

“Mind over Mater: The Case of Clytemnestra’s Dream”

Diane M. Borden, Ph.D.

Clytemnestra’s dream of the serpent at the breast provides a multivalent entry into both Aeschylus’ *THE ORESTEIA* and the larger implications of the conceptual shift from matriarchy to patriarchy in Western Culture. This paper investigates the erasure of the maternal body by a privileging of the paternal symbolic of reason and law, and its empowerment. Emergent in classical Greek civilization, the assumed “superiority” of reason (that is the conscious mental functions of logic) continues to dominate Western thought, particularly in institutional practices and constructed conventions of social norms. Through mythic discourse, in both meanings of the word as narrative and belief system, the paper explores the rise and triumph of mind over mat(t)er. Dramatically reported in *THE LIBATIONS BEARERS*, this paper analyzes how Clytemnestra’s dream displays the nursing breast, with mother and child in “fierce embrace,” as a site of violence, where Orestes bites the breast that feeds him.

Counter to this site, Orestes stands trial for matricide in part three of *THE ORESTEIA* in the concluding play *THE EUMENIDES*. He comes to judgment in a courtroom setting governed by the powers of Athena, the goddess born from Zeus’ head, without experience or knowledge of the maternal womb or breast. Man-born, she upholds the principle of law and rationality. As a consequence, the Athena principle displaces the archaic mother, then shifts to and empowers a social order which idealizes mental ideation. Yet, the supposed “civilizing” processes of reason remain blinded to their own defenses against primal, instinctive, and intuitive experience and knowledge. The discussion illustrates this telling irony: that the law creates its own injustice and unreason. It seems that mind needs a mother.

The paper speaks to various psychoanalytic and post-modern theorists in parsing Clytemnestra’s dream and Athena’s court. Klein on the breast, Kristeva on the archaic mother and abjection, and Chassuguet-Smirgel on sadism shed light on the performatives of the nursing scenario. Perceptual process and the mirror phenomenon are explored with ideas from Winnicott and Lacan. Feminist thinkers, such as Jessica Benjamin and Luce Irigaray, bring their expertise to the dialogue. And, as our topic opens up to include the psychodynamics of the law, we consider the work of Lacan, Derrida, and Drusilla Cornell.

In conclusion, the theses examined in this paper, contextualize the historical evolution and simultaneous dialectic of the mind/body split fundamental to Western thought. Examination of the discourses of dream, myth, drama, the law, and psychoanalysis allows us a multi-rhetorical and multi-critical set of tools to investigate the ongoing debate. That the mind/body split can be gendered, as this paper argues, only complicates the perhaps “forced” dualism of psyche and soma. That we go to an ancient dream to help us understand the human psyche in the 21st century tells us we are still very much part of an old, old story, that we continue to live in mythic times.