The Case for the Crazy Woman: Feminine Rebellion in Greco-Roman Texts

The origin of evil, according to Greek myth, was a rebellious woman. In opening the jar, in doing what she was told not to do, Pandora released upon Earth an irreversible corruption, bringing suffering and sin to the world. Women, as the theodicy in cultural belief, were thought to carry an inherent wickedness within them, a curse to mankind which needed to be controlled and subjugated. Thus, there could be nothing more threatening to humanity than a woman who disobeyed, who had the courage to question and who acted with autonomy. In behaving contrary to the expectations placed upon her, a woman became monstrous to society. Through analyzing the portrayal of women who dissent in several Greco-Roman texts, including Sophocles' *Antigone*, Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, and several myths from the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, the patriarchal forces behind this social phenomenon are revealed, in turn demonstrating the power of the crazy woman in fiction and reality as a means of resisting oppression.

1. The Negative Portrayal of Women who Rebel

In a society like that of the ancient Greeks, where a woman's life is relegated to one of servitude and confinement, the act of protest need not be a large one. It is disruptive enough to simply reject complaisance. The accepted behavior of a woman is silence and obedience, and by speaking at all, she has deviated from her expected role in society, threatening the status quo operation which concentrates the power in the hands of men. As Ruden describes in her commentary on *Lysistrata*, "[s]ince it was female nature to be uncontrolled, a woman had, day by day, the potential to run amok and needed a rigidly defined role in the household to channel her energies" (Ruden 100). This life in the household was one of "dim rooms and monotonous labor designed to assure men that women were not up to anything" (Ruden 102). The restraining of women to the role of servant in the home, existing only within the walls of that home, was

methodically enforced by men to subdue women and assuage their fear of losing control. With women consigned to the domestic sphere, the sociopolitical sphere remained exclusively male, consolidating the power of the patriarchy. A woman who made any move to step out of her sphere, then, was seen by society as threat. An unfettered woman was an unstable woman.

In Sophocles' play, *Antigone*, Antigone is introduced as a woman struck by grief. Her brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, have killed each other in combat, fighting on opposite sides—Eteocles for Thebes, and Polynices alongside the Argos. The king of Thebes, Creon, has forbade his people from mourning or burying Polynices as he was a traitor of the state. Antigone refuses to follow this ordinance, knowing that without burial, Polynices' soul would never properly be laid to rest, and he would not enter the Underworld. As a woman, she was a symbol of domestic duty, and it was precisely that loyalty to the unspoken rules of familial responsibility that motivated her to disobey the law, and which was ultimately her hamartia. Her deed was benign, nothing more than the act of sprinkling dry dust on the body of her brother and giving him his proper rites. It was a victimless act, one that did not disturb the rest of society, yet to King Creon, a woman disregarding his orders was horrifying. His words depict plainly that he perceives his power to be threatened by Antigone's noncompliance. He compares her to the personification of Anarchy itself, a notably feminine personification:

> "Anarchy!— show me a greater crime in all the earth! She, she destroys cities, rips up houses...Therefore we must defend the men who live by law, never let some woman triumph over us. Better to fall from power, if fall we must, at the hands of a man—never be rated inferior to a woman, never." (Sophocles 94)

Antigone, the woman who refused the king's orders, becomes a representation of the destructive forces of chaos which threaten the structure of society. A woman has undermined authority, and

that is dangerous to an order whose stability rests upon the fact of her subjugation. Antigone is also described by Creon as mad (88), and as worthless (89). Creon is the king, a representation of the state itself, and therefore the implication of this description is that a woman loses her value to society upon her departure from acting in accordance with her perceived purpose. Furthermore, she must be of unsound mind for even wishing to do so.

In *Lysistrata*, a comedy written by Aristophanes, the women of Athens orchestrate a sex strike to force the men of the city to stop the Peloponnesian War against Sparta, which at the time of the play's writing had been raging on for twenty years, costing Athens a significant amount of both money and human lives. When the women fortify the Propylaea and the Acropolis, they take over the symbolic core of Athenian government and gain political control. The men of Athens then attempt to attack the Acropolis to reassert their dominance over the polis. During this conflict, the men demean the women, calling them sluts and threatening violence. "If someone had done a proper job of slapping them, they'd keep their yappers shut" (Aristophanes 22), the Men's Chorus Leader says, while an Athenian councilor states that "[t]his is what happens because of women on the loose" (25). The reaction of these men to the entrance of women into the political sphere is one of defensiveness. Having lost their control, they feel politically neutered, and are compelled to retaliate viciously in desperation to regain their power over the women, seeking to return them to the domestic sphere and thereby return the structure of society to its status quo.

This play is notably a satire. Aristophanes was staunchly against the Peloponnesian War, advocating for an end to the conflict due to the strain it placed on the polis. In *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes' forms his rhetorical claim that the war should be ended, and lampoons the incompetence of the administration that allows it to continue, by comedically insinuating that

women could accomplish it more effectively than the foolish men in charge. That is, women are used as the crux of the insult brought against the Athenian government, the feminine estate within society becoming a metaphor for stupidity, used to criticize men. In fact, he portrays the women who strike as being crazed, much like how Creon attempted to dismiss Antigone's dissent by devaluing her ratiocination. "I'm a hornet when I'm roused" (Aristophanes 28), the Women's Chorus Leader claims, and according to the Chorus of Old Women, "[their] anger's like a savage, frothing boar" (39). Through the motif of an aggressive, rabid animal, Aristophanes depicts these rebellious women as wild and dangerous. They are seen as histrionic, their protests unworthy of acknowledgement.

In the myth of Procne and Philomela, this motif also appears. After she found out that her husband, Tereus, had violently raped and mutilated her sister Philomela and held her captive in a cottage in the wilderness, Procne set out to free Philomela, and the two women then decided to wreak revenge upon Tereus. When Procne's young son, Itys, came to her, she was overcome by fury. Procne then "dragged Itys off, as a tigress does an unweaned fawn, in the dark forests... [and] with an unchanging expression, struck him with a knife" (Ovid). She and Philomela proceed to mutilate Itys' body before cooking the pieces to serve to Tereus.

Vase painting of Procne and Philomela preparing to kill Itys, attributed to Makron, c. 480. Photo from the Louvre.

This description of Procne as she acts upon her desire for vengeance resembles that of a feral and predatory creature, and in depictions such as Makron's vase painting of the scene, the two sisters assume an animalistic quality, appearing almost vulture-like, with talons and disturbingly neutral expressions. The myth further states that "Procne cannot hide her cruel exultation [at Tereus' horror], and... [was] eager to be, herself, the messenger of destruction" (Ovid), while characterizing Philomela as frenzied. Here, the women's act of rebellion is to retaliate against the man that has violated them, yet still, their portrayal is skewed in the oppressor's favor, marking their actions as irrational and deranged and undermining the complexity of Procne and Philomela's experience.

In the story of Arachne, after being challenged by Pallas Minerva to a weaving competition, Arachne creates an intricate tapestry which depicts the experiences of several

mortal women who suffered sexual violence perpetrated by deceitful male gods, including those of Europa, Leda, Antiope, Alcmena, Aegina, and Proserpine. In response to this criticism of the gods' cruelty, which emphasized how they abused their power to violate mortal women, Pallas Minerva was enraged, deciding that Arachne deserved punishment for what was interpreted as an act of hubris and a blatant insult to the gods' authority. Minerva brutally beats Arachne and ultimately transforms her into a spider. Arachne's rebellion is to speak out about the brutality of the gods' rule, and yet Pallas Minerva, despite being regarded as the goddess of justice and law, unfairly punishes Arachne for her protest. In this sense, Pallas Minerva, as one of the gods herself, is representative of authority and the flawed administration of justice in patriarchal society, justice being a privilege rarely extended to women. Patriarchal authority, as seen in this myth, seeks to silence and punish women who dissent.

Having now explored the negative portrayals of rebellious women in various Greco-Roman texts, the functional purpose of perpetuating these perceptions begins to reveal itself. Rebellious women are described degradingly in stories written within the patriarchy as a means for men, who feel their control slipping, to reaffirm their power and reinforce the structural oppression of the female voice. Looking again to *Antigone*, as Creon announces the condemnation of Antigone to death for her insolence, he says, "[f]rom now on, they'll act like women. Tie them up, no more running loose" (Sophocles 90). Creon, afraid of his authority over Thebes being challenged by a woman, insists on returning Antigone to the state of silence, and in doing so, exposes the patriarchal belief that existing as a woman and being politically engaged are intended to be mutually exclusive behaviors. On this, philosopher Judith Butler says:

> Interestingly enough, both Antigone's act of burial and her verbal defiance become the occasions on which she is called "manly" by the chorus, Creon, and the messengers.

> Indeed, Creon, scandalized by her defiance, resolves that while he lives "no woman shall rule" (51), suggesting that if she rules, he will die... Earlier, he speaks his fear of becoming fully unmanned by her: if the powers that have done this deed go unpunished, "Now I am no man, but she the man [*aner*]" (528). Antigone thus appears to assume the form of a certain masculine sovereignty, a manhood that cannot be shared, which requires that its other be both feminine and inferior. (Butler 8-9)

What is expected of a woman then, is for her to accept the relegation imposed by the ruling class of men and to exist outside of the polis without complaint, to make no effort to insert her voice into the societal dialogue and its perpetually male-centered narrative. Upon doing so, a woman will have moved away from her allotted space in the world, leaving her domestic confinement and entering the agora. To a patriarchal society, the mere existence of a woman within the agora is a threat to functioning order of the world, because she is assuming the role of man, and in turn, the men perceive themselves to be emasculated. She poses a danger when she possesses a voice, and to ensure that she cannot cause a disruption to the operations of the patriarchy, that voice must be silenced.

That silencing is effectively achieved through the labelling of a woman in the agora as irrational. When claiming that a woman is crazy, in any variation of the word—hysterical, savage, or histrionic—it is implied that a woman's capacity for reasoning is fundamentally deficient. She is governed by her emotions instead of rational thought. Her protest is not to be taken seriously, nor is her objection to be reasoned with. As a result, she is effectively dehumanized, lowered to an inferior rank of sentience, brought closer to animal and further from man, and that provides justification for why she is subjugated. Ridicule acts as the most convenient of dismissals, taking away the power of a dissident woman's words, just as Tereus

cuts out Philomela's tongue and Pallas Minerva shreds Arachne's tapestry. At its core, the portrayal of rebellious women as crazy is a reactionary phenomenon, done in response to the perceived invasion of male dominated spaces by women.

2. Reclaiming the Power of the "Crazy" Woman

If women are deemed by men to be crazy when their words and actions threaten to dismantle the misogynistic structure of society, it is because men are afraid. To feel threatened, there must be a certain trepidation, an acknowledgement that women do in fact have the capability to disrupt and demolish the patriarchy, that this is a possible reality and a natural consequence of the oppression that they perpetuate. Therefore, it is imperative that women do not stop when they begin to feel this resistance. Instead, the "violent" and "crazy" archetype of woman must be embraced and encouraged as a motif of revolution.

In the story of Caeneus, Jupiter offers Caeneus a wish after raping her. In response, Caeneus says, "This injury evokes the great desire never to be able to suffer any such again. Grant I might not be a woman: you will have given me everything" (Ovid). This is the undeniable truth of the feminine estate. Power is a concept defined in relation to masculinity, and men are the gender of sovereignty, thus it is natural that women would wish to assume the role of a man to escape the hardships they endure. However, it is impossible within a patriarchal system for women to shapeshift into men in such a way that will fully remove them from the societal associations with the feminine. Even after Jupiter grants her wish and Caeneus becomes a man, he still faces the prejudice of men. Latreus, a centaur, says to him, "[f]or you will always be a woman, Caenis, to me. Does your natal origin not remind you; does not the act you were rewarded for come to mind, at what cost you gained this false aspect of a man? Consider what you were born as, or what you experienced" (Ovid). There is no escape from the rampant

misogyny of society without a complete deconstruction of patriarchy. Attempting to become more masculine or to assimilate among men will not change that one is perceived of as weak, so long as misogynistic thought exists which associates the mere proximity to femininity with being weaker.

The only method to achieve a revolution in how society views women and begin to fell the patriarchal system in place, then, is to decouple femininity from weakness, not by approximating the masculine, but by making extreme resistance a feminine trait. This is the power of the crazy woman. When the crazy woman takes the first step into the agora, she disavows herself from passivity. This alone is enough to instill fear into men and to threaten the misogynistic structure they rely upon to continue subjugating women. The crazy woman must not stop there.

In Foucauldian philosophy, it is discussed that force used by the people is terror, considered deviant and criminal, but that force when used by the ruling class is enforcement, and therefore seen as legitimized. When Philomela and her sister Procne seek revenge against her rapist, they are effectively starting a riot. The crazy woman is terrifying because she uses force against her oppressor, and that is why the motif of violent revenge against attackers is crucial to women's liberation. Antigone's sister Ismene says to Creon in response to him calling them crazy, "[t]rue, my king, the sense we were born with cannot last forever... commit cruelty on a person long enough and the mind begins to go" (Sophocles 89). By not only reclaiming but also celebrating the crazy woman trope, the sedative power is removed from the label, and men are no longer able to weaponize it for the suppression of women's ideas. After all, rebellion will always be seen as crazy by the ruling class, because the desire to alter society so drastically seems delusional to those who have no need for a change.

The pathologizing of women as mentally ill for their refusal to conform to the expectations placed upon them has been a prevalent phenomenon throughout history, used to silence and dismiss a woman that asked for more from society than what she was allotted. Hysteria, a pseudoscientific medical condition first appearing in the work of Hippocrates in ancient Greece, dictated the course of gynecology for several centuries after its conception despite being demonological in origin. In Victorian England, a woman could be institutionalized for being mentally unwell if she was considered too opinionated or politically excited, or for any other behavior that was deemed undesirable or deviant. In the modern day, women continue to receive the label of crazy if they speak out against abusers or simply resist misogyny. In fact, the perception of a woman as hysterical and strange for acting in any way that does not align with the accepted behavioral patterns has accompanied patriarchy in all its forms and iterations, and for as long as the patriarchal forces that allow for this phenomenon continue to exist, it will continue to occur. Until then, there is a power that must be embraced in the identity of the crazy woman.

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