Patriarchal Authority and "Coming Home" In Tragedy

Patriarchal authority in the power of women in the home has been subverted in different ways over the past few millenniums in tragedy. To return from matriarchal to patriarchal rule Clytemnestra in the *Oresteia* has to be murdered in cold blood in an act of vengeance. There is a sharp return back to matriarchal rule in Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming*, where a woman sees through her role as her husband's, what Gayle Rubin refers to as a, conduit and manipulates the men in her life using their misogynistic fantasies to control and subvert them to literally a kneeling position before her.

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* allows a further move away from woman as aesthetic fantasy and through a drastic rebellion allows a woman to become much more than a wife and mother. Others, such as Italian playwright Dacia Maraini's postmodern play *I sogni di Clitennestra* have attempted to rewrite the misogyny of plays like the *Oresteia* to put an even greater emphasis on women being able to "come home" to their authority and power. An examination of these texts using theorists as varied as Penelope Prentice, Froma Zeitlin, Toril Moi, and finally Rubin herself will allow for the ways in which patriarchal authority is subverted and the power of women is accentuated in these plays to come to life.

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Harold Pinter's 1965 play *The Homecoming* displays a subversive female protagonist whose actions change the lives of the men in the home she takes over. There are a variety of "homecomings" in the play. Max's wife, Jessie, "returns" in Ruth. Ted, and Ruth, are both coming home to their birthplaces. The most important homecoming, however, is the way in

which patriarchal authority is subverted by Ruth's actions throughout the play.

In her essay *What Max and Teddy Come Home To In The Homecoming*, Ricki Morgan argues that the majority of the characters in the play "come home" by the end of the play's events.[1] Max, Morgan argues, "comes home" to the truth about his wife, Jessie, cuckolding him throughout their marriage. The facade of what he thought his idealized family life was like is destroyed by the revelation of her affairs. Teddy, his son, "comes home" to the truth that his wife Ruth is, perhaps, a sex worker, and that his marriage is in ruins. His calmness in accepting her new life is further confirmation, according to Morgan, that "his life is falling apart." (491)[2]

Both father and son have reactions, not entirely dissimilar, to what their wives are and enjoy similar fantasies about their family lives. Teddy is especially guilty of this and speaks in generalized cliché ridden statements about his wife with Ruth:

> She's a great help to me over there. She's a wonderful wife and mother. She's a very popular woman. She's got lots of friends. It's a great life, at the university...you know...It's a very good life. We've got a lovely house...we've got all...we've got everything we want. It's a very stimulating environment (50).[3]

Each man is also in denial about their career successes. Max as a butcher and Teddy as a philosophy professor are idealized by both men throughout the play. Their descriptions of home life are illusions that are betrayed once their patriarchal illusions about them are subverted by revelations about their wives.

While the male characters in Pinter's play are fascinating, my primary concern is with

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1 Morgan argues that the only characters who do not "come home" in the play are Lenny and Joey, who, as a pimp and demolition worker respectively, "are at home in this savage world." (Morgan 490)

2 Morgan notes that this is a similar reaction to the character of Stanley in Pinter's play *The Birthday Party*.

3 Ellipses come from the original text.

Teddy's wife Ruth. Ruth herself "comes home" to the truth that her life in America with her children and Teddy was a facade. As Penelope Prentice argues in her 1980 article *Ruth: Pinter's The Homecoming Revisited*, Ruth is "the most misunderstood" character in, according to Prentice, not only *The Homecoming* but all of Pinter's plays (Prentice 458). For the purposes of my own thoughts and research, Ruth is the most compelling character to engage with. A closer examination of the text will dig deeper into how Ruth is able to manipulate and dominate the men in the home for her own gain.

Another facade that has developed in the wake of *The Homecoming's* publication is that Ruth does follow through with her agreement and become a prostitute.[4] After careful readings of the text and consultation with theoretical texts, I do not see how this can be so clear to certain theorists. All of the confusion seems to come out of a line in the middle of the play, which is often miscorrectly read as Ruth having a deep, dark, secret in her past. She says, a few lines before Teddy's cliché ridden remarks about her, that her life before she met Teddy, "was different...when I met Teddy...first." (50). Ruth only mentions her career after each member of the house, and Teddy, have discusses their own work outside of the home and, in particular, praised Teddy for his. With no definitive evidence, scholars have assumed that Ruth saying she was a "photographic model for the body" means she was a prostitute, even though she proceeds to describe her work in detail immediately afterwards (57).[5]

4 Prentice cites a nearly quarter page list of theorists who she feels have misread Ruth as not only a prostitute after the play ends, but also before her marriage to Teddy in the past. She also points out Austin E. Quigley and Martin Esslin as examples of theorists who, despite their otherwise well done close readings, also manage to misread Ruth.

5 According to Prentice, Esslin, without any constructive evidence, states that "photographic model for the body" is "a widely known euphemism for prostitute" (462). There is no textual evidence that Ruth did any modeling in

As Prentice argues, and is confirmed by Pinter in interviews, Ruth gains her freedom to leave Teddy and the children and begin a new life on her own terms.[6] At the end of the play, Teddy leaves from the states without Ruth. Everyone who is left in the home, besides Sam, Teddy's uncle, have been trying to persuade Ruth to stay with them and work as a prostitute with Lenny as her pimp. Ruth negotiates with them in only conditional terms that are never properly agreed to. She states to Lenny during their conversation:

> I'd want at least three rooms and a bathroom...I would naturally want to draw up an inventory of everything I would need, which would require your signatures in the presence of witnesses...All aspects of agreement and conditions of employment would have to be clarified to our mutual satisfaction before we finalized the contract. (77-78)

While Lenny seems convinced here, Ruth only says "well, it might prove a workable arrangement" and, when Lenny offers to shake on their agreement, she states "oh, we'll leave it till later" (78-79). Note that Ruth further delays an official agreement by requesting witness for their contracts. While Ruth does say that their plan is a "very attractive idea," nowhere in the text does she officially acquiesce to their plans (77). To assume that she will feels a bit shortsighted.

What Ruth is really doing at the end of the play gets to the core of how theorists have often misread The Homecoming in the past. Much like many of the other strong women in Pinter plays, waits for the right moment to manipulate the situation to her advantage. Ruth is not

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the nude.

6 Prentice cites an interview with Pinter from the *Saturday Review* where Pinter is quoted as saying that Ruth "does not become a harlot" at the end of the play (qtd in Prentice 476).

using the family, she is manipulating their attempt at using her to her own advantage. As Prentice writes:

> Not one of the men understands Ruth—or perhaps understands women at all, including the dead mother Jessie—whereas Ruth does understand them, and contrives to assert her superiority which leaves them unfulfilled, defeated, baffled. Her command...is simply her defense against their attack. (460)

Perhaps this can apply to the theorists whose conclusions Prentice is arguing against as well? Much like Teddy's relatives, theorists, male theorists, have misinterpreted Ruth. She succeeds in taking over the house, by the end of the play the men are crawling to or kneeling besides her, replacing Jessie as the "mother" to further her plan.

Ruth is in control of her own destiny. She waits for the right moment to take control and then subverts the men to a submissive position, literally, at her feet. Although during the play do perform as women, Ruth is able to gain control as they are mesmerized by their patriarchal fantasies of whoring her out and keeping her in domestic service. She could be a prostitute or "do a bit of cooking...make the beds...scrub the place out a bit" (78). Her husband Teddy is defeated and completely broken by the end of the play. A further display of their fantasies comes when his brothers negotiate with Ruth to keep her in the home, Teddy remarks that they need to "get back to the children," Sam joins Teddy in arguing for her return to the children, to which Max says "she can have more. Here. If she's so keen" (70). Ruth, as Kelly Morris argues, is a "victor through her own victimization" (190). She allows herself to be pawed at by them in order to control them. Even if she does acquiesce to being a prostitute, it will be on her own terms.

Ruth's homecoming gives her freedom and allows her to become a completely actualized person. Teddy brings her home to gain the approval of his father and family. From when Teddy and Ruth arrive at the house, the family who is tolerant of a pimp, she is immediately pronounced to be a whore. Her dance, kiss, and time on the couch with Lenny and then Joey is part of her plan to take over the home. During the negotiations, Sam is outraged and scolds his family for trying to keep Teddy's wife. Obviously, it is troubling that she leaves her husband and children to fulfill her own needs, but in an unhappy marriage leaving Teddy and the children behind is the only way for her to move on. As Prentice notes, early in the play Ruth cautiously mentions that their children may miss them. But given the tense situation they are walking into, as Teddy seeks his family's approval, her caution should be advised as the right situation. At this point, however, Ruth is no longer "Teddy's wife," but has become an actualized, complete, person named Ruth.

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While a homecoming in *The Homecoming* allows for patriarchal authority to be subverted and eventually defeated, since antiquity the exact opposite has often been the case. Aeschylus' the *Oresteia* is a perfect example of a play in which the authority of the male is reaffirmed. In the *Oresteia*, Agamemnon "comes home" to begin a cycle of violence which restores patriarchal rule to his land. Third wave feminist critics have argued that the *Oresteia* is a prime example, if not, according to Daniela Cavallaro, *the* example "of a literary work that staged the passage from maternal rights to paternal rights" (Cavallaro 340). Froma Zeitlin argues that the trilogy goes "from female dominance to male dominance...from matriarchy to

patriarchy" (Zeitlin 89-91).

While a man and his line of succession may own the home and its land, the wife is the one who dominates the home. As Zeitlin notes in her essay *Playing The Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama* in the anthology *Nothing To Do With Dionysos? Athenian Drama In Its Social Context*, while the house "is the property of the male and his family line" it is often the domain of the female; the rules of society align and restrict her to them (Zeitlin 76). The men of tragedy, often so associated as Zeitlin is quick to point out with Kings and other forms of royalty, like Agamemnon in the *Oresteia*, step foot into the world outside the home "to pursue manly accomplishments in war and politics" (76).

While Agamemnon is away taking part in the Trojan War, Clytemnestra is tricked into giving up her daughter, Iphigenia, by her husband so she may be sacrificed to the Goddess Artemis to avenge the killing of a hare: "My captains, Artemis must have blood!" (110)[7] This is done by Agamemnon lying to her; he says that she is going to be married to Achilles, one of the heroes of the war. While Agamemnon is away from ten years at the war, she has an affair with Aegisthus and they begin to plot his murder upon returning. Clytemnestra does not wait patiently like Penelope does for Odysseus and when he returns, his concubine Cassandra in tow, does not defer to him. She becomes an adversary, a "subversive threat" to his rule and promptly murders him (77). Much like Ruth in *The Homecoming*, she rids herself of her children not by leaving them behind, but by exiling Orestes and forcing Electra to be essentially become a servant in their home.

Clytemnestra's subversion and murder of Agamemnon's authority begins a cycle of violence which eventually leads to "order" being restored. This cycle, as Denys Page argues in

7 For this paper I will be citing from the Robert Fagles translation of the *Oresteia*.

his introduction to an older edition of *Agamemnon* consists of "Agamemnon must pay with his life for a life which he destroyed; and his murderess must pay with her life for taking his; and her son must be brought to justice for killing her" (qtd in Fontenrose 71). Zeitlin remarks that the premise of the Oresteia can be summarized as "the establishment in the face of female resistance of the binding nature of patriarchal marriage where the wife's subordination and patrimonial succession are reaffirmed." (89) It is interesting the roles the Gods play in the trilogy. Orestes' revenge, upon returning home and reuniting with his sister Electra, comes directly from the Gods. He receives orders from Apollo in *The Eumenides* to kill his father's killers. In his article *Gods and Men In The Oresteia*, Joseph Fontenrose notes that Apollo is clear that Zeus is not pleased with Clytemnestra and that Agamemnon is "held in honor" (Fontenrose 84). Also in *The Eumenides* Athena remarks that Apollo's testimony for Orestes comes directly from Zeus.

Although she does ask for Zeus' support right before partaking in the murder of her husband, nowhere in any of the plays is Clytemnestra's killing of Agamemnon noted as being ordered by a God. Fontenrose argues that nowhere in the text of the plays is it clear that Zeus desires punishment for either Agamemnon or Orestes nor is it clear anywhere that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus have his blessing to murder her husband. As a ghost while speaking with the Erinyes, Clytemnestra complains that no Gods were angry when she was killed:

> You—how can you sleep?
>
> Awake, awake—what use are sleepers now?
>
> I go stripped of honour, thanks to you,
>
> I wander in disgrace, I feel the guilt, I tell you,

Withering guilt from all the outraged dead! (235)

While it is clear to modern audiences that sacrificing your daughter to a Goddess is a heinous action that is unforgivable. But as Fontenrose notes, Agamemnon is simply acting as a king would to appease the Gods and not bring their wrath down on him while at war.

Perhaps this is why Zeus does not speak up or condone the murder of his child? The fact that they are men and Clytemnestra and her daughter are simply females is perhaps an issue as well. Other feminist critics have argued that for the Athenian democracy to thrive at the end of the trilogy of plays, Clytemnestra has to be defeated, Agamemnon avenged, and gender roles restored to their proper form. While Clytemnestra is portrayed as a monster, Orestes is given a hero's welcome, complete with a complicit sister in Electra who dutifully assists him in restoring patriarchal order to the kingdom. For Sue-Ellen Case, "the Oresteia enacts the 'battle of the sexes,' using Athenian cultural and political codes to prescribe that women must lose the battle" in the plays (Case 13).

Feminists have also made an effort to reclaim the trilogy by rewriting it. Much as writers like T. S. Eliot and Eugene O'Neil have done in the past with, respectively, their plays *The Family Reunion* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, so has Italian playwright Dacia Maraini. Cavallaro goes into vivid detail about Maraini's postmodern play *I sogni di Clitennestra*, which is "an attempt to modernize and transform Aeschylus' trilogy" (340).[8] The characters keep their Greek names in the play but the action is moved to Prato and involves lower class Italian workers from Sicily. A chorus appears on stage and many events take place off stage as in

8 Since the play is written in Italian and I was not able to acquire an English translation in time for the writing of this paper, I will be relying on Cavallaro's reading of the play. An English adaptation, *The Dreams Of Clytemnestra*, was also presented on stage in 1989 in New York.

classical Greek plays. Often the same event is recounted, in a more postmodern fashion than in the *Oresteia*, from a variety of angles and memories.

Much of the *Oresteia* is keep by Maraini for her play but brought into modern times. Clitennestra defies her husband, who is away for a long time during the play, and rejects her husband's patriarchal claim on their daughter.[9] At the end of the play, rather than be murdered, Clitennestra is sent away to a mental institution and removed from society forever. Other aspects of the play come from, as Cavallaro points out, other Greek tragedies. Cassandra is able to escape from death in this play.[10] An interesting portion of the play comes from the fact that, like in Euripides and Sophocles version of these events, Clitennestra is pregnant with her lover's child, which is missing from the *Oresteia*. As in Euripides version where he marries the daughter of Helen and Menelaus, Orestes marries a former model from Milan at the end of the play.

Orestes, instead of being tormented by the Erinyes, is overcome by dreams about three prostitutes who accuse him of killing the youngest one. They taunt him via his dreams, accusing him of the murder repeatedly. Nevertheless, by the end of the play they have been, through circumstances unknown, tamed. In a turn of events familiar to readers of the *Oresteia*, they report to Clitennestra when she in the asylum that they now literally are faithful servants of man. Females, no matter if in antiquity or contemporary times, will eventually be brought into submission by the patriarchy.

The role of Athena, embodiment of the patriarchy, is portrayed as psychoanalyst who attempts to convince Clitennestra to accept her submission to men and to begin acting like a

9 Maraini's spelling of Clitennestra.

10 Interestingly, Cassandra and Clitennestra get along for most of the play, even holding hands in bed after a threesome with Agamemnon.

traditional, feminine, woman. Cavallaro describes Athena's role:

> This contemporary Athena is so much a woman "who thinks like a man" that even psychically she resembles a man. But more importantly, she (he?) has reached her position of power by studying the Freudian school of thought and fully accepting and supporting its patriarchal vision of mental health. Even at the cost of betraying her own sex. (343)

Athena, of course, takes the side of Orestes in the original play. The Goddess/psychoanalyst sides with the patriarchal concerns in both plays. In the *Oresteia* Athena breaks the tie in favor of Agamemnon's son and then is able to lull the Erinyes, who have spent the plays taunted and attacking Orestes, into a submissive state by changing them into The Eumenides. In *Sogni*, Clitennestra confronts Athena in the insane asylum and Athena proceeds to attempt to convince her that the correct development of females is from active to fully passive and obedient. In modern times, most people would frown on murdering a woman for being disobedient and unfeminine, but one wonders how many in the world would find tossing her in an asylum for not "behaving" properly a just result? Sadly, the number is probably higher than we think.

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In *A Doll's House*, Henrik Ibsen's 1979 play, the protagonist Nora has her own form of a homecoming. Nora, at the end of the play, "comes home" to the realization that she is "first and foremost a human being" (464). By slamming the door at the end of the play, Nora brings about a return of the maternal rights that are stripped away by Athena in the *Oresteia*. According to Toril Moi in her book length examination of Ibsen, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, *A*

Doll's House is a "devastating critique of idealism" (Moi 225). Nora completely rejects her role as mother. She does not, however, "dismiss" the children as Clytemnestra and Ruth do respectively, but at the end of the play she does leave without them. Much as Ruth rejects just being a "wife" to Teddy, Nora refuses the role as her husband, Torvald's, "doll;" she refuses to define herself as either a wife or mother.

Like Clytemnestra, Nora is the one who is running the home in *A Doll's House*. As seen in Zeitlin, the rules of society restrict women to the home, but also give them the power in that domain. It is Nora's who borrows the money and fakes a signature to get it. She does not scheme against Torvald like Clytemnestra or use his weaknesses to win her independence like Ruth. At one point in the play she even fantasizes about Torvald saving her from her crime. In order to try to help her husband, Nora has to reject his aesthetic ideal and begin to assert her independence, even if it means illegal activities and forgery!

Moi argues that her rejection of these roles changes her from "wife" to Nora."[11] She rejects being her father's "doll child" and the "great sin" which her husband and father have committed against her (Ibsen 66)[12] At the end of the play she no longer loves, or can love, her husband. Note this exchange:

> Nora: That is just it: you have never understood me. I have been greatly wronged, Torvald—first by papa and then by you.

11 Moi notes that this is in defiance of nineteenth century thought such as, for example, Hegel's theory on women's role in society, which Moi uses as an example repeatedly in this chapter. According to Moi, Hegel was so strict in these views that he refused females admission to his lectures on the grounds that women could not be educated (247).

12 For this paper I will be citing from the Dover Thrift Edition of *A Doll's House*.

> Helmer: What! By us two—by us two who have loved you better than anyone else in the world?
>
> Nora: You have never loved me. You have only thought it pleasant to be in love with me. (66)

Nora not only cannot love her husband, but cannot even conform to society's idea of what love even means. Unlike Teddy's illusions about Ruth and their lives, Torvald is an egotist who prides himself on his sense of beauty. Nora praises him at the beginning of the play for his refined taste, making sure to mention that no one else's is quite like his. Her favorite macaroons are also forbidden so she does not ruin her perfect teeth. As Moi notes, in Helmer's eyes "beauty is freedom, freedom is beauty" (231).

At the end of *The Homecoming*, Ruth has asserted her independence and, much like Nora, escapes a failed marriage on her own terms. Unlike Ruth, however, while Nora does also leave her children and husband when she slams the door, it is quite clear that Ruth will be able to confront the outside world. As Prentice notes, Nora's remarks that she will not accept things from strangers cannot be juxtaposed with Ruth, clearly in control and having completely moved on, calls her husband "Eddy" and says to him "don't become a stranger" (80). The laws of the day did not permit women to take their children, so Nora cannot for legal reasons as well. Her husband is not bound to her in any way once she leaves as Nora clears him of that responsibility.

But she does not "dismiss" the children like Ruth and Clytemnestra do. Nora needs to change and it is quite clear at the end of the play to both her and the reader that her husband, like Teddy, will not ever change. She choose consciously to leave them behind because she cannot be with them until she is a whole person and not just a doll, or Mrs. Torvald Helmer, but Nora

and completely and truly. The children became her dolls, but unlike the circle of violence in the Oresteia which reaffirms patriarchal rule, Nora refuses to continue the cycle and walks out, returning matriarchal power to the home.

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The opening line of Gayle Rubin's classic essay *The Traffic In Women: Notes On The "Political Economy" of Sex* remarks that literature about women, positive and negative, are "a long rumination on the question of the nature and genesis of women's oppression and social subordination" (Rubin 157). Each of these plays adds to this discussion in varied and interesting ways. There is a different sort of independence found in each play and a varied set of terms for that independence. Nora, Clytemnestra, and Ruth are all domesticated women who change, for better or worse, throughout their travel in the play they are in. All three have or find a certain kind of freedom that is unique to them. They defy patriarchal authority and resist the toxic psychic death associated with it. Without constraints on their choices as woman in a misogynistic, patriarchal, society, as Rubin explains, without this a woman is just a woman:

> What is a domesticated woman? A female of the species. The one explanation is as good as the other. A woman is a woman. She only becomes a domestic, a wife, a chattel, a playboy bunny, a prostitute, or a human Dictaphone in certain relations. Torn from these relationships, she is no more the helpmate of man than gold in itself is money. (158)

The transaction of women through marriage and other kinship rituals causes women to be, in Rubin's words, "conduits" in relationships rather than fully actualized partners (174).

Eliminating all gender bias; equal pay, equal privacy rights, and more female elected representatives will not solve the ills of our society overnight. What the women in these plays seek is a different kind of independence than the one which men, like those in the Trojan War or someone like Robinson Crusoe seek. Their independence allows them to "come home" and reject the patriarchy and their role as a conduit for the men in their lives fantasies and desires.

Ruth finds that her life with Teddy and their children is a facade. He brings her home and presents her to his family like some sort of trophy wife. Through her manipulation of the men in the home she allows herself to reject her role as conduit and become a more actualized woman. She is no longer Teddy's wife, or a mother, she is now an independent woman on her own. Her rejection of her children is the final straw that allows her to move without the constraints of a capitalistic, patriarchal world holding her to the role of breeder and docile wife to be presented for the approval of other masculine capitalists. She is fully in control of her life.

Clytemnestra rejects not only her husband but the Gods whose decree allowed her daughter to be executed through trickery, manipulation, and lies. She refuses to stand by and wait for her husband, like Penelope does, to return obediently while he takes part in masculine war activities and beds concubines against their will. She extends her rule to outside of the home and all of Agamemnon's land. She rejects her children, but only after one dies and the others align themselves with their father. To restore things to the rightful, male run, ways a disturbing cycle of vengeance must be enacted, ending with a female Goddess and one of her own daughter's being complicit in the bloodshed.

Nora rejects her role as conduit and personification of male aesthetic fantasy. She rejects her children, but not because they have betrayed her, or that they are no use to her, but because

she has to become a real, fully actualized, person that is not just a doll or mother or wife before she can properly be in their lives.

Each of these plays is a different sort of homecoming. Two women are able to escape, one has to be murdered to set things right. All of their homecomings are important and essential to the discussion of patriarchal authority and the power of women in tragedy.

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