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AESHYLUS' 'MYSOGYNISM' IN ORESTEIA

Aeschylus' attitude towards women has been one of the controversial issues among classics. The famous scholar of Aeschylean tragedy Gustav Grossman in his book *Promethie und Orestie* considered, that Aeschylus' heroines were mainly characterized by the negative traits: 'In Aeschylus' tragedies women and Orientals are similarly lacking in self-control both in good fortune and misfortune, in joy and sorrow; slavishly, cowardly, or despotically criminal; voluptuous; under the spell of the immediate; lacking in dependability and common sense... In marriage as in the state, the woman in Aeschylus' eyes needs the firm hand and sensible guidance of the man.'¹ On the other hand, G.-J.-M.-J. Te Riele assumed that Aeschylus' women characters were characterized in terms of such feminine traits as 'tenacité', 'curiosité', goût du détail and exaggerations.'² According to A. Podlecki, Aeschylus was not a crypto-misogynist and in his stimulating paper 'Aeschylus' Women' tried to re-examine the female characters of the dramatist by analyzing both his survived plays as well as the fragments. Was Aeschylus a misogynist or not? Some awkwardness, that arose while calling him a misogynist may partly be caused by placing Aeschylus in a rank with Semonides and Hesiodes, the authors who were famous in antiquity for their hostility to women. These writers attributed to women almost entirely negative traits and condemned them as a punishment of the male race and a reason for the ending of the golden age.³

¹ Grossman G., *Promethie und Orestie*, Heidelberg, Carl Winter 1970, 228.

² Riele Te G.-J.-M.-J., *Les Femmes chez Eschyle*, Groningen, Djakarta 1955.

³ According to M. Arthur women's sexuality from the point of view of the class Hesiod represented, emerged as a threat, which required regulation. Apart from their sexuality, hostility to woman was a product of the perception, that women had not concrete stake neither in any particular social milieu, nor in any particular family. In Semo-

To perceive Aeschylus as a misogynist or not we have to consider Aeschylus' conception of woman. The conception then must be studied in the broader context of the writer's new world vision as this and only this was the main issue of Aeschylus' tragic theatre. For the proper functioning of this new model, according to Aeschylus' viewpoint, the subordination and the control of women by men was undeniable prerequisite. But why woman must be subordinated to male? What is the force she represents? These and other questions can be answered after the detailed investigation of Aeschylus' model of the world-order. And if after this study we shall still continue to perceive Aeschylus' conception about the necessity of sex hierarchization as a misogyny, then alongside with F. Zeitlin we can claim, that Aeschylus' attitude towards women 'Stands squarely within the misogynistic tradition which pervades Greek thought'.⁴

In this paper we shall restrict ourselves with the brief consideration of Aeschylus *Oresteia*, as the trilogy is the most important cultural document in any exploration of the social status, the role and the functions of women presented in Greek literature.

In the trilogy the dramatist is busy with the building of the new model of the world, where the new principle of justice based on the persuasion and logic is to be achieved. For the proper functioning of this new world-order the new ideology concerning sexes must be established, the ideology, that affirms the superiority of the male over the female. For Aeschylus the control of women by men is the cornerstone of this new model as the female and the female principle in general being basically unruly appears to be potentially threatening for the stability of a society. The polarizing imagination, which characterizes Greek mythic thought and establishes a strong dichotomy between male and female, posits a predictable response from both – the female and the male side. According to it female self-assertion on her own behalf is expressed only at the cost of annihilation

nides' famous diatribe on women the prominent complaints against women are their sexuality and laziness. M. Arthur suggests that by the VI century misogyny was established as a topos of Greek poetry... The misogyny of Hesiod, Semonides or Phocylides reflect thought which assimilated the differentiation of the roles of male and female to the polarities whose opposition defined the world-order. Arthur M. B., *Early Greece: The Origins of Western Attitude Toward Women*, Women in the Ancient World, ed. by J. Peradotto and J. P. Sullivan, State University of New York Press 1984, 7-58, 24, 48.

⁴ Zeitlin F., *The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in the Oresteia*, Women in the Ancient World, *The Arethusa Papers*, edited by J. Peradotto and J.P. Sullivan, State University of New York Press, Albany 1984, 159-194.

the other, the male, annihilation being total enslavement or murder of men and total domination of women – gynecocracy.

Aeschylus presents the new model of sex hierarchization in the *Oresteia* through the dramatic enactment of the monumental human characters – both female and male. Here the paradigmatic gynecocratic mythos is presented according to the laws of tragedy, though in the trilogy this mythos acquires an absolutely different ending. It doesn't end in a total annihilation of the male race; instead of it the author offers a new solution for the agreement of previously hostile male and female sides.

But to achieve the final harmony the way is quite long and full of obstacles. For the acceptance of this ideology and to regard it as the only right solution, Aeschylus had to resolve certain problems. One of the main prerequisite for the new ideology was extremely negative portrayal of the female character and the female phenomenon in general in order to justify her future subordination. Secondly, Aeschylus had to present the male force as a positive one in general to justify her future domination over the female. And finally, the dramatist had to solve the conflict between two institutions of the family – the kinship and matrimonial bonds, each associated with the separate sex forces. Giving priority to one of these institutions meant declaring of the superiority of one of sex forces, what automatically would entail acceptance of the principle of sex hierarchization.

The female perspective of the trilogy is represented by Clytemnestra and Erinyes, her incarnations. The very first mentioning of Clytemnestra in Greek literature in *Odyssey* is entirely negative. In Delcourt's mind according to the rules of the misogynic tradition the accusation of one concrete woman is immediately extended to the whole female sex – a single sinned heroine becomes the paradigmatic image of all woman and as a rule the recommendation is given to husbands to keep eye on their wives.⁵ In Aeschylus' tragedy, though, Clytemnestra is not presented from the start as an altogether negative woman. She is an intelligent woman, as we see her in the first episode, who invented the scheme of the beacon signals to learn earlier than others the news of Troy's capture.⁶ Her superiority over her partners – both Agamemnon and Aegisthus in this aspect is also obvious. The queen is more powerful and more intelligent than any man altogether in the play. She most convincingly demonstrates her abilities in

⁵ Delcourt M., *Oreste et Alcméon*, Paris 1959, 84.

⁶ The watchman speaks about Clytemnestra's 'male-plotting heart' (*Agamemnon*, 11). She fully acknowledges her cleverness and is angry, when others don't accept her intelligence, as in case of Argos old men (*Agamemnon*, 1401).

the brief dispute with Agamemnon about his walking on the tapestries (*Agamemnon*, 931-43). Clytemnestra accepts the male role with her another partner – Aegisthus, who is denounced as a woman ‘woman... house-keeper’, who kept Clytemnestra’s bed warm while Agamemnon was out of his house leading a war against Troy (*Agamemnon*, 1625-26). And again, the chorus in *The Libation Bearers* call Clytemnestra and Aegisthus ‘two women’ and refer to his ‘female mind’ (*Choephoroi*, 304-5). It was Clytemnestra, not he, who planned Agamemnon’s murder and who accomplished it. He was only an adjunct to this plot (*Agamemnon*, 1633-37; 1643-45). All these prove, that she insisted on being the dominant partner until after Agamemnon’s death. This not womanly intelligence of Clytemnestra was one of the reasons of the dispute among the classics on her character – how to regard the queen, as an androgynous female or as a woman different from ordinary ones, as she knows much more than they do and can check her emotions. The majority of scholars consider her as a masculine female, what is caused by her masculine intellectual abilities and by her activities: a) neglecting her husband; b) choosing the sex partner on her own; c) plotting and accomplishing her husband’s murder; d) usurping the power. Abovementioned acceptance of the masculine role in the intercourse with the partners serves to create such an impression as well.⁷

On the other hand, the queen’s values are chiefly female – she perceives the war, the public space from the female perspective. When she describes the situation at Troy on the night of the Argive victory, the queen simply states the victory and then speaks about the woes of the Trojan survivors, who are now slaves (*Agamemnon*, 326-29). She warns the Argives, that in case they don’t behave properly, they will have many troubles on their return (*Agamemnon*, 338-470). Agamemnon’s wife is insistent while explaining how greatly matrimonial relations suffer, on the one hand, from the war and its requirements (sacrificing Iphigenia) and on the other hand, from the husband’s abandonment of the family space. These

⁷ Clytemnestra’s masculinity is declared by Zeitlin, 1984; Pomeroy S. B., *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves, Women in Classical Antiquity*, New York 1975; Humphreys S. C., *The Family, Women and Death*, London 1983; Foley H. P., *The Conception of Women in Athenian Drama* in (ed.) Foley H. P., *Reflections of Women in Antiquity*, New York 1986³, 127-168; Blundell S., *Women in Ancient Greece*, London 1995. For the different approach see Lefkowitz M. R., *Die Töchter des Zeus, Frauen in alten Griechenland*, München 1995, 146. According to Gagarin the references to Clytemnestra’s masculinity are made by the male characters in the play, who consider it abnormal for any women to display qualities that they (and many modern critics) feel to belong more properly to man. Gagarin M., *Aeschylean Drama*, Berkeley, University of California Press 1976, 93.

female values of Clytemnestra are, of course, a good argument for the scholars, who assume, that the queen is mainly presented as a woman, though not an ordinary one.

To a certain extent Clytemnestra, as mentioned above, doesn't appear to be an entirely negative person. She can be regarded as a 'shrewd political rebel' (in Zeitlin's term), who fights against the masculine regime. Clytemnestra doesn't initiate hostilities. It was Agamemnon, who abandoned her first by sacrificing her daughter. And we have to bear in our mind that the main male character Agamemnon as well as Argive army are not depicted positively in the play. According to Gagarin, the reason of this criticism is their behavior – they went to an extreme of male military domination. But the picture changes drastically after Clytemnestra murders Agamemnon.⁸ As a rule, the answer of the masculine female over her abusement is much more strong than the initial provocation from men's side. Through this terrible deed Clytemnestra rushes into the public space – usurps the political power. A personal Vendetta is transformed into a gynecocratic issue.⁹ She becomes a political tyrant and establishes the rule of two women (with her lover and then coregent Aegisthus) – namely, the gynocracy. The transformation of Clytemnestra is gradually prepared on a mythopoetic level of the tragedy. Cassandra connects her with the dark, monstrous female forces – Scylla, amphisbaena, and the mother of Hades: 'What odious monster shall I fitly call her? An Amphisbaena? Or a Scylla, tenanted the rocks, a pest to mariners, [1235] a raging, devil's mother, breathing relentless war against her husband?' (*Agamemnon*, 1233-36). Clytemnestra is also associated with Omphale. When the queen urges Cassandra to accept her fate of slavery, she mentions the mythological precedent of Heracles' enslavement by the Lydian queen Omphale. This mythological allusion is by no means accidental, as Omphale everywhere in tradition is associated with the rule of women – while being his slave Heracles had to accomplish the role of female: wear women's dresses, do woman's work, serve as the male sexual object.¹⁰

⁸ In the light of male x female opposition the way Agamemnon died is also remarkable. The chorus lament, that Agamemnon, who suffered much 'on account of a woman', died 'at the hands of a woman' (*Agamemnon*, 1453-54). Clytemnestra used deceit, women's weapon (*Agamemnon*, 1636). This was especially disgraceful for a military man, who ought to die in the battle.

⁹ Zeitlin, 1984, 163.

¹⁰ Zeitlin, 1984, 166.

Clytemnestra's negative portrayal is continued in *The Libation Bearers*. Here it takes even more negative form. The queen is presented as the mother-tyrant, who neglects not only matrimonial relations, but also those between mother and her children. She makes her children's life unbearable and poses obstacles to their future.¹¹ Besides, Clytemnestra is a dangerous force at the public level as well. According to Zeitlin, her action in the beginning of the second play creates a 'ritual impasse'.¹² She sends the slave woman and Electra to Agamemnon's tomb to appease his soul by libations. It is her, as wife's duty to husband, but her case is unique, as she is murderer at the same time (*Choephoroi*, 84-100). So the murderer can not appease her victim, her action proves invalid. 'This impasse is emblematic of the dysfunction of the social order under her regime'.¹³

Clytemnestra in this tragedy is much more connected with wild, barbaric female forces on the mythopoetic level. The chorus of the slave women sing one of the most vehemently antifeminine odes in Greek tragedy (*Choephoroi*, 585-651), in which they relate the stories of three well-known crimes committed by women (Althea, Scylla and the women of Lemnos), all of which are attributed to the 'unloving love, that overpowers women' (*Choephoroi*, 600).¹⁴ Notwithstanding the fact, that Clytemnestra isn't mentioned here by name, it is obvious, that the lines about a wife's adultery are directed to her: 'But since I have recalled tales of pitiless afflictions, it is the right time to tell of a marriage void of love, an abomination to the house, and the plots devised by a wife's cunning against her warrior lord, against her lord revered with reason by his foes. But I honor the hearths of homes not heated by passion's fires, and in woman a spirit that shrinks from audacious deeds' (*Choephoroi*, 623-30).

Among these terrible deeds Clytemnestra's action resembles mostly the crime of the Lemnian women. This crime is considered to be a paradigmatic pattern for the female evil. 'The Lemnian allusion completes the misogynistic progression by moving from one to all, from individual transgression to a collective menace, that wipes out an entire race' and placing Clytemnestra's offence straight after this deed works to create an impression, that Clytemnestra's act is also directed to annihilate the male

¹¹ Electra unwed, arrested in maidenhood is bound to the paternal hearth. Vernant J.-P., Hestia-Hermès: Sur l'expression religieuse de l'espace et du mouvement chez les Grecs, in: *Mythe et pensée chez les grecs*, Paris 1969, 97-143. Orestes is an exile and can not cross the boundary into adulthood.

¹² Zeitlin, 1984, 166.

¹³ Zeitlin, 1984, 166.

¹⁴ Gagarin, 1976, 97.

race. It is by no means accidental, that the choral ode is placed just before Clytemnestra's murder by Orestes.

Clytemnestra's murder is not an end in itself. The negative female force doesn't cease its existence. The murder of mother evokes a renewed female power. The Erinyes, the incarnations of Clytemnestra are conceived as even more negative force: 'But these are wingless in appearance, black, altogether disgusting; they snore with repulsive breaths, they drip from their eyes hateful drops; their attire is not fit to bring either before the statues of the gods or into the homes of men' (*Eumenides*, 53-54).

Pithia fails to identify them: 'I have never seen the tribe that produced this company, nor the land that boasts of rearing this brood with impunity and does not grieve for its labor afterwards' (*Eumenides*, 56-59).

Beside their appearance the Erinyes are perceived as a negative force mainly because they champion a justice, which is judged as primitive, barbaric, archaic and regressive.

As we have already mentioned above for accepting Aeschylean ideology of sex hierarchization and for justifying the subordination of male by female, the male force should be presented as a positive one. Thus the male force of *The Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides* should differ from the male force depicted in *Agamemnon*. It should no more be the subject for criticism – such as was Agamemnon in the previous play. The new male character – Orestes is presented as a positive force in *The Libation Bearers*. Aeschylus succeeds to offer such an image of Orestes by means of uniting several factors: Firstly, Orestes is the person, who fulfills the god's order, and who gradually acknowledges, that the murder of Clytemnestra – the killer of her husband, the mother, who rejected her children, the tyrant of Argos – is his duty. Secondly, Orestes is well aware of the fact, that the task is very hard to accomplish. He regards the murder of his mother as an unholy act, a blasphemy, and feels the necessity for purgation. Thirdly, Orestes fights for the interests of both spaces – for the restoration of oikos as well as for the liberation of polis. Such a presentation of a male force gives ground to suspect, that some sort of compromise is now closer.

Finally, Aeschylus had to solve the conflict between blood relationship and marital ties. In case this conflict between two institutions of family is not solved, the renewed and redoubled power of uncontrolled, barbaric female force, female principle of justice will return and threaten the universe again and again. Orestes' trial takes place in Areopagus, where the goddess Athena presides over the new court composed of picked Athenians. The court is in dilemma – it has either to acquit Orestes as the avenger for the father's murder and thus give pre-

ference to matrimonial bonds, or it has to blame Orestes and by this act value more highly blood ties represented here by the Erinyes. Attaching preference to either of the institutions automatically means giving preference to one of the sex forces. Apollo advocates Orestes, whom in past he had commanded to kill his mother. Apollo's argument for Orestes' acquittal consists in the statement that killing a noble and honored man is much disgrace, then killing a woman, while the Erinyes declare that shedding of kindred blood brings pollution (*Eumenides*, 653-656). When both sides return once again to these arguments it seems, that the situation reaches a deadlock. It is then, that Apollo resorts to the new, biological argument. He states, that father is the only parent, mother merely an incubator (*Eumenides*, 657-66). Athena is an evidence of it, claims he, since she was born directly from Zeus and has no mother. This is Apollo's final argument. In reply to this the Erinyes have nothing to say and upon it Athena bases her vote for Orestes' acquittal.¹⁵ Though we can't see here the same male dominance unlike previous play. The votes of juries are equal and Orestes is acquitted by Athena's sole vote. At the same time the admission of the superiority of the male parent meant acknowledging the superiority of the male principle over the female one. After all this for the establishment of the new hierarchical principle of sex relations one final act is necessary – the limited restoration of the female power. And indeed, the Erinyes are transformed into the Eumenides – the benevolent female forces. According to Zeitlin, this last act completes the transference of the political power, which Clytemnestra had brazenly claim in *Agamemnon* to the ritual power of the female exemplified by the role assigned to the Erinyes in Athens.¹⁶

Therefore in the new model of the world-order, according to Aeschylus, as we see, the hierarchization of sex forces is absolutely necessary. The dramatist believed, that Clytemnestra and in general, the uncontrolled female force impeded the functioning of society, and on the broader scale, prevented the progress of the world-order.

The Aeschylean conception of woman implies the necessity to subdue, tame, curb this uncontrolled force, which in fact is accomplished through the transformation of the Erinyes at the end of the tragedy. The dramatist's conception of woman echoes traditional suggestions about the female nature. At the same time, the playwright himself introduces new cultural clichés, which to a remarkable extent determined the tendencies of the approach towards women.

¹⁵ Gagarin, 1976, 103.

¹⁶ Zeitlin, 1984, 183.