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Waiting for Judgment

Melanie Foster

The mood was tense. Everyone in the waiting room looked nervously around at each other, then at themselves, wondering what their eternal fate would be. The small, cramped waiting area had barely enough room for all of the recently deceased souls and many sat on the floor, suffering the pain of death once again in this torturous wait. Three regal-looking women sat cramped in a corner looking at each other, perhaps judging their chances against the others. Finally one broke the silence.

“What do you think your chances are- of getting in I mean?” she said softly, her eyes haunted and vacant.

“If we ever get past this line my actions will speak for themselves- I have nothing more that I need say,” replied the most brazen. One could see the bloody spot on her ghostly figure where the murderous wound had occurred.¹ “I have no doubt that the gods will see that I had justice in my hand² and was paid back in the harshest way. My own son had as much pity for me as my husband had for my poor daughter.”

Her eyes betrayed none of the emotion that might accompany such a horrific statement, but instead revealed a hardened soul that had little emotion at all. “I’m Clytemnestra, by the way.”

“My name is Jocasta,” said the first woman. Her neck had the familiar markings of strangulation³ and translucent tears streamed down the apparition. “Family does indeed have a strange way of simultaneously creating love and pain in us.”

The third woman did not quite look as human as she might, and every now and then dark feathers would fall off of her indistinct body and disappear into the mist that swirled around on the floor. “Pleased to meet both of you,” she said in a singsong voice⁴ that the other two could not help but notice did not quite fit with how they had first regarded her. “I am Procne, and I’m sorry about the feathers. Apparently, you change back into human form after your death. “Family is the most conflicting thing in the world- some members you hate, others you love, and some...” her voice trailed off as she appeared to be thinking about her own history.

An unemotional messenger appeared at the door and called another poor soul to the judgment room, where it would be determined if he would spend his eternity in the bliss of the Elysian Fields or the eternal agony of Hades. Jocasta shivered with fear. “It could be a while before they get to us. I think the waiting is more nerve-wracking than the actual judgment.”

“It seems that we all have some family issues,” said Procne. “Anyone want to pass away the time by talking about them?”

¹ At the end of *The Libation Bearers*, Orestes slays Clytemnestra, but it doesn’t say how, so I was purposely vague here.

² The hand with which she murdered Agamemnon.

³ She strangled herself after learning of Oedipus’s true identity.

⁴ Procne was turned into a nightingale after her crime was realized.

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“I will,” said Clytemnestra haughtily. “I have absolutely no regret for what I have done. My sister⁵, who attracted every man by just batting her long eyelashes at him, was spirited away from her husband by a particularly enamored one. Poor, defenseless Helen, “but my heart is not fluttered as I speak before you”⁶- “she alone killed all those Danaan lives”⁷ without any thought as to the suffering behind it. In order to recapture her, my husband and an army of Greeks set off, but they needed favorable winds because Agamemnon offended the goddess Artemis and she punished him by stopping the winds. They killed my baby Iphigenia to appease her, and then to spend ten years fighting over Helen⁸. When he returned, I killed him and that little tart he brought home. My children killed me in return because I had taken another man. When I do it I get killed, yet when Helen does it thousands of men die to save her.”

The other two looked at her in silence as she rattled off this bloody history without an iota of emotion. Jocasta broke the silence. “You have a lot of anger and I think it stems from your inadequacy in comparison with your sister. From birth, she was the most beautiful woman on earth and you were just the sister- like an afterthought. You wanted to protect your daughter from going through the same rejection and eclipsing that you suffered growing up. She was you, thirty years ago, and when Agamemnon killed your daughter, he killed all that you wanted your life to be. You were almost living vicariously through her.”

“You obviously didn’t care about your other children because they were their father’s favorites, like Helen was,” Procne added. “You wanted to conquer all the injustice that you had been served, and after ten years of simmering, you had enough anger to break your marriage vows through adultery. By doing this, you dirtied your soul enough to work yourself up to murder. Also, you wanted that power that you had been denied throughout your life.”

Clytemnestra seemed to ponder this analysis for a minute before returning to her permanent scowl. “So I’m not perfect- but I’m sure that you two aren’t either. If you had lived good lives you wouldn’t be so worried. Let’s hear what you’ve done so justice can lead you to the place where you deserve to spend eternity.”

Procne, brushing off a few more feathers, started to speak hesitantly. “I killed my son and fed him to my husband,” she said, practically choking on the words. “He had ravaged my sister Philomela and cut out her tongue, and when she escaped from him by alerting me through a woven warning, I stabbed the son he prized and made him into a soup. When he tried to kill my sister and me, we all turned into birds.”

Jocasta nodded silently. “I think that both of you prize your female relatives over the male. Maybe since we are usually confined to the domestic realm together, we women bond together easily. The weaving is a symbol of something that we share that they have no part in- but it is such a small, insignificant thing. Men dictate our lives- they say who we will marry and make it our job to please them- making them an easy target for our resentment.”

⁵ Helen

⁶ *Agamemnon*, line 1402

⁷ *Agamemnon*, lines 1464-1465

⁸ The Trojan War

“I took that symbol and used it against Agamemnon. The female products of the household, our woven goods, let “Justice lead him in”⁹ and by stepping on them, he proved that men have no regard for us women and what we do. So did you have a man that ruined your life- or are you just patronizing us?” Clytemnestra said with a face that was impossible to read- it looked both angry and dismissive at the same time.

“Well...” continued Jocasta, “I suppose you could say that my male relatives also ruined my life. My son killed my husband, and unaware of his identity, married me and became king of Thebes. When he aspired to know the identity of the murderer, he discovered his own- and I couldn’t live with what I had done.”

“But *you* didn’t do anything!” Clytemnestra said angrily.

It was the first time any trace of emotion had entered her voice and the other two looked at her in surprise as she spat out the words.

“Don’t you two get it? These men have ruined our lives, led us to death, and now we have to worry if we offended the gods enough to suffer throughout all eternity. They’ll get off scot-free as heroes, probably. They rule the world and treat us like they treat it- only there to please them! We were no better off than slaves- and even the gods affirm that we are worthless dirt. Apollo let my son go free on the basic premise that since I killed a man and he killed a woman, my crime was worse. Don’t you understand that through our actions we just showed what a horribly unequal society we lived in and it made absolutely no difference?” she practically shouted.

The room went quiet as the other ghosts turned and stared at this irate woman, now standing and screaming down at the other two. Not fazed by the fifty other pairs of eyes on her, she turned around and stared down anyone who dared to look her in the eyes. She then sat back down calmly and, with a look in her fiery, translucent eyes invited them to respond or, if they had the courage, to refute her.

“I don’t disagree with you,” said Procne, “My own experiences have taught me that men think they are entitled to everything and have little respect for our desires. They deprive us of a voice in the world, just as Tereus silenced Philomela’s voice. I hope that maybe someday we will have a world where men and women can coexist peacefully without one being stronger than the other.”

“Hah!” Clytemnestra’s laugh had not an iota of amusement but instead was laden with irony. “Keep wishing, because that won’t happen for a LONG time. How can you not be angry? How can you be so forgiving? They *ruined* your lives and you desire absolutely no revenge? You just want women in the future to enjoy the same rights as men? Why can’t we live like that now? How come Helen can live her life out of the domestic pen that we women are kept in and be fawned over, and yet we broke the same rules and now are possibly going to suffer eternally for it? ”

Jocasta looked at her, and then spoke. “We all have been hurt by men, Clytemnestra. But we already took care of that. We all killed- there’s no point in rehashing all the pain that led us to this corner in this room waiting to see if we are justified in what we have done. Helen made her choices and you made yours- men will always be men and prefer beauty to intelligence. I’m sure she had her moments of regret for her actions, but ultimately she will be in the same situation as us.”

⁹ *Agamemnon*, line 911

Clytemnestra took what someone who had not heard the last outburst might have interpreted as a deep breath, but the two women knew was just a return to her former state of impassivity. “I know what I did was right, and what Helen did was wrong” she sniffed, giving the other two a look of disdain.

Procne looked doubtful. “I don’t know if I’ll get in. He was my only son, and I chose my sister before him. I guess in a way I did what Helen did, only she chose Paris over her son, so I don’t condemn her. At least you know that your sin was unintentional, Jocasta. There’s no way they can punish you in death when you’ve already been punished so in life,” she said consolingly.

Jocasta sighed. “I wish I could be so sure. It seems that death is no better than life- you just are overwhelmed by what you have done and what you didn’t do- and now there’s no way to change it. We’re just left with the enormity of what our legacies were on earth. I left the earth a mother and lover to the same man. Procne, you fought for your sister while killing your son. Clytemnestra, you sought revenge for your daughter while gratifying your concept of moving a woman’s place in the world further, albeit through your desire for power. We have all done good and bad in our lives. There’s nothing more we can do except hope that the gods see that the good outweighs the bad.”

Procne nodded while Clytemnestra remained stoic. As the door to the judgment room opened again and the messenger appeared, the entire room seemed to hold its breath in agitated anticipation.

“Clytemnestra,” he called, putting absolutely no emotion into the name.

She rose haughtily and looked down at the two women beneath her, then stalked off towards the door without a word.

“You think she’ll get in?” whispers came from all around.

Most of the men thought no, most of the women thought yes. Even death could not shatter the solidarity between genders, and the other two women hugged in silent affirmation of their wary hope for the future, and that their future home might be kinder than their past one.

Explanation

In this story, I departed from the traditional characters of Clytemnestra, from the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, Jocasta, from *Oedipus the King* and Procne, from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and yet tried to keep an aspect of the persona the different authors wrote of. Obviously, the three women speak in modern English, and the setting I laid out has no existence in Greek mythology, but I thought it appropriate to have the women in a moment of nervous anticipation. Since their futures were so uncertain, their stark actions in the past would be clearer.

I chose these three women in particular because I thought they had unique stories, but with a common thread of rebelling against the set power of men and suffering for it. I also noted that their problems were strictly familial ones, thus the contrast and comparison of the three families would be interesting. Procne’s murder of her son is, in a way, similar to Clytemnestra’s choosing of Aegisthus over Orestes, but different because Procne murders to revenge her sister while Clytemnestra not only murders to revenge her daughter but also to advance her own power. The figure of Helen also was one of the big topics that I wanted to cover, and I thought as Clytemnestra was her sister it might be

interesting if some of her problems stemmed from her feeling inadequate being the sister of the most beautiful (and arguably one of the freest) women in the ancient Greek world.

The character of Jocasta I wanted to be the calm, rational one, mirroring her husband/son's status as the intelligent hero. As such, she would be a clear contrast to the smothered anger that fueled Clytemnestra while somewhat breaking down the causes of her anger. In *Oedipus the King*, she does seem to be quite apt to figure out what is happening, and I thought that would make her a good psychoanalyst.

For Procne, I wanted to portray the more tender side that Ovid gives the audience a peek at in her moment of indecision before the murder of her son, Itys. I wanted her to be rueful and sad, and therefore scared for her fate. I don't really know why I added the bit about the feathers, but I guess I kind of saw it as her shedding her sins in this place where all is revealed.

Clytemnestra was the first figure I selected, because she had so many problems and seemed like the ideal candidate for women's rights. She added the angry passion to the story, and said the things that women just didn't say back then-, which I thought coincided perfectly with her character.

All in all, I wanted these women to be the familiar characters, but take on a new aspect to show the status of women and the probable resentment that accompanied it, while displaying their problems as a result of this disparity.

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