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Power Bitches of Ancient Greece

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POWER BITCHES OF ANCIENT GREECE

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Sally Jessy Raphael:

In her book *Writing A Woman's Life,* Carolyn G. Heilbrun claims that women have had few role models in literature; that the numerous heroines encountered in readings are content to make marriage their primary goals, and that they are denied opportunites for education, travel, and exploration, and pursuit of a career (Heilbrun, 25). How many women in our audience today grew up reading the "Betsy and Tacey" stories or countless Helen MacInnes novels where the heroine, after facing numerous episodes of peril, settles down to marry the hero and live happily ever after? Today on *Sally Jessy Raphael* we have a guest who was not caught in this trap. We have a woman who "gave / Pleasure to the people of her land..." (Euripides, 11-12). Keep in mind that she has been scrutinized by the press, and we're not here today to try and determine the validity of those often questionable attacks. With that, let me introduce to you former First Lady Nancy Reagan.

Nancy Reagan:

Thank you, Sally. It's a pleasure to be here.

Sally Jessy Raphael:

I understand that you were an avid reader as a child.

Nancy Reagan:

Yes, in fact when I was young my favorite bedtime stories were *The Medea* from Euripides and *Agamemnon* from Aeschylus. Later on, when I went to Smith College, I enjoyed studying them more closely. I admired the two main women in these dramas, Medea and Clytemnestra, because they were powerful, and because, as Mary Lefkowitz put it, "they do what they set out to do, and take action, like male heroes" (Lefkowitz, 5).

Sally Jessy Raphael:

Let's go to our audience for a moment. You in the corner ...

Cora:

My name is Cora. I'm from Athens, Georgia. I was a member of the Screen Actors' Guild Board in the late Forties. I just can't understand why anyone would want to read this kind of stuff. Really. What kind of a twisted, power hungry ...

Sally Jessy Raphael:

Let's get back to Mrs. Reagan, shall we?

Nancy Reagan:

Both Clytemnestra and Medea were agressive, and were therefore characterized as masculine. In the opening of *Agamemnon* the watchman says Clytemnestra "manoeuvers like a man" (13). Further on, at line 355, the leader says that Clytemnestra's words are "spoken like a man." She is no docile woman; she is "guileful and faithless with all her decisions made and all the secrets in her own possession" (Garner, 37). The creation of such a strong and determined woman allowed Euripides to follow with his *Medea.*

Cora:

But do you think these women were happy?

Nancy Reagan:

That's a good question. Not only is Medea a tough woman, but she is a bitter one as well, making her a vicious creature. She says, "We women are the most unfortunate creatures ... (231) What they say of us is that we have a peaceful time / Living at home, while they do the fighting in war. / How wrong they are! I would much rather stand / Three times in the front of battle than bear one child" (248-251). In modern terms, as stated by Charles Rowan Beye, "Medea is a hysterical, repressed, rage-filled wife and mother and Jason is her unfeeling opressor" (Beye, 315).

Sally Jessy Raphael:

How about you, sir, with your hand up in the front row?

Norm:

Well, maybe Medea and Clytemnestra just suffered from PMS?

Nancy Reagan:

It's possible. Both had a list of ruthless murders to their names. However, I think these acts were power struggles more than anything else. You see, by the Greek code of honor, it was expected of the wife to kill herself upon the death of her husband. Both Clytemnestra and Medea rebel against this. Instead of killing themselves, they kill their husbands. According to Nicole Loraux in her book *Tragic Ways of Killing a Woman,* "Not only was the queen no ordinary tragic wife. Clytemnestra did not kill herself, and it was Agamemnon who was to die, ensnared in her veil and his body pierced with wounds. She turned death away from herself and brought it upon the king, just as Medea, instead of killing herself, was

to kill Jason indirectly through his children and his newly-wed wife. The murdering queen denied the law of femininity, that in the extreme of misery a knotted rope should provide the way out" (Loraux, 8)

Cora:

Speaking of which, don't you think you've done a similar thing by cutting off Ronnie's children from his first marriage?

Sally Jessy Raphael:

Let's get back to our topic. What sparks the murders that Medea and Clytemnestra commit?

Nancy Reagan:

Both Medea and Clytemnestra commit murder out of jealousy. "Clytemnestra, like Medea, is jealous of her husband's affections for a new woman" (Garner, 91). Medea, is of course, ousted by a woman who can bring Jason the power of the royal line, whereas Clytemnestra is replaced in Agamemnon's bed by the concubine, Cassandra.

Cora:

Affairs are definitely *not* a modern problem. Exactly how did they kill them, though?

Nancy Reagan:

Both women commit murder using two tools in common: the knife and the cloth. Clytemnestra stabs Agamemnon: "...and then I strike him /once, twice, and at each stroke he cries in agony" (1404-1405). Medea stabs her two sons: "You who have had the heart to raise a sword against / Your two children ... " (1325-1326). While stabbing might have been a common means of murder, it is interesting that robes are also involved in the killings.

Norm:

This puts a new twist on the phrase "dressed to kill."

Nancy Reagan:

Clytemnestra wraps Agamemnon in a robe, trapping him so he is easier to stab. She calls direct attention to this: "He had no way to flee or fight his destiny— / our never-ending, all embracing net, I cast it / wide for the royal haul, I coil him round and round / in the wealth, the robes of doom, and then I strike him ... " (1401-1404).

Medea feigns forgiveness towards Jason and sends his new wife the gift of a dress. "For I will send the children with gifts in their hands / To carry to the bride, so as not to be banished / A finely woven dress and a golden diadem / And if she takes them and wears them upon her skin / She and all who touch the girl will die in agony; / Such poison will I lay upon the gifts I send" (784-789).

Norm:

Should the Smithsonian be cautious about accepting any more of your dresses for their collection?

Nancy Reagan (wringing her hands):

The idea that clothing should play such an important part in a murder corresponds with the fact that the ones committing the murders are women. Clothing falls into the category of women's interests, for when Jason's new wife, "saw the dress, (she) could not restrain herself" (1156). Clothing appeals to women, and it is women who know about clothing and who concern themselves with it

Cora:

Personally, I think you would have given up on these stories after the first page. They don't seem to be all that power hungry.

Nancy Reagan:

Well, both Jason and Agamemnon are guilty of adultery, but Clytemnestra and Medea have men to "run to," as well. Remember, Agamemnon has been

gone to war for ten years. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are waiting to take over the palace after Agamemnon's death. "The horror of Clytemnestra's adulterous passion which led her to murder her husband has suggested their theme, and they go on to sing of frightening examples of the destruction Eros has brought about" (Garner, 82).

Cora:

Are you suggesting that you and Frank Sinatra will someday rule the United States?

Nancy Reagan:

As I was saying, Medea flees to Athens to live with Fr...King Aegus. However, her position is not the same as that of Clytemnestra. For Medea, King Aegus is an escape, not a reason. The accusation of adultery can only lie with Jason, and the lines "Flow backward to your sources, sacred rivers, /And let the world's great order be reversed," (410-411) are interpreted as, "The old songs, such as those about Helen and Clytemnestra, which have continuously and unfairly sung of women's faithlessness, are now to be stopped and corrected" (Garner, 94). For the first time in Greek tragedy, the woman is not to blame. Now if only people could think this way today.

Sally Jessy Raphael:

We'll be right back with some talk about the households in *The Medea* and in *Agamemnon* after a word from our sponsor: Ajax.

Nancy Reagan:

Both Clytemnestra and Medea are battling for power over the household. One can imagine that after an absence of ten years, it would be hard for Clytemnestra to relinquish power back to Agamemnon and his concubine. By killing Agamemnon, she can run the palace with Aegisthus to aid her.

For Medea, it is the same problem. Her position has been replaced by the new queen, and in lines 446 to 626 Jason and Medea quarrel as husband and wife, trying to knock the other down and gain control over the household. Jason says, "You might have lived in this land and kept your home. / As it is you are going to be exiled for your loose speaking" (450-451). Medea slaps him with, "A distinguished husband / I have-for breaking promises" (510-511).

Norm:

We see this stuff all the time on TV.

Nancy Reagan:

Agamemnon was one of the first pieces to bring the domestic side of Greek life into full view. It takes place entirely at the home of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* both had home scenes, but the action roved from place to place. *Agamemnon* opens with a servant, the watchman, telling the reader that the Trojan War has come to an end. This setting of familiarity opened up the possibility for Euripides to take the domestic setting even further in *The Medea*. Not only does it open with a servant, but one who is out front of the house gossiping in the street.

Cora:

I think there's a lot of truth to be found in gossip.

Nancy Reagan:

Notice that the servants are important, as well. Cassandra, who is concubine/slave to Agamemnon, has a large role in the play, especially when she refuses to step on the red carpet and enter the house because she senses the disaster that has happened. The servants in *The Medea* are all-knowing, especially when it comes to Medea's plots.

Cora:

Just like Kitty Kelley.

Nancy Reagan: (Ignores Cora's comment.)

The Medea is a more intricate version of the story of lover's revenge played out in *Agamemnon*. Without the pattern of the strong "masculine" woman, the jealous murder instead of suicide, and the acknowledgment of the lower classes, it is doubtful that *The Medea* would have come into existence in the content and form that we know it.

Cora:

Would you like to comment on some similarities between these two plays and Kitty Kelley's biography of you?

(The last tape of this episode has not come down to us.)

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