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Essay #1

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Gender Benders: The Affirmative Sexual Evolution of Ajax and Medea

Protagonists in Greek tragedy endure much psychological damage. In some cases, disgrace upsets the core of the subject's identity as a man or woman. In regard to traits like behavioral directness, activeness, loquacity, and emotionality, the title characters of Sophocles' Ajax and Euripedes' Medea¹ break gender boundaries by illustrating stereotypes of the opposite sex. The very courses of these reversals contain qualities of the archetypal male and female. Ajax's switch from manliness to womanliness and his return to the former reflect the self-restraint and balance that males exemplify. Meanwhile, Medea wavers between feminine and masculine traits in a process that mirrors the erratic nature of women. This natural order underlies the gender looseness of both figures.

Ajax initially proves his manliness. After winning Achilles' armor, Odysseus finds the Greek army's "flocks and herds of captured beasts all ruined / And struck with havoc by some butchering hand" (l. 26-7). According to Athena, Ajax's humiliation and anger over the loss of the prize has pushed him to such violence (39-41). The single "hand" behind this carnage indicates that only Ajax has caused it. His decision and ability to kill such large groups of animals alone reveals his nerve and tenacity. His belief that he was avenging himself upon "the whole Greek army" (44) instead of dumb animals shows the murderous extent of his boldness. Such audacity suits a manly warrior. Moreover,

¹ Euripedes, "Medea," Ten Plays by Euripedes, trans. Moses Hadas and John McLean (New York: Bantam Books, 1960). Since this text does not give line numbers, all Medea citations refer to page number.

the word "struck" in the lines above suggests the focused force of the attack, while the hand's "butchering" motions show how deeply Ajax has steeped himself in gore. This insensitivity to violence also fits the masculine stereotype.

In his quest for vengeance, Ajax has actually exceeded that caricature. His wife Tecmessa elaborates on his actions:

. . . some [beasts] he slew . . .
Cleanly with a neck-cut; others he hacked asunder
With slashes at their ribs. But two special
White-footed rams he lifted up, shore off
One's head and the tip of its tongue, and cast them from him;
The other he bound upright against a pillar,
Seized a stout length of harness, made from it
A singing whip . . . to lash him with,
And, mid the blows, poured forth . . . awful curses
(234-43)

To "hack," "slash," "shear," "lash," or inflict "blows" upon a creature, one must make swift, powerful movements with a weapon or fist. The "cleanliness" of Ajax's throat slices attests to the precision of his assaults. Also, to "cast" an object off means to hurl it away, not to place it gently aside. To "bind" or physically restrain something animate, one must struggle against its will and hence create more violence. The "seizure" of an object involves a rapid and well-aimed motion toward it. Even the curses embody verbal "attacks"; by "pouring [them] forth" as Tecmessa describes, Ajax acts like a mighty, destructive flood. With mostly only one or two syllables, the words above reflect the punchy, direct nature of his deeds. The sheer number of these words—at least one per line—overwhelms the audience with their and Ajax's violence. Such aggression characterizes testosterone-pumped males. The magnitude and nakedness of Ajax's brutality show the extremes of masculine power.

One could argue that this frenzied reaction to dishonor characterizes emotional women more than stoic men. Indeed, Ajax follows up his savagery with a burst of feminine passion. Tecmessa quotes him as saying, "Woman, a woman's decency is

silence" (293). His repetition of "woman," first in reference to his wife and then to her gender, applies the tenet directly to her. Since "decency" relates to desirable mores or morals, Ajax expresses an ideal; i.e., women *should* remain quiet. Silence, then, is a fundamental trait of females. Yet after his frenzy, his second moment of public "indignity" (367), the hero "sat . . . without speaking, for some time" (311). Suddenly, the man acts as he said a woman should. Tecmessa's reference to this scene only 18 lines after his chauvinistic sentiment underscores the reversal of his conduct.

Ajax also acts womanly at the other vocal extreme. According to his wife, "His own way / Was not to cry aloud in his distress," but to use "low and muffled" sounds (320-2). As a man, his "own" conduct should consist of masculine behaviors. Since his quiet laments are part of such manners, they must signify manhood. Meanwhile, "crying aloud" embodies the vocally demonstrative nature of women. Although this behavior contrasts the ideal of womanly silence, it represents the reality of her expressiveness. Both scenarios contrast the usually subdued manner of males like Ajax. By describing the latter in the past tense, Tecmessa implies that he is now reacting to his troubles noisily like a woman. When he grieves over the "mockery" toward his mad slaughter (367) and laments, "Crushed as I am, I'd . . . ," the Chorus states, "My lord, no blustering words" (386-7). This mid-sentence interruption suggests that Ajax has not paused long enough to allow for a more proper place of interjection. By contrasting his unrestrained woe with its own terseness, the Chorus subtly chastises him and shows him how he should behave. Such loquacity does not befit him or his masculinity. As Ajax would have to admit, his current reaction toward dishonor mirrors that of a woman.

The most notable sign of his gender switch lies in his emotionality. At one point he states, "Lord, what a plaintive creature / Womankind is!" (580-1). By amassing all women into a single organism, he erases their individual quirks and deems them equally mournful. Melancholy thus represents a common female trait. According to the Chorus,

one woman—Ajax's mother—will express such feeling for her dead son by "utter[ing] her heart's anguish," emitting "high, rending strains," and allowing her "breast [to] be beaten, and the tresses torn" (629-31). This female manifests emotion through vocal distortions and physical self-injury. Earlier, Tecmessa states that upon realizing his disgraceful butchery, Ajax "beat his head and bellowed . . . and in an anguished gripe / Of fist and fingernail he clutched his hair" (307-10). By displaying behaviors like beating and hair-pulling, he expresses his misery just as his mother would exhibit hers. The "anguish" in both cases—one from mourning, the other from shame—stresses the similarity between Ajax's and women's grief. In response to his doubled ignominy, Ajax shatters gender norms.

Several statements further clarify the hero's departure from manhood. Before his decision to kill himself, Ajax states, "My speech is womanish for this woman's [Tecmessa's] sake" (652). The word "is" shows that his articulation has truly become—and does not merely appear to be—feminine. Ajax alludes to this change when he states, "All that I was has perished / With these poor creatures [I have slaughtered]" (404-5). The phrase "all that I was" refers to his identity, whose facets include masculinity. The death of his identity and its existence only in the past tense signify the death of his manhood. By tying this circumstance to his killing spree, he pinpoints the latter as the moment of his breakdown. Manly deeds have thus led to self-castration. Indeed, Ajax tells the Chorus, "You shall no longer see this man, / Such a man . . . As Troy ne'er saw the like of" (421-3). In the first line, "man" could refer to his overall personhood. In the second half, though, he cites his participation in the Trojan War, an event that male warriors dominated. Thus, he connects masculinity to the now invisible "man" in him. Thanks to the disgrace of the massacre as well as of the armor contest, Ajax has lost that part of his self.

The hero reestablishes his gender through and immediately after his death. For instance, he hopes to kill himself with "one swift unconvulsive leap / Upon [his] piercing blade" (833-4). Such speed and smoothness shows his deliberate beeline toward death. Also, the string of adjectives in the first line indicates the precision of his plans and his focus on his goal. Ajax similarly proclaims, "I must leave this idle vein of weeping / And set about my business with some speed" (852-3). The first line cites useless emotionality; the second line denotes motivation and efficiency. Since one would associate the first trait with females and the other ones with males, these lines represent Ajax's transition from womanhood back to manhood. On the brink of death, he returns to his true sex.

Suicide also confirms the hero's manliness as an active means for revenge and redemption. Teucer tells the Chorus:

. . . don't huddle near like a crowd of women,
Instead of the men you are, but rally round
And help [guard Ajax's corpse]
(1182-4)

Granted, the acts of "huddling" and of "rallying" resemble each other. While females gather "near" the corpse, however, they do not necessarily face it; they could cluster on the edge of the scene without engaging themselves in it. Teucer's words suggest that huddling is the only thing women would do, so their actions would not be productive. Conversely, by gathering or forming a circle "round" the body, males would face the scene more squarely. Since they should also "help" in some way, their actions could fulfill useful goals. In short, while women show passive behaviors, men display active ones. True to his gender, Ajax's suicide represents more than an end in itself. After seeing his brother's corpse, Teucer says, "It [the suicide] . . . destroys me" (1002). He means his emotional incapacitation rather than his physical destruction. Still, the word "destroys" implies suicide's devastating impact on survivors. The outward touch of the

death renders it an active rather than an inert phenomenon. Ajax's suicide can cause much later harm, as well. He asks the Furies:

. . . mark my end,
How Atreus' sons have brought me to my ruin,
And sweep upon them for their ruin too.

(837)

Ajax's legacy does not end with his life, for he uses his suicide as a means with which to destroy his opponents. When he blames Menelaus and Agamemnon for his "ruin," he does not just mean his infamy. His suicide would also throw blood on their hands, for their contempt has driven him to that point. Menelaus and Agamemnon would deserve worse punishments than if he had accepted his shame and moved on in life. The punishment of these scorners by divine justice would imply his relative innocence and would restore his dignity. By achieving such ends as the destruction of his foes and self-redemption through suicide, Ajax would regain his active masculine side.

The hero finds gender confirmation through others, too. Teucer recalls his brother's exploits in Troy, e.g., when he "came, / Alone, to save" his trapped allies from Hector (1269-74) and when "he closed alone / In a single fight with Hector" (1283-4). As in his livestock massacre, Ajax's combat against the Trojan demonstrated his physical strength. The emphasis on his "lone" status shows his intrepid spirit in the face of great opposition. Thus, Teucer remembers him at his masculine peak. Unlike in the slaughter, though, Ajax meant to protect, not destroy, his allies. By recognizing the decency that tempered him then, his mourners give his life and masculinity a positive angle. Ironically, one of his greatest critics redeems him, too. While comparing his worth to Ajax's (1238-9), Agamemnon asserts, "Was he the one real man in the whole Greek army?" (1240). In this query, he assumes that Ajax was a "real man," not a womanish disgrace or even a caricature of his own sex. As a skillful fighter, he must have exemplified the self-discipline of that ideal.

Perhaps Ajax does not merit the label now, for Teucer and Agamemnon refer to the past. Odysseus dispels that doubt when he calls Ajax a "brave man" (1332), "the bravest man / Of all that came to Troy, except Achilles" (1340-1), and "a valiant man in death" (1346). These adjectives indicate the deceased's courage not only in war but also against his personal demons. Despite his recent frenzy, he ended his life with manly dignity. Moreover, Odysseus' repetition of that valor emphasizes the intensity of his belief in it, if not its truth. If negative opinion ravaged Ajax in life, then a positive view like this one rebuilds his status. For future generations, he will live on not as a contemptible weeper but as a great warrior, a steadfast comrade, and the epitome of manhood. He has both reset his gender bounds and reached the happy medium between excessive masculinity and unseemly femininity. Hence, with his return to manliness and final redemption, Ajax's development illustrates the moderation of the prototypical male.

Medea has a more erratic evolution. Like Ajax, she starts the drama by overplaying her gender traits. She says, "Women are frail things and naturally apt to cry" (p. 33). The "natural" presence of such timidity and emotionality means that those traits define a woman's character. Medea illustrates this idea when, after Jason scorns her for a princess, her "whole frame [is] subdued to sorrow, wasting away with excessive weeping" (33-4). Her expression of misery through her entire body—not just her face—and her physical deterioration through such emotion reveal its intensity. However, the fact that the Nurse dubs this reaction "excessive" means that Medea exaggerates—and perpetuates—the notion of female emotionality.

Her suicidal impulses in response to the betrayal reinforce her sex's passivity, as well. She states, "It's all over . . . I would gladly die" (37). Unlike Ajax, she expresses no desire to wreak divine havoc on her foes by means of her death. The finality she evokes with the word "over" also shows her disinterest in such posthumous effects. Likewise,

she states, "Let me seek lodging in the house of death" (36). This sentiment describes a withdrawal into a safe haven rather than an active confrontation against foes. The image of a domestic arena strengthens that of the passive female. Medea does curse her family amidst her suicidal lament (35), which could causally link her death wish with the others' destruction. However, she also says, "May I live to see [Jason] and his bride . . . in one common destruction, for the wrongs that they inflict . . . on me!" (36). Since Medea wants to witness their downfalls during her lifetime, her death would not provide a means or justification for divine retribution as Ajax's does. Therefore, her suicide represents a retreat from life more than a fight against scorners. This passive tendency indicates Medea's undue womanliness at the start of the play.

Although she does not yet act on them, she does reveal masculine impulses early on. The Nurse states, "She'll not recover from her rage . . . till the lightning of her fury has struck somebody to the ground" (35). Lightning represents a quick, precise, and conspicuous phenomenon. Although women often display passion without action, Medea's wrath against Jason resembles Ajax's swift, direct, and unabashed frenzy against the livestock. Her potential to physically manifest her feelings by "striking" someone sharpens the masculine edge of her actions. In contrast to internalized feelings, this ire can injure others. Medea's fighting spirit becomes clearer when the Nurse says, "Whoever crosses swords with her will not find victory easy . . ." (34). The speaker paints conflict with Medea as a duel or battlefield skirmish. The difficulty of beating her shows the skill and/or sheer force with which she wins—qualities that contrast the inactive, retiring female stereotype. The allusion to war—a male-centric field—also heightens her manliness. Medea uses similar imagery when she declares, "I had rather fight three battles than bear one child" (38). Her lopsided scale—three battles on one side, one childbirth on the other—suggests the weight of her preference for war. Her desire for pain and death in soldiery rather than pain and life in motherhood reveals

her mannish side. Though such feelings seem peculiar to Medea, other females would sympathize with her. The heroine states, "Woman in most respects is a timid creature . . . but wronged in love, there is no heart more murderous than hers" (38). Apparently, a tendency toward physical harm characterizes the entire gender just as softer traits do. Unlike womanly men, whose histrionics do not suit their sex, manly women have nature on their side. As she maintains some truths of female stereotypes, Medea also supports detours into male ones.

The heroine returns to her shifty femininity as she starts to scheme. She says to the Chorus, "Now I shall tell you all my plans"—and she does (49-50). Instead of executing her plot in secret like Ajax, Medea first explains it to the Chorus. In fact, she announces that she will announce her plans. This double layer of declarations shows her tendency to talk before acting—a supposedly typical female habit. This speech delays the fulfillment of her goals, which renders her inactive. Her chattiness also exposes her uninhibited female nature. After Creon's decree to exile her, Jason makes a mid-speech aside to Medea: "Be quiet, please" (44). Evidently, she can barely contain her desire to interrupt him and trespasses the line between speaker and listener. She does not adhere to social limits as strictly as men would. Jason also cites her "howling gale of . . . verbosity" (43). Like a tempest, her speech is often wild, continuous, and boundless. Her vocal excesses verify her fickle feminine state.

Even after her plot has begun, Medea's emotions seem flighty. She reveals her state as she struggles with whether or not she should kill her children:

My heart is water . . . at the sight of my children's bright faces. I could never do it. Goodbye to my former plans. . . .
And yet . . . Do I want to make myself a laughing-stock by letting my enemies off scot-free? I must go through with it. What a coward heart is mine, to admit those soft pleas. . . .
Ah! Ah! Stop, my heart. Do not you commit this crime. . . . No! . . . I shall not leave my children for my enemies to insult.

(55)

Medea falters over her next step. When she claims she would "never" murder her kin, their innocence seems to have touched her. Her farewell to her plots and their status as her "former" intrigues show that her feelings have moved her to leave the matter behind—for now. The utterance "And yet . . ." indicates the formation of a new, contradictory thought that justifies the murders. Her present belief in their necessity—as she displays with the word "must"—and rage against potential humiliation compel her to commit the crime. Still, Medea's abrupt groans and order to "stop" herself shows lingering fears and repulsion. Her equally sudden, scorn-wary decision against this passiveness uncovers doubts about those doubts. One can see such emotional vacillations speed up by the end of the passage. Indeed, her "watery" heart suggests the fluid and mutable nature of her feelings. The sheer number of mind-changes represents not only gratuitous verbiage but also behavioral paralysis—for she does nothing as she stands there—and conflicted passions of dread and anger. Despite her rebuke of her own "cowardly" and "soft" nature, which implies her bent toward manliness, the qualities above ensconce her in womanhood.

Medea's schemes represent her detachment from their execution. The Nurse mentions an early sign of this tendency: "I have already noticed her casting a baleful eye at [her children] as if she would gladly do them mischief" (35). Although the malice of her gaze shows intent as well as a capacity to do harm, she manifests it obliquely. The words "as if" indicate that Medea has not directly hurt her sons, though she looks like she could. Medea herself states, "We women are helpless for good, but adept at contriving all manner of wickedness" (41). She implies that her sex cannot do good but tends toward evil. Yet she does not claim that women actively "do" the latter; she simply says they plan it. Women stay behind the scenes of a crime, away from its actual execution. Medea clarifies this inclination when she ponders a "difficulty" in her plan: "If I am caught entering the palace . . . I shall be slain . . ." Although she chooses poisoning

as "the direct way" to kill the princess (41), Medea has her sons bring the gifts to their victim (53). Thus, she does not actually perform or even witness the deed. Whereas Ajax kills the beasts with his own hands, Medea's hands, at least initially, stay clean of blood.

Rather than retain her femininity, Medea reverses her gender quirks once more as she filters out her feelings. The Chorus wonders how she will "steel her heart and hand" to kill her children (51) and spite faithless Jason. Later, Medea proclaims, "my heart, steel yourself" as she exits to commit the act (59). Like a warrior who numbs himself to violence, she must not yield to her womanish sensitivity. Indeed, the word "steel" evokes emotional as well as material coldness (i.e., weaponry). After the deaths of the princess and Creon, the Messenger asserts to Medea, "You have inflicted a foul outrage on a king's home, yet you rejoice . . . and are not afraid" (53). The first clause refers to a scenario that would usually produce horror and sorrow. The second clause presents Medea's incongruous delight. Although joy is a feeling in itself, it signifies her callousness toward others' pain. Likewise, her lack of fear (or consequences) resembles the boldness of Ajax, who set out to kill his comrades while neglecting the act's moral repercussions. Hence, to avenge herself, Medea has calcified the soft, feminine parts of her heart.

The heroine's actions, like her reactions, veer toward masculinity near the end of the play. After divulging her plot to the Chorus, she proclaims, "Nobody shall despise *me* or think me weak or passive" (50). Her scheme will prove her strength and activeness—qualities of manhood—and dissolve others' scorn for her femininity. Indeed, her emphasis on herself implies that her actions will distinguish her from other females. If she acts unlike a woman, she must be acting like a man. If necessary, she will "take a sword in [her] own hands and face certain death to slay [her scornors]" (41). Such a deed mirrors that of the beast-killing Ajax or of any warrior. Despite her

preference for tact in the murders, she shows willingness for direct, bloody confrontation. She makes good on her word when she tells herself to "seize the sword, seize it" (59). Medea does not just talk about her plan to kill her sons but also acts on it. Her repetition of the word "seize" hammers the idea into her mind, while her hand correspondingly takes the blade before her exit. Instead of limiting her anger to wails, she will physically express it by attacking the children herself. Later, when Jason accuses Medea, ". . . you slew them," she replies, "I did, to hurt you" (63). Ajax killed himself to ensure divine justice against his scorners; Medea kills her sons to retaliate against hers. Thus, she accomplishes a similar end with similar masculinity.

At the play's end, Medea remains beyond her true sex but does reaffirm it subtly. As she leaves to kill her sons, the Chorus says, "Gone, gone for nothing, are your maternal pangs" (59). She has lost one of the central traits of females: the ability to nurture and protect their own offspring. The repetition of "gone" stresses the completeness of its absence. Medea now slays her kin as a man would slay his enemies. The Leader summarizes her development: "The love of Jason has carried [her] through the gates of death" (59). Due to the disgrace of Jason's betrayal, the heroine has changed from a grieving wife with mannish urges to an avenger who overpowers real men. When one examines her transformation piece by piece, a less linear picture emerges. By oscillating between femininity and maleness and ultimately remaining outside her own gender, Medea's development reflects the fluidity of womanhood. Although she ends the play in a manly state, her evolution throughout it matches the nature of the classically fickle female.

Hence, through traits like emotionality, activeness, and directness of deed, Ajax and Medea fluctuate within and beyond their own sexes. The allowance of opposite traits under each gender shows the mutability of that concept when shame affects the character. Yet order springs from this gender chaos and from disdain itself. Ajax's

public disgrace as a warrior and Medea's private shame as a cuckolded wife lead each figure to act in ways that, overall, reaffirm his or her sex. Thus, in both plays, others' scorn helps to uphold the identity of its targets. This accordance between human opinion and natural reality assures audiences that, even with the sad, bloody trials of mortals, the universe can and does make sense.