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A Taste for Revenge: Nefarious Cooking in Greek Literature

A persistent stereotype of ideal femininity in Greek antiquity exists in numerous examples of literary and artistic representations of women pursuing homely, everyday tasks. Activities within the home, such as weaving, child-rearing, cooking and baking, were the purview of women, while men labored outside of the home. Women who busied themselves with such wholesome activities were praised in literature and were presented as attractive and desirable in artistic representations. But at the same time, a seemingly contradictory topos exists in Greek tragedy and myth in which female heroines use these very same mundane household tasks assigned to them as weapons to strike back against their enemies. Even so mundane and domestic a task as cooking is transformed into a grotesque parody of industry when used to cause mischief or even death.

In general, women who wished to cause harm used what was closest to hand in the women's quarters and kitchens. Since the hearth and herb garden were in the woman's domain, her activities there would raise no suspicion. The sorceress Circe, for example, dupes her guests by presenting herself as a feminine ideal; she weaves, she sings, and she cooks. Her culinary hospitality, however, turns her guests into beasts who are under her complete control. But other heroines pursue a far more gruesome and hands-on approach to culinary revenge, such as Medea, who persuades the daughters of Pelias to butcher and boil their father, and Procne, who serves the cooked meat of their son Itys to her husband Tereus. Furthermore, Klytemnestra's association in both art and literature with the double axe regularly used in sacrifice, and Medea's and Procne's slaughter of their young children have an undeniable link to sacrificial rites, though monstrously perverted.

Such acts of butchering and cooking inevitably suggest the rituals of sacrifice and invite the question of whether or not women were permitted to wield knives, slaughter animals or handle raw meat, an issue that has been argued by M. Detienne, R. Osborne and J. B. Connelly. If, as Detienne suggests, women were banned from participating in sacrifice, the act of a female butchering and cooking meat would have been considered irreligious, even without the added horror of the human victim. But if, as Osborne and Connelly counter, women regularly handled raw meat and participated in sacrifice, the presentation of these vicious acts in the guise of ritual sacrifice would be perverse, but for different reasons. The traditional role of the nurturing female care-giver in the form of a wife, mother, or daughter is transformed to that of avenging priestess. It is not the act of butchering that is grotesque, therefore, but the choice of victim.