

Clytemnestra both victim and executioner

*Marinella Calabrese*¹

Abstract

The present article deals with the relation between the concept of mask and some dynamics of fiction and revelation related to it. Each person, in the sense of individual, wears more masks, according to the roles and contexts of the society in which they live. The mask hides and, at the same time, reveals parts of the subject's personality. Even in the dynamic "victim-executioner" the roles, although apparently opposed, can sometimes be confused and overturned, and the masks can be exchanged. Among the figures of Greek mythology, Clytemnestra, the uxoricide who witnessed the murder of her first husband and newborn son, who saw the beloved daughter Iphigenia sacrificed for her husband Agamemnon's cravings for power, embodies the double role of victim and executioner. Clytemnestra has no other way to claim her role as a wounded mother and betrayed queen, if not to take power and exercise it in a bloody way: from being a victim she becomes an executioner, manifesting in her actions the primitive, cruel and murderous part she despised in the husband and in the world that surrounds her.

¹ CIPA Centro Italiano Psicologia Analitica, Catania, Italy

E-mail corresponding author: marinellacalabrese69@gmail.com



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1. Clytemnestra in the past

The Greek tragedy, from its birth, involved the use of masks. The mask served to make the features of the actor's face more evident, to enhance their expressions, to amplify the voice.

The mask distorted the appearance of a face, making it overly cheerful or dramatically desperate and allowed the public to more easily recognize the character who was on the scene. The mask allowed the actor to play more roles in the same tragedy because, while the mask identifies a character, it also hides its true nature. This twofold sense of unveiling and concealment is well rendered by the twofold etymology of the word: in Latin, the word "mask" means person, while in Arabic the term "maskharah" means caricature, mockery.

The mask has become the metaphor par excellence of fiction, of the possibility of hiding from others or of showing different parts of oneself.

Each person, in the sense of individual, wears more masks, according to the roles and contexts of the society in which they live. The mask hides and at the same time reveals parts of the subject's personality.

No one can grasp the totality of one's psyche and many psychic parts will remain confined to the realm of the unconscious, obscure even to ourselves. By observing us we can see the mask we wear and try to ask ourselves about our true identity, try to complete that process that Jung calls "individuation" and is realized through the integration of conscious and unconscious parts of the psyche.

Jung distinguishes between personal and collective unconscious and in the collective unconscious the dimension of the individual meets that of all past and present humanity: "*The unconscious is the universal that not only connects individuals to each other to make them a people, but unites them to men of the past and to their psychology*". (Jung, 1912, page 179)

In the collective unconscious we find archetypes, innate ideas and at the same time patterns of behavior. The archetype itself is unknowable, we can approach it only through images and through myth.

"The individual awareness, which is then the process of individuation, consists then in integrating the archetype with the conscience thus freeing man from the obscure domain of prejudice" (Moretti & Mencarini, p. 148).

The narratives concerning myths and their protagonists overcome the limits of time and space and fascinate us today as they did yesterday.

In Greek tragedies every story becomes universal history and every character is always current. Victims, executioners, murderers, dramas, blood that colors the scene: the theater stages the dark shadows of the individual and collective psyche that have always been lost in obscure labyrinths.

Aeschylus in the "*Oresteia*" and then Euripides in "*Iphigenia in Tauride*" and "*Iphigenia in Aulis*" tell us of the fate of Agamemnon and the women of his family, marked by a common and terrible destiny.

Clytemnestra saw her husband and son killed by Agamemnon, who then forced her to marry him. Clytemnestra and Agamemnon will have four children: Iphigenia, Elettra, Oreste and Crisotemi.

But also Iphigenia will be sacrificed by her father. And Clytemnestra will suffer this pain as an affront that deserves revenge.

What woman is Clytemnestra? What armed her hand? What daughter is Iphigenia? What man is Agamemnon? And who are these figures within us? What masks do they represent?

1.1 The deception is present several times in these tragic events

In the Euripidean version of the myth, Iphigenia is called in Aulis by her father with the false pretext of marriage with Achilles. In reality, a sad fate awaits Iphigenia. Agamemnon deceptively attracted his daughter to sacrifice her because this is the only way he could have the winds in favor and set sail for Troy: the ambition of the supreme command led him to put power, and therefore the public plan, before that of private affections. This contrast between public and private, between the duties of a leader towards his army and the love of a father for his sons dominates the soul of Agamemnon in the first part of the tragedy. At the beginning of the drama Agamemnon shows himself determined not to perform acts that he defines outlawed and far from the custom and the law, like killing the children he himself generated.

But having generated is not an act that allows him to escape the laws of the order to which he belongs: the male mode of the generation marks, on the contrary, the close belonging to that order, public and political, which imposes on him the killing of his daughter.

Iphigenia, among all his children, is the one who is most closely connected to her father by a close relationship of filial affection, showed in the first meeting and when she is holding on to him, in an exchange of intense affection. But here the ironic game is resolved when an old servant reveals the deception. And for a few hundred verses the hope that the sacrifice, despite the increasing eros for the war of which the army is prey, can be avoided through the different actions of Achilles, Clytemnestra and Iphigenia herself. To save her daughter by favoring the private and family environment would represent, in the eyes of Clytemnestra, the proof of Agamemnon's wisdom that would consist, at least this time, in respect for the affections and values of the family.

Iphigenia clings to her father's knees, in an attempt to move him to pity, reminding him that he is the first-born daughter whom his father would have liked to marry to a valiant man and would have liked to take with him in old age.

Clitemnestra and Iphigenia embody different aspects of the feminine in the drama: the mother who gives birth creates an indissoluble bond with her creature, which will always be like a fiber of her own body.

Iphigenia is closer to the Greek conception by which the children belong to the father. It is the first sign of Iphigenia's belonging to the paternal world and to the values he embodies.

But every attempt at supplication is in vain: Iphigenia can only accept the destiny assigned to her and sacrifice herself for the good of Hellas.

If in the first part of the tragedy Iphigenia was the tender young girl clinging to the body of her father to avert him from sparing her, after her sudden change of mood, she is the woman who introjected the values of war and patriotic in the name of which she stages her heroic death.

Iphigenia wants to go to the sacrificial altar without the mother and without tears for the mother, not allowed by the ritual; moreover, she invites Clytemnestra to refrain from crying and from any sign of mourning.

The ending is known: people present feel the blow vibrate but on the ground they don't see the girl but a throbbing doe that, as Calcante assures, the same Artemis has placed on the altar, a victim more pleasing to her than a girl, whose blood would contaminate her altar. And in front of the prodigy the mourning of the mother also fails, and Agamemnon, now ready to set sail, urges his wife to be happy for the fate of their daughter, who now lives in the company of the gods.

The Clytemnestra that we find in the Aeschylus "*Oresteia*" is a very different woman from the one who begged Agamemnon not to sacrifice her daughter.

Clytemnestra is now a powerful and ruthless woman, who has been queen without a king for ten years. She is an absolutely anomalous woman in the feminine world of the time, not only for her adulterous relationship with Egisto and the murder of her husband, but above all for her relationship with absolutely masculine power, as well as her language, her male rhetorical ability, her inflexible determination, her frightening violence and the extraordinary ability to lie in order to attract her husband into the lucidly and shrewdly crafted mortal trap.

To the deception that Agamemnon had set for her, by bringing Iphigenia to sacrifice, Clytemnestra replies with another deadly deception: Agamemnon has just returned from the Trojan war, Clytemnestra welcomes him before the palace, proclaiming her happiness to the citizens, invites her husband to enter the palace with declarations of fidelity and love, obviously untruthful.

In the absence of Agamemnon, she never tried to commit suicide, she chose Egisto as a lover and as an accomplice and she removed her son Oreste so that he could not rebel and hinder the aims of power of his mother and Egisto.

Agamemnon, in the face of such declarations of love and loyalty, without suspecting anything, follows Clytemnestra inside the house, where a refreshing bath is prepared for him. And as soon as he is immersed in the water - alone, far from the escort, obviously helpless - Clytemnestra implements her plan.

In Aeschylus, Clytemnestra's hand is moved by a bestial hatred, her virile character turns her murder into a slaughter. It is no coincidence that the weapon of her crime is the ax, or rather the double-edged ax, symbol of political power. An unthinkable weapon in a woman's hand.

Clitemnestra is not even a loving mother: she removed Oreste and forced Elettra to a cruel fate. Unlike her brother, Elettra is not personally dangerous: revenge is a male task. But she could generate male children, future avengers: to avoid it Clitemnestra gives her as a wife to a farmer, who, perfectly aware of the social abyss that separates him from the princess, will never join her.

Clitemnestra also kills Cassandra, the slave that Agamemnon had brought with him and from whom he is expecting a child.

But she doesn't kill out of jealousy: the real reason why she eliminates Cassandra is the lust for power that in her is a need to claim her role as the only lady of the house and the kingdom.

Clytemnestra, a merciless and vindictive woman, could not have absolution from the Greek world, in whose eyes she was seen as a woman totally, unnaturally abnormal in the feminine world of the time.

1.2 Clytemnestra as a victim turned into an executioner

Did she wear a new mask? Or is her true nature that of a cruel murderer and not of a devoted woman? Clytemnestra thinks and acts like a man, like a cruel and unscrupulous man. It is as if something feminine had been lost in Clitemnestra inexorably and this loss had, as its only outcome, the death of Agamemnon and then her own.

Is it the pain Agamemnon caused to bring her to revenge? Is it the pleasure of power (which risks losing) that makes it act so ruthlessly? What "necessity" guides her hand?

What is lacking in Clytemnestra is any openness to feeling, to eros, to love. She doesn't love Agamemnon; she doesn't love Egisto.

Love that should be understood as a force that seeks to unite the opposites, the masculine and the feminine, the true Copernican revolution of our civilization that replaces "marriages of love" with imposed marriages. And certainly this is not the case with Clytemnestra!

The epilogue of Clytemnestra's revenge is bloody and brutal and overshadows the dramatic events that have marked her life: the pain is not erased but modified, broods like a snake, becomes flame under the ashes.

2. Clytemnestra in the present

In more recent times, feminism (by the voice of well-known writers) re-reads the story of Clytemnestra and re-conceptualizes her violence, identifying the causes in the impossibility of accepting the intolerable injustice and unhappiness to which women are condemned in that polis rightly called "a men's club", in an archaic male and sexist world in which women do not even have a priority role in motherhood (the woman welcomes the fetus but is the man who generates).

In this key, Clytemnestra's violence becomes a manifestation of a dignified and proud character and of inner strength, which allows her to rebel against the violence of male power, learning to use it as a resource.

Understood as the only possible response to male violence, Clytemnestra's violence thus becomes the pretext for reflecting on the relationship between genders in the modern world and asking ourselves what has really changed over the centuries.

Are women really considered on a par with men especially in relation to power?

Is the murder of a man by a woman considered to be the same as that of a woman killed by a man? Let us not forget that the abolition of the "crime of honor" is a recent history.

What price have women paid and still pay to carve out a space of vital freedom and self-determination?

Certainly in modern times Clytemnestra has been re-evaluated and seen not only as a cruel monster, but also as a victim of a cruel fate. However, the conversion of Clytemnestra's image is not a feminist invention. If we limit ourselves to the "*Oresteia*", Clytemnestra is certainly not a victim but in the "*Oresteia*" we already meet her as an adulterous wife of Agamemnon. We know nothing of his previous relationships with her husband, who, in the light of what other authors, like Euripides and Pausanias, report, appear in a light such as to at least think, to be euphemistic, that marriage was not born under the best auspices.

If love marriages did not exist then, the one between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra was born particularly badly. The wrongs that had been inflicted on her during the marriage, had only been the last act of a series of violence.

Clytemnestra's pain arms her hand as her heart gives the revenge.

There are several modern readings of Clytemnestra: starting from that of Dacia Maraini in "*I sogni di Clitennestra*" (1981), passing through that of Marguerite Yocenaur up to "*Il verdetto*" by Valeria Parrella in 2007.

The Clytemnestra by Dacia Maraini is a former prostitute, gathered on the street almost as a child by Agamemnon, a Sicilian emigrant who lives in Prato. Agamemnon decides to leave for America to escape poverty and seek his fortune and not be forced to cede his business as a small textile entrepreneur.

During his absence Clytemnestra and Elettra continue to work on the looms that her husband owns, breaking her back while her son Communist and homosexual Oreste emigrated to Germany. Egisto is an opportunist unemployed. Elettra, in love with her father, despises her mother and shares male values.

Iphigenia is a fourteen-year-old who Agamemnon, knowing that she will not survive childbirth (as it happens) because she has a heart condition, gave the man who put her pregnant, in exchange for money. From here, the deadly hatred of Clytemnestra, who poor and impotent, unlike the ancient one, does not even have the strength to kill her husband, who, having returned from America, dies of a heart attack. Clytemnestra, unlike the ancient tragedy, is not killed by Oreste, but goes mad.

Clytemnestra is a victim of her visions and dreams: the level of reality and vision are mixed and the boundary is lost between what happens in Clytemnestra's psyche and reality, as if her inner world had the power to change history.

Dacia Maraini, in an interview in 1984, explains that madness is nothing other than not being able to adapt to a world made for men.

Marguerite Yourcenar in her monologue dedicated to the figure of Clytemnestra (1984) presents us instead with a woman who has lost everything without the possibility of redemption.

Clytemnestra is not presented as the bloody avenger handed down to us by tradition. She doesn't hold an ax in her hand nor does her eyes shine with grim joy in planning the murder. Her abandonment in the arms of Egisto is not dictated by a sincere impulse of passion nor by the mere will to revenge against a condition of forced widowhood.

Clytemnestra is a woman who believes in a single love to which one remains faithful even by betraying, even if betrayed. Egisto is a way to deceive itself, to fill an abyssal void, an irreplaceable absence. Clytemnestra is a painful character because she is a lonely woman and little or nothing is comparable to the desperation of a woman abandoned by the beloved man.

The Clytemnestra by Valeria Parrella is completely different. In "*Il verdetto*" (2007), she appears in a court, accused of killing her husband and tells her story to the judges.

Clytemnestra is the daughter of the good Neapolitan bourgeoisie, who fell in love at sixteen with a young camorrista, as if kidnapped by an inevitable destiny.

2.2 The families of both are opposed to this story

Agamemnon's mother tries to make an attempt to stop everything with a curse but Clytemnestra puts in place an even more archaic rite: motherhood.

Ananke has found other ways to make space and manifest her power. Fate or fatality, one remains without escape.

Then she gets married and she goes to live with him in an armored villa on the slopes of Vesuvius. The years pass, Agamemnon becomes a boss, the family grows. But Iphigenia, one of her daughters, is killed during a settlement of accounts: first victim of the Camorra war.

Clitemnestra staggers under the blows of fate cursing herself for not having been able to protect her daughter, her cursed offspring, blinded by her passion for Agamemnon.

Is it the love for Iphigenia that will arm the hand of this Clytemnestra or the all-encompassing love for Agamemnon to make her blind and furious?

Here passions are crossed and the thread of thought is lost. The shadow of power obscures love, spilled blood feeds the cruel fate.

During a long hiding of Agamemnon (who in the meantime continues, as he always did, to betray his wife) Clytemnestra becomes Egisto's lover. But out of loneliness, out of desperation: the only man she loves is Agamemnon.

When he finally returns, Clytemnestra is ready to forgive him everything: for him she prepares the bed, for him she cooks his favorite dinner. And Agamemnon finally arrives. But he is not alone, at his side stands a woman, Cassandra, daughter of the Apulian boss whom he had killed and whose place he had taken in Puglia, with a baby on her lap. Clytemnestra kills both.

Clytemnestra kills out of love and not out of hatred, because in her vision hatred does not lead to such a furious revenge, revenge is the daughter of pain which, in turn, is a child of love, an absolute and all-encompassing love, like a disease that removes all will, a virus that cannot be eradicated.

Clytemnestra is the victim of a cruel fate that has made her live among billions of possible lives: a dramatic life with no possibility of escape.

Clitemnestra is both a victim and an accomplice of her husband to the point of annihilating herself in him.

As she says on the last page of the monologue "*pouring the blood of Agamemnon, I shed my own blood*". She died with him.

In this story the danger seems to come from the annulment of oneself in a totalizing love, which allows no other life than that of the "woman of". Clytemnestra is a queen who is nevertheless such because a king has elevated her to this rank.

It's a match between love and power, which as Jung reminds us, seem irreconcilable poles. But it is a process that leads to the disintegration, to the death of innocents sacrificed in the name of a destiny that seems already written.

Clytemnestra becomes a symbol of an inevitable destiny, of a pain rooted beyond time, which cannot find peace in oblivion but is renewed day after day in her own name.

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