revenge.

Klytemnestra is the menstrual goddess whose breasts flow with poisons instead of milk; therefore, the recurrent discussion in tragedy over who precisely nursed her son Orestes is a debate over her identity as beneficent matron or menstrual force of vengeance. In Sophocles' *Electra*, Klytemnestra's virgin daughter insists that she nursed her brother and in Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*, the nurse insists at length that she, and not Klytemnestra, had nursed the young boy. The effect of this dispute is to distance the fluids that flow from the breast from those deriving from the womb and vagina, for each is suggestive of an antithetical personality.

THE REVENGE OF THE GODDESS

Through the presentation of Klytemnestra as a mother who does not produce milk, Klytemnestra is turned into the malevolent inversion of the food-producing matron. She inhibits the growth of edible, life-sustaining plants by withholding the nurturing potentialities of her body and the sustenance of the city over which she rules. Her kingdom, Mycenae, according to the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, is characterized by an abundance of toxic plants and plagued by delusions that cannot be cured by medicines.⁵⁸ Klytemnestra's inversion of natural processes matches the havoc wreaked by the warriors at Troy who turned a realm of cultivation into a toxic wasteland.⁵⁹ Identifying Mycenae with the situation at Troy after the holocaust turns Mycenae into an underworld city, as the prophetic Cassandra astutely notes.⁶⁰

Klytemnestra acts in a manner typical of outraged goddesses because of the murder of her maiden daughter Iphigeneia by her husband for the purpose of securing fortune for the war effort. Klytemnestra induces famine and sterility and withdraws to a netherworld location while Agamemnon is at Troy. She also carries her life-negating powers a step further than Demeter by devouring and consuming the human objects of her wrath. The mother who nourishes others is transformed into her malevolent equivalent: the woman who eats others and, in such a spirit, Klytemnestra savors her murder of Agamemnon's concubine as a "spicy relish" for her bed.⁶¹ In a like manner, Klytemnestra's

actual murder of Agamemnon on his return takes place in the bath, but is overlaid with a metaphoric version of his death which occurs in a cauldron used for cooking and brewing.⁶² Thus, Klytemnestra recurrently is accused of bringing about death through poisoning, either through her use of toxic plants or her own venomous bite.⁶³

Klytemnestra claims that her sacrifice of Agamemnon is revenge for the murder of her daughter Iphigeneia, an act which is described by Aeschylus as a sacrificial banquet rite at which Agamemnon and the leaders of the Greek forces made a "meal" of the child still "suckling" on the breast of the maternal earth.⁶⁴ In this passage, human personalities are overlaid with animalistic imagery so that the murder and feast of the daughter is portrayed as an outrage to the lactating, maternal earth. The feeding child of the earth eats no more because she herself is eaten. The feast is *anomos*,⁶⁵ without the pleasurable tones of musical accompaniment, *adaitos*,⁶⁶ of which none should eat, *anagnon*,⁶⁷ profane, and *anieron*,⁶⁸ unholy - a string of negations that indicate the outrageous and violent nature of the meal. The feast transforms the milk-producing earth into the treacherous and malevolent identity of Menis, the personified force of vengeance for blood rights of the maternal line.⁶⁹ This force has lain dormant in the palace, as the passage narrates, since the last banquet event and is activated at last by this recurrence of the sacrificial banquet meal.⁷⁰ Klytemnestra, we are told, is transubstantiated with this force⁷¹ that will consume the consuming hero, for Klytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon, although literally occurring with an ax, is described metaphorically as a bloody feast.⁷²

Klytemnestra's gustatory revenge is a reenactment of a ritual that has taken place in every generation of this dynasty. Agamemnon's grandfather Tantalos was the first to set a meal of human flesh, the stewed body of his own son Pelops, before the gods in order to test their omniscience. Thyestes, his son, followed his example in the banquet meal of his nephews that he served to his brother Atreus to usurp the kingship of this realm. The outcome of these banquet episodes, however, was the rebirth of a rejuvenated and perfected victim. Pelops, for example, was reconstituted by the gods and made more beautiful than before. This suggests that the banquet theme is a reflection of a ritual act of rebirth which involves return to the body of the goddess through the act of ingestion. In fact, Demeter is the only divinity to taste the flesh of Pelops which implies that the tale is a vestigial remain of the ancient theme of rebirth through incorporation into the body of the goddess.

Klytemnestra dedicates the sacrifice of Agamemnon to Zeus in his role of underworld lord⁷³ because Zeus is named as divinity who bestows the blessings of crops.⁷⁴ She labels these male figures with the identity of the netherworld lord who enacts the role of mate to the agrarian goddess. And so when Agamemnon's blood spurts and splashes onto Klytemnestra, she is "delighted like the garden plots sprinkled with dew which incites the buds in labor".⁷⁵

In the murder of her husband, Klytemnestra is reenacting a version of the original sacred marriage of the holy earth in which she plays the role of the goddess.

Klytemnestra's assumption of the identity of the divine earth is matched, in turn, by the transformation of Agamemnon's Olympian personality to an identity as botanical child of the earth. When Klytemnestra calls Agamemnon a "duplicate Geryon",⁷⁶ the three-bodied earth-born monster, she is adjusting Agamemnon's identity as immortal conqueror to his alter-self as botanical mate associated with the underworld. This trifold form is indicative of the goddess' underworld consort.⁷⁷ Thus it is the "thrice-glutted" spirit⁷⁸ of this genealogical line that compels men to engage in their bloody banquet meals, yet to remain unsatiated eternally.⁷⁹ When Klytemnestra murders Agamemnon, she strikes three blows, one for each of his trifold identities.⁸⁰ It is fitting, then, that Aegisthus, the illicit lover of Klytemnestra, should appear as the final manifestation of the tripartite, chthonic aspect of the hero. "I am third born" proclaims Aegisthus⁸¹ for he is the exact antithesis to Agamemnon's claim of heroism and kingship. Aegisthus is the outcast and pretender to Agamemnon's throne. He is the bastard child of the family, born of the incestuous rape of his mother Pelopeia by the host of the cannibalistic banquet Thyestes, her own father.

On Agamemnon's return from Troy, Klytemnestra persists in gestures that are appropriate to the loving earth, inviting the embrace of her male lover.⁸² Yet Klytemnestra does not allow the primordial act of conception and creation to occur. Although their actual physical reunion takes place in the bath when Klytemnestra murders Agamemnon, the symbolic meaning of that act is developed through an alternate version of the place of reunion. According to the metaphoric imagery of the play, Klytemnestra and Agamemnon reunite in their bed where Agamemnon encounters an evil spider in place of the loving goddess.⁸³ The mate dies in the act of coitus. Klytemnestra is said to have built her metaphoric womb-web boundaries so high and secure as to be inescapable.⁸⁴

After Agamemnon's incorporation into this inner world, a subterranean earthquake razes the boundaries, shaking the palace walls, and bringing down a shower of blood.⁸⁵ Agamemnon hereby is left without the means of rebirth; the passageways of his delivery are covered, obstructed, and destroyed, and he is plunged into a limbic state, unable to claim identity in either the realm of life or that of death. Klytemnestra has interrupted the birth process in utero, and feasts on the flesh of her dead mate as he had once feasted on the flesh of her body's issue. Klytemnestra thus has aborted the process of birth and has achieved her revenge in an identical manner to that by which her anger originally was aroused.

ANCIENT REALITIES OF MOTHERHOOD

The unfolding of the mythic tales of Demeter and Klytemnestra progressed from the experience of the maiden's unwilling separation from her mother to the mother's sense of loss over the death of her child. Myth, as we have seen, helped to voice the anxiety and psychological turmoil experienced by the maiden over menstruation and marriage, and set them in a meaningful religious framework. The mother's corresponding feelings over the loss of her child were further complicated by cultural practices that forced her to give up her child at birth. At such times, the experience of motherhood was in direct conflict with the dictates of the society legislated by men. For example, after the birth of a child, the men of the clan voted on its acceptance into the clan or its death by exposure. Apparently, rejection was a common fate, for Plato uses this situation as a metaphor for Socrates' interaction with his student. In Plato's *Theaetetus*, Socrates acts as midwife to "the soul that is in travail of birth".⁸⁶ Yet he begs his student, who has mentally delivered "an unreal phantom", to cast the thought away and "do not be angry with me like a woman robbed of her first child."⁸⁷ This conflict between the rights of motherhood and societal law is reflected in myth also. When Klytemnestra was pregnant by her previous husband, Agamemnon tore the child from her womb and dashed it to the ground before taking her as wife, thereby nullifying the legitimacy of the previous marriage claim.⁸⁸

Women had great difficulty in sublimating their grief and anger over the deprivation of a child for the prevailing demands of society. The powerful emotions induced over the lost child were fuelled by the women's own identification with the rejected, abandoned, or abducted offspring. They easily projected their plight onto the child as the myth of Demeter shows in the goddess' simultaneous search for her lost maiden and lost maidenhood.⁸⁹

CONCLUSION

Ancient Greek social and economic structures necessitated women's participation and activity in the home. The specifics of this arrangement, such as the marital experience and child-rearing determinations, proved to be the source of women's anger and resentment against men. Yet, at the same time, women's integral and primary role in the production of the *oikos* provided her with the means to challenge this order and force it to acknowledge her power and position in the family and community.

The ancient myths of Demeter and Klytemnestra articulated women's anger and their threat: devastation of the *oikos* on which ancient society depended. Because the myths were grounded in an agrarian economy where the domestic activities of women provided a secure economic foundation for society,

women's power within the home, particularly in relation to her involvement with plants and nurturance, enabled her to assert her power and control over life. The mythic traditions of angry goddesses provided a meaningful framework on which the ancient Greek woman structured her reality in such a manner as to recognize the physiological functions and processes of her body as manifestations of the energies of the goddess. The tenacity and variety of such religious motifs in ancient mythology made possible women's resolution of psychological conflicts at times of transition in their lives.

NOTES

¹ This appears to be a typical conclusion of those scholars who adopt a structuralist interpretation of ancient Greek literature and mythology. See, for example, Helene P. Foley, "The Conception of Women in Athenian Drama," in *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (1981) and Froma I. Zeitlin, "The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in the Oresteia," *Arethusa* 11, no. 1, 2 (1978).

² At the YWCA the Women's Crisis Service for Rape Victims and Battered Women, Manchester, New Hampshire, U.S.A.

³ Philip E. Slater, *The Glory of Hera* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), Numa Denis Fustel De Coulanges, *The Ancient City* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), pp. 40-53, Susan B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), pp. 62-65. The wife was considered to be a stranger in her husband's home (Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 657 ff., Euripides, *Medea* 214 ff.) Also, the varied meanings of *kḗδω* and its related vocabulary include marriage, sorrow, and kinship responsibilities of care. Poetic plays on the combined significance of this verbal root are a recurrent element in ancient tragedy. For example, Aes., *Ag.* 699-700: *kḗdos*, the bond of care is both of marriage and of sorrow; Eur., *TW* 54-567: *ἔνικῆδεῖον* (514), the bond of care is turned from a wedding song into a funeral lamentation, etc.

⁴ Pliny, *NH* 12.2, 28.23

⁵ C.G. Jung and Carl Kerényi, *Essays on a*

Science of Mythology (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 101-155.

⁶ Paus. 8.42

⁷ Janice Delaney, Mary Jane Lupton, and Emily Toth, *The Curse: A Cultural History of Menstruation* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976), Marilyn Nagy, "Menstruation and Shamanism," *Psychological Perspectives* (vol. 12, no. 1, 1981): 52-68.

⁸ *Dsc.* 2.75, *Gal.* 14.208.

⁹ Pliny, *NH* 12.2.

¹⁰ *Thphr.*, *HP* 5.9.8.

¹¹ Eur., *Bacch.* 1064-1075.

¹² Nonnos, *Dion.* 44.217.

¹³ Eur., *Bacch.* 1064-1067.

¹⁴ Paus. 2.2.7 Other images painted red: Paus. 7.26.2, 8.39.6; Herod. 4.191; *P1.*, *NH* 33.36.111-113, 35.157; *Serv. on Verg.*, *Ecl.* 7.22, 10.27.

¹⁵ Eur., *Hel.* 1104.

¹⁶ Pliny, *NH* 25.5.12, *Thphr.*, *HP* 9.15.1, *Dsc.* 1.97.7, *Hom.*, *Od.* 4.219-232.

¹⁷ Ovid, *Met.* 7.

¹⁸ Paus. 1.14.2.

¹⁹ Ovid, *Fasti* 4.531 ff.

²⁰ Ovid, *Met.* 5.439-471. For the venomous salamander or lizard and its identity with toxic plants: Pliny, *NH* 10.86. 188, 22.46.95, 29.74. For the hallucinogenic properties of Demeter's potion, see R. Gordon Wasson, Carl A.P. Ruck, and Albert Hofmann, *The Road to Eleusis* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978).

²¹ C. Kerényi, *The Heros of the Greeks*

(London: Thames & Hudson, 1974), pp. 57-61.

²² Jos., War 7.181.

²³ Athen. 15.671f-674a.

²⁴ For references, see Liddell & Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon: λήγος.

²⁵ Pliny, NH 25.11.31, Thphr., HP 9.8.4-8 (for herb-gathering rituals to appease the culled divinity) and Pliny, NH 25.58.105 in which an offering of honey and honeycomb is given as atonement for the culling of hiera botane, the "sacred plant".

²⁶ Pliny, NH 25.11.30, Thphr. HP 9.8.7, sch. Ar., Ploutos 701.

²⁷ Jos., War 7.183-184, Ael., NA 14.27. Charles Brewster Randolph, "The Mandragora of the Ancients in Folklore and Medicine," Proceedings of the American Academy (1904): 487-537. C.J.S. Thompson, The Mystic Mandrake (London: Rider & Co., 1975).

²⁸ Thphr., HP 5.9.8.

²⁹ Jos., War 7.182.

³⁰ Paus. 3.16.11, 7.4, Athen. 15.672; Artemis in myrtle: Paus. 3.22.12.

³¹ Plato, Phdr. 229-230.

³² Ar., Eccl. 155-160.

³³ Hom. Hymn Dem. 83, 354.

³⁴ For references, see Liddell & Scott, χολή and χόλος. According to psychoanalytic theory (Freud, Melancholia and Mourning), every separation involves mourning which must be "worked through" in a three stage process of protest, withdrawal, and reintegration. The individual cannot progress from the withdrawal stage when the loss arouses deep-seated anger. Withdrawal from social interaction because of anger is one of the characteristics of depression (melancholy).

³⁵ Diph. 74, Athen. 6.51.

³⁶ Hom., Il. 16.203.

³⁷ Aeschylus compares the sulking Achilles to mourning goddesses: Ar., Ran. 911-912, A. fr. 277 Loeb, Vita Aeschylus s. 6. Achilles rearing as a girl in the court of Lykomedes contributes to this confused gender identity. In the Iliad, Achilles repeatedly associates himself with feminine metaphors: as a mother bird protecting her young (9.323), as a swineherd with his herd of pigs, like those that fell into the abyss with the abducted Persephone.

³⁸ Hom., Od. 4.221.

³⁹ Pliny, NH 25.5.12.

⁴⁰ Helen's nepenthes potion is also called acholos (Hom., Od. 4.221) and has been identified as containing opium. See, Pauly-Wissowa, Real-Encyclopedia ("nepenthes") and Dr. P.G. Kritikos and S.P. Papadaki, "The History of the Poppy and their Expansion in Antiquity in the Eastern Mediterranean Area" Bulletin on Narcotics (vol. 19, no. 3, July-Sept. 1967) and (vol. 19, no. 4, Oct.-Dec. 1967).

⁴¹ Wilhelm Pelikan, L'Homme et les Plantes Medicinales vol. 1 (Paris: Triades, 1962), pp. 125-129. See also: Pliny, NH 25.9.31 where the plant boukolion is so named because "herdsmen collect the sap as it exudes of its own accord."

⁴² Arist., GA 2.4, PA 2.6.1., Pliny, NH 7.66.

⁴³ Arist., HA 587a31, Gal. 19.176, Pliny, NH 28.13.52.

⁴⁴ Eur., Ion 999 ff., D.S. 5.74.6, Ap. 3.10.3.

⁴⁵ Paus. 8.25.4-7.

⁴⁶ Hes., Th. 280 ff.

⁴⁷ Aes., Cho. 527-535.

⁴⁸ Arist., HA 2.12.1, 2.17.23, Pliny, NH 11.82.

⁴⁹ Hom., Il. 22.94, Verg., Aen. 2.471, Pliny, NH 22.46.95, Paus., 9.28.2-4. "The Arcadians," writes Pliny (25.53.94), "use, not medicines, but milk in spring season because beasts graze on medicated herbs." The transference of the potencies of psychoactive plants to milk through consumption was recognized in antiquity (Pliny, NH 25.53.94, 25.21.48, 26.84.136). For human milk as medicine, see Nic. Alex. 356, Pliny, NH 28.21.72-75, Dsc. 2.70.6, Gal. 6.775, 12.265. Pliny records the tradition of Helen's breast being used as mould for the first wine goblet which was made out of the resinous amber of pine. Also, note "A Dash of Morphine in the Milk," Science News (Sept. 1981) and Hazum, et al., "Morphine in Cow and Human Milk" Science (vol. 213, Aug. 28, 1981).

⁵⁰ Hom., Il. 22.94.

⁵¹ sch. Eur., Phoen. 638.

⁵² Nonnos, Dion. 5.146 ff.

⁵³ Pall. in Hp. 2.103d. Also, botanical emmenagogues tended to provoke lactation (Pliny, NH 24.38.59-63, Arist., GA 728a 18-21, 744a2-3).

⁵⁴ Aes., Ag. 1235.

⁵⁵ Ag. 1235. For a psychoanalytic interpretation of this and related passages, see George Devereux, "Dreams in Greek Tragedy: An Ethno-Psycho-Analytical Study" (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976).

⁵⁶ Ag. 1233.

⁵⁷ Ag. 1260-1261.

⁵⁸ Aeschylus uses medical language to describe the psychotic perceptions of the Mycenaean experience (179-180, 387, 640, 848-850, 1199). See Soph., Philoct. (168, 291, 637-638, 650, 697, 783-784, etc.) for similar vocabulary in reference to Philoctete's wound which was inflicted by a serpent's bite and, in turn, reverts the hero to a toxic condition (162-168, 691-717) analogous to that of Klytemnestra's Mycenae. The Mycenaean illness (νόσος), whose most obvious symptom is visual hallucination (17, 1217-1222, etc.), is perceived as a toxic plant growing in the earth (1001-1004). Compare this with the Erinyes' threat in Eumenides 478-479, 782-784, 941-942. The Mycenaean delusions derive from a botanical source (17, 848-850, 941-942, 1408-1409, etc.).

⁵⁹ Ag. 525-528. After devastating the powers of cultivation, the Greek army itself is left without a means of sustenance and enters the realm of death and decay (192 ff., 330 ff., 555 ff.) The dominant metaphors are agrarian. The Greek crew is described as a "herd of cattle lashed by winter storm, driven by an evil shepherd" (655-657). The sea "blossomed with corpses" (659-660) like a field that breaks out in vegetation after a storm (650-660). The sailors "graze" on suffering (669). Agamemnon returns from the wilderness wearing hunting boots (944), bringing with him the maiden Cassandra, "the hunted animal" (1063, 1065-1071).

⁶⁰ Ag. 1160-1161, 1291, 1311.

⁶¹ Ag. 1447. Translation: Richmond Lattimore in "The Complete Greek Tragedies", vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953).

⁶² Ag. 1128-1129, 1397-1398.

⁶³ Toxic plants: 1260-1261, bite: 1232-1234, carrion crow: 1472-1474.

⁶⁴ Ag. 104-159. The use of human images (ο'ίκψ, δέινov, etc.) relate the parable directly to Iphigeneia's death.

⁶⁵ Ag. 151.

⁶⁶ Ag. 151.

⁶⁷ Ag. 220.

⁶⁸ Ag. 220.

⁶⁹ Ag. 154-155, 749.

⁷⁰ Ag. 699 ff.

⁷¹ Ag. 1377-1379, 1497-1504.

⁷² Klytemnestra sings the carrion crow's song (1473) which is the song of the blood-glutted, intoxicated Erinyes (1184 ff.)

⁷³ Ag. 1385-1387.

⁷⁴ Ag. 525-526, 970-974, 1014-1016, 1387.

⁷⁵ Ag. 1388-1392. The ancient ritual of hierogamy is alluded to throughout the play. Zeus is invoked by the epithet of Teleios (973-974), the title of the divine bridegroom of the sacred marriage (Paus. 1.1.4, 10.35.2). This is the motivation for the sacrifice of Agamemnon (1504) which explains the significance of Zeus' cult title of Agamemnon (Paus. 7.5.5). Furthermore, Klytemnestra's entrance is preceded by reference to the ancient mystic rites (36-39) and the Chorus claim that they need an initiate to decipher the events (1163).

⁷⁶ Ag. 870.

⁷⁷ Bruce Lincoln, "The Indo-European Cattle-Raiding Myth" History of Religions 16 (1976): 42-65.

⁷⁸ Ag. 1476-1477.

⁷⁹ Ag. 1476-1480.

⁸⁰ Ag. 1386. Klytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon is a reenactment of a primal myth. Her third blow is like the third libation (243-247) poured to Zeus with the epithet of the underworld lord (1385-1387) who himself was third in succession to power (168-173). The drama had begun with the watchman's throw of dice, the lucky roll of 3-6, on a gameboard whose pieces represent Agamemnon and his fate (32-33). The struggle between opposed systems recurrently is posed as a contest at which the number three or the third accomplishment decides the winner (171, 173,

Eum. 589). Agamemnon's son Orestes challenges the third contestant to win the kingdom (Cho. 865-868).

⁸¹ Ag. 1605.

⁸² Ag. 600-612.

⁸³ Ag. 1492-1496, 1516-1520. Klytemnestra is herself the bedcovers, the infernal net (1115, 1580), the "thrice-cursed" coverlet of earth (872) that makes up this netherworld bed ($\chi\lambda\alpha\ \widehat{\iota\nu\alpha}$ 868-873) on which this version of the sacred marriage will be performed.

⁸⁴ Ag. 1375-1376, 1380-1383, 1492-1496, 1516-1520, 1538-1540.

⁸⁵ Ag. 1532-1534. Orestes is posed as the avenger who will rebuild the fallen wall (1280-1291).

⁸⁶ Plato, *Theaet.* 150c.

⁸⁷ *Theaet.* 151c.

⁸⁸ Eur., *IT* 1150, Paus. 2.22.3.

⁸⁹ Jung and Kerényi, p. 123. The sorrow of motherhood: Eur., *Hec.* 426 ff: "Others may take comfort, but not a mother."