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Breastmilk, blood, and semen: Corruptions of Motherhood and Gender Fluid-ity in the Oresteia Trilogy

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> Iphigenia my eldest sits in my lap
> in the evening, talking.
> I brush back her hair and kiss her shoulders,
> she wriggles and smiles, don't do that.
> kisses me with a soft mouth
> as when a baby she kissed my breasts
> and sucked and stared at me with large eyes –
> now goes to her father's quarters
> for she likes that flat shaggy chest
> in a way I do not.
> ...
> I feel the skin of my daughter, like potpourri,
> overnight the nipples flowered,
> sweet orchids, pushing. I could have placed
> my mouth over each. How soft they seemed.
>
> (Judith Kazantzis, *Queen Clytemnestra*)[1]

These lines from Kazantzis' poem *Queen Clytemnestra*, narrated by the ghost of the dead Greek queen, develop a nexus of interconnected themes already central to (but hitherto under-examined in) Aeschylus' *Choephori*: breastfeeding, motherhood, sexual competition and incestuous desire.[2] Clytemnestra's ghost here recalls her physical connection with her daughter Iphigenia, prior to the latter's murder at the hands of her father, Clytemnestra's husband Agamemnon. The language is ambiguous, with uncomfortable sexual overtones intensifying across the two stanzas. The repetition of the words 'kiss', 'kisses', 'kissed' subtly moves the reader's gaze from a tender image of mother-daughter affection to a jarring sexualisation of breastfeeding. Clytemnestra's reference to the teenage Iphigenia's preference for her father's hirsute, flat chest over her own breasts is also uncomfortable, as she links it to her own sexual distaste for Agamemnon ('she likes that chest... in a way I do not'). Of course, it is entirely unsurprising that a daughter should have different (non-sexual) response to

[1] Kazantzis (1995): 32.

[2] I was introduced to this poem by Professor Olga Taxidou at a series of lectures at the Archive of the Performance of Greek and Roman Drama in Oxford in November 2022 on performing and enacting bad mothers in modern versions of Greek tragedy and am very grateful to her for her advice and encouragement with this piece. I am very grateful also to Laura Swift, Alexandra Hardwick and the anonymous readers from the Rosetta journal for their comments and advice. Of course, any infelicities remain the responsibility of the author.

her father's chest compared with her mother, but the implication here is one of sexual preference, particularly given Clytemnestra's sexual rejection of Agamemnon. In the following lines, Clytemnestra's response to her daughter's puberty is overtly sexualised in an imagined role-reversal of the baby Iphigenia sucking her mother's nipple, though it remains counterfactual and unrealised: 'I *could have* placed my mouth over each (nipple)'. The poem's climax develops this theme of dysfunctional sexuality within the family and links the motif of transgressive female sexuality inextricably to Clytemnestra's death at the hands of her son Orestes, narrated by the ghost of the queen herself. Aegisthus in this poem is the same age as Orestes, intensifying the sense of competition between the two young men and the inappropriateness of Clytemnestra's relationship with Aegisthus which is predatory and even paedophilic in tone:

> He brought back twelve tusked monsters
> slung between spears from stumpy legs.
> I pinched his cheek and ran my face
> between the muscles of his thighs,
> licking, and calling him
> little hunter most excellent and –
> my Ganymede, and
> the deerhide sprang back and
> there stood my son.
> I laughed; the two boys
> stared at each other,
> Aegisthus grabbed for his dagger too late,
> Orestes said, mother,
> I stared at him; he had thickened and scarred,
> I couldn't see his eyes under the crest,
> his hair was darker brown, greasy, long.
> I was thinking it needed a wash
> when he threw the spear.[3]

Aegisthus' youth is emphasised here by Clytemnestra's behaviour and language: she pinches his cheek, a patronising gesture often used of adults to children, and addresses him in infantilising language, calling him 'little hunter' and 'my Ganymede', a reference to the mythical male child loved and kidnapped by Zeus. She thus adopts a much more commonly male role in Greek myth, becoming a predator and the dominant partner in the sexual relationship. This is a theme which we will see is

[3] Kazantzis (1995): 37.

already strongly present in the Aeschylean Clytemnestra. The parallel between Kazantzis' Orestes and Aegisthus is made clear when Orestes bursts into his mother's bedroom, catching her performing oral sex on her young lover: 'the two *boys* stared at each other". In contrast to the Aeschylean version (discussed in detail below), the sudden appearance of her son does not make this Clytemnestra immediately think of violence: instead, she laughs. Her laugh is, however, in some ways as disquieting as the Aeschylean Clytemnestra's call for a man-killing axe. It hints at a lack of sexual boundaries also seen in the Clytemnestra of *Agamemnon,* who proudly proclaims her murder and her adultery to a chorus of horrified Argive elders. The failure of mother and son to communicate effectively in *Choephori* (exemplified in Clytemnestra's failed attempt to supplicate her son by exposing her breasts to him, in order to prevent him from killing her) is intensified here: Kazantzis' Clytemnestra cannot even look her son in the eye, since his military helmet blocks her line of sight, and their extended debate in the ancient Greek version is truncated to a teenage grunt. Orestes speaks one word ('mother'), a deliberate and significant echo of *Cho.* 899 ('*Πυλάδη τί δράσω; μητέρ' αἰδεσθῶ κτανεῖν;*', 'Pylades, what should I do? Should I be ashamed to kill my mother?'), i.e. the powerful moment when Orestes first uses the word 'mother' in the play.

Kazantzis' version has no maternal breast-baring scene (presumably her Clytemnestra is already naked, since she is engaged in sex with Aegisthus): her laughing Clytemnestra is unapologetically sexual, and she does not make any attempt to stop Orestes. Indeed, her laugh suggests that she is completely confident and at ease: she does not expect his attack at all. In creating a scene in which Orestes is so starkly confronted with the visual evidence of his mother's sexual escapades with Aegisthus, and by making Aegisthus younger, Kazantzis draws out of the Aeschylean play a theme of sexual jealousy and competition which has largely been unremarked by scholars interpreting the play's causation, and which will be the focus of this discussion.[4] Kazantzis foregrounds Orestes' jealous reaction: her version has him

[4] From a vast bibliography on causation in the *Oresteia,* Goldhill (1984): 136-153 offers a useful summary of theories of causation in the trilogy, discussing both the divine commands of Apollo and personal or psychological motivation theories, with a focus on Lacan's theories of the father-signfier; see also Cohen (1986): 129-141for theodicy and justice in the trilogy; Kennedy (2006): 35-72 offers an intriguing and persuasive argument for the role of imperialism in the causation of the trilogy; see also Sewell-Rutter (2007): 97 for Apollo's role in influencing Orestes, contrasting Garvie (1986): xxxi and Gagarin (1976): 76 who both consider Orestes to some extent responsible for his own actions.

throw a spear at his mother rather than physically manhandling her and killing her with a sword, without debating with her his motivations or her previous actions. This framing of the episode, with Orestes catching his mother *in flagrante* and killing her with no exchange of words evokes a more impulsive murder, directly connected to his jealousy of the boy his own age he has just witnessed being pleasured by his mother. However, this strand of causation is already clearly present in Aeschylus' version, as we shall see below. Reading Aeschylus through the lens of Kazantzis highlights themes of inappropriate female sexuality, motherhood, filial sexual jealousy, and rejection, which are central to the *Oresteia* triology's meaning. Orestes is just as motivated by psychological impulses as he is by a moral prerogative to avenge his father's death: to ignore this is to miss a vital strand of the trilogy's causation. Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic theories of mother-son relationships, particularly her theory of breastfeeding and how this impacts on the psyche of the child, are particularly useful as an interpretative lens because of the focus on Clytemnestra's breasts (and the breasts of Orestes' foster-mother, Cilissa) at several key moments in the Aeschylean play.[5]

In Aeschylus' *Choephori*, Orestes returns from exile, now a man, with instructions from Apollo's oracle that he must avenge his father's murder by killing the murderers: his own mother Clytemnestra, and her lover Aegisthus. Orestes has grown up away from home and his re-entry into his fatherland and *oikos* is painful and complicated: this paper argues that his motivation for killing his mother is not simply the moral objective of avenging his father, but is also bound up with his feelings of rejection, his judgement of Clytemnestra as a (failed) mother, and his disgust at both her sexuality and his own involuntary sexual response to the naked breasts of the woman who is virtually a stranger to him. Orestes' motivations and psychology will be explored with close reference to three scenes in *Choephori*.[6] Firstly, Clytemnestra's dream of breast-

[5] Goldhill (1984): 133-53 discusses and models the fruitful application of psychoanalysis to the *Oresteia,* but he does not focus on Klein but on Lacan and Derrida. Klein's work on breast-feeding was influenced by her reading of the Orestes-myth (as we will discuss below), and her theory thus to some extent constitutes a 'reading' of the Oresteia, and one which has received little attention in scholarship.

[6] To what extent characters are fully psychologized in Aeschylus' plays is a large and not uncontroversial debate, and one which there is not space to engage with in detail in this article. I adopt an interpretative approach based on close readings of the text and follow the approaches of Van Emde Boas (2018): 317-336 and Easterling (1990): 83-99 in allowing the possibility of psychological characterisation in Aeschylus where the words and actions of the characters warrant it. I do not see the lack of explict interiority as a fundamental bar to a psychological character-presentation in drama. For the opposing arguments see Gould (1978): 43-67, Dawe (1963): 21-62 and Heath (1987): 119, and a good overview with bibliography in Rutherford (2012): 238-322. For the rich history and utility of

feeding a snake which bites her, drawing clotted blood with the milk from her nipple, secondly, the speech of the nurse Cilissa, whose claims to have exclusively fed and cared for Orestes undermine Clytemnestra's status as his mother, and finally the climactic scene of the play, where Clytemnestra bares her breast to her estranged son in a doomed attempt to stop him from killing her. Bodily fluids loom large in this trilogy, and it will be argued that here, with reference also to an earlier scene from the *Agamemnon*, (mis)gendered and inappropriately mingled bodily fluids are used to mark moments of gender-taboo behaviour, to signal characters transgressing the boundaries prescribed by society for their gender.[7] For the purposes of this paper, I take inappropriately mingled bodily fluids to mean the mixture of blood with semen or breastmilk, as this is an unnatural and disquieting phenomenon; mis-gendered bodily fluids will be taken as, for instance, the appropriation of a fluid usually considered in the Greek world to be exclusively male (e.g. semen) by a female character.

Breastfeeding the serpent: Clytemnestra's dream

On his return to Argos, disguised and with oracular instructions to kill his mother, Orestes is perturbed to find offerings from Clytemnestra on his father's long-dishonoured grave and asks the chorus for an explanation.[8] The chorus replies that a nightmare has terrified the queen and motivated these propitiatory gifts (Aeschylus, *Cho.* 523-534):

Χο: οἶδ', ὦ τέκνον, παρῆ γάρ: ἔκ τ' ὀνειράτων[9]
καὶ νυκτιπλάγκτων δειμάτων πεπαλμένη
χοὰς ἔπεμψε τάσδε δύσθεος γυνή.
Ὀρ: ἦ καὶ πέπυσθε τοὔναρ, ὥστ' ὀρθῶς φράσαι;
Χο: τεκεῖν δράκοντ' ἔδοξεν, ὡς αὐτὴ λέγει.
Ὀρ: καὶ ποῖ τελευτᾷ καὶ καρανοῦται λόγος;
Χο: ἐν σπαργάνοισι παιδὸς ὁρμίσαι δίκην.
Ὀρ: τίνος βορᾶς χρῄζοντα, νεογενὲς δάκος;

using psychoanalysis as a lens to interpret Greek literature see Lev Kenaan (2019), Dobson (2022) and Arthur (1977): 56-68.

[7]For the imagery of blood in the trilogy see Kearns (2021: 198-203), Vikovic (2021): 321-337, Lebeck (1971): 80-91and Zeitlin (1965): 463-508. On the paucity of reference to *maternal* blood more generally in Greek culture and literature see Wilgaux (2006): 342 and (2011): 221-22.

[8] As noted by Zeitlin (1978): 156, the libations, completed by a figure who is at once obliged to offer them (the dead man's wife) and from whom the rituals are automatically an insult (his murderer) form a 'ritual impasse' in the play. Orestes himself rejects the validity of the offering at 520-21, on which cf. Kearns (2021): 201; Klein (1963): 275-99 argues that Orestes accepts the sacrifice as an attempt to revitalise his father, but this is to misunderstand the Greek ritual.

[9] The Greek text of Aeschylus is the Oxford Classical Text of Page with any changes noted.

Χο: αὐτὴ προσέσχε μαζὸν ἐν τὠνείρατι.
Ὀρ: καὶ πῶς ἄτρωτον οὖθαρ ἦν ὑπὸ στύγους;
Χο: ὥστ᾽ ἐν γάλακτι θρόμβον αἵματος σπάσαι.
Ὀρ: οὗτοι μάταιον: ἀνδρὸς ὄψανον πέλει.[10]

Ch: I know, my child, for I was there. Shaken by dreams and wandering terrors of the night she sent these offerings, godless woman that she is.
O: And have you heard the dream? Can you tell it clearly?
Ch: She thought she gave birth to a serpent: so she says herself.
O: And where does the tale end, what was its outcome?
Ch: She wrapped it in swaddling clothes, like a baby.
O: What food did it crave, the new-born biter?
Ch: In her dream she offered it her breast.
O: Surely her nipple was not unwounded by the hateful thing?
Ch: No: it sucked in clotted blood with the milk.
O: This is far from meaningless: the vision represents a man![11]

This dream-sequence has received a lot of attention from critics (such as Devereux, Catenaccio and Walde, among others) who have pointed out its proleptic function in foreshadowing Clytemnestra's murder at the hands of her son, the resonance of snake and blood imagery with the rest of the *Oresteia* and offered various Freudian and Jungian interpretations of the significance of the dream for the characters' psychology.[12] The connections between Orestes and the snake are clear – he will strike his mother and injure her, just like his dream-snake avatar.[13] Orestes uncannily anticipates the snake biting his mother: he seems to know that she will breastfeed it before he is told, since he refers to the snake as a '*νεογενὲς δάκος*', 'new-born biter' when he asks what food it craved (there is no logical reason for Orestes to suppose, in such a bizarre dream-scape, that she will feed it at all).[14] The language he uses of his mother's body is pejorative and bestializing: '*οὖθαρ*' is a deliberately animalistic word for 'nipple', giving the sense of 'udder' or 'teat'.[15] Orestes reduces his mother to a milk-producing animal, figuring her as a sacrificial victim ahead of his planned

[10]I print here the reading of M, preferable given its reference to a person, i.e., Orestes. Garvie's objection is over-literal ('the vision is not of a man but of a snake' 190) and does not fully admit the real possibility of symbolism in a dream.
[11] All translations are my own.
[12] On psychological interpretations of the dream: Klein (1963): 275-99 "[Clytemnestra] experiences persecutory anxiety which clearly appears in her dream about the monster she feeds at her breast'; Rousseau (1963): 103 sees the dream as an expression of guilt. See also Catenaccio (2011): 215-219, Swift (2015): 125-131, Devereux (1976):183-218, Kelly (2018): 118. On snake imagery, and the word *δάκος* in particular see Zeitlin (1966) 250-251, esp. n.15.
[13]Garvie (1986): 189 'the son is like the mother', see also Brown (2018): 310.
[14]Brown (2018): 310 notes the strangeness of the question 'Orestes' question is not entirely natural', see also Garvie (1986): 188 'Orestes' question is not the most natural response'.
[15]In fact, it is a word universally used of animals in extant Greek literature (s.v. LSJ), except for one other instance of its application to a human which is in comedy (Telecides Fr. 31), where it is clearly meant to be invective in tone.

slaughter. The word used of the snake ('*στύγους*' – 'hateful thing') is later repeated in the language he uses to describe the murdered Clytemnestra ('*πατροκτόνον μίασμα καὶ θεῶν στύγος*', 'a father-killing stain and an object of hatred to the gods'; *Cho.*1028) in an attempt to justify his actions.[16] Clytemnestra is thus linked ethically as well as biologically to the 'snake' which bites her, raising the question of genetic inheritance which becomes so central to the trilogy in the *Eumenides*.[17] As will be shown in the following discussion, Orestes strongly self-identifies as the snake, which begs the question, if Orestes sees himself as a snake, is Clytemnestra also a snake? Does he kill her for moral reasons, or because he is biologically pre-determined to do so? This genetic implication of the dream is noted already by Vidal Naquet.**[18]** The dream, then, sets up a double strand of causation in the matricide: it represents Clytemnestra's failure as a mother and the monsterising impact this has had on her son.[19]

In the final play of this trilogy, Orestes' crime of matricide hinges on whether the mother or the father takes biological precedence: was he justified in killing his mother to avenge his father? He wrestles with this problem as he is on trial for her murder in Athens, speaking in a debate with the Eumenides, terrifying chthonic spirits who pursue him for this crime. At *Eumenides* line 606, Orestes asks '*ἐγὼ δὲ μητρὸς τῆς ἐμῆς ἐν αἵματι;*' ('Am I of my mother's blood?'), and receives the scornful answer from the chorus of angry goddesses: '*πῶς γάρ σ' ἔθρεψεν ἐντός, ὦ μιαιφόνε,* | *ζώνης; ἀπεύχῃ μητρὸς αἷμα φίλτατον;*' ('How else could she have nurtured you inside her stomach, murderer, do you reject the blood of your mother, closest of all?'; *Eum.* 607-608). The Greek adjective '*φίλτατον*', here translated as 'closest', is a superlative with connotations of 'most beloved', 'most dear', as well as resonances of close family kinship and is thus deeply ironic in this context.[20] Orestes is acquitted of his mother's

[16]Garvie (1986): 189 'the recurrence of the word [...] emphasizes the similarity between Clytemnestra's deed and that which Orestes is about to do'. Chesi (2014): 106 discusses the failure of this attempt by Orestes to erase Clytemnestra's status as mother, correctly equating it to his failure to 'assess matricide as a legitimate act of violence'.

[17]Tralau (2019): 8-21 offers a comprehensive survey of the issue of genetics in the *Eumenides*, see also Markovits (2009): 427–441 for a discussion of intergenerational concepts of justice in the play.

[18] 'However, this relationship he has with his mother is reversible for Clytemnestra is herself a snake' (1981): 161. See also Kitto (1956): 50, Winnington-Ingram (1983): 135 and Chesi (2014): 138, although her reading is that Orestes is '*forced* to become' a snake (my emphasis), I am dubious about this, his monsterisation is not forced but a consequence both of his genetics and his traumatic childhood.

[19] Cf. Chesi (2014): 142 'the dream scene displays the monstrous nature of Clytemnestra's motherhood, and the estrangement of the child from his mother.' Roberts (1985): 290 notes that the dream indicates the reality of Orestes' identity: Clytemnestra has not just *dreamed* that she birthed a monster, she *has* birthed a monster, and he will kill her.

[20] For the use of this word elsewhere in *Eumenides*, and its ironic application here, see Sommerstein (1989): 196-7 *ad* 607-8; for the more general resonances listed here see LSJ s.v. *φίλος* Ia-c.

murder by one vote – the goddess Athena, herself born from her father's head rather than a maternal womb, casts the deciding vote, giving the following justification:

> *μήτηρ γὰρ οὔτις ἐστὶν ἥ μ' ἐγείνατο,*
> *τὸ δ' ἄρσεν αἰνῶ πάντα, πλὴν γάμου τυχεῖν,*
> *ἅπαντι θυμῷ, κάρτα δ' εἰμὶ τοῦ πατρός.*
> *οὕτω γυναικὸς οὐ προτιμήσω μόρον*
> *ἄνδρα κτανούσης δωμάτων ἐπίσκοπον.*
> *νικᾷ δ' Ὀρέστης, κἂν ἰσόψηφος κριθῇ.*
>
> For there was no mother who gave birth to me
> I praise the male in everything, except for marriage,
> in every sentiment I am firmly on the father's side.
> Thus I will not give precedence to the death of a woman
> who killed her husband, the guardian of the house.
> Orestes wins, even if the vote is equal.
>
> *Eum.* 736-74.

Athena, a virgin goddess without a mother, unsurprisingly devalues the role of the mother in comparison with the father, her vote brings the tally to a draw which allows Orestes to be acquitted.[21] It has been pointed out that her role in re-establishing justice and ending the 'eye for an eye' cycle of revenge here casts her as a kind of 'de-sexualised mother-figure', replacing Clytemnestra, whose sexuality, as we shall see, is deemed incompatible with successful motherhood.[22] Melanie Klein, a post-Freudian psychoanalyst who worked on child development, used the Orestes myth to develop her theories of mother-child relationships and the role of breastfeeding in developing a bond between mother and child. In a posthumously published piece, she reflects on the theme of motherhood in the *Oresteia*, and touches on the role of Athena as a sort of antidote to Clytemnestra within the trilogy. She argues that Athena is the 'good mother' to Clytemnestra's 'bad mother' in the trilogy because Athena strives to make peace between the human characters, avoid bloodshed, heal family rifts and integrate the Furies into society, which features are characteristic of the "internalized good object", the good mother who "becomes the carrier of the life instinct".[23] Klein's theory of breastfeeding and the mother-child bond will be a useful lens to examine Orestes'

[21] Goldhill (2004): 39-40 discusses the uncomfortable tension between Athena's marginalised form of female identity (as a female goddess who does not have sex, enter marriage, or have a mother) and her role in resolving a conflict which centres on motherhood and the moral framework of marriage.
[22] Porter (2005): 8.
[23] Klein (1963): 275-99.

interpretation of the breast-feeding in his mother's dream and the later breast-baring scene in which Clytemnestra claims to have nursed her son.

The replacement of an (albeit inappropriately) sexually active biological mother with a sterile, virgin goddess in a maternally peace-making role, combined with the denial of the genetic role played by the mother in the creation of a child makes for an uneasy resolution to the trilogy. This is intensified by the fact that the court is equally divided on the question of Orestes' guilt, and the lengths to which Athena must go to placate the Eumenides in the aftermath of the judgement, both of which leaves an uncomfortable sense that whatever 'justice' has been achieved by the end of the trilogy is far from straightforward or universally agreed, and ultimately the play's attempts to downplay the genetic inheritance of the mother remain unconvincing.[24]

In the *Choephori*, the question of genetic inheritance is central to reading the dream-sequence. Orestes' reaction to the dream is to immediately and confidently identify himself as the snake, and the bite as the death-blow he must deliver to his mother in order to avenge his father's death.

> ἀλλ' εὔχομαι γῇ τῇδε καὶ πατρὸς τάφῳ
> τοὔνειρον εἶναι τοῦτ' ἐμοὶ τελεσφόρον.
> κρίνω δέ τοί νιν ὥστε συγκόλλως ἔχειν.
> εἰ γὰρ τὸν αὐτὸν χῶρον ἐκλιπὼν ἐμοὶ
> οὔφις ἐμοῖσι σπαργάνοις ὡπλίζετο[25],
> καὶ μαστὸν ἀμφέχασκ' ἐμὸν θρεπτήριον,
> θρόμβῳ δ' ἔμειξεν αἵματος φίλον γάλα,
> ἡ δ' ἀμφὶ τάρβει τῷδ' ἐπῴμωξεν πάθει,
> δεῖ τοί νιν, ὡς ἔθρεψεν ἔκπαγλον τέρας,
> θανεῖν βιαίως: ἐκδρακοντωθεὶς δ' ἐγὼ
> κτείνω νιν, ὡς τοὔνειρον ἐννέπει τόδε.
>
> Well then, I pray to this earth and to my father's grave
> that this dream come to pass through me.
> I judge that it corresponds exactly.
> For if the snake left the same place as I;
> It was wrapped up with my swaddling clothes;
> and it fastened its open mouth around my nourishing breast

[24] Kearns (2021): 202 'the resolution of the Oresteia trilogy is done by sleight of hand, and when viewed logically the problem of the shedding of kindred blood does not go away'.
[25] Here I take the reading of Garvie (1986), for his comments on the line see page 196 *ad* 544. Brown (2018): 313 also suggests that the possessive adjective 'my' is needed to complete the sense of the line, and notes that the reference to swaddling clothes is certain, as is the presence of a verb with the snake as the subject.

and mixed the loving milk with clotted blood
while she shrieked from fear at this pain,
then she must, because she has nourished a terrible monster,
die violently. For I, turned into a snake,
(will) kill her, as this dream says.

Cho. 540-550

Here we see Orestes merging his identity with the snake in his mother's dream.[26] He identifies their shared origin in Clytemnestra's womb '*εἰ γὰρ τὸν αὐτὸν χῶρον ἐκλιπὼν ἐμοὶ;*' ('if it left the same place as I') – a connection he feels is important despite his later uncertainty (discussed above) in the *Eumenides* as to whether he shares his mother's blood or not. He also lays claim to the swaddling clothes put on the snake '*οὔφις ἐμοῖσι σπαργάνοις ὠπλίζετο*' ('the snake was wrapped up in my swaddling clothes'). This proprietorial language continues in the way he speaks about Clytemnestra's breast, using the same possessive adjective '*καὶ μαστὸν ἀμφέχασκ' **ἐμὸν** θρεπτήριον*' ('and it fastened its open mouth around my nourishing breast'). Orestes here lays claim to Clytemnestra's body, seeking to define it solely by its maternal role: as the adjective '*θρεπτήριον*', '*nourishing*', makes clear, this is not a sexual breast. This provision of food via the breast is equated by Orestes with maternal love – thus the milk it provides is '*φίλον γάλα*', 'loving milk'; there are additionally connotations of kinship in the adjective *φίλος*, pointing the genetic kinship between mother and son which Orestes (and later the divine court in the *Eumenides*) will go on to deny.[27] There are striking resonances with his language here and the psychoanalytical theories of Klein, who postulated that the infant objectifies and personifies its mother's breast – the 'good breast' provides milk, the 'bad breast' (for whatever reason, be that illness, lack of milk or wilful neglect) does not, and the infant perceives this as a betrayal and a rejection.[28] Orestes' attempts to objectify Clytemnestra and her breast as the 'good breast' which provides 'loving milk' will ultimately fail, as we shall see, and the rupture between Orestes' expectation and

[26] Brown (2018): 312 *ad* 540-50 comments that this dream sees Orestes accepting the role of his mother's murderer and notes the strangeness of this acceptance, but does not go as far as arguing Orestes adopts the snake's identity.
[27] I owe this suggestion to Laura Swift.
[28] Klein (1975) *The Psychoanalysis of Children*; see also two earlier pieces in which this theory had its roots: Klein (1921) and Klein (1926), both available in Klein (1975) *Love, guilt, and reparation, and other works, 1921-1945*. Frampton (2004): 357-368 offers an excellent summary of Klein's main theories and their impact on subsequent theoretical and literary depictions of breastfeeding.

reality, and his resultant feelings of outraged rejection lead directly to Clytemnestra's violent death at her son's hands.[29]

Orestes vividly re-imagines Clytemnestra's pain and fear as she is bitten by the snake, invoking her embodied experience as well as the sounds she produces ('*ἡ δ' ἀμφὶ τάρβει τῷδ' ἐπώμωξεν πάθει*', 'while she shrieked from fear at this pain') – but rather than provoking pity or concern for his mother, his conclusion is that she has to die. His explanation for her death here is not linked to his father's death or questions of morality: he states that she must die (using a strong word of compulsion, '*δεῖ*', 'it is necessary', *because* she has nourished a violent monster ('*ὡς ἔθρεψεν ἔκπαγλον τέρας*'). He identifies himself with the snake, describing himself with the participle *ἐκδρακοντωθεὶς* ('having become a snake') and connecting his monstrous metamorphosis directly with the project to kill his mother.[30] Orestes seems to anticipate here that what will ultimately drive him to kill his mother is not a coldly logical application of patriarchal morality, but his own rage and resentment at her neglect and rejection of him, which have turned him into a monster capable of killing his mother. He is not born a snake but rather becomes one. In this way, he subtly rejects an essentialist interpretation of Clytemnestra's dream, in which she gives birth to unnatural offspring, already a monster: it is Clytemnestra's treatment of him which turns him into the snake.

The final image from this section of the dream-sequence relevant here is the mingling of blood and breast milk caused by the snake's bite (and later repeated in Orestes' analysis of his mother's dream). The mixture of clotted blood and milk is deeply unsettling and resonates with the clotted blood emblematic of the violent, dysfunctional house elsewhere in the trilogy.[31] The combination of blood and milk disturbs the image of unproblematic, nurturing motherhood and implies a lack of appropriate nurture, or an inappropriate bond between nurturer and nurtured. As Chesi has pointed out (although with a different focus) 'the presence of a clot of blood in the mother's milk

[29] Pyplacz (2022): 244 argues that in the *Eumenides*, Apollo's famous speech denying that mothers have a genetic role in forming children is implicitly a criticism of Clytemnestra for failing to *act* as a mother to her son. I am not sure this is convincing in respect to Apollo's speech specifically: I would argue the application of guilt to Clytemnestra is more strongly seen here in the *Choephori*.

[30] Roberts (1985): 290 notes the resonances of metamorphosis in the verb *ἐκδρακοντωθεὶς*.

[31] Orestes, imagining the death of Aegisthus says the Fury will drink his blood (*Cho.* 575-78); Apollo at *Eum.* 179-184 threatens to force the Furies to vomit up the 'clots' of black blood they have imbibed. At *Eum.* 261-66 the Furies themselves talk of draining the blood from Orestes' body in recompense for the shedding of Clytemnestra's blood.

attests that Clytemnestra is not able to feed and bring up her own child'.[32] The scholium on *Cho.* 546 comment somewhat obliquely that the blood in Clytemnestra's milk increases Orestes' hunger for her blood, perhaps an early indication of the idea that Clytemnestra's lack of nurture for her son turns him against her and ultimately becomes at least part of the causation of her death.[33] As will be shown through analysis of the speech of Orestes' wet-nurse Cilissa and the climactic breast-baring scene, it is not necessarily a case of Clytemnesta's *inability* to nuture and bring up her son, but her *failure* to do so that will become a key strand in the causation of her own murder.[34] His biological mother's corrupted, bloody milk is replaced by the milk of an enslaved woman who shows him love despite the hardship of raising him, while his biological mother has exiled him to the care of strangers to further her sexual relationship with Aegisthus.

In fact, Clytemnestra has already created a similarly disturbing palimpsest of bodily fluids in the first play of the *Oresteia* trilogy, the *Agamemnon*. In her triumphant speech immediately over her husband's freshly-murdered corpse (*Ag.* 1372-1398), Clytemnestra revels in the violent penetration of her husband's prone body. The sexual tone of these lines is unmistakable: '*παίω δέ νιν δίς: κἀν δυοῖν οἰμωγμάτοιν μεθῆκεν αὑτοῦ κῶλα*', 'I struck him twice and with two groans his limbs relaxed' – the verb παίω has a sexual connotation, while the image of his groans followed by his limbs relaxing (in death) is a grotesque recollection of orgasm.[35] She goes on to glory in her third strike '*τρίτην ἐπενδίδωμι*' ('I gave it to him a third time', 'I stuck it in him a third time') before re-casting the spurting of his blood as if it were fertilizing semen.[36] The third blow has an uncomfortable ritual echo in the practice of pouring three libations to Zeus Soter which is alluded to several times in the trilogy (*Ag.* 246, *Cho*.

[32]Chesi (2011): 36.
[33] For the scholium on this line see Tucker (1901): 283. Chesi (2011): 38 'If the trace of blood in milk is the evidence of Orestes' frustrated desire to be nourished by his mother then the shedding of Clytemnestra's blood becomes a surrogate for this desire...hunger for milk turns to a hunger for blood and death.'
[34]Chesi (2011): 32-35 argues that we should read this as menstrual blood, arguing that Clytemnestra is not wounded by the snake: it seems more likely that we are meant to read the blood as emanating from the snake's bite.
[35]For *παίω* in a sexual context see LSJ s.v. A4, and Chavez (2011) 76-79.
[36]For an early suggestion of the sexual undertones in this passage see Moles (1979): 179-189 and Sommerstein (2002): 154 (who connects her impropriety of language to her transgressive character). The sexual nuance is taken as read by Kearns (2021): 200 and Vidović (2021): 324 but explicitly denied by Thomas and Raeburn (2011): 215 *ad loc* 'personally we would hesitate about the further step of interpreting the image in terms of ejaculation'. This reticence is odd, given that they readily accept the imagery of pregnancy and birth which follow, and the two processes are naturally inextricably connected. For sexual imagery in Clytemnestra's language elsewhere in the *Agamemnon* see Pulleyn (1997): 565-567.

577-8, 1073, *Eum.* 759-774): thus Agamemnon's wrongfully spilt blood mingles conceptually with ritual wine in a perversion of a religious act of devotion.[37] Indeed, Clytemnestra very much casts the murder *as* a righteous religious act of revenge as is clear from her self-definition as an *alastor*, dispensing Zeus' justice.[38]

> *κἀκφυσιῶν ὀξεῖαν αἵματος σφαγὴν*
> *βάλλει μ᾽ ἐρεμνῇ ψακάδι φοινίας δρόσου,*
> *χαίρουσαν οὐδὲν ἧσσον ἢ διοσδότῳ*
> *γάνει σπορητὸς κάλυκος ἐν λοχεύμασιν.*
>
> And blowing out a sharp spurt of blood
> he hit me with a black shower of bloody dew,
> me, rejoicing no less than a fertile ear of corn
> swelling in the god-given rain in the childbirth
> of the ripe flower-buds. Aes. *Ag.* 1389-92.

Throughout the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra consistently refuses to be constrained within the gender-boundaries set for her by society, and her appropriation of masculine characteristics of intelligence, political acumen and rhetorical skill are commented on uneasily by various characters.[39] Her murder of Agamemnon is here cast as a sexual triumph, but also a re-birth, as the images of fertility and growth strongly imply her joy and pleasure at the freedom his death brings her. The combination of blood and semen created in this imagery perverts the marriage union, as Clytemnestra has done in choosing her own sexual partner, taking over the rule of Argos and deciding to murder her husband rather than re-submit to his greater authority on his return from Troy. She penetrates her husband's body and forces him to ejaculate not semen but blood.[40] As the combination of blood and semen in this scene from *Agamemnon* marks her as an unnatural and sinister wife, so the blood and breastmilk indicates that she is not a nurturing mother-figure in *Choephori*.

[37] For this triple ritual of Zeus the saviour in these lines and elsewhere in the *Oresteia* see Thomas & Raeburn (2011): 214, Conacher (1987): 50-1 and Zeitlin (1965): 463-508.
[38] She claims to be acting in line with justice at 1432-3 and evokes the avenging *alastor* image at 1497-1504. On these claims cf. Raeburn & Thomas (2011): 220, 225-6, Fraenkel (1950) 675-677, 711-712. Zeitlin (1965): 472-475 explores the perversion of ritual language in this scene.
[39] Bierl (2017): 528-563 offers a comprehensive discussion of Clytemnestra's gender-bending political acumen. See also Drew Griffith (1995): 91-2 and Kendall (2020) (MA thesis): 17-18.
[40] Chesi (2011): 36 offers a more overtly sexualised interpretation of Clytemnestra in these lines as 'a woman made wet by male blood', also recognising that the scene represents corrupted female fertility, as I argue above.

Clytemnestra justifies her killing of Agamemnon with various arguments, but sexual jealousy is clearly part of the motivation, for all her posturing as a justice-wielding alastor acting on behalf of her murdered daughter Iphigenia. At *Ag.*1431-1447 she runs through the reasons for her husband's killing, dwelling briefly on issues of justice ('*μὰ τὴν τέλειον τῆς ἐμῆς παιδὸς Δίκην | Ἄτην Ἐρινύν θ', αἷσι τόνδ' ἔσφαξ' ἐγώ*', 'by the duly-fulfilled justice owed to my daughter, Ruin and the Fury, with whose aid I slaughtered this man'; *Ag.*1432-1433) before characterising herself as a humiliated wife, listing Agamemnon's sexual indiscretions (which Greek male audience members would likely have thought perfectly within his rights as a man) and describing with vindictive pleasure her slaughter of the enslaved concubine Cassandra.

Clytemnestra:
κεῖται γυναικὸς τῆσδε λυμαντήριος,
Χρυσηίδων μείλιγμα τῶν ὑπ' Ἰλίῳ:
ἥ τ' αἰχμάλωτος ἥδε καὶ τερασκόπος
καὶ κοινόλεκτρος τοῦδε, θεσφατηλόγος
πιστὴ ξύνευνος, ναυτίλων δὲ σελμάτων
ἰσοτριβής. ἄτιμα δ' οὐκ ἐπραξάτην.
ὁ μὲν γὰρ οὕτως, ἡ δέ τοι κύκνου δίκην
τὸν ὕστατον μέλψασα θανάσιμον γόον
κεῖται, φιλήτωρ τοῦδ': ἐμοὶ δ' ἐπήγαγεν
εὐνῆς παροψώνημα τῆς ἐμῆς χλιδῆς.

Here lies that abuser of his wife,
toyboy of Chryseis and the rest at Troy:
and this prisoner, the prophet,
his bedwarmer, chanter of oracles,
faithful bedfellow, who rubs all the sailors'
'masts' on the ship's benches. They've gotten
just what they deserve.
He's ...like that, and she – like a swan,
after singing her final death-lament
lies here, his lover: and for me she has brought
a delicious side-dish to my bed, a pleasure in which I luxuriate.
Ag. 1439-1447

Clytemnestra's words here reveal her jealousy of Agamemnon's extra-marital sexual exploits: she uses the word '*λυμαντήριος*' ('rapist', 'abuser') of his relationship with her – this is such a strong word that Raeburn and Thomas have argued she must be talking about his behaviour towards Cassandra.[41] Rather, the use of this word

[41] Raeburn and Thomas (2011): 220, see also Fraenkel (1950): 678 *ad* 1438.

potentially offers a chilling insight into their relationship prior to his departure to Troy, particularly as in the lines immediately preceding, Clytemnestra has described her consensual relationship with her chosen lover, Aegisthsus in language that suggests both mutual sexual appreciation and kindly treatment, and in which Aegisthus is emasculated to some extent by his characterisation as the 'tender of the hearth', a passive role not suited to a male hero.[42] It could also refer to his behaviour towards his wife in bringing back a concubine from Troy, which Clytemnestra evidently sees as an insult to her dignity.[43] Clytemnestra also refers here to Agamemnon's repeated sexual relationships with other concubines at Troy: however, far from presenting Agamemnon as a sexually dominant womaniser, the word she uses demeans and emasculates him: he is the '*μείλιγμα*' ('plaything') used to satisfy the sexual appetites of multiple Trojan women.[44] This terminology not only impugns Agamemnon, stripping him of agency, but also continues the theme of perverted sacrifice, since the plural of this word can also refer to propitatory offerings to the dead as it does in the prologue to the *Choephori*, where Orestes wonders aloud whether the enslaved women he sees are bringing libations as '*νερτέροις μειλίγματα*' ('offerings to the dead'; *Cho*. 15). The word recurs again at *Eumenides* 106-107, when Clytemnestra rebukes the Furies with the libations she has paid to them ('*ἦ πολλὰ μὲν δὴ τῶν ἐμῶν ἐλείξατε | χοάς τ' ἀοίνους, νηφάλια μειλίγματα*', 'you've licked up plenty of my offerings, wineless libations, unmixed appeasements'). The queen's choice of words for her husband thus does double-duty in asserting her sexual dominance over him and in attempting to validate her murder of him as religiously sanctioned.

Clytemnestra then turns to Cassandra, whom she describes in derogatory language as having regular sex with Agamemnon as well as the other sailors on the ship during the journey to Argos. This sexual language, even more shocking to a Greek audience coming from a female, further reinforces both the characterisation of Clytemnestra as a sexually transgressive woman and the sexualised interpretation of her earlier speech over Agamemnon's body. She does not acknowledge the fact that Cassandra is

[42] *Ag.*1435-7: '*ἕως ἂν αἴθῃ πῦρ ἐφ' ἑστίας ἐμῆς |Αἴγισθος, ὡς τὸ πρόσθεν εὖ φρονῶν ἐμοί οὗτος γὰρ ἡμῖν ἀσπὶς οὐ σμικρὰ θράσους*', 'as long as the fire in my hearth is lit by Aegisthus, and he remains kind to me, as before – for he is no small shield of confidence for me'.

[43] I owe this suggestion to the anonymous reviewer from the Rosetta journal.

[44] The connotation of this word (LSJ s.v. μείλιγμα) is very much of substances and/or objects used to soothe the appetites of humans or animals. Cf. *Od.*10.217 (a master soothes the wild temper of dogs with treats). At *Eumenides* 886, Athena refers to her speech as a possible μείλιγμα to soothe the Furies.

enslaved, and has little choice about the matter, and in fact both the repeated words for sexual partner she applies to Cassandra ('*κοινόλεκτρος, ξύνευνος*' and the use of the dual verb '*ἐπραξάτην*') seek to make the Trojan captive entirely complicit in her own rape, something also clear in the statement '*ἄτιμα δ' οὐκ ἐπραξάτην*', 'they've (both) gotten just what they deserve".[45] Her pleasure in killing Cassandra is obvious, and indeed potentially sexual: the text of lines 1446-1447 has caused problems for many critics seeking to understand the presence of the word '*εὐνῆς*' ('bed'): '*ἐμοὶ δ' ἐπήγαγεν εὐνῆς παροψώνημα τῆς ἐμῆς χλιδῆς*', 'for me, she's brought a side-dish to the pleasure of my bed'.

Sommerstein comments that 'the transmitted text means... [Cassandra's death] has brought a side-dish to my bed, to the pleasure in which I luxuriate' before going on to argue that the word εὐνῆς is an interpolation into the text.[46] Given Clytemnestra's evident sexual pleasure in the act of murdering Agamemnon, discussed above, it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that she gets sexual pleasure too from the murder of her rival: it fits with her characterisation throughout the text as sexually confident to the point of (from a Greek perspective) monstrosity. This reading further explains the odd term '*παροψώνημα*', 'side-dish', as Cassandra's death forms an additional pleasure to the 'main dish' of killing her hated husband. Clytemnestra has just brazenly announced her own adultery to the chorus and used directly vulgar and sexual language in her voyeuristically hostile description of Cassandra, and it is entirely in character that she should get a thrill from the murder of her husband's lover as much as she does from the murder of the man she hated.[47] This sexual motivation for Agamemnon's murder will link the mother directly to the son in *Choephori*, where we will see Orestes experiencing feelings of sexual jealousy and rivalry for Aegisthsus in the moments before he kills Clytemnestra.

[45] Fraenkel (1950) 685-7 *ad* 1446 is reticent about the sexual interpretation, perhaps unsurprising given the context in which he was writing, on which see Elsner (2021): 319-348. Later commentators and critics have no problem interpreting these lines as sexual in tone (see note 35 below).
[46] Sommerstein (2008): 177 n.309, Fraenkel (1950): 686 objects to the interpretation on moral grounds which is, I argue, a misreading of these lines, while he confirms there is no grammatical problem with the genitive εὐνῆς. Elsner (2021) provides helpful context for Fraenkel's (arguably wilful) refusal to see sexual tone in Aeschylus.
[47] Raeburn and Thomas (2011): 221 'Clytemnestra will relish sex with Aegisthus all the more now', see also Pulleyn (1997) who analyses Clytemnestra's language in relation to Cassandra, finding links between sex, death and food in her words.

Wet-nursing Orestes

Choephori provides the enslaved nurse Cilissa as an alternative mother-figure for Orestes. Her existence is a direct challenge to the claims of Clytemnestra to have nurtured and mothered her baby son in his infancy. Her claim to have provided constant care for Orestes further problemetises Clytemnestra's motherhood, which, as we have seen, was already presented as corrupt in the serprent-dream, where her bloody breastmilk and monstrous offspring suggested her unfitness as a nurturer. In this scene, the nurse describes in surprisingly realistic (even comedic) detail the hardships she endured in raising Orestes: this scene not only connects back to the dream-scene, but will be key for our interpretation of the climactic breast-baring scene of the play, as Cilissa's story undermines the truth of Clytemnestra's posturing, and raises doubts about her status as a 'good mother'[48]

Cilissa:
ὰ μὲν γὰρ ἄλλα τλημόνως ἤντλουν κακά:
φίλον δ' Ὀρέστην, τῆς ἐμῆς ψυχῆς τριβήν,
ὃν ἐξέθρεψα μητρόθεν δεδεγμένη,—
κἀκ' νυκτιπλάγκτων ὀρθίων κελευμάτων
καὶ πολλὰ καὶ μοχθήρ' ἀνωφέλητ' ἐμοὶ
τλάσῃ:—τὸ μὴ φρονοῦν γὰρ ὡσπερεὶ βοτὸν
τρέφειν ἀνάγκη, πῶς γὰρ οὔ; τρόπῳ φρενός:
οὐ γάρ τι φωνεῖ παῖς ἔτ' ὢν ἐν σπαργάνοις,
εἰ λιμός, ἢ δίψη τις, ἢ λιψουρία
ἔχει: νέα δὲ νηδὺς αὐτάρκης τέκνων.
τούτων πρόμαντις οὖσα, πολλὰ δ', οἶομαι,
ψευσθεῖσα παιδὸς σπαργάνων φαιδρύντρια,
γναφεὺς τροφεύς τε ταὐτὸν εἰχέτην τέλος.
ἐγὼ διπλᾶς δὲ τάσδε χειρωναξίας
ἔχουσ' Ὀρέστην ἐξεδεξάμην πατρί.

For all the other troubles I bore patiently,
but my beloved Orestes, on whom I spent my soul,
whom I received from his mother and nursed,
and the many and troublesome tasks,
fruitless for all my enduring them,
when his loud and urgent cries broke my rest.
For one must nurse the senseless thing like a dumb beast,
of course one must, by following its mood.

[48] This scene has long been noted for its surprisingly 'low-brow' contents: cf. Sidgwick (1892): xvii who calls the speech 'pithy illiterate babble' and feels its function is to puncture the dramatic tension. Gregory (2009): xxiii, Garvie (1986) 243-4 focuses on her status as an 'ordinary' person and her genuine affection for Orestes and Brown (2018): 362-3 follows Seidensticker (1982): 71-5 in noting that the scene, although containing scatological elements familiar from comedy, is not in fact comic in effect.

For while it is still a baby in swaddling clothes,
it has no speech at all, whether hunger moves it,
or thirst perhaps, or the call of need:
children's young insides work their own relief.
I would anticipate these needs.
Yet many a time, I think, having to wash
the child's linen because of my own errors,
laundress and nurse had the same function.
It was I who, with these two handicrafts,
received Orestes for his father.

Cho. 748-762

Klein's theory of breastfeeding, applied to Cilissa, would see her building a positive bond with Orestes, as she provided him with milk on demand, despite the huge sacrifices this entailed for her of broken rest and frustration. Although she is not his biological mother, she functions as such, being his primary caregiver: Kristeva, building on Klein's theories of breastfeeding, argued that the subjective role of a mother can be accessible to anyone who engages in what she terms the 'function' and practices of motherhood, as the process of performing these functions and practices creates a transformed positionality in the subject.[49] This (Klein-inspired) Kristevan model of performative, rather than genetic motherhood, offers a model for understanding the role of Cilissa in this play and the theme of motherhood which is so central in this trilogy, by which Cilissa's performance of constant care for Orestes undermines Clytemnestra's role as his mother.[50] On the other hand, Clytemnestra's failure to provide care for her son (if we accept that Cilissa was the sole provider) would problematize her role as mother, a key consideration given the ethics of matricide and the means by which she attempts to dissuade him. Commentators have demurred over the question of whether Cilissa has wet-nursed Orestes, mainly because of the clash it creates with Clytemnestra's claim to have done so at *Cho.* 896-899 (i.e., they wish to take Clytemnestra's claim at face value, and therefore they seek to interpret the care here as other forms of childcare than breastfeeding). It is of course possible that both women fed Orestes, but the wider characterization of Clytemnestra as a liar who exploits traditional stereotypes of femininity to manipulate the men around her (see below) and a bad mother undermines this interpretation.[51] The

[49]Kristeva (2001): *passim*, esp. 137-8, 155-156.
[50] Chesi (2014): 84 also notes this, although without reference to Kristeva '... it is not the biological experience of motherhood, but the task of mothering and nursing that bonds mother and child in the first place.'
[51] So Garvie (1986): 244 says Cilissa was 'not actually a wet nurse', giving only the later lines in the play where Clytemnestra claims to have fed Orestes as justification. Brown (2018): 366 also takes Clytemnestra's claim to be

evidence of the text seems undeniably to point to wet-nursing: the repetition of the verb τρέφω, plus the noun '*τροφευς*' ('nurse') and references to the baby's hunger and thirst.[52] The constant level of care provided by Cilissa here (the references to frequent night-waking, the emotional depiction of her frustration combined with her love for the mute creature who cannot communicate its needs, the reference to performing both feeding and cleaning duties) precludes any maternal care provision, which is important for the upcoming scene in which Orestes decides to kill his mother.[53] The reference to having received him from *both* parents (from the mother in line 750 and from the father in 762), far from indicating a contradiction in her story, is a claim to have taken over all parental responsibility. The presence of Cilissa at this point in the play, and her highly realistic, detailed picture of the drudgery involved in raising a small baby provides a corrective for Clytemnestra's upcoming attempt to adopt the role of the 'good mother', it undercuts it and renders the attempt doomed.[54] Although this speech is short, it is of vital importance in interpreting Clytemnestra's interactions with her son, to which we now turn.

Mother and Son

Clytemnestra's first reaction on hearing that Orestes is in fact alive and has just killed Aegisthus: she immediately calls for a weapon, so that she can kill her son rather than be killed by him. Upon hearing that her son is in fact alive, and that he has attacked her lover Aegisthus, Clytemnestra utters these words:

Clytemnestra:
οἳ 'γώ. ξυνῆκα τοὔπος ἐξ αἰνιγμάτων.
δόλοις ὀλούμεθ', ὥσπερ οὖν ἐκτείναμεν.
δοίη τις ἀνδροκμῆτα πέλεκυν ὡς τάχος:

true, citing in addition the reference at *Cho.* 545 where Orestes refers to C's breast using the possessive adjective – but Orestes cannot possibly *know* whether his mother fed him. He has been in exile for years, and very few children remember being breast-fed. See also Margon (1983): 296-297. Vidović (2021): 331 argues that Cilissa clearly positions herself as having done all the care for Orestes, which must include feeding him.

[52] Pyplacz (2022): 245 also identifies Cilissa as a wet-nurse and correctly identifies that this 'mothering' has replaced Clytemnestra's role as mother for Orestes 'Clytemnestra's neglect...resulted in Cilissa's becoming Orestes' real mother'. Cf. also Garvie (1986): 257.

[53] Here I disagree with Chesi (2014): 113 who states that Cilissa 'contradicts herself' on the point of having provided sole, constant care to Orestes. I see no such contradiction in the text. Mackay (2018): 160-161 follows Karydas (1968): 65 in arguing that Cilissa is lying out of self-interest but does not explain why the nurse would be motivated to do this – given that Clytemnestra is elsewhere proved a liar, and the nurse has no obvious reason to lie, it seems much more likely that she is telling the truth. For the contrast between Cilissa's emotion and Clytemnestra's coldness see further Rose (1982): 50.

[54] Griffith (1995): 92 also takes this speech of Cilissa as contradicting the 'maternal bond' between Clytemnestra and Orestes.

εἰδῶμεν εἰ νικῶμεν, ἢ νικώμεθα:
ἐνταῦθα γὰρ δὴ τοῦδ᾽ ἀφικόμην κακοῦ.
Ah! I get the meaning of the riddle.

We are to die by treachery, just as we killed.
Someone get me my man-killing axe, as quickly as you can!
Let's see whether we are to conquer or be conquered:
for I have reached this excess of evil now.
Cho. 886-891.

She turns immediately to violence, calling for the axe with which she has killed Agamemnon, and she is clearly prepared to kill her son rather than be killed by him. She casts the upcoming confrontation as a conflict in which she will either conquer or be conquered, a masculine use of martial language consistent with her character.[55] This undermines her attempt to persuade him to show mercy which immediately follows (she is not able to attack him without the weapon, which she does not get to in time, so she is forced to try persuasion). She seems to realise that she is crossing yet another line in her direct reference to the point she has come to in 891 ('I have reached this excess of evil now'). Brown sees line 891 as expressing regret at the 'necessity' of killing her son, but the statement, following the call for a weapon and the factual statement of the battle to come, seems cold and calculated rather than regretful.[56]

She has shown no emotion whatsoever on hearing that her only son is alive: quite the opposite, her immediate impulse is to kill him. This is in direct contrast to her response, immediately following these very lines, to hearing her lover Aegisthus is dead.

Orestes:
σὲ καὶ ματεύω: τῷδε δ᾽ ἀρκούντως ἔχει.
I have been hunting for you. He has had more than enough.

Clytemnestra:
οἲ 'γώ. τέθνηκας, φίλτατ᾽ Αἰγίσθου βία.
Aahhh! You have died, my brave, most beloved Aegisthus!

Orestes:
φιλεῖς τὸν ἄνδρα; τοιγὰρ ἐν ταὐτῷ τάφῳ
κείσῃ: θανόντα δ᾽ οὔτι μὴ προδῷς ποτε.
You love the man? Then you can lie in the same grave,

[55] For the 'manliness' of Clytemnestra see Betensky (1978), Podlecki (1983): 32-5, Goldhill (1984), McClure (1999): 70-100, Almandos Mora (2020), Bierl (2017).
[56] Brown (2018): 399 'she implies that she would rather not have to kill her son.'

and you won't ever betray him in death.
Cho. 892-895.

Orestes enters already behaving aggressively towards his mother, using a verb ('*ματεύω*') which has connotations of dogs on the scent of prey, picking up on the bestialising language he had used of his mother's body in the earlier dream-interpretation.[57] He is eerily reminiscent of his mother here: when she triumphs over the dead body of her husband in *Agamemnon*, she portrays Agamemnon as a fish, caught in her net.[58] She was the hunter, her husband the prey, now their son has turned the tables on her. The genetic connotations of the dream-prophecy are fulfilled, as the son becomes as much of a monster as his murderous mother.

Clytemnestra's reaction to Aegisthus' death is markedly more emotional than her reaction to the news of her son's survival. Orestes seizes on this evident emotion immediately, jealously recasting her use of the superlative '*φίλτατ'*' ('most beloved') in his petulant question '*φιλεῖς τὸν ἄνδρα;*' ('you love the man?'). He connects her love of Aegisthus to his decision to kill her, conjuring an image in which a shared grave replaces the shared bed of their adultery ('you can lie in the same grave'). His reference to betrayal is polyvalent: of course, he is referring to his father, and the betrayal of adultery, but he is also referring to himself, as becomes clear in their upcoming conversation. He feels betrayed that his mother chose her lover over him, a sentiment already expressed by Electra at *Cho* 132-134:

πεπραμένοι γὰρ νῦν γέ πως ἁλώμεθα
πρὸς τῆς τεκούσης, ἄνδρα δ' ἀντηλλάξατο
Αἴγισθον, ὅσπερ σοῦ φόνου μεταίτιος.

For now we are pretty much outcasts, sold
by the woman who birthed us, in exchange for a man
Aegisthus, who shares the crime of your murder with her.

This language of commerce, used to express Electra's feelings of resentment and betrayal at her mother's apparent choice of Aegisthus over her children, prefigures

[57]For this verb see Goldhill (1984): 179.
[58] Clytemnestra: '*ἄπειρον ἀμφίβληστρον, ὥσπερ ἰχθύων,*| *περιστιχίζω, πλοῦτον εἵματος κακόν.*', 'I cast around him an endless casting-net, just like a fish, an evil wealth of fabric'; Aeschylus: *Ag.* 1382-1283. For Orestes as hunter see Goldhill (1984): 179-180, Vidal-Naquet (1972): 135-158

Orestes' jealousy of Aegisthus here.[59] Electra has remained in Argos, but Orestes, the exiled son, will be shown to have even more complicated feelings towards his estranged mother.

Despite Orestes' aggressive entrance onto the stage, his obvious violent intentions, and his furious allusions to her sexual relationship with Aegisthus, Clytemnestra attempts to persuade her son not to kill her. She does so in a famous gesture: baring her breast, she makes an appeal to the rights she has a mother, adopting the role of nurturer. This scene is modelled on *Iliad* 22.79-89, where Hecuba bares her breast to Hector to attempt to prevent him from going to his death by fighting Achilles. Hecuba also uses language which evokes the physical bond of breastfeeding and the comfort it brings the child (the breast is described as λαθικηδέα 'banishing care') and uses the language of respect and pity ('*τάδε τ' αἴδεο καί μ' ἐλέησον*', 'respect these (breasts) and pity me'). Hecuba's supplication fails not because she is a bad mother or disingenuous, but because Hector feels compelled by his heroic honour to go and fight, although he knows it will spell doom for his mother, wife, and city.[60]

> **Clytemnestra:**
> *ἐπίσχες, ὦ παῖ, τόνδε δ' αἴδεσαι, τέκνον,*
> *μαστόν, πρὸς ᾧ σὺ πολλὰ δὴ βρίζων ἅμα*
> *οὔλοισιν ἐξήμελξας εὐτραφὲς γάλα.*
> Stop! My son, respect this breast, my child,
> at which many times, sleeping,
> you sucked out the nourishing milk with your gums.
>
> **Orestes:**
> *Πυλάδη τί δράσω; μητέρ' αἰδεσθῶ κτανεῖν;*
> Pylades, what shall I do? Should I be ashamed to kill my mother?
> *Cho*. 896-899

The verb '*αἴδεσαι*' ('respect') is an ethical call for Orestes to recognise what she is owed as his mother. She repeats words for child ('*παῖ*', '*τέκνον*'), creating a powerful image of the gentle bond of mother and son with the phrase '*εὐτραφὲς γάλα*' ('nourishing milk'). This use of childhood language, combined with the mention of

[59] Garvie (1986): 78 *ad loc* comments 'the metaphor of selling is continued...Clytaemestra sold her children...and in exchange received Aegisthus.'
[60] See Marshall (2017): 189-190, Miguez Barciela (2019): 81-93.

Orestes' gums infantilises him as a toothless, helpless infant.[61] Clytemnestra, like Cilissa, uses the adjective '*πολλὰ*' ('many times') to portray a continuity of care which was much more believable from the exhausted nurse. Her description of Orestes breastfeeding as he sleeps ('*βρίζων*') potentially undermines the truth of her story, as babies cannot feed while they are asleep.[62] Brown correctly identifies that the word '*ἀμ"*'('at the same time') shows that '*βρίζων*' here must mean actually asleep as opposed to 'feeling sleepy', a mistake that he attributes to Aeschylus' lack of knowledge about breast-feeding, but it seems equally possible that it is deliberate and meant to cast doubt upon the truth of Clytemnestra's words.[63] In any case, this image of infant feeding is highly idealised, and with Cilissa's much grittier, more detailed and realistic account of breastfeeding Orestes in mind, the audience are not so easily deceived.[64]

When contrasting the reports of the two female characters, it is of key importance to recall that Clytemnestra has precedent for outrageous, shape-shifting lies in this trilogy, and in particular, lies which depend on the disingenuous performance of 'traditional' gender roles.[65] At *Agamemnon* 855-913, she gives a long and deceitful speech in which she poses as a loving wife, when in fact she is about to murder her husband and his enslaved Trojan concubine.[66] This speech too involves adopting the tropes of a typical gender role which she herself does not fulfil, but in *Agamemnon*, the deception is successful, largely because Agamemnon himself lacks the intelligence of his wife, and cannot see through her tricks. In *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra's murder of her husband and gloating speech over his body give concrete proof that her 'loyal wife' speech earlier in the play is entirely disingenuous. I would argue that her intention to kill Orestes here (seen in her call for the 'man-slaying

[61] Also noted by Popescu (2012): 152 [An unpublished dissertation] in reference to the use of Clytemnestra's body as a locus for non-verbal, embodied memory.
[62] This word seems to connote actually being asleep rather than feeling tired: so Agamemnon at *Il.*4.223 would not be caught 'snoozing', and at Aes. *Ag.* 275 it refers to a sleeping mind, capable of dreaming.
[63] Brown (2018): 401 "Garvie notes that babies do not actually feed while asleep but presumably Aeschylus had not observed this."
[64] See Marshall (2017): 192 'Cilissa's subsequent appearance undermines any sincere claims of genuine maternal care from Clytemnestra'. Vickers (1973): 405 calls the attempt to pose as a nurturing mother 'laughable', Whallon (1958): 271-275 also argues that the scene does not ring true. Rousseau (1963): 124 'Clytaemestra's deceit is flatigious.' Contrast Garvie (1986): 292 *ad* 896-8 "There is no good reason to doubt the sincerity of Clytaemestra's maternal feelings" followed by Brown (2018): 401 *ad* 896-8 "There is nothing to suggest that his mother's relationship with him was less close than his nurse's".
[65] Wohl (1997): 104 'Clytemnestra offers a fiction of herself waiting loyally like a good wife'.
[66] For Clytemnestra's deception of her husband here see Morell (1997): 147-164

axe' at 899) should be read in the same light: it shows that she is entirely ready to kill her son.

The cultural capital of motherhood is strong enough to give Orestes pause, at least for a moment: significantly, he uses the word 'mother' for the first time in the play in his response here, as he momentarily wavers.[67] Pylades' answer focuses on the oracular command of Apollo, placing that ethically above the rights of Clytemnestra to be considered and treated as a mother. His clear implication is that divine retribution will follow if Orestes fails to act on Apollo's orders. This, of course, ignores the divine retribution that *does* follow in the *Eumenides*, when the chthonic furies pursue Orestes for the crime of matricide. This ethical and religious reassurance, obscuring as it does the complexity of the situation, is enough to immediately convince Orestes. His moment of doubt is extremely brief:

> **Pylades:**
> *ποῦ δὴ τὰ λοιπὰ Λοξίου μαντεύματα*
> *τὰ πυθόχρηστα, πιστὰ δ' εὐορκώματα;*
> *ἅπαντας ἐχθροὺς τῶν θεῶν ἡγοῦ πλέον.*
>
> What would be the outcome then of Loxias' oracle,
> delivered at Delphi, and our oath-sworn promises?
> Consider all men enemies before you make an enemy of the gods.
>
> **Orestes:**
> *κρίνω σὲ νικᾶν, καὶ παραινεῖς μοι καλῶς.*
> *ἔπου, πρὸς αὐτὸν τόνδε σὲ σφάξαι θέλω.*
> *καὶ ζῶντα γάρ νιν κρείσσον' ἡγήσω πατρός:*
> *τούτῳ θανοῦσα ξυγκάθευδ', ἐπεὶ φιλεῖς*
> *τὸν ἄνδρα τοῦτον, ὃν δ' ἐχρῆν φιλεῖν στυγεῖς.*
>
> I judge you have the upper hand, and you advise me well.
> You, come on– I want to slaughter you right next to him,
> since you thought he was better than my father when he was alive:
> Sleep with him in death, since you love
> this man and hate the man you should have loved.
> *Cho.*900-907

[67] Goldhill (1984): 117 'Significantly, Orestes does not use the word μήτηρ until the highly emotive question (899)'. On this hesitation also Lebeck (1971): 116 Albini (1977): 83, Saxonhouse (2009): 56-7, O'Neill (1998): 222 and Garvie (1986): 293 *ad* 899.

There is very little emotional conflict in the making of this decision – we might compare this to Medea, who debates in an agonizing soliloquy whether she can bring herself to kill her children – there is no such internal or external debate here.[68] Orestes is truly his mother's son – Clytemnestra in the previous play of this trilogy similarly does not show any remorse or hesitation about her decision to kill Agamemnon, declaring proudly that she has done the deed and will not deny it ('*οὕτω δ' ἔπραξα, καὶ τάδ' οὐκ ἀρνήσομαι*'; *Ag.* 1380), using the adjective 'rejoicing' of her mood in the immediate aftermath of the killing ('*χαίρουσαν*'; *Ag*. 1391) and finally declaring to the chorus that she exults in the deed ('*χαίροιτ' ἄν, εἰ χαίροιτ', ἐγὼ δ' ἐπεύχομαι*.', 'rejoice, if you want to rejoice – I exalt in it'; *Ag.* 1394). So Orestes' interpretation of the breast-feeding dream has become a self-fulfilling prophecy, as he proves himself to be the monstrous son of a monster. This is in contrast with a reading of Orestes as an unwilling or regretful agent of Apollo: his anger and vindictiveness here make such a reading difficult to justify.[69]

Despite Pylades' focus on the religious imperative driving the matricide, Orestes' language is not the language of a moral agent, acting (willingly or unwillingly) on behalf of the oracle. This self-direction is highlighted by the verb θέλω in 901: he is pursuing his own revenge and his own desires, not the oracle of Apollo. Orestes is vindictively violent: addressing his mother with a disparaging imperative, without title or address ('*ἔπου*' – 'come on you!'), and he seems to take savage pleasure in planning and staging her murder, telling his mother he wants to slay her next to her lover ('*πρὸς αὐτὸν τόνδε σὲ σφάξαι θέλω*'). Again, the word '*σφάξαι*', 'slaughter' configures Clytemnestra as an animal to be slain, de-humanising her. As we have seen above, there are strong links between mother and son, for Clytemnestra used this verb to describe her killing of Agamemnon with similar tones of a perverted animal sacrifice at *Ag.*1433.[70] This is not a religious punishment, or a hot-headed crime in the heat of the moment but a calculated execution. Brown comments on this scene that Orestes lacks

[68]For interpretations of Medea's complex psychology and characterisation in the monologue prior to killing her children, with particular focus on her indecision see Reeve (1972): 51-61, Kovacs (1986): 343-352, Foley (1989): 61-85, Cairns (2021): 8-26.

[69]Contrast Rousseau (1963): 123 seeking to exonerate Orestes from any blame for his mother's murder: 'Both brother and sister are distinguished from the former pair of sinners by the purity of motive through which they act.' This reading takes too little account of the psycho-sexual motivations I discuss here, which Rousseau wrongly argues are not seen on stage.

[70] '*μὰ τὴν τέλειον τῆς ἐμῆς παιδὸς Δίκην*, | *Ἄτην Ἐρινύν θ', αἵσι τόνδ' ἔσφαξ' ἐγώ*, 'by justice, exacted for my daughter, by delusion, by the Fury, with whom I slew this man'; *Ag.* 1432-1433.

an ‘evident motive’ for his elaborate staging of the murder. However, a close examination of the language used shows that Orestes’ motivation is revenge for Clytemnestra’s sexual agency in sleeping with a lover of her choice: he imagines his mother sleeping with Aegisthus in death (‘*τούτῳ θανοῦσα ξυγκάθευδ’*’) a macabre image which seeks to immortalise her sexual betrayal. He makes explicit that it is Clytemnestra’s sexual behaviour which drives his decision to kill her (‘*ἐπεὶ φιλεῖς |τὸν ἄνδρα τοῦτον, ὃν δ’ ἐχρῆν φιλεῖν στυγεῖς*’). The moral opprobrium and jealousy Orestes feels is made clear by his inability to name Aegisthus, the repetition of the verb φιλεῖς/ φιλεῖν and by his use of the forceful verb ‘*ἐχρῆν*’, ‘it was necessary’ in relation to the love his mother should have felt for Agamemnon. Clytemnestra did not love the man she ‘ought’, in Orestes’ opinion, to have loved, and so she must die.

In focussing on his mother’s sexuality in this moment, Orestes is denying and repressing her motherhood. It is important to recall the physical staging of this scene, in which Clytemnestra has exposed her breast to her son as he threatens her with a sword. It is not clear whether the actor would have bared a prosthetic breast (versions of which did exist at least for comic plays) or there was some other subterfuge used to avoid the audience seeing the obviously male chest of the actor at this point (e.g. positioning of actors).[71] Drew Griffith (1995) makes the intriguing suggestion that Aeschylus here exploits the convention of male actors playing female parts to draw attention, at this climactic moment to the ‘masculine’ nature of Clytemnestra which is so often referenced in the *Agamemnon*.[72]

Fig. A, a red-figure vase from c.350-330BCE offers a visual comparison of the scene: indeed, Taplin identifies the vase as a direct response to the *Choephori.*[73] Orestes is naked, his legs straddle the crouching Clytemnestra bringing his crotch and genitals close to her face. He clutches a handful of her hair in his left hand, pulling it upwards, while his right hand brandishes a sword, the blade pointing directly up towards the top

[71] Drew Griffith (1995): 87-92 summarises the various problems with the staging. See also Taplin (1978): 61 who argues against a ‘breast reveal’, refuted by Sommerstein (1980): 74 n.32 and Brown (2018): 400 who argues for a specially-prepared, convincing costume.
[72] Drew Griffith (1995): 92 “The threatened and narrowly avoided revelation of the actor’s male body beneath Clytaemnestra’s woman’s robe recalls this earlier emphasis on her mannish nature’.
[73] An image of this vase is available open-access at https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103TX4 (accessed September 2023) and it is also reproduced in Taplin (2007): 56-8. Castellaneta (2013): 61-80 argues that the scene on the vase depicts Euripides’ Electra since the vase is dated to 330BCE, but the dating argument is inconclusive on its own given that both Euripides and Aeschylus are well before 330BCE, so it is not clear that one author would necessarily take priority over the other on these grounds alone.

of the vase. Clytemnestra exposes her breast, cupping it with her left hand while her right hand stretches up to her son's face in a gesture of supplication. Above the pair and to the right, a disembodied Fury hangs in mid-air, holding two snakes, symbols of her forthcoming revenge on Orestes. This scene is pulsing with male violence: Orestes is muscled, naked, his genitals in the centre of the image, a second erect phallic symbol in the upright sword he holds aloft. The postioning of his naked crotch in relation to his mother's body is uncomfortable, and suggests an incestuous connotation to the encounter which was also explored by Judith Kazantzis in her version of the myth.[74] Already in the Aeschylean play, as is evident both from Orestes' obsessive references to Clytemnestra's sex life and from his swift rejection of her identity as his mother, when Orestes sees Clytemnestra's breast, he interprets it not as a nurturing symbol of maternity, but as a sexual object, used to seduce inappropriately, outside the bonds of marriage with his father. Orestes' use of sexual mores as a reason to justify his mother's death indicates that he is struggling with his mother's sexuality. Orestes has of course, been raised elsewhere, away from his mother, which makes it all the more likely that he would not naturally or immediately view her body as maternal, when he has never experienced it as such, or known her acting in a maternal role. Cilissa's narrative shows that even his earliest memories will be of someone else fulfilling the maternal role in his life. We may even wonder if Orestes feels aroused by his mother's breast here.[75]

This sort of breast-exposing scene has an erotic model as well as the Iliadic maternal model discussed above, and ironically the woman involved is Clytemnestra's own sister. Helen, like her sister, is a woman whose exercise of independent sexual agency causes destruction and conflict, an unmaternal mother who abandons her child for Paris (as both Electra and Orestes say they have been abandoned by Clytemnestra for Aegisthus). Helen famously exposes her breasts to Menelaus as he approaches her to mete out violent punishment for her adultery in the aftermath of the Trojan War. Overcome by desire, he forgives her, and they are reconciled:[76]

[74] See below for discussion of Kazantzis' reading of the relationship as an incestuous one.
[75] Young (2005): 75-96 has written about the erotic and sensual nature of breastfeeding, offering a controversial blurring of the maternal and sexual boundaries even when no separation between mother and child has occurred.
[76] This scene is parodied in Aristophanes *Lysistrata* 155-6 which also references Menelaus dropping his sword upon seeing Helen's breasts. Stevens (2017): 172 notes that the scholia on both *Andromache* and *Lysistrata* state that the Helen-Menelaus breast-baring scene goes back to Ibycus and the *Ilias Parva*, and so will have been known to 5th century audiences.

Peleus [addressing Menelaus]:
ἑλὼν δὲ Τροίαν — εἶμι γὰρ κἀνταῦθά σοι
οὐκ ἔκτανες γυναῖκα χειρίαν λαβών,
ἀλλ', ὡς ἐσεῖδες μαστόν, ἐκβαλὼν ξίφος
φίλημ' ἐδέξω, προδότιν αἰκάλλων κύνα,
ἥσσων πεφυκὼς Κύπριδος, ὦ κάκιστε σύ.

When you'd taken Troy, yes – I'll go there too!
You didn't kill your wife, when you'd got her under your grip,
but, when you saw her breast, you threw away your sword
let her kiss you, fondling the betraying bitch,
weaker in character than Aphrodite, you utter coward!
Euripides, *Andromache* 627-631

The scene shares strong physical similarities with the Orestes-Clytemnestra scene: both men have physical hold on the woman they are attacking, both have a sword and in each case the woman exposes her breasts. In the Euripidean version, Menelaus is de-humanised alongside his wife – she may be a dog ('*κύνα*'), but his behaviour towards her ('*αἰκάλλων*') is also used of dogs fawning on humans.[77] Bestialised and emasculated by sexual desire, Menelaus loses his weapon and is an object of disgust for the speaker Peleus, who criticizes him for being 'weaker' than his sexual urges (symbolised here by the female goddess of sexuality and desire, Aphrodite) and addresses him with the deeply pejorative superlative adjective '*κάκιστε*' ('worst/basest/most cowardly man'). Helen succeeds in her attempt to obtain mercy because her erotic gesture is aimed at a sexual partner who cannot resist the temptation of sexual contact with her. Clytemnestra, on the other hand, fails in her supplication because her son does not recognise a ***mother's*** breast when she exposes herself – the erotic connotations of her gesture to the son she never mothered ultimately drive him to kill her.

In the final exchange between mother and son, competing motivations come to the surface as Orestes insists on the inevitability of his mother's death. His father's murder is mentioned for the first time in their conversation at 908-909:

[77] Stevens (2017): 172 *ad* 630 notes the overdetermination of words relating to dogs here: 'Helen is a κύων but Menelaus fawns upon her like a dog'.

Clytemnestra:
ἐγώ σ᾽ ἔθρεψα, σὺν δὲ γηράναι θέλω.
I nourished you, now I want to grow old with you.

Orestes:
πατροκτονοῦσα γὰρ ξυνοικήσεις ἐμοί;
A father-killer, and you want to live with me?

Clytemnestra here again claims to have 'nurtured' Orestes, a claim which has been undermined by Cilissa's description of near-constant care for the infant, which was followed by his exile abroad. Her desire to 'grow old' with her son has an incestuous ring to it, as Garvie notes, this formulation normally means that two people would grow old together, as we might expect for a husband and wife. This description of Clytemnestra as a 'father-killer', 20 lines into their exchange, is the first time Orestes refers to the murder of Agamemnon as a reason for their dispute. It is immediately followed by a reference to fate driving on Clytemnestra's death in punishment for Agamemnon's (910-11).

At line 927 (at the end of this exchange and seconds before he kills her) Orestes directly references his father's blood as the driving force ('*πατρὸς γὰρ αἶμα τόνδε οὐρίζει μόρον*', 'yes, for my father's blood determines this fate for you'), linking his punishment of his mother back to the serpent-dream, as Clytemnestra immediately does herself in her reply ('*οἰ᾽ γὼ τεκοῦσα τόνδ᾽ ὄφιν ἐθρεψάμην | ἦ κάρτα μάντις οὐξ ὀνειράτων φόβος*', 'alas, I bore and nourished this snake, the terror of my dreams is coming true!' *Cho.* 928-9).[78]

Nested between these references to Agamemnon, which may be termed the 'religious' or 'Apolline' motivation for matricide (i.e. to avenge the killing of Orestes' father) are competing motivations which further reveal Orestes' sense of betrayal at his mother's abandonment of him and sexual jealousy of her relationship with Aegisthus. At 913-918, mother and son argue about Orestes' exile in Phocis and Clytemnestra's adultery.

[78] Garvie (1986): 300-301 has a detailed discussion of the (many) textual problems of this line. The MS reading of αἶσα (fate) for αἷμα (blood) maintains the focus on Agamemnon's death, which is the main point here, although it lessens the connection to the dream, and perhaps makes Clytemnestra's reply less relevant. I follow Garvie in assigning line 929 to Clytemnestra.

Orestes:
τεκοῦσα γάρ μ᾽ ἔρριψας ἐς τὸ δυστυχές.
You gave birth to me and cast me out to suffering.

Clytemnestra:
οὔτοι σ᾽ ἀπέρριψ᾽ εἰς δόμους δορυξένους.
No, I sent you out to the home of a military ally.

Orestes:
αἰκῶς ἐπράθην ὢν ἐλευθέρου πατρός.
I was shamefully sold, although born from a free father.

Clytemnestra:
ποῦ δῆθ᾽ ὁ τῖμος, ὅντιν᾽ ἀντεδεξάμην;
What was the price, then, that I accepted in exchange?

Orestes:
αἰσχύνομαί σοι τοῦτ᾽ ὀνειδίσαι σαφῶς.
I am ashamed to rebuke you for this openly.

Clytemnestra:
μὴ ἀλλ᾽ εἶφ᾽ ὁμοίως καὶ πατρὸς τοῦ σοῦ μάτας.
You don't speak equally of your father's indiscretions.

Orestes reproaches his mother for his exile, describing it in emotive terms ('you cast me out to suffering'). The mythic motivations for Orestes' exile from Argos vary: in Pindar's *Pythian* 11 and in Stesichorus' version of the *Oresteia* story, it seems the nurse sent him away to save him from his mother's murderous intentions.[79] This does not seem to be the case in *Choephori*, since Cilissa makes no mention of it, and Orestes and Clytemnestra both agree that the decision to send Orestes away was hers.[80] Orestes here feels he has been 'sold' into a situation similar to slavery, the price being his mother's freedom to pursue her sexual relationship with Aegisthus.[81] This echoes Electra's criticism of her mother earlier in the play at 190-191 ('*ἐμὴ δὲ μήτηρ, οὐδαμῶς ἐπώνυμον|φρόνημα παισὶ δύσθεον πεπαμένη*', 'but my mother, who has acquired a hateful attitude towards her children, unworthy of the name mother')

[79] Pindar *Pythian* 11.17-18, Stesichorus Fr. 179 (Finglass). See Swift (2015): 126-127 and especially n.15 for discussion of the development of this myth and its iconographic parallels, Castellaneta (2013): 49-51 offers a useful close analysis of the Stesichorus fragment and its use of the breast-baring motif.
[80] Rösler (2006) makes the intriguing suggestion that Aeschylus adapts the myth to create a shock for the audience when Clytemnestra's murderous intentions are revealed only as she calls for her axe in the climax of this play. At *Agamemnon* 877-886, in her lying speech to her husband, Clytemnestra claims the suggestion to send Orestes away came from their ally Strophius, who advised her it was safer for the boy to be in his palace than in Argos without his father present.
[81] For this accusation of slavery/being sold from Orestes see Brown (2018): 407-408, Garvie (1986): 297 finds the accusations 'far-fetched'.

and 131-4 where she uses similar commercial language, directly accusing her mother of having 'sold' her and Orestes to live her chosen life with her lover. Orestes cannot bring himself to speak of his mother's sexual exploits, but his meaning is clear to Clytemnestra, who retaliates with a sarcastic comment about his sexual double standards, since he doesn't seem to think it was unacceptable form Agamemnon to have various extra-marital affairs. This comment is surprising in a context where most Greek men would have assumed the husband's right to have sex outside the marriage, and in itself shows the transgressive nature of Clytemnestra's personality – she is behaving as a man would, in viewing his *wife's* affairs as unacceptable.[82] Orestes' feelings of resentment at maternal rejection and his sexual jealousy of Aegisthus are thus set alongside the murder of Agamemnon and the commands of Apollo as equally strong motivations for his revenge.

Close analysis of the dream-scene and of the debate between mother and son in the moments before the matricide has therefore shown Orestes' complex psychological response to the mother he has been separated from and thrown light on his reaction to the sight of her naked breast as well as offering insight on the reproaches he makes to his mother in their final meeting. The speech of the nurse Cilissa, coming between the snake-dream and the murder creates audience uncertainty about the truth of Clytemnestra's claims to have had an intimate mother-son bond with her son prior to his exile, and when linked with Clytemnestra's previous untruths in *Agamemnon*, positions the queen as a liar who exploits gender stereotypes to manipulate male characters to her advantage. Ironically, the readings above saw the self-righteous Orestes prove himself similar in many ways to the mother he despises, as shown by Aeschylus' carefully constructed parallels of vocabulary, staging and theme in the two taboo, intra-familial murders. The psychological reading of his relationship with Clytemnestra and her failure to mother him adequately raises an intriguing question of nature versus nurture: in a trilogy which ultimately seeks to denigrate and downplay the genetic role of the mother, is Orestes like his mother because he is her biological son, or does he commit murder because her neglect and sexual devicance has *created* a monster. Knox makes a strong case for the genetic argument through the recurrence of lion imagery throughout the trilogy, noting how Agamemnon and

[82] See Brown (2018): 408. Calypso similarly complains to Hermes at *Od*. 5.116-145 of the double standard in sexual mores among the gods.

Clytemnestra are both referred to as lions in *Agamemnon*, which is picked up in *Choephori* line 937 in the description of Orestes as a lion wreaking revenge on the palace.[83] We have also seen snake imagery binding mother and son: not only does Orestes self-identify with the dream-snake at *Cho.* line 549, but Clytemnestra recognises him as such moments befoe her death: '*οἳ 'γὼ τεκοῦσα τόνδ' ὄφιν ἐθρεψάμην*', 'Alas! I bore and raised this snake' (Cho. 928). Clytemnestra is called a snake in *Agamemnon* (1233) and earlier in *Choephori* (249).[84] Aeschylus takes the dream of Stesichorus, in which Agamemnon is the snake, whose son is re-born from his body to take revenge on his killers and makes it about the mother-son relationship. The implication that Orestes is a snake born from a snake emphasises the genetic link between mother and son and ironically undermines the anti-maternal 'justice' dispensed by Apollo and Athena in the *Eumenides*. Orestes' matricide is argued in the final play of the trilogy to be 'unmonstrous and unproblematical' by the unconvincing claim that he owes nothing to the mother who merely hosted him as a foetus, and to whom he is not therefore blood kin.[85]

This reading both of Orestes' dream-interpretation and his language in the debate with Clytemnestra during the breast-baring scene offers support for a behavioural and psychological motivation overlaying the genetic. Orestes' frustration with his mother's lack of nurture and his inability to accept her sexuality come to the fore in the final moments before the matricide, while Apollo's justice is given much less airtime. The trilogy's search for an answer to the problem of generational violence and retaliatory vigilante justice thus encompasses various complex, mutually dependent explanations for the occurrence of such intra-familial conflicts.

[83] Knox (1952): 17-25. For the snake imagery linking mother and son see Lebeck (1971): 130.
[84] See Roberts (1985): 283-286 for the portentious nature of the snake-omen in the *Oresteia* and how it is used to link Orestes with his mother, although she ultimately feels his actions are differentiated from Clytemnestras.
[85] Cf. Kearns (2021): 193-209, Roberts (1985): 292.

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