A Fairy Tale of Mythic Proportions: Parallels between the Agamemnon story and Classic Fairy Tales
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When considering the Greek story of Agamemnon and his family, one is not immediately reminded of a fairy tale. The themes of death, violence, and revenge don’t fit into our visions of princesses, knights in shining armor, and happily ever after. However, on closer inspection it seems this mythic story actually does have many parallels to fairy tales. A new adaptation of this story, Clytemnestra’s Daughters, by Christopher Shorr, brings out many of these parallels. Each of the three daughters fills the role of a typical fairy tale heroine in different moments of the play, and Iphigenia and Chrysothemis both work hard to maintain their dreams and illusions. The fairy tales Snow White and Cinderella in particular have many parallels to the female characters in Clytemnestra’s Daughters. Although this story may not have the “happy ever after” that appears in almost all fairy tales, it does have many of the themes and structure in common with fairy tales. There are many different versions of this story, whether in myth form, Greek tragedy, or modern adaptation, but the focus here will primarily be on Shorr’s adaptation, with comparisons made to how the story is told in The Oresteia, by Aeschylus, Electra, by Sophocles, and Iphigenia at Aulis, by Euripides.

Clytemnestra’s Daughters is an adaptation written by Christopher Shorr, professor of theatre at Moravian College. Though it is not published yet, a reading was done by the Moravian College Theatre Company and Touchstone Theatre in January 2010 and it is set to be published soon after that. I spent the summer of 2009 working with Shorr on his adaptation, helping him edit, research, and revise it. The story differs quite a bit from the original tale. It starts out the same, with Agamemnon sending for Iphigenia in order to make a sacrifice to get the winds at Aulis to blow. However, in this adaptation Iphigenia and Achilles really do have a relationship
and they love each other. Clytemnestra and Achilles come up with a plan to save Iphigenia, a plan that involves Achilles pretending that it is best to go through with the sacrifice. Iphigenia overhears him telling this to Agamemnon, and when the time comes for the sacrifice she takes her own life because she is so upset that Achilles lied to her. In Act Two, much is the same as the original story – Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon and Cassandra when they return from Troy, with the help of Aegisthus. Act Three, however, again departs from the original story. Electra is locked up in a cage, while Chrysothemis stays with her mother and is able to go out to parties and be treated fairly well. Electra is abused by Aegisthus, but she is determined to get revenge on him and her mother. Eventually Chrysothemis, pitying her sister, takes action and steals the keys that will let Electra out of the cage. Electra by this point has been driven slightly mad, and proceeds to immediately kill Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. In her madness, Electra starts taking many pills, until she overdoes, passes out, and eventually dies. The play ends with Chrysothemis attempting to clean up all the blood.

While this story might cause some to argue that it doesn’t fit the definition of a fairy tale, it actually turns out that the fairy tale is difficult to define. Some critics feel any story with a magical occurrence qualifies as a fairy tale; others feel that even magic isn’t necessary. Still others insist that fairy tales simply have a certain feel to them. J.R.R. Tolkien also debated this issue in his article “On Fairy-Stories,” where he expressed his dissatisfaction with the dictionary definition of a fairy tale. He went on to say that “fairy-stories are not in normal English usage stories about fairies or elves, but stories about Fairy, that is Faerie, the realm or state in which fairies have their being” (Tolkien 113). Despite the difficulties in definition, we do know that fairy tales have been around for thousands of years in an oral form, and Jack Zipes tells us in his book *When Dreams Came True* that they “were told largely by adults and for adults” (Zipes
Dreams 2). Today we don’t think of fairy tales as stories told for adults, but the fact that they were makes them closer in style to the Greek myths than we may have realized. Some people suggest that the first fairy tale known to exist is the story of “Cupid and Physche,” a story about the Greek goddess Venus. Clearly, the elements of Greek culture in this story show that the fairy tale and myth are linked in certain ways.

This is evident when considering the list of themes in fairy tales presented by Max Luthi in his article “Central Themes of Classical Fairy Tales.” We find that almost every theme he lists is applicable to the story of Agamemnon in some form or another. These include “readiness to help, die, or fight; the wish to do harm; the human world is not in order; dangers threaten from within the family,… the small and the weak can triumph over the large and the strong; justice prevails; appearances are deceptive… justice should be tempered with mercy; destiny is inevitable” (Luthi 48). Some of these clearly apply to the mythic story, such as the dangers from inside the family, others are seen more clearly in the adaptation Clytemnestra’s Daughters, and some occur in the original plays by Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides. Some of these specific themes, especially those that appear in Clytemnestra’s Daughters, will be looked at in more depth later on in this paper.

Aside from theme, one important element of the fairy tale worth looking at is the function. Zipes cites Vladimir Propp’s study of thirty-one basic functions of a tale, and narrows it down to a summary of eight different functions. The first is that “the protagonist is confronted with an interdiction or prohibition that he or she violates in some way” (Zipes Dreams 3). This comes up many times in the story of Agamemnon, depending upon who you look at as protagonist. Agamemnon himself violates the generally accepted law that one does not kill or sacrifice his own child. In Clytemnestra’s Daughters, with Electra as protagonist, we see her
violate the usual code of the man taking action instead of the woman. Orestes, as taken in *The Oresteia* by Aschylus, goes against what was accepted in those times by committing the horrible act of matricide. The second thing that normally happens is the “departure or banishment of the protagonist, who is either given a task or assumes a task” (Zipes *Dreams* 3). This is pretty clear for our two main protagonists, Electra and Orestes (depending on which story you are considering). Orestes has been exiled by his mother, but just by being the only son of Agamemnon it is his duty to avenge the death. Electra, in Shorr’s version, takes over the role of Orestes. In a way she is “banished” by being mistreated and locked up in a cage, and though she is not given the task of killing Clytemnestra, she takes it upon herself to do so. The protagonist next has an encounter with something or someone, and of the options presented by Zipes, the one that applies in this case is “encounter with villain” (Zipes *Dreams* 3). Electra has many encounters with Clytemnestra, while Orestes first encounters her as he is pretending to be someone else.

The next act event we usually see in fairy tales is that “the endowed protagonist is tested and moves on to battle and conquer the villain” (Zipes *Dreams* 3). This seems to be a pretty general description, but we can say that both Electra and Orestes step up to the plate and go to try and kill Clytemnestra. The next two steps that Zipes gives seem to be missing from the Electra/Orestes story; they are that there is a “sudden fall in the protagonist’s fortunes” and “the protagonist makes use of endowed gifts” (Zipes *Dreams* 3-4). It could be argued that Electra experiences a setback when she is locked up in the cage, but if these functions are to follow in chronological order that would not fit here. Orestes, once he returns, experiences no setbacks, unless you count his wavering on the task in *The Oresteia*. However, the Orestes in Sophocles’ *Electra* has no moment of doubt. And while Electra and Orestes both make use of their personal
strength and sense of justice, they aren’t “endowed gifts” in the sense of magical powers or extreme cunning. We do get back on track with function number seven, however, which states that “the villain is punished” (Zipes Dreams 4). Both Electra and Orestes are successful in killing Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

This success leads to the classic part of all fairy tales: the happy ending. This, however, is where Shorr’s modern adaptation differs the most from the classical fairy tale and the traditional telling of the Agamemnon story. At the end of Electra everything seems to be fine now that the villains are gone, and though Orestes deals with the Furies in part three of The Oresteia, he is ultimately cleared of all charges and can lead a normal, happy life. The end of Clytemnestra’s Daughters is different. Electra succeeds in killing her mother and her mother’s lover, but also ends up killing herself in the process. Why is Electra deprived of her happy ending? Within the story, what rules of society does Electra break that leads to her own demise? While she appears as protagonist throughout most of the play, intent on getting justice for her father’s murder, she eventually falls prey to the same forces that drove her mother. It is no longer simply justice, but a sense of revenge and hatred that fuel her final actions, actions that are bad enough to be punished by death. Electra crosses the line between justice and revenge, working for good and working for bad, and in the end she has to pay for it.

Steven Swan Jones goes so far as to suggest that the “happy ending is such a basic and important aspect of the genre [of fairy tales], it may be regarded as a… definitional feature” (Jones Magic Mirror 17). According to Jones, a story without a happy ending is not a fairy tale. However, Sheldon Cashdan, in his book The Witch Must Die, disagrees. He states that there are fairy tales with unhappy endings. He mentions Hans Christian Andersen’s “The Little Match Girl” (though the status of that story as a fairy tale is debatable), and says that in the original
version of *The Little Mermaid*, the main character at the end of the story throws herself into the ocean and “dissolves into sea foam” (Cashdan 37). So while Cashdan makes the point that not all fairy tales have to have happy endings, it is nevertheless a very common feature in them, and one that does separate *Clytemnestra’s Daughters* from a typical fairy tale.

The other major departure that *Clytemnestra’s Daughters* makes from the traditional fairy tale is the lack of magic or the supernatural. This almost always appears in a fairy tale in one form or another, whether it is a talking animal, some sort of enchantment, or a fairy godmother. Though some say that magic isn’t necessary for a fairy tale, it’s hard to think of one that doesn’t have this magical element to it, and those that do come to mind are also debatable in whether they are truly fairy tales. However, in mythology we do often see the supernatural, especially when dealing with the gods. It can be some sort of transformation, a gift of immortality, or even bringing someone back to life. Some of these things do appear in the Greek plays about Agamemnon and his family – for instance, Iphigenia is supposedly saved by a goddess in Iphigenia at Aulis, and in *The Oresteia* Orestes is chased by Furies and Clytemnestra’s ghost appears. Most, if not all, of these things were removed from *Clytemnestra’s Daughters*. This does give a greater sense of reality to the story, but the lack of magic clearly does not contribute to the parallels that the story has to fairy tales.

Despite these exceptions, Electra fits the role of a typical fairy tale heroine quite well in *Clytemnestra’s Daughters*. In most traditional tales the hero or heroine is a young adult trying to find a place in the world, like Electra. She also fits into the theme of appearance versus reality, which Luthi focuses on in his article. Luthi mentions “the under-estimated youngest” as a common hero or heroine and discusses when “the apparently ordinary, small, weak, or ugly triumphs over the apparently – or even actually – big, strong, powerful, or beautiful” (Luthi 49,
Electra is certainly unexpected and underestimated just by being the youngest sister and also by being a female in that society during that time. Women had little power, which is why in the original story it is Orestes, the male, who comes to save the day. A woman would not have broken the unspoken code; it was the son’s job to avenge his father’s death, not the daughter’s. One of the main reasons why this adaptation was written was to show the power and powerlessness of the characters, and show that women could rise to the challenge just as well as men, if necessary. So Electra is small, relatively weak, and not expected to be doing anything violent in the original plays. However, in Shorr’s adaptation she is stronger in personality and she ultimately does defeat those in power, even though Aegisthus is a strong male, both physically and in terms of his position in the household. It seems that the odds of the small, female Electra killing the big strong male Aegisthus and the tough, older female Clytemnestra should have been impossible. However, it is precisely that which happens.

Having Electra as the heroine instead of Orestes actually makes this story seem more similar to a fairy tale in some ways. The central figure of the fairy tale is usually the female, not the male. If you consider all the classic, well known fairy tales that are popular in our culture – Cinderella, Snow White, Rapunzel, Sleeping Beauty, Little Red Riding Hood, Beauty and the Beast, even Hansel and Gretel – the story features a woman or a girl as its main character. Although the women in these stories don’t always appear to have the most power, they do have important functions and roles to play in the story. One such function, brought up by McGlatherey in the book Fairy Tale Romance, is the role of “the sister as angel of rescue” (McGlatherey 32). It is common in fairy tales for a sister to do something that will save her brother, such as Gretel shoving the witch into her own oven. In Sophocles’ version of Electra, we learn that Electra saved Orestes when he was a baby by getting him out of the house during
the murder of Agamemnon and sending him away, where he might be safe. However, in *Clytemnestra’s Daughters* it is ultimately Chrysothemis that does something to rescue a sibling – she is the one who finally releases Electra from her cage, enabling her to go forth in her quest to defeat evil and kill Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

It is possible that due to this action Chrysothemis fills another role in the typical fairy tale, that which Max Luthi calls the “Faithful John sort” (Luthi 49). This is another example of the theme of appearance versus reality, in that we have a character who appears “suddenly to be unfaithful or treacherous, but precisely that which appears to be cruel faithlessness is the essence of true loyalty” (Luthi 49). This definition might be a bit of a stretch in Chrysothemis’s case, since she doesn’t necessarily do anything that makes her appear suddenly unfaithful. She has no appearance of actual treachery, she simply does not take action. By the end of the play, though, she certainly does show her true loyalty. Perhaps we cannot say that it is “that which appears to be cruel faithlessness” which shows her loyal side.

There is, however, another character who might fit the bill here – Achilles. In true fairy tale fashion, he takes part in a plan which he knows will make him appear treacherous, but it is all for good. He seems to betray Iphigenia by making it known that he thinks Agamemnon should go through with sacrificing her, but he is only saying this because he thinks it will truly save her in the end. He has been loyal to her all along. Luthi also states that “the Faithful John figure finally reveals everything himself” (Luthi 50). Achilles, with the help of Clytemnestra, reveals to Iphigenia that he has been loyal all along, saying “I would never let them hurt you” (Shorr 28). Unfortunately for Achilles, here we see a twist on the reception of the Faithful John – even though he always intended to help her, and was loyal all along, Iphigenia cannot accept
him precisely *because* he appeared treacherous, lied to her, and did not remain openly loyal the entire time.

Iphigenia’s reaction to the situation not only affects her and Achilles, it is also what creates such a drastic change in her mother between Acts One and Two of *Clytemnestra’s Daughters*. In Act One, Clytemnestra appears to be a caring mother, trying to save her daughter from being sacrificed. In Act Two she turns into the villain of the story, and if we consider Electra our heroine, Clytemnestra is the main force that she has to overcome. In fairy tales, older women are never the heroine of the story, which leaves the villain as Clytemnestra’s logical role. These older women are much more often the “obstacle or opposition,” according to McGlatherey (McGlatherey 113). In fact, it is not difficult to see Clytemnestra as the “wicked witch” of the story. She abuses her daughter, has an affair, and murders her well-loved husband. The witch in a fairy tale, according to Sheldon Cashdan, often “poses a lethal threat” to the hero or heroine (Cashdan 17). This is certainly true for Clytemnestra, because Electra is abused so much that she is close to death. In fact, if we compare Clytemnestra to the well known witch figures in stories such as *Snow White* and *Cinderella*, we can see the similarities even more clearly. Those stories feature “a stepmother [who] makes the heroine’s life miserable by taunting her, withholding food from her, and forcing her to perform impossible tasks” (Cashdan 17). The first two are exactly what Clytemnestra does to Electra.

While Clytemnestra may not have mystical powers like many of the witches in fairy tales, she does at least have power and domination over the household. She completely controls her children, and it seems that she can control Aegisthus as well. Though she is the woman, she is more assertive and stronger in character than he is. She makes good use of manipulation – another theme that Luthi feels is common in fairy tales. Though it is not directly stated or
shown, it wouldn’t be surprising if she was manipulating Aegisthus to do the things she wanted. She certainly manipulates Agamemnon when he gets home, pretending to be glad at his homecoming and welcoming him, trying to put him completely at ease, only to kill him when he is most vulnerable. She also attempts to manipulate Chrysothemis by trying to force her own opinions on her, in the hopes that she will pass the lesson on to Electra. In Sophocles’ *Electra*, this is clear when Electra accuses Chrysothemis of merely repeating her mother’s words and not having any opinion of her own. And Clytemnestra certainly tries to manipulate the situation she is in at Aulis by coming up with a complicated plan to save Iphigenia.

This plan, of course, does not work the way Clytemnestra wants it to, and as a result she is a changed person, sworn to get revenge. Many fairy tales begin with the death of a mother, and in the case of Electra’s story, the argument could be made for a metaphorical death of Clytemnestra from the end of Act One to the beginning of Act Two. Clytemnestra seemed like a normal, loving mother up until that point, and then she is completely changed. The Clytemnestra we saw earlier no longer exists. Instead she is harsh, cruel, and focused on killing. She has thus completed her transformation to villain of the story and in a way, Electra has lost her true mother. Cashdan tells us that “in most fairy tales, the witch dies as a result of action taken by the hero or heroine” (Cashdan 60). This is absolutely true for Electra, who ends up killing her “witch.” Usually after this event we have hope and the promise of a happy ending. In this situation, when Clytemnestra is killed, it does give faith that good will triumph over evil. This hope is tainted when Electra dies, but things in the story still follow the natural progression that we expect, in that those who deserve to be punished are killed by the end of the play.

Even though Electra can be considered a heroine in *Clytemnestra’s Daughters*, with Clytemnestra as her villain, Iphigenia also has a unique role in the play because she is the first
heroine we see. Though Electra might be considered the main heroine, her role in Act One is quite minimal (we only see her in the first scene, and then not again until Act Two). Iphigenia is more of a typical fairy tale heroine, at least ones that we think of today, in that she is kind, loving, and relies on the man to save her. In fact, there are many parallels between her and one famous fairy tale heroine in particular – Snow White. Iphigenia is the only one of the three daughters that has a “Prince Charming,” since Achilles is the equivalent of this. He is one of the best warriors, he is famous, and he is almost immortal. When we first see Iphigenia she is longing for her Achilles, dreaming of him and wanting to be with him. In the original draft of Clytemnestra’s Daughters, the play opened with Iphigenia sitting at the piano singing the song “Some Day My Prince Will Come,” from the Disney version of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. This song ultimately had to be changed due to copyright issues, but the original choice certainly shows that Iphigenia is a Snow White type. Both women begin their stories by singing a song of longing and dreams, hoping to be with the perfect man.

However, things turn sour for both Iphigenia and Snow White. In Snow White’s situation we see little of her father, and he does not try to save her. McGlatherey says that in fairy tales, it is almost always true that “the father’s love in unquestioned, but that the changed circumstances in his household render him powerless to take effective action” (McGlatherey 87-88). This seems to hold true for Snow White, since we accept that he father loves her, even though he lets his new wife have all the power and he has no ability to stop her. This quote can also be seen as true in the case of Iphigenia. Ultimately, we accept that Agamemnon does love Iphigenia very much. We can see this through his struggle with his decision and the way the two characters act around each other. Agamemnon also faces “changed circumstances,” though they are not in his household. They are the circumstances he faces as King and general of the army,
and his duty to his men and his country. These circumstances, however, do not “render his powerless” – they in fact do the opposite. The force him to take action and thrust all of the power onto him. The similarity between the father of Snow White and the father of Iphigenia is that both fathers love their daughters, but both are unable to save them – whether it is because they cannot take action, or they are forced to do an action that they do not want to do.

In addition to this, there are other similarities in the stories. Steven Swann Jones, in his article “Structure and Themes in Snow White” describes a general cycle that appears in the story of Snow White. This cycle can then also be applied to Iphigenia’s story. The cycle has three steps. In Jones’ words, they are that “first, a threat is directed against the heroine; second, that threat is realized in some form of hostility; and finally, a rescue or escape from the hostility is effected” (Jones “Structure” 123). The pattern is obvious in Snow White: she is threatened by her stepmother and sent away, she is eventually successfully killed by her stepmother, but she is brought back to life, whether it is by the kiss of her prince in the Disney version, or else the stumbling of the dwarfs while carrying her coffin in the original fairy tale. For Iphigenia, the parallel seems obvious for at least the first two steps. Iphigenia’s life is threatened by the Agamemnon’s need to perform a sacrifice, and the threat is realized when Iphigenia is killed. Though in some versions of the story Iphigenia willingly dies at that moment, if the whole sacrifice situation had never happened she would not have died, and so can be considered a result of hostility that she is killed. It is also possible that this requirement in the cycle is fulfilled by the fact that she was about to be killed. Her rescue is a little more ambiguous. We can say that in Clytemnestra’s Daughters she had the option to be rescued by Achilles and turned it down, so her escape still would have been possible (though not realized). In Euripides’ Iphigenia at Aulis, and the original mythic story, it is reported that Iphigenia’s body was replaced at the last moment
by a deer, and Iphigenia herself was saved by the goddess Artemis and whisked away to another land. We see her later in another one of Euripides’ works, *Iphigenia at Tauris*. Shorr debated adding this element to his own work, and was still not completed decided what would appear in the final draft.

The two other daughters, Electra and Chrysothemis, both have parallels to a famous fairy tale heroine as well. Both, in fact, can be compared to the classic story of *Cinderella*. In *Clytemnestra’s Daughters*, the similarity between Cinderella and Chrysothemis becomes apparent at the end of the play, when Chrysothemis is seen on her knees, scrubbing the floor. Like Cinderella, Electra and Chrysothemis are both daughters that are mistreated, and are really royalty in disguise. The father is virtually absent in the story of *Cinderella*, doing nothing to help his daughter, and in this play the father is literally absent at this point, having been killed. However, aside from these similarities that fit both girls, Electra and Chrysothemis seem to be fairly different characters in personality. The reason why they both share parallels with Cinderella is because they both fit in with a different version of Cinderella. Chrysothemis mirrors the famous American version of *Cinderella*, the version popularized by Disney. She is more pitiable and useless than Electra is, though she does eventually take action at the very end of the play. Cinderella weeps for her deceased mother (or in Chrysothemis’ case, her father), and performs rituals at her mother’s grave. Cinderella has a happy ending; Chrysothemis is the only one that has anything close to a happy ending by still being alive at the end of the play.

Electra, on the other hand, fits in with the older versions of Cinderella. In Jane Yolen’s article “America’s *Cinderella*,” she explains the differences between who Cinderella was in the original fairy tales and what she has become today in our society. In contrast to the pitiable, kind to a fault Cinderella in Disney’s version, she was originally a more shrewd, strong character.
Yolen says she “tricks the step sisters with double talk,” a common technique used in Greek plays (Yolen 133). Cashdan also refers to the Cinderella in the Grimm version as “embittered and jealous,” two traits that define Electra in Act Three of this play (Cashdan 95). Electra is a daughter that is treated like a slave in her own home, much like Cinderella was. While in Clytemnestra’s Daughters we only see her abused and locked up, in Sophocles’ Electra she makes reference to being forced to do the duty of slaves in her own home. Cinderella is also a woman who knows that “wishing solves nothing,” something else she has in common with Electra (Yolen 135). Out of the three daughters in Clytemnestra’s Daughters, Electra is the one who does not have an idealized dream of the future and she spends her time planning action, rather than simply wishing or relying on someone else. In fact, Yolen goes as far as to say that “in most of the Cinderella tales there is no forgiveness in the heroine’s heart. No mercy. Just justice” (Yolen 137). This seems to describe Electra perfectly. Electra is determined to get revenge of Clytemnestra for the sake of justice. She cannot forgive what has happened, and she clearly shows no mercy.

Electra, and many of the other female characters, are given much stronger roles in Clytemnestra’s Daughters than they had in the original myth. Nevertheless, they are still reliant on males as a result of the society that they live in. In fairy tales, the males often play a negligible role. Cashdan refers to this situation, saying that “male figures in fairy tales tend to be portrayed as weak or unavailable” (Cashdan 94). In Clytemnestra’s Daughters, the males that we see are for the most part quite weak (Aegisthus, Achilles, Agamemnon), or else they simply don’t exist (Orestes). It is the heroines that the story centers around, and even the villain is often an evil stepmother or witch – a female character. In stories such as Snow White or Cinderella, the prince really plays a very minor part and his character is more one-dimensional. Despite this,
Zipes does point out in his book *Fairy Tale as Myth* that “No matter what they may do, women cannot chart their own lives without male manipulation and intervention” (Zipes *Fairy Tale as Myth* 89). This is evident in the original mythic story – In Sophocles’ *Electra*, even though Electra wants to take action, she instead has to wait for Orestes. Clytemnestra cannot really take credit for the murder herself, but rather lets Aegisthus claim he came up with the plan.

In *Clytemnestra’s Daughters*, the women do have the opportunity to take control of their own lives. However, doing so goes against the accepted rules of their society, and by doing so they are “punished” in some way when they act in a way they should not. Often this punishment is death, or some other form of unhappy ending. Zipes also states that “one aspect of the fairy tale… is about the domestication of women” when speaking of *Snow White*, but this can be true for many fairy tales (Zipes *Fairy Tale as Myth* 89). We certainly see this in *Snow White*, when she takes care of the dwarfs’ house, and in *Cinderella*, when she cleans the house (in some versions of the tale, she does this cheerfully and almost willingly). In *Clytemnestra’s Daughters* we have the opportunity to see women breaking away from this role and they are no longer confining themselves to the world of domestication.

In some ways it is because of this that *Clytemnestra’s Daughters* shares much in common with fairy tales. While there is a sense that the females in fairy tales are “relegated to passive roles,” as Jones says in his book *The Fairy Tale: The Magic Mirror of Imagination*, and our Greek heroines break free of that in this new adaptation, there is also the fact that this story focuses on family and personal relationships (Jones *Magic Mirror* 65). Fairy tales are traditionally based on such issues, instead of dealing with the culture as a whole, which is what happens more often in legends and Greek myths. Males dominate legends, women dominate fairy tales – and as a result males “represent the ideals and models of behavior” that are used as
an example for society (Jones Magic Mirror 65). Clytemnestra’s Daughters, then, has elements of both a fairy tale and a legend. It is steeped in the traditional Greek myths, but it takes a more modern view of the people in the story and their personal relationships and reactions to situations.

While some of the characters in this play live in the real world and are motivated by things like revenge, others are striving to make their lives happy and perfect, like a fairy tale. As Zipes says, it’s in human nature to “want to make our lives classic” (Zipes Fairy Tale as Myth 5). Aside from the characters wanting fairy tale lives, the story of Clytemnestra’s Daughters itself has many characteristics that fairy tales have, albeit some of the darker qualities. Alison Lurie points out in her book Boys and Girls Forever that fairy tales are vivid and blunt. She says that “Sometimes we need to have the truth exaggerated and made more dramatic, even fantastic, in order to comprehend it” (Lurie 125). This can certainly apply to Clytemnestra’s Daughters.

Very few people experience anything like Agamemnon and his family experience. Most of us don’t get abused and locked in a cage by our mothers, our mothers don’t kill our fathers, and our fathers don’t sacrifice our sisters to the gods. Nevertheless, we still deal with many of the problems that are involved in these situations. We can relate to the desire for justice, the difficulties in deciding whether or not to act in a certain situation, and the feelings of betrayal and heartbreak. Just as there are “lessons” to be learned through fairy tales, there are also lessons we can learn from the Greek tragedies. Murder is punished, justice can ultimately be upheld, and being controlled by revenge will be harmful.

Although Clytemnestra’s Daughters has been adapted from Greek tragedy and has roots in Greek myth, it also has much in common with classic fairy tales. Myth and fairy tales are tied more closely together than most people realize, and this story demonstrates that. While some of
the original tragedies by Sophocles and Aeschylus also incorporated similar themes to those in fairy tales, it is really this new adaptation by Christopher Shorr that emphasizes these themes and similarities. There are many parallels between the characters and classic fairy tale characters, and events in fairy tales are reflected in this play. With the fairy tale being such a diverse genre that is so difficult to define, *Clytemnestra’s Daughters*, while not necessarily a modern fairy tale, can certainly be compared to these classic works.
Works Cited


