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TRIGGER WARNING— Discussion of Sexual Assault, Domestic Violence, & Rape

Woman Revengers: Greek Revenge Tragedy to Modern Revenge Narrative

From classical Greek tragedy to modern revenge tragedy, the role of the female revenger has undoubtedly changed over time. Within Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the protagonist Clytemnestra seeks revenge against her husband Agamemnon for sacrificing their daughter and being unfaithful to their marriage. In classical revenge tragedy such as *Agamemnon*, a woman's revenge is heavily aided and/or influenced by a man, in this case by Clytemnestra's own paramour Aegisthus. In modern works such as Hannah Capin's *Golden Boys Beware*, the protagonist Jade is sexually assaulted by a group of boys, the high school "elites," and orchestrates her own revenge. In doing so, Jade uses those in her company as her tools to take such revenge, especially a boy named Mack who she seduces into killing his friends on her behalf, rather than Jade being manipulated or influenced by anyone else. The role of the woman revenger takes a new form here—one self-sustained and independently influenced. The establishment and progression of feminism is a mirror to this evolution from classical revenge tragedy to modern revenge tragedy, as women in revenge literature, theatre, and film are depicted as having more independence, free will, and capability to carry out their own desires in modern time, especially when compared to classical works. From *Agamemnon* to *Golden Boys*

Beware, the role of a woman revenger within the canon of revenge narrative changes and evolves overtime, aptly reflecting the waves of feminism.

To understand the shift between female revengers in both of these works, it is important to first acknowledge the origins and waves of feminism, a substantial impact on the way female protagonists are written in general, and how their capabilities are depicted. The first wave of feminism took place in 1848, where women were seen as “un-ladylike” for their actions in speaking out, participating in public demonstrations, and being detained for their activism (Rampton). The second wave took hold in the 1960s and sustained into the 90s. Such a wave focused predominantly on “sexuality and reproductive rights” (Rampton). The third wave of feminism took place in the 90s, and focused on abolishing gendered, misogynistic stereotypes that discouraged women up to this point from wearing certain clothes, colors, styles, and so on (Rampton). The fourth and active wave of feminism is ongoing, so it has no set date. This wave is always developing and mutating in unforeseen ways (Rampton).

Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* is key in the analysis of the evolution and diversification of the female revenger role within the canon of revenge literature over time, particularly in conjunction with the foundation and progression of feminism. Considering feminism wasn’t so much as a mere thought when *Agamemnon* was composed, Aeschylus’ work is unique for its time, and offers a multi-layered plot of revenge and wrongdoing, thus in turn making the characters increasingly complex with various motives. For Clytemnestra, the wife of Agamemnon, her revenge is sought out not only as vengeance for her daughter and retribution for her husband’s infidelity, but is also substantiated by her own infidelity and her desire to replace Agamemnon and rule with her paramour. This complexity defines Clytemnestra as a cunning woman revenger, but there is more to the picture. In executing her revenge, it is undeniable that her

lover, Aegisthus, had some stake in this, as he surely desired to take Agamemnon's place politically and remain with Clytemnestra romantically. Clytemnestra's revenge is somewhat self-inspired, but is heavily aided by Aegisthus and his own intentions and motives. Though Aeschylus breaks the mold for female revengers in *Agamemnon*, his work still falls prey to the pre-feminist era, rampant with explicit acts of misogyny and sexism, deeply engrained in society in this time.

Agamemnon's infidelity also introduces a pivotal female character that complicates the righteous revenger role that Clytemnestra exemplifies. His mistress Cassandra plays into the well-used "doomed woman" stereotype perpetuated in literature, also commonly identified with the "damsel in distress" trope. Such a character undermines Clytemnestra and her heroism as she works in part to oppress this woman and perpetuate stereotypes. Clytemnestra's oppression and condescension presents itself as she speaks to Cassandra, luring Cassandra into Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's home, speaking to the chorus as though Cassandra cannot even hear, saying "Unless she's like a swallow and owns an unintelligible barbarian tongue, I am trying to persuade her by speaking words within her comprehension" (Aeschylus, 1050-52). In referring to Cassandra indirectly and alluding to her unintelligence, Clytemnestra illustrates her perspective in seeing Cassandra as less than, as a poor, stupid woman. Clytemnestra does not offer Cassandra the respect that Clytemnestra herself expects, which is to be heard and regarded by her audience.

Not only does Clytemnestra exemplify misogyny towards Cassandra as was commonplace in this time, but the chorus in *Agamemnon* does as well. As Cassandra rightfully pleads her case as to not follow Clytemnestra into her home, the chorus refers to her as a "poor wretch" (Aeschylus, 1321) and responds to her extensive monologue by stating:

So much misery as yours, but so much skill, lady, and you spoke at length! If you truly know your own fate, how can you tread bravely towards the altar like an ox driven on by god? (Aeschylus 1925-28)

The chorus exemplifies misogyny here, expressing unbridled astonishment in Cassandra's ability to speak for herself, and at great length, no less. Not only this, but the chorus blatantly expresses doubt in her foresight, perceiving her actions as "tread[ing] bravely" (Aeschylus, 1927) and thus hindering the chorus' confidence that what she says is true. Seeing the chorus' reaction to Cassandra speaking also lends to the idea of what the chorus truly thinks of Clytemnestra. Surely in an age where misogyny and sexism were deeply embedded, such perceptions of Cassandra would not be limited to her alone. Rather, it is much more likely that the chorus suppressed these vocalized microaggressions and blatant expressions of misogyny in Clytemnestra's presence, as she was their ruler. While elements of such oppressive and condescending language and behavior do seep through to interactions with Clytemnestra, these actions are not as prevalent as they are with Cassandra, though they are undoubtedly still there.

Something quite intriguing within *Agamemnon* is its blatant proof that misogyny runs incredibly deep in this time period. After Clytemnestra has killed Cassandra and Agamemnon, she triumphs in her victory, while the chorus does not side with her whatsoever:

CHORUS. We marvel at your tongue, at your bold mouth in vaunting such words over your husband.

CLYTEMNESTRA. You test me like a witless woman, but I speak with a fearless heart to those who know; and whether you yourself wish to approve or to blame me, it's all the same!

This is Agamemnon, my husband, but a corpse, the work of my right hand here, a just architect. This is how things are.

The CHORUS' distress increases and they turn to lyric;

CLYTEMNESTRA at first continues in speech, then her emotion increases too.

CHORUS. What evil thing, woman, grown in the earth to eat, or to drink from a source in the flow of the sea, did you taste to perform this rite of death, incurring the people's spoken curse?

You have thrown them off, you have cut them off, and you shall be put out of the city, a mighty hate to the townsmen (Aeschylus, 1399-1411).

The chorus not only criticizes Clytemnestra for the way she has spoken about her late husband Agamemnon, who was not only unfaithful to her, but who sacrificed their daughter to aid in his conquest, but the chorus goes so far as to request that she be banished for her acts, claiming she is an “evil thing,” (Aeschylus, 1407) inferring that Clytemnestra has committed an act so unforgivable that she should be removed. So quickly is the chorus inclined to turn on Clytemnestra and treat her as though she is “a witless woman,” (Aeschylus, 1401) not only

condemning her for her actions, but speaking to her with such condescension and shame, as she is woman.

As with Clytemnestra's complicated character as a whole, Clytemnestra's revenge is multi-faceted to say the least, as her seemingly righteous act of vengeance for her daughter and her own self is further complicated by the presence of Aegisthus. While Agamemnon did commit heinous, unforgivable acts in the killing of his daughter and his infidelity to Clytemnestra, Clytemnestra is also heavily influenced by her male counterpart Aegisthus, who sees the killing of Agamemnon necessary as to take over his throne and his marriage. To further complicate this matter, Clytemnestra also exemplifies her own means of internalized misogyny towards Cassandra, which hinders her own image as a righteous, powerful female revenger in this era. Rather, she is quite ordinary in this way and mirrors actions of the sexist, oppressive, misogynistic men around her. She is dismissive of Cassandra despite the wisdom Cassandra holds (which, granted, only the audience is aware of, via dramatic irony), and effectively pins her as a scapegoat for Agamemnon's transgressions, or at the very least forces her to face the repercussions for them. Rather than giving Cassandra the righteousness, liberty, and freedom she deserves to speak for herself and attempt to rectify the situation, the situation Agamemnon forced her into by taking her as a prison of war and stripping her of any rights she may have had previously, Clytemnestra silences Cassandra and acts on her internalized misogyny in a fatal way. Assuming that Clytemnestra has projected her anger about Agamemnon's transgressions onto Cassandra, blaming Cassandra for the infidelity and disrespect, Clytemnestra also participates in a modern phenomenon known as victim-blaming, another blatant expression of sexism.

Clytemnestra's complex character surfaces an interesting topic of gender roles and stereotypes, especially in the time when *Agamemnon* was first performed, in 458 BC (Agamemnon). In this era, women were expected to be and were wholly depicted as submissive homemakers, ones to accept their place and honor their husband by performing their womanly duties. Clytemnestra's character challenges this ideology, as she is commonly described in a very masculine way for the time in which *Agamemnon* was composed and performed. Even in comparing the two main female characters, Clytemnestra oppresses Cassandra and dismisses her just as men typically would in this era. Clytemnestra also presents herself as power-hungry and motivated to take action, something uncharacteristic of women in this period. More succinctly put, "Many of the other characters describe Clytemnestra in a masculine way whilst still referring to her as a woman. Clytemnestra herself also uses language usually reserved for male characters. Clytemnestra's masculine representation in her own dialogue continues in the behaviors and activities Clytemnestra adopts, culminating in the murder of her husband" (Allsop). Clytemnestra exemplifies this concept well in her speech:

And now you are to hear my oaths, in their full right: I swear by Justice fulfilled for my child, by Rum and by the Fury, for all of whom I slew this man, that for me no expectation treads in fear's palace so long as fire is burned at my hearth by Aegisthus, loyal towards me as in the past; he is no small shield of confidence for us (Aeschylus, 1431-37).

Not only does Clytemnestra demand to be heard, but she expresses righteousness and triumph, a typically masculine quality in this time, so much so that Clytemnestra reflects her

husband Agamemnon's own homecoming in her expression. After returning victorious from war, Agamemnon had indulged in his own righteous, triumphant display that could even be seen as reserved for the gods, and Clytemnestra replicates this exultance in her own way. Such an understanding of Clytemnestra's character in this display contextualizes what it means to be a powerful female revenger in this time, and leads exceptionally well into Hannah Capin's *Golden Boys Beware*.

Riddled with tension, romantic interest, deceit, and heightened emotion, *Golden Boys Beware* fits well within the canon of revenge narratives. Speaking more specifically, this novel is a rape revenge narrative in which the main character, Jade, seeks retribution and vengeance for the "golden boys" who have violated her. Aside from push-and-pull of Jade's friend group throughout the execution of the revenge, she is entirely self-motivated and enacts her revenge by any means necessary. Similarly to Clytemnestra, she is a woman in pursuit of power, but for a much different reason. After being assaulted by a group of boys, she makes their downfall—ultimately, their demise—her main focus. She seeks to dismantle them not only to take their place and retain their power for her own gain, but also to make them feel pain that she did. *Golden Boys Beware* plays to the similar tropes as *Agamemnon*, but does so in an entirely different manner, thus alluding to the evolution of the woman's role within revenge narratives.

Jade's intentions and mindset bleed through to much of the novel, as the reader is given a very real sense of her conscience as she commits her acts of revenge against each of the "golden boys," one by one. A fantastic example of this is:

Just once, I scream into the stream of red and white—
scream for Connor's broken neck—

scream for the dagger we'll slash into Duncan's throat—
scream for Mack, good and evil and all mine—
—for *that little whore*, for *crazy bitch*, for *queen* (Capin, 108).

Jade does not only provide insight to her mindset as she at once enacts and anticipates brutal revenge on these members high school royalty, the boys who violated her, but she expresses her motives in doing so. Not only have these boys caused her trauma in assaulting her, but they continue to cause her pain, calling her disgusting things, ones that she suppresses and instead deems herself “queen” (Capin, 108). Such expressions would never surface in a time such as the one in which *Agamemnon* was performed, as it was unthinkable for a woman to be so valiantly pinned against the men around her, especially using a man as a pawn in order to eradicate her assailants.

A considerable parallel between these two works of revenge is the presence of royalty, and the pursuit of it, a victim’s desire to take power from a transgressor. For Clytemnestra, she and her lover Aegisthus desired to take power from her husband and transgressor, Agamemnon. For Jade, the high school boys who assaulted her were school “royalty,” and Jade sought the power and following they had. Not only do these revengers seek retribution for the acts committed against them, but they also desire power to rise above those who have done them wrong.

Jade’s character is complex just as Clytemnestra’s is, both characters proving to be multi-dimensional and deserving of substantial analysis. While Jade does exemplify a common goal in relation to Clytemnestra, their means and aid in executing revenge are quite different. Jade is calculated and manipulative, and rather than being aided and influenced in her revenge by a man,

she instead flips the anticipated gender roles and leans into a femme fatale trope. Where Clytemnestra is heavily influenced by the motives of Aegisthus and is aided by him so he might rule alongside her, Jade afflicts her love interest Mack with a similar role, flipping the gender stereotypes. As opposed to being influenced by a man and his desires, she influences Mack to share a common desire and leads him to aid her in her conquest, ultimately leading him to his own demise, solidifying this quality of a femme fatale. An interesting commonality to note here is Jade's likeness to a Siren, another trope commonly found in ancient Greek mythology. Unlike Sirens though, Jade does not desire companionship alone, rather this likeness is substantiated by a desire to use Mack as a pawn to enact her revenge, her feeling of attraction a mere accident at best, ultimately serving no more than as an inconvenience to her grander plan.

This inconvenience is best shown when Jade states that "Summer was right. I was right. Mack is perfect" (Capin, 44). Not only is Jade explaining his usefulness to her carefully-orchestrated plan, but she also—unbeknownst to her in this moment—foreshadows to her feeling towards him. Not only is he the perfect pawn, someone Jade sees as easy to manipulate, but she also eventually falls in love with him, and Mack with her. Jade does see him as perfect both romantically and in terms of her plan, until the end of the novel where she finds out that he played a substantial role in her assault. Though Jade does end up killing Mack at the end as well to finalize her elaborately orchestrated plan of vengeance, her feelings towards him more the majority of the novel add complexity to her character. Jade becomes less of a cold-hearted killer and more of an actual high schooler with feelings here, though Jade and Mack's romance is admittedly quite outlandish in its fast-paced progression, and how it leads Mack to play into the murder of all of his friends.

Though *Agamemnon* and *Golden Boys Beware* may seem to be ultimately disconnected from one another, strung together only by coincidental parallels of female revenge and involvement of a substantial male character, the necessity to compare these two works runs much deeper than this surface level analysis. Rather, the importance of these two works in conjunction with one another lies more in their differences than their parallels. In this case, the differences between these two works allude to a grander picture, one that indicates a progression of the idea of woman, what a woman may accomplish, one certainly worth talking about.

The key element that separates these two works—put plainly—is ideology of the power of woman. While both Aeschylus and Capin alike push the boundary within the revenge narrative canon, their boundaries are quite different. Aeschylus shocked an audience by giving a woman masculine, powerful, righteous attributes, something both unfamiliar and uncomfortable for its time. Capin, on the other hand, pushes the boundary by giving Jade animalistic tendencies, and an undeniable bloodlust as a result of her trauma that hasn't been entirely well-received, something unexpected especially from such a young woman, even in modern society:

I also don't know how I feel about the girls being violent, privileged sociopaths which makes them somehow a perfect match for the equally privileged sociopath boys they are killing... but this is part of the framing of the novel: that the boys picked "the wrong girl". So... what? There is a right girl? (Grilo)

Due to Capin's over-the-top depiction of revenge there surfaces an unfortunate criticism. Rather than being powerful, unapologetic revengers, women may instead be seen as "violent, privileged sociopaths" (Grilo) in *Golden Boys Beware*. Not only this, but the suggestion here that

there may be a “right girl” (Grilo) to assault without consequence is a message that is understandably ill-received. Jade’s unrealistic ability to completely entrance and manipulate Mack into killing his friends on her behalf with no knowledge of her traumatic experience on his behalf does a disservice to the severity of what she has endured, abandons a feminist narrative, and morphs Jade’s plan from one of revenge to one of Mack seeking power by murdering his friends. Considering Mack had no knowledge that Jade had been so horribly transgressed by his friends (Mack didn’t even know that she *knew* them, as she played a “new girl” role in order to orchestrate her plan of revenge), his motive is far from pure, and certainly was not influenced by seeking vengeance for Jade. Instead, it changes *Golden Boys Beware* into a graphic, ruthless killing streak by Mack to be more popular than his friends, when observing the story from Mack’s perspective. This fantastical and unrealistic plot becomes estranged here from that of *Agamemnon*, where Clytemnestra indeed breaks the “norm” of her time as well, but does so by mulling her plan over for a considerable amount of time, and kills her wrongdoer in one foul swoop. While she is quite theatrical in her dramatic retelling (naturally so, as it is a theatrical piece) after she has committed the act, the act itself seeks immediate resolve and is over in a moment. Jade’s is drawn out, cruel, unfathomable. Both female revengers kill their wrongdoers, but both do so in an entirely different manner.

So, herein lies an important question: Observing how feminism has influenced the role of the woman revenger over the course of history, how has feminism brought stories of female revenge from a place of *Agamemnon* to that of *Golden Boys Beware*, and how far is *too far* within this canon? Clearly after a certain threshold is reached, a story becomes superficial and even offensive, certainly when handling such topics as sexual assault and rape, in rape revenge narratives such as Capin’s *Golden Boys Beware*. Rick Esner of *The Current*, a student-run

newspaper out of Nova Southeastern University, speaks on the rape-revenge narrative canon, and states that “The traumatic experience in these films is usually rape and often is the center focus of the entire movie,” (Esner) and expands upon this idea saying that he is “sick of the male gaze in all these horror movies that are supposed to be centered on women and hopefully this revitalization of this genre shifts the industry to more impactful viewing experience” (Esner). While Esner’s viewpoint may admittedly be narrow sighted in this article as a whole, he makes some substantial points here. Speaking to Capin’s *Golden Boys Beware* specifically, Jade’s revenge is not only over-the-top and theatrical as previously mentioned, crossing a threshold between reality and fantasy, but also exploits the trauma as a result of sexual assault. This exploitation, fueled by a desire in media to depict high stakes, thrilling, ruthless revenge, undermines the traumatic experience of so many women *and* men afflicted by assault. While Capin’s novel roots itself in an expression of fantastical, unapologetic feminism, it indeed crosses a boundary that makes the novel seem a bit insincere.

In the space between *Agamemnon* and *Golden Boys Beware*, there is a substantial gap in time, one in which feminism was established and where it then flourished, an expansion that is still in motion today in form of the fourth wave of feminism, as mentioned previous. In this space there have been numerous works that have bridged the gap between the character of Clytemnestra and the character of Jade, two women with dimensional, multi-faceted identities. One of such works is *I Spit on Your Grave*, a film that debuted in 1978 and is widely recognized as one of the most pivotal, substantial female revenge narratives up to its release. *I Spit on Your Grave* has less than desirable ratings, earning a whopping 5.6/10 on IMDb. Described as a film in which “an aspiring writer is repeatedly gang-raped, humiliated, and left for dead by four men she systematically hunts down to seek revenge,” (IMDb) it has been ill-received

by many. “The rape-revenge film genre has a fairly sleazy reputation, summoning images of a battered and traumatised woman taking violent revenge on her attacker(s), as in *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978)” (Austin). This film received much criticism for its exploitation of survivors of assault, similarly to Capin’s depictions. The prevalence of such media is understandably controversial, as seeing women lead revenge narratives is a triumphant step for gender equality in media, while seeing such women predominantly confined to overly dramatized rape revenge narratives is disheartening, to say the least.

Has Hannah Capin’s *Golden Boys Beware* crossed a line? For Clytemnestra in *Agamemnon*, though Clytemnestra was heavily aided and influenced by her paramour Aegisthus, her traumas were not over-embellished, rather simply stated, her husband’s dramatic return and her act of killing substantiating the plot. In comparing these two works, it seems as though female revengers have gone from a place of inequality and sexism to a place of exploitation of trauma and embellishment of revenge for the audience’s pleasure, which amounts to a very unfortunate portrayal that commits a real disservice to victims and their traumas. Diana Aramburu discusses the differences between narratives featuring “victim into avenger,” as opposed to these characters “doubling as both victims and criminals” (Aramburu). Roxanne Grimmett also dives into the revenge tragedy genre, citing that “Revenge tragedy is a dramatic sub-genre that conventionally develops an unsettling level of audience sympathy for male characters who are, essentially, murderers” (Grimmett). So why is there a distinction between male revengers as criminals and murderers and female revengers as bad-ass sexual assault survivors? While feminism has brought the canon of revenge narrative to a much better place than it once was, previously riddled with explicit expressions of misogyny and sexism, has it now reached an unfair place, one that serves as an injustice to men, women, and assault survivors

alike? At the very least, feminism has inspired a complete transformation to the woman revenger character; this much is undeniable.

From a pre-feminist era to modern time, the role of woman revenger has endured a serious rework. As exemplified through the stark contrast between Clytemnestra and Cassandra's depictions in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* to Jade's in Hannah Capin's *Golden Boys Beware*, the difference is undeniable. As with both the establishment as well as the expansion of feminism over time, women in the media have endured a drastic change, with revenge narrative as no exception. As shown, older works such as Greek revenge plays are riddled with misogyny, sexism, and oppression of women, and woman revengers are wholly aided and/or influenced by a male counterpart. In more recent works, female revengers are self-sustained and self-influenced, no longer needing a man to aid them in their conquest, but rather targeting men in their revenge and/or using them as pawns to execute their plan. Unfortunately there is a serious question as to how far is *too* far, especially within the canon of rape revenge narratives starring a female revenger, as it over-dramatizes and capitalizes on trauma as a result of sexual assault, rape, and domestic violence. Despite this jarring issue, the reality still stands that female revengers have undergone dramatic change from *Agamemnon* to *Golden Boys Beware*, such a change influenced by the birth and evolution of feminism overtime.

ABSTRACT

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