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AESCHYLUS' *ORESTEIA* TRILOGY

At the City Dionysia of 458 BC, two years before his death, Aeschylus presented his dramatization of the myth of the house of Atreus. Later known as the *Oresteia* ('the story of Orestes'), Aeschylus' version takes the form of a connected trilogy that unfolds in chronological sequence, with continuity of subject-matter, imagery, characters, and story-line. *Agamemnon* tells of the title figure's return after conquering Troy, and his murder (along with his Trojan concubine Cassandra) at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra, who seizes power with her lover Aegisthus. Her exiled son Orestes returns to avenge his father's death, murdering Clytemnestra and Aegisthus with the help of Electra and the slave-women of the house, who give the second play its name, *Choephori* or *Libation Bearers*. After the matricide, Orestes is pursued by the Furies, spirits who take vengeance on those who shed kindred blood, tracking him first to Delphi and then to Athens. There Athena establishes a court to try cases of homicide, and the goddess herself breaks the jury's deadlock by voting to free Orestes. She calms the Furies' anger, persuading them to reside in Athens as spirits of marriage and fertility, transforming them into 'the kindly ones' or *Eumenides*, the title of the third play. Following the trilogy a satyr-play, *Proteus* (now lost), told the escapades of Menelaus, Agamemnon's brother and husband of Helen, when he was shipwrecked in Egypt on his way home from Troy.

To understand how the trilogy works requires a double focus. First, we must remain alert to the theatrical unity of the piece and the various ways in which Aeschylus achieves it, combining an incomparably rich poetic text with a strong sense of dramatic momentum. But we also must attend to the differences that operate from play to play, for the triadic structure means that each tragedy establishes its own relationship to the audience. With this double focus we engage the moment-to-moment unfolding of events, even as we place them in the larger pattern of history and chronology that the trilogy compasses.

In *Agamemnon* the action plays itself out in a murky light. Ambiguity and *double entendre*, dark prophecy and deceptive hopes create an atmosphere of anxious uncertainty. Events and emotions keep turning into their opposites

– affirmation leads to denial, good news presages disaster, victory breeds defeat, beauty gives rise to destruction – as the triumphant return of the king proves but a prelude to his murder. In contrast to *Agamemnon*, the action of *Choephori* is tightly focused, unfolding with precision and clarity, almost claustrophobic in its effect. Aeschylus radically alters the relationship between stage and auditorium by drawing the spectators into the murder plot as co-conspirators, committed to the plan and its success. The audience's relationship to the dramatic events shifts again in *Eumenides*, where the mythical Orestes moves out of his own story and into that of Athens, playing a crucial role in the foundation of Athenian civic, ritual, and legal customs. Here the fifth-century audience approximated the jurors at Orestes' trial, arriving at a judgement and yet aware of how the case (and the drama itself) was subsumed in the virtual history of their own city.

The trilogy works via a progressive movement towards the audience – from obscurity to clarity, from past to present, from monarchy to tyranny to democracy, from retributive to collective justice, from ancient Argos to near-contemporary Athens. The theatrical embodiment of the process lies in the transformation of verbal imagery into dramatic action, the realization of the world implicit in the word, as language literally 'takes the stage'. Pivotal images and figures of speech assume a visual and physical life, until the institutions of the city where the play was performed are 'founded' before the audience's eyes, and with their help.

AGAMEMNON

The *Oresteia* begins with one of the great opening monologues in the history of drama (1–39). An unassuming Watchman lies on the roof of the house, waiting for the beacon fire that will bring news of Troy's fall. With his first word 'Gods!', he begs the higher powers to release him from the pain of a year's watch. He speaks of the great cycle of stars, doubtful that in such a panoply a single torchlight could appear, but still he obeys 'the command/ of a woman who thinks like a man' (10–11). The sudden appearance of the beacon turns his fear for the house to joy, the fire-signal gleaming like the dawn of a new day. As the Watchman leaves to wake Clytemnestra and 'start the dance' (31), he recovers some of his early guardedness, refusing to divulge what he knows, but calling on the house to tell its own story.

Like all well-written dramatic characters, the Watchman has something specific to do – stay awake, keep watch, spread the news when a single torch ignites the story of Agamemnon's return. His monologue has a natural ring to it, as if he were welcoming the audience into the play. But the prologue also presents a tightly wrapped bundle of proleptic themes and images that will be played out over the next three and a half hours in the theatre – the gods, sickness and pain, night and day, sleeping and wakefulness, women and men, good news and conquest, speech and silence.

The Watchman's desire to 'start the dance' anticipates the entrance of the chorus, old men of the city left behind when the army sailed for Troy. The *parodos* opens with an anapaestic prelude (40–82) that moves back ten years earlier, when the brothers Agamemnon and Menelaus first 'brought suit against Priam' (41) in the form of the Trojan War. Priam's son Paris had abducted Helen, the wife of his Greek host Menelaus and sister of Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra. In so doing, Paris violated the Greek code of hospitality, *xenia*, guaranteed by the god Zeus, who sends the two sons of Atreus and a thousand ships to win Helen back. The chorus call the war-dead 'a first offering' (literally, a 'preliminary sacrifice', 65), the word referring to the sacrifice before a wedding, presumably that of Paris and Helen. The perversion of a marriage ceremony is the first of many such maimed rituals in the trilogy, linking weddings with death.

The chorus themselves emphasize their age ('fallen leaves that crumble', 79–80) and powerlessness ('we wander, a dream through the daylight', 82). And yet they suddenly grow animated by the sacrifices that burn through the city. Addressing the absent queen Clytemnestra, they wonder if the burnt offerings mean that good news has come from Troy. The very thought of Clytemnestra and the prospects of victory overcome their impotence and energize their reflections, serving as the catalyst for the chorus's shift from anapaests into full lyric.

Characteristic of the play, the same impulse that drives the action forward takes us back in time, back to the scene at Aulis before the Greek army sailed for Troy. In the complex lyric that follows, a series of narrative vignettes – what we might call 'choral events' – stands out. The chorus recall the eagles that appeared as portents of success, until 'swooping down on a pregnant hare big with young,/ they tore and feasted' (118–20). The chorus try to reverse the pattern of good omens turning bad by sounding a refrain they will repeat two more times in the course of the *parodos*: 'Sing sorrow, sorrow, but may good win out in the end' (121).

The chorus re-enact the prophet Calchas' interpretation of the oracle, with a single chorus member delivering Calchas' lines, a technique that operates later in the ode when Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter. The prophet predicts triumph, but prays that no god 'darken the bit/ you forge on Troy' (131–33), leading the chorus to repeat their refrain of sorrow that hopes for victory. The group then turn their thoughts to the ships penned in at Aulis by contrary winds, a delay in the war that leads to a more ominous sacrifice than that of the pregnant hare, and to strife that (literally) 'lies in wait, terrible, ready to break out again,/ keeping house with deceit, a child-avenging wrath that never forgets' (154–55). The piling-up of adjectives gives some sense of the complexity of Aeschylean lyric. The two lines evoke the sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis and of Agamemnon at Argos, and the feast of Thyestes in the previous generation, but the references are muted and jumbled, waiting for the play to elucidate them.

As if voicing the audience's desire for clarity, the chorus sing for the last time their refrain that sorrow might achieve some ultimate good. They then utter a desperate prayer to Zeus, the god 'who sets men on the path/ to learn by suffering' (176–78). Acknowledging that divine wisdom comes violently, against men's will, the chorus consider the Greek army at Aulis as an example of this cosmic lesson. Angry at the eagles' feast of the pregnant hare, the goddess Artemis sends contrary winds to keep the ships from sailing. While the soldiers grow restless, Agamemnon as commander-in-chief must either sacrifice his daughter to assuage the goddess or abandon the expedition. A single chorus member takes on the role of the tortured king, debating with himself (still in lyric) as he realizes there is no way without evil. The group describes how Agamemnon 'put on the yoke of necessity' (218), a paradox that emphasizes both his individual choice and the way that fate necessitates it. To rephrase the decision, we might say that Agamemnon freely chooses to do what he in fact has to, a situation re-enacted later in the play when he walks on the red tapestries.

The climax to this extraordinary *parodos* is the re-creation of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, an innocent girl whose blood is shed so that more blood can flow. Through the vivid language and choral movement, we see her pray to her father for mercy while the soldiers shout for war. Bound and gagged, lifted like a goat over the altar, Iphigenia strikes each of her killers with eyes filled with pity, like a picture straining to speak. The images are striking, unforgettable – a twisted sacrifice, the perversion of paternal love in the face of the cry for war, the death of innocence, the waste of a young life. On the verge of the fatal blow, the chorus stop short and refuse to say what happened. Their sudden reticence reminds us of the Watchman at the end of the prologue, who also refuses to divulge all that he knows.

Suddenly the chorus-leader shifts into iambic trimeters and greets Clytemnestra, who enters from the palace. Her first words cap the opening movement of the play: 'Good news! as the saying goes,/ when dawn is born from her mother night./ Joy beyond your greatest hopes – / the Greeks have seized Troy' (264–67). The confirmation of triumph coincides with the appearance of Clytemnestra, who will dominate the play both rhetorically and dramatically from now on.

In her famous Fire speech, Clytemnestra describes the beacon signals that announce Agamemnon's victory with a series of stunning similes – torches like a relay race, bonfires that rise up like the sun and then break through the clouds like a full moon, flames racing like ships across the water and dancing in the clear mirror of the sea. Even as the language dazzles, it draws the worlds of Argos and Troy together, bound by a chain of fire. The news that arrives at the house of Atreus is a blaze descended from the holocaust of Troy.

Clytemnestra further explores the relationship between the Greek victors and their Trojan victims in her next speech, imagining the chaos of a fallen

city. Psychically attuned to the victims, she creates the pathetic scene of Trojans falling on the bodies of their dead, of women weeping for their husbands, of children clutching at the legs of the old men. The Greek conquerors, on the other hand, roam the city freely and sleep 'like happy men,/a night when no guard stands watch' (336–37). Implying their defences have fallen too quickly, Clytemnestra fears that the Greek army may be 'conquered by what they have won' (342). They still must return home, where 'the anger of the slaughtered may wake,/ and evil break out again' (346–47).

With these two extraordinary speeches, Clytemnestra forces us to see that the fate of Troy and that of Argos are bound inextricably together. With her poetic and rhetorical power, she takes control of the play, and as she returns to the palace we know that she is the force to be reckoned with.

Left alone in the orchestra, the chorus celebrate the victory in their first stasimon, returning to their view that Zeus guarantees the rights of *xenia*, punishing mortals who 'trample untouchable things' (371). They move from the general idea of human excess to the specific example of Paris, who came as a guest to Menelaus' home and stole his wife. The chorus also consider Helen, who brought to Troy a 'dowry of death' (406–08), and then they cross the waters back to Menelaus and Sparta. The household laments the royal bed and the fading print of Helen's body, and Menelaus finds no respite in sleep, for the dreams of his lost wife slip through his arms.

The chorus leap quite naturally across space and time, just as they did when alternating between human victory and its divine underpinnings at the opening of the stasimon. Changing focus again, they leave the royal palaces for the hearth of an average Greek home, where a lone woman confronts the deadly commerce of war:

> War is a money-changer of bodies;
> his balance rests on the point of a spear.
> From the fires of Troy, he sends dust that weighs heavy –
> packed in the hold
> urns swollen with powder
> to take the place of a man.
> (*Ag.*, 437–44)

The blow of Zeus, so clearly marked in the fate of Paris and the fall of Troy, also operates on the Greeks who conquered the city. Popular anger swells against Agamemnon and Menelaus, and the stasimon ends in a mood far different from the jubilation with which it began. A great victory has turned into a series of defeats, and collective celebration at the sack of a city gives way to individual grief. The shift is so complete that the chorus begin to doubt the news of the victory itself, wondering if the beacon-story was simply Clytemnestra's dream, a woman's rumour, swift to spread and swift to die (486–87).

A bedraggled figure enters the orchestra through one of the *eisodoi*, no spectacular return of a victorious army but the arrival of a solitary soldier. The chorus leave the lyric mode to welcome him in regular iambic trimeter, a human voice that will confirm or deny the wordless message of the beacon.[1] Instead of news of victory, however, the Herald expresses his amazement that he has come back at all, 'with all my hopes shattered except one – / that I might . . ./ die here, and be buried in my home soil' (505–07). After enumerating the simple pleasures of survival – the earth, the sunlight, the sight of home, the presence of protecting divinities – the Herald celebrates a victory that eradicates those very blessings:

> Digging up the soil of Troy,
> he [Agamemnon] worked it with the pick-axe of Zeus –
> altars smashed, temples rubble,
> the seed of the land destroyed.
>
> (525–28)

Agamemnon has 'yoked' Troy, paying Paris back for the rape of Helen that 'harvested' only death for his country (529–36). The reversals are complete – the natural world is uprooted and the places of the gods obliterated. Clytemnestra's warning that the Greeks let 'no passion make them ravage what they should not' (341–42) has gone unheeded.

A strange stichomythic exchange follows, the first real dialogue in the play, and yet one that brings very little to light. The chorus-leader adumbrates that those at home also suffered during the army's absence, but he refuses to elaborate, using silence as a 'long-practised remedy from harm' (548). For the third time in the play, the dark side of the past is exposed only to be covered up with silence. As the Herald tries to understand the veiled hints, he finds himself drawn back to the war – the blazing sun on the decks of the ships, the dank heat and sweat of their berths, the worm-eaten rations, the fear of camping near the walls of the enemy, the steady drizzle, the slow rot of their clothes, the teeming lice, and the winter cold that slaughtered birds, sweeping down from Mt Ida. After his graphic account of the realities of war, the Herald desperately tries to resurrect the joy of conquest:

> But why count the dead?
> Have we lived only to think of them?
> Must their wounds break out again?
> No! I say good-bye to disaster./. . ./
> It is good to boast in the light of the sun,
> my words soaring over all land and sea,
> Troy has fallen! . . .
>
> (570–77)

But the shift to the triumphant mode seems forced, as if the horrors at Troy have spoiled any simple sense of victory.

Suddenly Clytemnestra appears at the threshold of the palace, upstaging the Herald and the chorus in the orchestra. In control of the entrance to the house, she tells the Herald to return to her husband and urge him to hurry back 'like a lover to his city'. For a woman, 'no light shines brighter than her man/ when she opens wide the gates and welcomes him home' (601–05). The language is daring, an erotic voice in the midst of the war-talk of the Herald, and no less dangerous. Clytemnestra returns to the palace after another dynamic appearance in which she reasserts her dominance.

With the queen's departure, the chorus turn their attention to Menelaus and learn that his ship was lost from sight. The Herald's secret is out – a storm at sea destroyed the fleet on its return.[2] In a *tour de force*, the Herald recreates the catastrophe – fire and water (lightning and sea) joined forces against the Greek ships, like a crazed shepherd driving his flock to doom. After the storm, 'when the shining light of the sun rose up,/ we saw the Aegean flower with corpses' (658–59). As elsewhere in the play, the rising sun with its promise of renewal dawns on desolation. The oxymoron 'flower with corpses' has a similar effect, a symbol of beauty and growth that turns into its opposite. The poetic imagery reflects the dynamic structure of the scene, for the report of victory that the Herald has brought becomes, in the telling, news of disaster.

The Herald exits, having brought the war and its aftermath wrenchingly to life, one of the great secondary roles in Greek tragedy. In a mood markedly different from that which started their previous stasimon, the chorus burst into lyric by attacking Helen, the paragon of beauty who spread only ruin: 'Helen – hell for ships, hell for men, hell for cities' (688–90). Aeschylus puns on the word *hele*, a form of the verb 'to destroy', as if Helen's name encapsulates her fate and provides the frame for her dramatic character. Developing the idea that she and Paris have made a marriage to death, the chorus describe her as 'a spear-bride fought over by both sides' who abandoned the 'gentle veils' of Sparta, perhaps suggesting the bridal veil worn at a Greek wedding. The 'wedding hymn' that the Trojans sing when Helen arrives turns into a funeral dirge, and the marriage-bed becomes a 'bed of death' (705–14). The arrival of Helen at Troy accomplishes 'bitter rites of marriage' that reveal her as 'the bridal-weeping Fury' (739–49), the noun 'Fury' ringing out as the final word of the strophe. The conflation of weddings and funerals brings home to the audience the depths of the violence unleashed at Troy, and also serves to link Helen and her sister Clytemnestra, who fatally undermines the sanctity of her own marriage as well.

In this stasimon Aeschylus exploits the freedom of lyric to incorporate material unbounded by strict logical and psychological constraints. In the story of the lion cub, for example (716–36), the chorus introduce a dramatic image so vivid that it assumes a life of its own. Raised in the home, the cuddly animal grows from pet to killer as time reveals its true nature. The specific relevance to Helen (or Clytemnestra, or Agamemnon) is left open,

since there is no simile at work. Rather, the lyric suggests correspondences by image, metre, and juxtaposition, as when the chorus move abruptly from the havoc wreaked by the lion to the day of 'windless calm' that brought Helen to Troy. The peaceful arrival seems far removed from the violence and bloodshed of the beast grown wild, until we learn that the new bride herself proves to be a Fury who unleashes untold death.

At the end of the stasimon, the chorus shift to anapaests to welcome Agamemnon, their formal address capturing the paradox of the returning hero: 'King, who ravaged Troy,/ offspring of Atreus . . .' (783–84). As the leader who destroyed a city, Agamemnon bears responsibility for his actions; as the child of Atreus, an heir to a past over which he has no control, Agamemnon is guiltless. The double edgedness of human circumstance, so briefly but tellingly marked here, emerges time and again in the trilogy and provides much of its vitalizing tension.

Driving his chariot into the orchestra, Agamemnon symbolically brings the Trojan War with him. Standing at his side, unnamed but visible to the audience, is Agamemnon's war-prize, the Trojan princess and prophetess Cassandra. The chariot with a standing man and woman reflects fifth-century wedding iconography, for we know that an Athenian husband would drive his bride to her new home in a cart, frequently heroicized in vase-painting as a chariot. The confusion of weddings with war in the previous stasimon (through the marriage of Paris and Helen) now takes concrete visual form with the arrival of Agamemnon and his 'war-bride'.

Speaking from the chariot, Agamemnon greets his city and describes the gods who helped him to victory, but his account of the moment of triumph is disturbing:

> Shield-bearing young of a wooden horse
> timed their birth to the setting stars.
> A lion leapt the walls
> and gorged itself on a frightened city,
> lapping up the blood of kings.
> (825–28)

We hear echoes of the omen at Aulis, where eagles devoured the young of the pregnant hare, but here the new-born animals do the feasting. The army is a lion – like the cub in the second stasimon that grows to destroy the house that raised it – feeding on the blood of a great city. Given the poetic richness of the *Oresteia*, choice of language can implicate a character in a way he or she does not intend, and here Agamemnon's description triggers a complex set of responses that take the audience back to events preceding the war, particularly those leading to the sacrifice of Iphigenia.

When Clytemnestra appears at the threshold, the situation turns electric. She delivers a riveting speech that merges public with private, intimacy with boldness, culminating in the play's famous dramatic action, the spreading of

the dark-red tapestries to welcome Agamemnon home. However, she begins by addressing the chorus, not Agamemnon, a *gestus* for the alienation she felt while her husband was at Troy. In a domestic version of the Herald's speech on the hardship of war, Clytemnestra describes her loneliness at home when rumour broke around her like a plague. Fear was her sole companion, as she heard reports of Agamemnon being wounded and even killed, driving her to thoughts of suicide. At this rhetorical high-point, Clytemnestra shifts gears and addresses her husband obliquely: 'So your child is not here, as should be the case,/ the living proof of our love for each other,/ Orestes' (877–79). By holding off the name, Clytemnestra leaves open the possibility that she has Iphigenia in mind, and the effect in the theatre is palpable.

Having spent many wakeful nights waiting for the beacon, and having endured the nightmares that followed when sleep did come, Clytemnestra at last can welcome her husband home:

> I call on my husband –
> sheepdog of the flock
> mainstay and mast of a warship
> central pillar of a great hall
> a father's only son
> land to the sailor lost at sea
> calm after a night of storm
> spring water to the parched traveller.
> (896–901)

The hyperbole generates its gestural counterpart, as the queen orders her slaves to spread the tapestries before Agamemnon, so that 'justice may lead him to the home/ he never hoped to see' (911).

For a long moment the talking stops, as the servants lay out the lush red tapestries in the orchestra for Agamemnon to walk on. Do they flow out of the palace to suggest the bloodshed that lies ahead, and the past violence that has stained the house of Atreus? Or are the tapestries spread out from Agamemnon's chariot leading up to the palace entrance, as if the blood spilt at Aulis and Troy symbolically swamps the orchestra? Or are they strewn from both ends, linking the fates of Troy and Argos, binding the past to the present? However the scene is staged, the tapestries cut the orchestra with a dark-red path, a striking visual field that draws together the various images of bloodshed in the play.

Agamemnon contemptuously rejects the oriental excess and obsequiousness of his wife's welcome, fearing that by trampling such wealth he might inspire envy from the gods. Now Clytemnestra raises the dramatic stakes, initiating a rapid stichomythic exchange with her husband, and after a dialogue of only fourteen lines, Agamemnon yields to her request. Critics have tried to glean the rational basis for his change of heart, but in performance the crucial shift is less a question of argument and deliberation

than of rhythm – Agamemnon is swept up by Clytemnestra's verbal pace and energy. Put in psychological terms, tragic stichomythia respects the mystery of decision without attempting to explain it away, acknowledging that men and women often pretend to rational choice while really making a stab in the dark.

Before stepping down from the chariot, Agamemnon introduces Cassandra and orders his wife to welcome her as a new slave into the house. But Cassandra quickly is forgotten once Agamemnon tramples down the dark-red path. His conduct is not sacrilegious (the cloth is not sacred); rather it symbolizes Agamemnon's destruction of the wealth of the house. Clytemnestra enforces that sense as she coaxes her husband inside, vowing to drain the sea for the dyes needed to colour miles of such fabric, willing 'to lay out all the bounty of the house to be trampled,/ . . ./ weaving the strands that bring this life home' (963–65). Her verbal excess matches the boldness of the action, and when her husband reaches the palace, she utters a final prayer that seems to signal his imminent death: 'Zeus, Zeus, harvester! Ripen my prayers./ Turn your mind to the harvest at hand' (973–74). She follows Agamemnon inside, the carpets are removed, and the chorus are left to consider what has happened, and what lies ahead.

In a quick-paced, agitated ode, they admit that the king has returned safely, but they cannot silence their premonitions, a 'dirge of the Furies' that sings within (900–02). Try as they may, the chorus cannot find words for their fears, for the 'fire that burns in the mind' (1034). We expect the off-stage death-cries of Agamemnon to resolve their uncertainties, but suddenly Clytemnestra emerges from the palace. Both she and the chorus have forgotten Cassandra.

Clytemnestra alternately encourages and cajoles the Trojan prophetess to follow her inside, to stand by the sacrifice she has prepared to welcome Agamemnon home. But Cassandra refuses to respond, and her silence could not be more eloquent or effective. For the first and only time in the play, Clytemnestra and her verbal pyrotechnics do not control the action. When her last strident threat fails, the queen beats a sullen retreat back into the palace, and all eyes turn to Cassandra, the solitary figure still standing in the chariot. What will she say?

On-stage and mute for some 250 lines (the last thirty-one of which focus directly on her *refusal* to speak), Cassandra breaks her silence not by speaking at all, but by singing. She lets out a heart-rending cry, followed by the name of her destroyer, the god Apollo. After each of her lyric utterances, the chorus respond with two lines of spoken dialogue, inverting the normal pattern in which the chorus use lyric metres and the actor speaks. The transference gives this lyric dialogue exceptional power, and Aeschylus fully exploits its dramatic possibilities, for eventually the chorus adopt *Cassandra's* lyric mode, swept up in the events that the prophetess conjures in her song and dance.

Raped by Apollo, Cassandra denied the god children, so he cursed her with the gift of prophetic insight that no one would believe (1202–12). A victim of male force in its many manifestations, Cassandra finds herself bound to Agamemnon, the commander of the army that destroyed her family and razed her city, and she foresees her death at the hands of Clytemnestra, a woman too much like a man.[3] Powerless in a world she can predict but cannot control, Cassandra sees other victims of bloodshed in the house, the children of Thyestes who were served in a feast to their father (1095–97). The fate of the slaughtered children suggests the sacrifice of another youthful innocent, Iphigenia, whose death forges an important link in the chain that now binds Cassandra to her new home.

Turning from the past to the immediate present, Cassandra reveals Clytemnestra's plan to kill 'the husband who shares her bed' (1108), the very events taking place off-stage. At the precise moment that Cassandra envisions the netting of Agamemnon in the bath, the chorus leave the rhythms of speech and move into the dance, shifting from iambic trimeters to lyric dochmiacs (1121). They exclaim that Cassandra's 'prophecy does not make us happy', a phrase that literally means 'your word does not wash me clean'. Unconsciously the chorus echo Cassandra's description of Clytemnestra 'washing her husband clean in the bath' (1109), caught up in her images and mode of expression. Metaphorically netted in a *kommos*, the chorus now alternate with Cassandra in lyric as she evokes Agamemnon's off-stage murder, the fate of Troy, and her own 'sacrifice' at the side of the king.

We should linger a moment over the importance of the bath as the place of Agamemnon's death. Commentaries on the play emphasize the Homeric practice of a wife bathing her husband (an anachronism in fifth-century Athens), but they fail to appreciate the contemporary relevance of a wife dutifully (if ironically) washing her husband's body before his burial, one of the responsibilities of women in the Greek funeral ritual.[4] There is a hint of nuptial bathing as well – Clytemnestra is Agamemnon's 'bedmate' (1116), suggesting a twisted version of the ritual bathing that took place as part of the Athenian wedding. We already have seen how the play masterfully confuses weddings and funerals – the 'preliminary offering' of the corpses of Greek and Trojan soldiers at the wedding of Paris and Helen (65); the wedding song that turns into a dirge when Helen arrives at Troy (705–16); Cassandra driven to her new home like a bride in a chariot, only to 'die together' (1139) with Agamemnon.

Cassandra's lament reminds the chorus of the nightingale's song (1142–46), referring to the myth of Procne and Philomela in which Procne's husband Tereus raped her sister Philomela, and then cut out her tongue.[5] When Philomela communicates the deed in her weaving, the two sisters take their revenge by killing Tereus' son, Itys. Transformed into a nightingale, Procne forever sings for her dead child; turned into a swallow, the speechless

Philomela sings a garbled, inarticulate melody, which the ancients associated with the swallow. Comparing Cassandra to Procne is apt, for she is raped by Apollo, forced to 'marry' Agamemnon, and finally sings a lament for the loss of her family and city. But Cassandra also takes on the other voice of the myth, for earlier Clytemnestra likens her to a swallow who sings incomprehensibly (1050–51), the Philomela figure in the story. Aeschylus exploits both aspects of Cassandra's persona, the lyrical and the inarticulate, finding an appropriate mythical paradigm to elicit the audience's double sympathy.

These connections between myth, ritual, and dramatic character should not be dismissed as recondite or irrelevant to the stage. A modern production of the *Oresteia* could costume Cassandra to suggest a twisted wedding, and the actress could use the bridal imagery as a way to grapple with the character's inner visions. The movement and the music accompanying her song could suggest, alternately, a marriage hymn and a funeral dirge, perhaps echoing the recreation of Helen's arrival at Troy in the second stasimon. The bird imagery – from the eagles in the *parodos* to the swallow and nightingale associated with Cassandra – could be linked by dance and gesture to signal both the innocence and the ultimate power of nature. These theatrical ideas are encoded in Aeschylus' language and should be given their due if a modern production (or contemporary reader) wishes to tap into the trilogy's full imaginative life.

After this unprecedented exchange, Cassandra moves into speech to 'talk through' what she and the chorus have just experienced. She delineates the strands in the web of past, present, and future, but only after she has swept the chorus and the audience up in them. Her first words in dialogue metre clarify the nuptial motifs scattered through the lyric: 'No more like a newly-wedded bride/ will my prophecies peek out from under veils' (1178–79). Fifth-century art often represents bridal veiling and unveiling, an important aspect of the Greek wedding that occurs at crucial moments in other tragedies. In Euripides' *Alcestis*, for example, the climactic return of Admetus' wife takes the form of a bride unveiling before her husband. Earlier in *Agamemnon* Helen left the 'delicate veils' of her marriage-bed in Sparta for a disastrous wedding at Troy (690–92), and now Cassandra throws off her metaphorical veils before she enters the palace at Argos.

With her visionary insight, Cassandra sees a chorus of Furies who never leave the house, a band of revellers who 'sing their hymn as they besiege the chambers' (1186–91). The fifth-century audience may have envisaged the group of Furies as symposiasts at a drinking party, or as the celebrants who accompany the nuptial procession and sing outside the newlyweds' chamber. Instead of praising the bride and groom, however, their hymn denounces the betrayal of a wedding, 'a brother's bed and the man who trampled it' (1193). The reference is to Thyestes' fatal seduction of Atreus' wife that prompted Atreus to arrange a feast of Thyestes' own children. The 'trampled' bed also carries undertones of the twisted marriage of Paris, who

abducted Menelaus' wife Helen and so 'trampled untouchable things' (372), and it suggests the adultery of Helen's sister Clytemnestra, whose unnatural liaison with Aegisthus links her to Thyestes' only surviving child. Finally the image of trampling recalls Agamemnon's exit down the dark-red tapestries. He 'tramples' the cloth (957, 963), just as Cassandra will 'trample' her way into the palace (1298).

The chorus are amazed at Cassandra's resolution, walking to her death like 'a god-driven bull to the altar' (1297–98). The sacrificial imagery links Cassandra to Iphigenia, whose sacrifice features so prominently in the *parodos*. The young girl's death at Aulis served as a 'preliminary offering' for the ships (*proteleia*, 227), the same word used for the first casualties at Troy, offered for the wedding of Paris and Helen (60–67). Cassandra views her own death as a sacrifice, but not for a marriage – her warm blood will sanctify the funeral of Agamemnon (1278). Iphigenia once sang paeans at her father's table (242–46), only to provide a silent offering when she is gagged like an animal wearing a bit (234–46). Clytemnestra berates Cassandra for *refusing* to wear the bit (1066), and the prophetess sings inauspicious lamentations to Apollo rather than the customary paeans to the god (1074–75, 1078–79). Through poetic image and situation, the death of Cassandra reduplicates the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the blood of innocent women fertilizing the ground for new acts of bloodshed.

Unlike Agamemnon who blindly walks the red tapestries to his death, Cassandra sees clearly what lies in store for her, and her last words reveal a tragic nobility in the face of the known and inescapable. She proclaims that life is at best a shadow, and, at worst, as ephemeral as a picture erased by a wet sponge. In language that echoes the unveiling image with which she began her speech, Cassandra prays 'that the blow is sure . . . and I close my eyes at last' (1294). Only with the fall of the sacrificial blade will this unveiled bride escape the horrors that her prophetic visions force her to see.

After her long scene with the chorus, Cassandra finally enters the palace, and we expect to hear the off-stage death-cries, just as we did after Agamemnon's exit. Once again our expectations appear to be frustrated, for the chorus begin to chant in anapaests (1331–42), the steady rhythm that introduced the *parodos* (40–103) and the first stasimon (355–66). The metre leads us to expect that a full choral ode is gathering steam, when suddenly the blood-curdling cry of Agamemnon is heard from behind the façade. Thanks to Aeschylus' manipulation of lyric metres, the long anticipated murder of Agamemnon now comes as a shock.

At the king's outcry, the chorus fracture into twelve voices (1348–71), their tone varying from the impassioned to the ludicrously timid. Some call for immediate intervention in the palace – 'I cast my vote/ for action' and 'Better to die than live under tyrants.' Others advise caution – 'From the evidence of cries alone/ are we to prophesy that he is dead?' 'It is one thing to guess, another to know.' The last speaker adopts the wait-and-see attitude

– 'I add my vote for that opinion' – meaning that the chorus split down the middle, six for delay, six for action. Although no one in the audience is counting, the division of the chorus seems to be the same as that of the jury in *Eumenides*. The stage-picture in the orchestra – a chorus divided over Agamemnon's murder – may have been mirrored in the final play, when the jury's vote is split over Orestes' guilt.

The appearance of Clytemnestra with the corpses of her two victims dispels any doubts.[6] In an extraordinary speech, Clytemnestra recounts the murder of her husband, shifting to the present tense when she describes the death-blows. Classicists write somewhat dismissively of the 'historical' present tense without appreciating the powerful clue it gives to the actor. It is as if Clytemnestra's emotional memory works so strongly that she actually relives the crucial moments. She revels in Agamemnon's blood as if it were a seminal rain that falls on the crops in the spring, infusing the seeds with life (1389–92).

Not only does she confuse death blood with life-giving rain, but Clytemnestra assaults the ritual order of the city as well. She speaks of Agamemnon's blood as the third offering that honours 'Zeus below the earth, the saviour (*sôter*) of corpses' (1387), conflating the ritual offerings to the dead with those poured at a banquet, where the third libation traditionally went to Zeus *Sôtêr*. Clytemnestra also appropriates Agamemnon's funeral rites to herself, proclaiming that she alone will lament the corpse, supervise the interment, and speak at the grave (1541–54). With grisly irony, Clytemnestra already has given her husband his funeral bath, and now he lies in public view, a perverse laying-out of the body wrapped in its net-cum-funeral shroud. The ritual inversion spoke directly to the original audience, who saw before them a powerful image of their world gone awry.

Responding in dochmiacs, the chorus alternately attack the queen's brazenness and mourn the dead king. Clytemnestra defends her actions by pointing to Agamemnon's sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia. We have observed the close ties between Iphigenia and Cassandra, and now Clytemnestra implicitly brings them home, for she speaks of Agamemnon's sacrificial victim while standing over the corpse of her own. Drawn together by imagery and circumstance, the two innocent females personify the destruction caused by Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. The king had to die, in no small part because of the sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia, and Clytemnestra's murder of Cassandra, perhaps more than the slaying of her husband, distances her from the audience and makes her death seem dramatically right.

As Cassandra predicts (1326–29), the chorus bewail Agamemnon without mentioning her, but Clytemnestra cannot get the Trojan prophetess out of her mind. After alluding to her own adulterous liaison with Aegisthus, Clytemnestra desecrates the dead Cassandra as the whore of the Greek army, boasting that her death 'brings an added relish [side-dish] to my bed'

(1447). So distorted is Clytemnestra's view of her victim that the audience realize she is no less blind than her husband was to the events in train. She has slaughtered an innocent woman, a second Iphigenia, but one whose loss the audience feels personally, by virtue of Cassandra's long and moving scene before her death.

The chorus answer each speech of Clytemnestra with a lyric outburst, mainly in dochmiacs, increasing their pressure until the queen finally leaves the metres of speech and meets the chorus halfway in anapaests. The dramatic effect is that of two opposed parties battering their way towards a precarious cease-fire. In the process, major themes and characters reappear with striking vividness – Helen, Clytemnestra's crazed sister who brought death to so many at Troy; the blood-thirsty curse, an avenging force that works in the house; the role of Zeus, both cause and fulfiller; the wounds of the past that break out again; the king Agamemnon, who is caught in the web of a spider; his sacrifice, and the sacrifice of Iphigenia; Thyestes' feast on his own murdered children; the *lex talionis* that blow must answer blow, and who acts must suffer. At the end of the exchange, a provisional resolution seems within reach – an emotionally drained Clytemnestra prays that a pact might be made with the demon in the race to leave things as they are, if only the madness and bloodshed would depart.

Suddenly Aegisthus appears from the palace and shatters the mood in the theatre:

> Light of dawn, break on this day of justice.
> The gods bring vengeance,
> they look down on the sins of men.
> I know when I see this man at my feet,
> tangled in the robes of the Furies.
> It brings me joy . . .
>
> (1577–82)

It is as if Aegisthus enters in the wrong mode, with the wrong energy, into the wrong play. Coming after the lyric exchange between the chorus and Clytemnestra, his speech upsets the precarious balance that has been achieved, renewing the drive towards vengeance and propelling us into the next play of the trilogy.

Aegisthus recounts the story of his father Thyestes, who ruled Argos with his brother Atreus until rivalries led to Thyestes' banishment. Atreus later welcomed his brother home with a banquet made of the cooked flesh of his own children, and in horror Thyestes cursed the house. The sole surviving son of Thyestes, Aegisthus boasts that the curse still lives, for now he stands over the corpse of Atreus' son, Agamemnon. The gruesome banquet, referred to earlier by Cassandra and the chorus, lies behind the other images of slaughter and eating in the play – the eagles devouring the pregnant hare, the lion cub that grows to feed on the household flock, the Greek army

that drinks Trojan blood like a ravenous lion. By clarifying the archetype of perverted feasting in the last scene of the play, Aeschylus prepares for the re-emergence of the motif in *Choephori* and *Eumenides*, where Clytemnestra dreams of a snake that drinks her blood and the Furies hope to feed on the living Orestes.

The chorus treat Aegisthus with open hostility, berating his cowardice and decrying his seizure of political power in Argos. When they raise the spectre of Orestes' return from exile to take vengeance and claim the throne, Aegisthus calls out his armed bodyguards, whose arrival confirms that a tyrant rules the city. The play began with the distant war at Troy, and now chaos has come home to Greece in the form of political repression and potential civil strife.

Silent since her anapaests with the chorus, Clytemnestra intervenes firmly and decisively. She reminds her new husband of the bitter harvest they have reaped already and the blood they have shed, and she urges the chorus to disperse to their homes. Instead of leaving *en masse*, which is usual at the end of a tragedy, the chorus break into small groups and each has a final, shrill exchange with Aegisthus before exiting from the theatre. The fragmented, vitriolic departure of the chorus gives the visual and verbal lie to Clytemnestra's wish for herself and Aegisthus: 'You and I shall rule/ and make the house well again' (1672–73). The final scene of *Agamemnon* makes it clear that more bloodshed and a new cycle of violence must be unleashed before there is any hope of cure.

CHOEPHORI

Agamemnon begins with waiting; *Choephori* opens with an arrival. Two young men enter the empty orchestra, and we learn that Orestes has returned from exile with his friend Pylades. He offers belated funeral rites for his father, cutting off a lock of hair and putting it on the grave, a ritual act that establishes the place and dramatic circumstance. We need not imagine a grave-mound hastily erected between plays, for Orestes' words and actions 'create' the tomb in the centre of the orchestra. As well as establishing his filial piety, the ritual gesture signals Orestes' new maturity, for Athenian youths dedicated locks of hair on reaching manhood. The activities at the grave cease with the sudden arrival of the chorus of women, causing Orestes and Pylades to withdraw and observe these new visitors to the tomb.

In this brief prologue, Aeschylus differentiates *Choephori* from *Agamemnon* in several essential respects. The protagonist (Orestes) appears at the outset, moving the story into a new generation. He shifts the focus from the palace-façade at the back to the tomb of Agamemnon in the centre of the orchestra, meaning that the palace must be 'thought away' by characters and audience alike until Orestes arrives there at line 652 to begin the revenge plot. Put in more dynamic terms, the action moves out towards the audience

for the first half of the play and then pulls back to the façade for the murders. The fact that Orestes and Pylades withdraw to observe the new arrivals presents the audience with a mirror-image of our own relationship to the play. Like Orestes, we are onlookers and we share his perspective, especially when Electra discovers the offerings he made at the grave – we know who left them and we know he is watching. As the plot unfolds, our position as spectators shifts from fellow-observers to 'accessories before the fact', accomplices who watch with full knowledge the entrapment and murder of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Contrast our relationship to *Agamemnon*, where we know that something untoward is happening, but the details are not divulged until the Cassandra scene, and then from the point of view of the victim and not the perpetrator.

Dressed in black, singing threnodies, and bearing libations to the grave, the chorus (accompanied by the silent Electra) continue the funeral motifs begun by Orestes. After a terrifying nightmare, Clytemnestra has sent her slave-women to calm the spirit of her dead husband with offerings. The chorus know their libations provide no remedy, since 'no stream can wash away/ blood that stains the hand'. The earth is so clotted with gore that 'no liquids can flow' (66–75). In a play that focuses on murder, the revulsion of nature at human bloodshed is emphasized from the start. After the *parodos*, Electra asks the chorus for help as she pours Clytemnestra's offerings. In a short dialogue, the women convince her to alter the designated prayer and call instead for the death of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, demanding murder for murder. As Electra prays for vengeance, the chorus crown their libations with a lamentation that draws the play's first movement to a close.

Aeschylus has set the stage beautifully for the emergence of Orestes from hiding. Electra spies a lock of hair at the tomb and concludes that her brother has returned, only to reject the thought as impossible. Like the chorus in *Agamemnon* unsure of the beacon fire, Electra needs a human voice to answer her doubts. The sight of footprints adds to her mental anguish, and the appearance of Orestes in person compounds it. In a quick stichomythic exchange, she asks the stranger 'Why do you wind me in this net?' and Orestes responds, 'It traps me as well' (220–21). The reunion of brother and sister takes the form of mutual entrapment, the alternating lines of dialogue articulating the strands of the net. The imagery reveals that the world of *Agamemnon* – the net thrown on Troy, the snare that traps the returning king – is still alive in the next generation.

The recognition scene also develops the idea of germination, the small and insignificant generating the large and momentous. We see Orestes plant the dramatic seed by leaving a lock of hair, and we watch it burst into life when Electra seizes on it. Knowing that a 'vast trunk can grow from the smallest seed' (204), Electra welcomes her brother as a 'seed of hope, watered by tears' (236). However, we recall from the first play that Agamemnon uprooted the city of Troy, only to have his own blood fall like spring rain on the newly

planted seeds (*Ag.*, 1388–92). Now the renewing acts of homecoming and recognition take place at his tomb, where the metaphors of birth and growth are harnessed to death, generating fresh plans for bloodshed.

Orestes describes the forces that drive him to vengeance, chief among them Apollo's oracle prophesying what he would suffer if he failed to avenge his father and regain his patrimony. The principle of retributive justice provides the impulse for the long lyric *kommos* that follows, lying at the heart of the trilogy. The chorus, Orestes, and Electra steel themselves to the task ahead, invoking support from the spirit of Agamemnon and various deities above and below the earth. Critics have argued long and hard over the dramatic purpose of this complex interchange, the longest lyric passage in extant tragedy. Does the *kommos* convert Orestes from a hesitant to a single-minded avenger? Or is the energy directed primarily at the spirit of Agamemnon? Or does it focus on the audience, a gathering of dramatic forces (both seen and unseen) that convert the theatre itself into a place of vengeance?

Beginning in anapaests, the chorus call Orestes and Electra to the inexorable demands of the *lex talionis*. In the lyric sections that follow – strophic pairs with intermezzi, alternating Orestes–chorus–Electra–chorus – the siblings lament their father's fate while the group keeps up the refrain that blood must pay for blood. The pattern of speakers, metre, and responsion shifts when the chorus and Electra recount the aftermath of Agamemnon's murder, driving Orestes to deliver his strongest cry for vengeance. All three parties invoke Agamemnon's spirit to rise and join them, completing the transformation of the offerings sent by Clytemnestra to calm Agamemnon's anger in the *parodos*. Just as Electra changed her prayer when pouring the libations over the grave, now she and Orestes follow the chorus's lead in rousing Agamemnon's spirit to action.

As Cassandra does in *Agamemnon*, so Orestes and Electra 'talk through' the events of the lyric in regular speech, a formal reiteration of the essential issues of the *kommos*. In the brief exchange with Orestes that follows, the chorus recount Clytemnestra's nightmare that led her to send libations to Agamemnon's tomb. Although editors commonly attribute these lines to the chorus-leader, they may have been divided among the individual members of the group. The voices coming from around the orchestra would give the sense that Orestes was surrounded and trapped by the very dream that terrified his mother – he is the snake born to Clytemnestra that feeds at her breast and drains her lifeblood along with the milk.

With the attention now focused on him alone, Orestes outlines his plan for revenge. Disguised as travellers, he and Pylades will approach the palace, ask for hospitality, and, once inside, kill Aegisthus – Orestes makes no mention of Clytemnestra. He advises the chorus to be silent when appropriate, and to speak when the time is ripe, setting up their intervention with the Nurse later in the play. Electra exits through one *eisodos* (and out of the play, for

she never returns), Pylades and Orestes depart via the other, and the chorus are left alone for the first time.

Functioning as a true 'act-dividing song', the lyric snaps the moorings of locale and setting, as the chorus sing of strange beasts from the earth and sea, of celestial terrors made of air (hurricanes) and fire (thunderbolts), all four elements of early Greek cosmology. However, these natural prodigies prove no match for the human monster, illustrated by three myths and epitomized by Clytemnestra's murder of her husband.[7] The last image in the stasimon is of a *new* murder returning home as the child of former murders, and the final word is 'Furies'. Orestes appears from an *eisodos* and demands entry at the palace, fulfilling in the flesh the chorus's description. A young Fury has come home to perpetrate a crime that is the offspring of prior bloodshed in the race.

The return of Orestes and Pylades introduces the play's second act, and the first scene could be called 'getting inside'. Orestes knocks at the palace door and calls impatiently for a servant, an odd set of actions for a tragic hero but a scenario quite at home in Greek comedy where getting a servant to open the door is a stock routine. Orestes announces that he brings news to the rulers of the house, more fitting for a man to hear than a woman. We are surprised, therefore, when Clytemnestra appears at the doorway instead of Aegisthus. She promises the strangers all due hospitality, including 'a warm bath and soft bed to soothe you' (670). Given the welcome to her husband in *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra's offer of a bath is almost grotesque. However, the irony here operates totally at her expense, and its edge sharpens when the unrecognized young man claims that he brings news of Orestes' death, adding disingenuously 'But perhaps I am speaking to those who are not concerned. I do think his father should be told' (690).[8]

Why does Aeschylus throw such strange shadows over the action – the comedic door-knocking, Clytemnestra's unwitting *double entendre*, and Orestes' conscious irony delivered from the safe distance of disguise? The answer may lie in the relationship that these elements help to forge with the audience. The incongruous tone binds us even faster to the revenge plot, for the prior knowledge that allows us to laugh to ourselves also fortifies our complicity in, and commitment to, the impending deed. The audience are 'in' on the joke, just as we are 'in' on the plans for murder.

Clytemnestra reacts to the news with a cry of grief, prompting some critics to conclude that she is capable of manufacturing any and all emotions at the drop of a word. A more effective approach to her character is to take these moments of strong feeling at face value. It is far more powerful, and theatrically more disturbing, if Clytemnestra wants her husband home when she says she does in *Agamemnon*, if she considers him worthy of the praise she bestows, in a fifth-century form of wish-fulfilment. Now she cries out instinctively when she learns that another child of hers has been taken: 'Stripped of my loved ones, and now Orestes./ He did well to keep his

distance/ and not step near this morass of death' (695–97). The play-actor here is not Clytemnestra, but Orestes himself, who stands before his mother biding his time before he adds her blood to the swamp. Orestes asks that his hosts not stint their welcome because of the news he brings, an appeal to the guest–host relationship that resonates uneasily, for we know that Orestes will violate its sanctity just as Paris did with Menelaus. But the ploy works, and Orestes accomplishes the task set for the scene in the space of only sixty lines, as Clytemnestra welcomes him and Pylades inside.

Again alone in the orchestra, the chorus call on various powers to join the battle and guide Orestes' sword. They repeat the word 'now!' on three occasions, giving the impression that the murder of Clytemnestra is at hand. Suddenly the chorus-leader spots the figure of the Nurse, Cilissa, bustling from the palace, sent by Clytemnestra to fetch Aegisthus. Even more surprising than her appearance is the speech she delivers, a disarming account of her sorrow at the news of Orestes' death. She relates in unabashed terms what her life was like as the wet-nurse for the baby Orestes – waking in the middle of the night, nursing 'the little beast' (753), trying to guess his needs, and ending up washing nappies:

> Young insides are a law unto themselves;
> you just have to guess. Like a prophet I was,
> but many's the time I guessed wrong . . .
> Washwoman and child nurse, they're one and the same.
> (757–60)

The Nurse's speech intensifies the tragedy, for we imagine Orestes as an infant, connected like everyone at that age to the most basic bodily functions. *This* is the man who now waits in the palace to commit murder, and we wonder again at the complex weave of events that could lead from the instinctual cries of a baby to the deceit of a matricide. In some respects the Nurse is a counter to Clytemnestra – her manner of expression and conscious self-irony ('like a prophet I was') contrast with the rhetoric of the queen, and her commitment to the baby Orestes puts in relief Clytemnestra's claims to feel a mother's concern. In the final analysis, however, we enjoy the Nurse's account because we know that the object of her care and love is still very much alive.

With typical tragic economy, Aeschylus now makes the unknowing Cilissa a linchpin in the plot. The chorus convince her to alter the message she brings to Aegisthus, so that he will come without his customary bodyguards, the thugs introduced at the end of *Agamemnon*. The intervention of the women here demonstrates the inadequacy of the oft-repeated rubric that the tragic chorus never materially affect the action. Sensing that better news might lie ahead, the Nurse leaves to do as her fellow-slaves suggest.

With the stage empty, the chorus embark on their second act-dividing song, three strophic pairs with a mesode between each strophe and antistrophe

(a – mesode 1 – a′/ b – mesode 2 – b′/ c – mesode 3 – c′). The tripartite structure – itself built on triads – links the divine world to that of the human characters, foreshadowing the ultimate resolution of the trilogy where gods and humans stand together in common purpose. Praying for Orestes' victory, the chorus appeal to Zeus, the household divinities (perhaps implying the Furies who live in the race), Apollo at Delphi, and Hermes who leads souls to the underworld. In the final triad they turn to the mortal agents, imagining Orestes in the palace face to face with Clytemnestra: 'When she cries, "Son!"/ say to her "My father's!"/ and drive death home' (828–30).

Given the chorus's emphasis on the fatal meeting between mother and son, the audience once again expect a death-cry from the palace. Instead, Aegisthus enters briskly down an *eisodos*, barely concealing his delight at the news from the Nurse. The chorus play their part to perfection, flattering the tyrant's vanity by urging him to find out the truth for himself, inside, man to man. Eager to cross-examine the Messenger, Aegisthus exits into the palace with self-assurance bordering on the ludicrous, proclaiming with his last words that the stranger 'cannot trick a man whose eyes are open' (854). Appearing for the first and only time in *Choephori*, Aegisthus is so incongruous and his dispatch so rapid (the entire scene takes twenty lines) that he makes an almost comic impact. His arrogant confidence that his 'eyes are open' as he walks into the trap brings to mind his rival Agamemnon, who also walked blindly to his death through the same door.

The pace accelerates as the chorus shift to lyric anapaests, again praying for Orestes' victory. As soon as they hear Aegisthus' death-cries, however, they pull back from the murder: 'Stand back till the verdict is in/ and we will seem guiltless' (872–73). The women who transformed Electra's opening libation into an offering for vengeance, who urged Orestes to bloodshed in the *kommos*, who intercepted the Nurse and changed her message, and who guided Aegisthus to his doom – these very women now distance themselves from the outcome. At the same time, the pace of exits and entrances accelerates. A servant rushes from the palace crying that Aegisthus has been slain, the queen enters to ask the reason for the alarm, and she learns that 'He who is dead has killed the living' (886). The servant then exits after an on-stage life of only twelve lines, followed almost immediately by the appearance of Orestes and Pylades at the palace doors. The confrontation between mother and son finally comes to pass.

This flurry of entrances and exits has led theatre historians to conclude that the skene had more than one door, since handling the comings and goings from a single entranceway would be awkward. But that is precisely the point. In *Agamemnon* Clytemnestra guards the threshold, overseeing access to the house, and controlling the events that take place within. The situation changes radically in *Choephori*, for the tomb of Agamemnon in the orchestra provides the scenic focus for the first 600 lines of the play, during which the façade is ignored. The palace emerges as a locus only when the

incognito Orestes arrives there, inaugurating a series of increasingly short scenes, each involving at least one 'transgression' of the central door. At the homecoming, Clytemnestra enters from the palace, and she, Orestes, and Pylades exit back into the house. In the next scene the Nurse enters through the same door, and departs down an *eisodos* fifty lines later. The third encounter takes less than twenty lines, as Aegisthus meets the chorus in the orchestra and exits into the palace. The fourth scene begins with the servant entering through the same palace door, followed by Clytemnestra ten lines later. In another five lines Orestes and Pylades also enter from the palace, and after the great confrontation of forty-five lines, all three return through the same door, mirroring their first exit.

This spate of entrances and exits, unprecedented in tragedy, shatters Clytemnestra's control of the threshold. The effect would be lost if there were another entrance into the palace. There must be only one, a single passageway that Orestes penetrates. The irony is that his initial success in doing so unleashes a scurry of comings and goings, all leading to the deed that drives Orestes *away* from his home even as he reclaims his rightful place in it.

In the crucial scene between mother and son, Clytemnestra reminds Orestes that by killing her he will be stabbing the mother's breast that nurtured him. For a moment the thought chills Orestes, and he turns to Pylades, asking his friend what has been called the central tragic question, *ti drasô*, 'What shall I do?' (899). In a three-line response, his only words in the play, Pylades tells Orestes to follow the oracle of Apollo, incurring the enmity of mortals rather than the anger of the gods. The dramatic situation could not be etched more clearly. A heretofore silent character, one who has loomed in the background as a symbol of Orestes' exile and alienation from his natal family, steps forward and speaks for the matricide. Short of a *deus ex machina*, Aeschylus could not introduce a more compelling voice than that of Pylades, emanating both inside and outside the action, and Orestes 'judges' (903) in his friend's favour.

Clytemnestra initiates a stichomythic exchange that propels the scene to its climax. Pleading for her life, she threatens Orestes with 'the bloodhounds of a mother's curse', a vivid periphrasis for the Furies. She finds her son no more approachable than a tomb, and in a flash of insight Clytemnestra realizes that he is the snake she bore in her dream. Orestes drags his mother off-stage to kill her over the corpse of Aegisthus: 'You killed whom you should not, now suffer what should not be' (930).

While that paradox still echoes in the theatre, the chorus-leader introduces the third and final stasimon with a four-line speech, noteworthy for the sympathy it shows Orestes' victims. The ode proper constitutes the victory song the chorus referred to earlier, the form similar to that of the previous stasimon, with a mesode intervening between each strophe and antistrophe. However, the note of triumph is tempered by the predominance

of dochmiacs, the agitated metre associated with the Furies at several points in the trilogy. The tension between the drive to resolution (the repeated phrase 'it has come'), and the unsettling rhythm with which it is expressed, underlines the horrible ambiguity of Orestes' action.

Orestes returns from the palace with the bodies of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, and the stage-picture recalls the scene in *Agamemnon* where Clytemnestra exults over the corpses of her husband and *his* lover.[9] In both plays, the victims lie wedded to death, while the killer conjures images of the adultery that helped motivate the murder. For all the dramatic differences between *Agamemnon* and *Choephori*, the two plays confirm that the cycle of violence will continue – bloodshed engenders future bloodshed as inexorably as one generation follows the next.

Along with the two bodies, Orestes displays the robes that trapped Agamemnon in the bath, and he struggles to find the right name for them – chains, shackles, bath-curtains, a snare, a trap. Returning to the funereal mode with which the play began, he delivers a eulogy for his father and then shifts almost immediately to mourn 'the act, the suffering, the whole race,/ since I win no glory but wear the stain of victory' (1016–17). Like Agamemnon before him, Orestes has returned a conqueror, but unlike his father he realizes how compromised his conquest is.

Sensing that he is losing the reins, Orestes takes hold of an olive bough garlanded with cotton, the traditional sign of a suppliant. Facing exile for killing his mother, Orestes will return to Delphi in supplication, as Apollo advised. The chorus reassure him that by 'killing the vipers you freed the land of Argos' (1046–47), but the young man cries out in terror – the vipers he sees are not lying at his feet but writhing in the hair of women who approach him, clad in black, dripping blood from their eyes, 'the bloodhounds of a mother's curse' (1054). Orestes describes his visions in a stichomythic dialogue with the chorus, the strict form encapsulating the madness even as it underlines the growing chasm between the hero and the group. With the associative power of a nightmare, it is as if the black-clad chorus women have metamorphosed into Furies, the snakes in their hair recalling the viper of Clytemnestra's dream that has grown up to be Orestes himself.

Isolated by his encroaching madness, Orestes flees from the theatre, armed only with his suppliant bough. The fact that he cannot withdraw inside the palace makes it clear that the cycle of bloodshed must be stopped elsewhere, in a new dramatic world. Alone in the orchestra for the last time, the chorus shift to anapaests to describe the generational storms that have struck the house: first, the feast of slaughtered children, referring to Thyestes' horrific banquet; second, the death of a husband, king, and commander-in-chief, killed by his wife in the bath; third, Orestes' murder of Clytemnestra, an act that may restore the house or bring on its doom. It is fitting that the chorus close the play with a question: 'Where will it end?/When will it sleep, this force of ruin?' (1075–76). The destructive energies that have

worked their way through *Agamemnon* and *Choephori* remain to be dealt with in the final play.

THE EUMENIDES

The last act of the trilogy opens at Apollo's temple in Delphi, the most important oracular site in the Greek world. At the centre of the orchestra, where the tomb of Agamemnon was located in *Choephori*, stands the *omphalos* or navel stone of the earth, marking the inner sanctum of Apollo's shrine. In a cancelled entry, Orestes takes his suppliant's position at the *omphalos*, and the chorus of Furies (perhaps covering their masks with their cloaks so to hide them from the audience) scatter on the orchestra floor, asleep. To begin the action, the priestess of Apollo delivers her prologue back by the façade, unaware of what lies at the centre of the orchestra, which represents the 'interior' of the temple.[10]

The Pythia's speech outlines the devolution of prophetic power at Delphi, moving peacefully through a series of female deities until control of the shrine is conferred on the god Apollo. The priestess prays in orderly fashion to a string of deities, articulating a careful hierarchy that culminates with Zeus, the 'Fulfiller' or 'Harvester' (28). Because the audience can see what the Pythia cannot – namely that the monstrous Furies surround the bloodstained Orestes at the *omphalos* – we maintain an ironic distance from her opening genealogies and formulaic prayers. The audience's 'split' vision infuses the Pythia's prologue with the tension it otherwise lacks, when compared to the inherently dramatic situations facing the Watchman in *Agamemnon* and Orestes in *Choephori*.

At the conclusion of her prayer, the priestess 'enters' the temple by walking into the orchestra. At the unexpected sight of Orestes and the Furies, however, she scrambles out in terror on her hands and knees. The Pythia describes in vivid terms Orestes at the altar and the Furies surrounding him, a tableau still present before the audience but as yet unanimated. She portrays the Furies much as Orestes imagines them at the end of *Choephori*, first as women, then as gorgons, then harpies without wings, dressed in black, defiling the temple, noses dripping, eyes oozing a horrible liquid. The precision of the Pythia's verbal picture fills in what most of the audience could make out only vaguely, given the size of the theatre of Dionysus. Once again, it is the words working on the audience's imagination, as much as graphic physical details, that create the sleeping Furies and their prey in the orchestra.

Leaving the problem of the temple's pollution to Apollo, the Pythia exits out one *eisodos*, even as the god himself enters down the other. The overlapping entrance and exit give the impression that events have reached a stage where divine interference is required. Promising his suppliant release from the Furies, Apollo advises Orestes to flee to Athens and take refuge at

Athena's cult-statue. There the goddess will find 'judges for your case,/and words that cast a calming spell, the means/to rid you forever from this pain' (81–83). Apollo calls on Hermes to protect the traveller, and the god's role as intermediary between the earth and the underworld suggests that Orestes' flight to Athens is like a journey back into life. Hermes' physical presence is not necessary, although the god (played by a mute) may have entered with Apollo and led Orestes off at the end of the scene.

As Apollo and Orestes exit out one *eisodos*, the ghost of Clytemnestra (yet unnamed) enters down the other.[11] This second 'flowing' exit and entrance reinforce the rhythm of flight and pursuit, introducing the very force that Orestes would elude, the murder victim who demands vengeance from the living. Moving among the sleeping Furies, she rouses them to pursue Orestes who, like a fawn, has escaped their net. The physical manifestation of the Furies – sleeping, waking, dancing, hunting, tracking – strengthens the sense that they represent a natural force, that their outrage at kindred bloodshed demands a primordial respect that cannot be gainsaid, even by Apollo. In perhaps the strangest dialogue in tragedy, each of Clytemnestra's exhortations is followed by a groan or whimper from the chorus, one of the few ancient stage directions that has survived. The Furies 'chase the prey in a dream,/ like howling dogs that never leave the track' (131–32). Goaded by Clytemnestra, they finally wake to vengeance and pursuit, rising from the orchestra floor to begin the *parodos* as the ghost disappears.

The stage picture of Clytemnestra waking the Furies recalls the *kommos* of *Choephori*, in which Orestes, Electra, and the chorus wake the spirit of Agamemnon. If Agamemnon's tomb and the *omphalos* at Delphi both are located orchestra-centre, then Clytemnestra's effort to rouse the forces of vengeance mirrors the *kommos* in subject and staging. At the end of *Eumenides*, Athena will 'replace' Clytemnestra's ghost in the centre of the orchestra (both parts were played by the same actor), reversing the energy unleashed here by putting the anger of the Furies to sleep and converting them to beneficent spirits.

The *parodos* proper begins with the chorus already in the orchestra, where they perform three strophic pairs in a mixture of iambic and dochmiac metres, an agitated rhythm that fits their anger that the prey has 'slipped from the snare' (147). In the last four lines of the second strophe and antistrophe, the metrical correspondence is more than exact – word-breaks occur at precisely the same place, and several phonetic and syntactic echoes are heard. The effect is to bind together the Furies' drive for vengeance with the stain that Orestes has spread over the navel of the earth. Accusing Apollo of polluting his own temple, the chorus vow to track Orestes down even if he flees to the underworld.

As if hearing his cue, Apollo bursts back into the orchestra to drive the Furies out of his temple. In a clash of irreconcilable opposites, the beautiful, gold-clad Olympian assaults the blood-dripping, subterranean daughters of

Night. He associates them solely with torture and mutilation, rejecting their ancient office of bringing to justice those killers who shed kindred blood. Apollo argues that the bond between husband and wife surpasses ties of birth and kinship, and so, by not pursuing Clytemnestra when she killed her husband, the Furies have dishonoured the sanctity of marriage. The chorus respond instinctively, vowing they will never let Orestes go, and they leave the orchestra 'driven by a mother's blood/ to track and hunt him down. We go for Justice' (230–31).

As Apollo follows them out through an *eisodos* vowing to help Orestes, Orestes himself arrives down the other *eisodos* to take refuge at the altar of Athena. This last 'flowing' exit and entrance effect the transition from Delphi to Athens. Orestes establishes that the orchestra represents the temple interior by addressing the cult-statue of Athena at the centre-point (235–43). Given the flexibility of the Greek stage and the power of language to create location, it is likely that the marker used earlier for the *omphalos* at Apollo's temple now represents the ancient, aniconic image of the goddess.[12] Situated in the strongest acting position in the ancient theatre, Orestes makes his appeal to Athena at the same place he called on Apollo for help, and where he and his sister prayed to their murdered father in *Choephori*.

His prayers are answered not by Olympian intervention but by the arrival of the Furies, one of the most powerful entrances on the Greek stage. Performing a second *parodos*, the chorus fill the large open space of the orchestra with images of the hunt, moving like dogs tracking a wounded fawn or cowering hare (244–53). The simile recalls the pregnant hare in the *parodos* of *Agamemnon*, killed by eagles who feasted on her unborn children. That act of bloodshed led to the sacrifice of Orestes' sister, Iphigenia, and now Orestes himself must give the Furies his blood to drink as payment for killing his mother.

Surrounded by these manifestations of the forces of vengeance, Orestes clings to the goddess's image and cries out again for Athena to save him. Here Aeschylus subtly shifts away from the strange and bizarre towards the recognizable world of fifth-century Athens. Orestes calls on Athena in Libya, where Athens recently had sent a large expedition to support a local revolt against Persian rule. Orestes also refers to a treaty between Argos and Athens, concluded only a few years before the production of the *Oresteia* in 458.[13] As *Eumenides* unfolds, Aeschylus relates the situation of the play more and more directly to the audience and the city where the action now takes place. Although the specific Athenian references mean nothing to us, they do point the way for a modern production that wishes to explore and establish comparable equivalents for a contemporary audience.

Once again, the only response to Orestes' appeal to Athena comes from the Furies. Binding Orestes 'in the chains of their song' (306), they too move towards the recognizably contemporary, casting a spell on their victim that mimics the Athenian practice of depositing curse tablets before a trial,

pre-emptory magic aimed at silencing an adversary when he comes to testify. The Furies modulate from speech to anapaests and then into lyric proper – three strophic pairs interspersed with mesodes in an intricate structure, followed by a final strophe and antistrophe with no mesodic interruption. The changing rhythms and interlocking patterns mark a progression from outrage to assertive clarity. The third mesode contains particularly violent dance-rhythms, reinforcing the way the Furies spring and bring down their human victims, but the cadences grow calmer in the closing stanzas, as the chorus assert that their rights were spun out by the Fates and are part of the make-up of the universe.

At last Athena appears, probably at orchestra level, since her strategy throughout is to insist on parity and work towards inclusion. Although surprised to see the Furies in her temple, she treats them and the suppliant Orestes with equal consideration. In a stichomythic dialogue, Athena questions the Furies and gains a major concession when they grant her authority to judge the issue by trial. She next questions Orestes, who responds with his longest speech in the play, recapitulating the action of *Agamemnon* and *Choephori*. The slower pace allows Athena and the audience to realize the full dilemma before them – how to choose between a suppliant who brings no harm to the city and the Furies whose ancient offices must be honoured. If they leave without victory, the goddess predicts 'the poison in them will seep/ over this land, an endless plague' (478–79). To resolve the crisis, Athena establishes a court to try the case, and she leaves to gather the jury, 'the best people of my city' (487).

In the stasimon that follows, the Furies consider the larger context in which Orestes is but an example. If Athena's court overturns the *lex talionis* by letting Orestes go free, then the human urge to commit crimes will run unchecked. The imperative verbs and second person pronouns (at 526–28, 538, 542) suggest that the Furies are addressing the audience and appealing to the Athenian sense of justice, presenting themselves as the guarantors of social order conceived in terms of fifth-century popular morality. Euripides uses a similar strategy in his *Bacchae*, produced some fifty years after the *Oresteia*, where the chorus of Bacchantes – who represent wild and foreign forces at the outset of the play – uphold the middle ground of conventional Athenian morality in the second stasimon. The change in *Bacchae* is temporary, since the horrific violence unleashed later in the play undermines any claim for Dionysiac moderation. The shift in *Eumenides*, however, serves a more integrative function, for the Furies embody complex forces that demand both fear and respect. They remind us of the fragility of the human family and the restraint needed to keep anarchic tendencies from bursting the bonds of community.

The merging of play and spectator gathers momentum when Athena returns with a herald, a trumpeter, and twelve Athenian jurors, a kind of surrogate audience brought on-stage. Athena directs the Herald to call the

trial to order, and he uses the audience in the theatre as the crowd he must quiet.[14] The trumpeter sounds his call, the only time in an extant tragedy that the instrument was heard. According to ancient sources, a trumpet blast signalled the start of dramatic performances at the City Dionysia, serving as the cue to begin a new play. By using the sound here to open the trial, Aeschylus links the dramatic action to the theatrical festival in which it is a part, further inviting the audience to see themselves as an integral part of the play.

Athena promises to teach the city her new ordinances, but Apollo enters unexpectedly and interrupts her 'founder's speech'. Normally a new arrival in Greek tragedy is announced by someone on-stage, or the character makes the identification when he or she first appears. Aeschylus observes neither convention here, indicating the anomaly of the god's arrival. Surprised by his appearance, Athena asks Apollo what business he has in the case and then postpones her speech on the future of the court, declaring the trial open.

Although the physical set-up is uncertain, an appropriate staging would leave Orestes in the centre of the orchestra, Apollo on one side, the Furies on the other, and Athena standing upstage-centre between the two voting urns brought on by the jurors, who take their seats near (or perhaps even in) the audience. This arrangement allows the prosecution and defence to avoid upstaging themselves when they make their arguments, and encourages the audience to view themselves as the extension of the jury come to judge the case. In rapid-fire stichomythia, the Furies cross-examine Orestes, who justifies the matricide as revenge for the death of his father and Clytemnestra's husband. Since the Furies privilege the murder of a mother, related by blood, over that of a husband, Orestes' plea makes little impact on them. Taking up Orestes' defence, Apollo points to his oracle commanding Orestes to avenge his father's murder, and then advances the specious argument that no blood tie exists between a mother and her offspring anyway. According to Apollo, the mother of a child is not really a parent at all, and therefore the Furies have no business pursuing Orestes.

This notorious speech (657–73) deserves comment, for it often is quoted as evidence of Aeschylean misogyny and proof that the *Oresteia* encodes and legitimizes the repression of women. The politics of gender in the trilogy (and the society that produced it) is more complex than often is admitted, and the assumption that Apollo acts as the mouthpiece for the poet should be rejected as naïve and simplistic. Among other things, such an interpretation neglects the dramatic context in which the god appears in the trilogy. Recall the strong negative associations of Apollo in the Cassandra scene in *Agamemnon*, and the god's dismissive arrogance towards the Furies at the opening of *Eumenides*. The contrast with Athena, who protects the suppliant Orestes without driving the Furies away, could not be more pronounced, and the goddess herself reinforces the difference

by reminding Apollo that he may do what he likes in Delphi but not in Athens.

This background strongly colours the audience's response to Apollo's speech, where he argues in sophistic fashion that the father is the mother of the child. The god offers as proof the strange birth of Athena, who sprang fully formed from the head of Zeus. According to Apollo, women are not really parents, but merely the nurturers of the seed that the father generates. Therefore Orestes' murder of his mother is not as unnatural as it appears, since there is no real blood connection between a mother and her child.

Of course the position that women were not really parents was anything but the popular or the legal view in the fifth century. The Periclean citizenship law of 451 limited Athenian citizenship to individuals both of whose parents were Athenian, and we know that the marriage of *homometric* siblings was forbidden as incestuous, while a man could marry a sister by the same father as long as they had different mothers. Besides the counter-intuitive nature of Apollo's argument, the most telling reason for the audience to reject it derives from their experience of the trilogy in the theatre. If a mother is not a parent, then why does Aeschylus highlight the image of the pregnant hare devoured with her unborn children, or use it as a means of foreshadowing the destruction of the Trojan War in *Agamemnon*, where the 'shield-bearing young of a wooden horse/ time their birth to the setting stars' (825–26)? If Apollo is right, then Orestes' murder of Clytemnestra raises no serious questions about blood ties, pollution, and matricide; the Furies have no business haunting Orestes, nor has Orestes any reason to feel haunted; and the dramatic heart of the trilogy – the *Choephori* – suffers cardiac arrest.

Apollo further compromises his position by offering a bribe to Athena and her city (667–73), something against which Athena specifically warns her people (693–95, 704). Aeschylus also suggests the shady side of Apollo by failing to give the god a clear exit when he slips off-stage at some point after the jury casts its vote. Apollo neither speaks nor is spoken to, an anomaly in the ancient theatre, as if his argument had little significance in a court where mortal agents make the difficult decisions. Viewed in the full dramatic context, Apollo's speech denying that women are parents of their own children radiates with something less than the pure white light of Aeschylean approval.

Athena follows Apollo's defence with a plea that her city continue to honour the homicide court down through the ages. Three times in her charter speech she addresses the Athenians of the future, as if to remind her citizens in the audience that the trial scene acts out their own, ongoing history. At her instruction, the jury rise from their seats to vote, moving to the urns (probably large and free-standing), placing a hand into each, but

dropping a white pebble in only one. In *Agamemnon* the conquering king describes the fall of Troy in similar terms:

> Hearing no pleas for justice
> the gods made their verdict clear.
> An urn of blood filled with votes
> for manslaughter and the death of Troy.
> At the other urn, the shadow
> of hope, her hand wavered . . .
> now smoke holds that city.
>
> (*Ag.*, 814–19)

That imaginative vision of the gods' destruction is redeemed by the actual process of voting. Human jurors decide the murder trial, moving between Apollo and the Furies who remain in their fixed positions on opposite sides of Orestes. As they file across the orchestra, the Athenian jury symbolize the freedom and responsibility of democratic justice.

After the last juror returns to his seat, Athena steps forward to speak, perhaps taking her stand between the two urns.[15] She announces that, if the votes are equal, she will cast the tie-breaker for Orestes. Born without a mother, Athena champions the male principle in all things and so refuses to honour the death of a woman more than a man. It seems at first that the goddess simply parrots Apollo, but she complicates her position (and vote) by adding that her respect for the masculine does not extend to marriage.[16] The ballots are counted and found to be equal, an image of deadlock that – thanks to Athena's intervention – allows Orestes to go free. In a long speech of gratitude, Orestes promises that Argos (the home city to which he returns) will join in a non-aggression pact with Athens, an alliance he vows to guarantee even from the grave. In *Choephori*, the tomb of Agamemnon was the locus for vengeance; the tomb of his son, Orestes, will be the source of a different kind of energy, uniting cities and honouring the role of Athens in establishing a new mode of justice.

As Orestes exits via the *eisodos*, Aeschylus' story of the house of Atreus draws to a close. But the play does not, for *Eumenides* continues another three hundred lines, almost a third of its length. The Furies and Athena still remain in the orchestra, two female forces locked in the most important conflict of the trilogy. Their confrontation shapes up as a battle between two contending modes of expression – lyric and rhetoric – that proved so important in *Agamemnon*. Enraged at Athena's verdict, the Furies explode into lyric, threatening to release a plague on Athens and her people. Each of their lyric outbursts is matched by a speech from Athena, who tries to persuade them that their defeat is, in fact, a victory. After four such lyric eruptions from the chorus and spoken responses from the goddess (778–891), the Furies finally agree to 'put the black wave of bitter anger to sleep' (832), leaving the dance and joining Athena in regular speech.

Describing their conversion as 'falling under a spell' (900), the Furies accept the position of honour and authority in the city that Athena offers. The scene ends with the chorus lying on the orchestra floor and Athena standing over them, recounting the blessings they are to sing for their new home.

The metamorphosis to Eumenides ('kindly spirits') reverses the transformation at the start of the play, when the ghost of Clytemnestra rouses the sleeping Furies to vengeance and pursuit. Instead of waking them to anger, Athena calms their rage, moving among them in a mirror-image of that earlier scene, enhanced by the fact that the same actor played both Athena and Clytemnestra. The visual parallels take us back to the *kommos* of *Choephori*, where the chorus, Orestes, and Electra wake the spirit of the dead Agamemnon to help them exact vengeance. But the seeds of these enactments of sleeping and waking are planted in *Agamemnon*, when the Watchman struggles to stay awake, afraid to close his eyes, and the chorus sing of Zeus leaving the memory of pain in place of sleep (*Ag.*, 179–80). Clytemnestra imagines the victorious Greeks at Troy, sleeping with no guard on watch and unaware that the anger of the slaughtered may wake against them. The Herald describes the sea dozing in the heat of summer, and the terrors of sleeping beneath an enemy's wall. The chorus tell Cassandra to put her prophecies to sleep (1247), and they protest after Agamemnon's cry that the murderers' hands are wide awake (1357). From its poetic genesis in the first play, the actions of sleeping and waking culminate in the final transformation of the Furies who 'awaken' from their vengeful anger and rise from the orchestra floor to bless the city of Athens.

By persuading the Furies to remain, Athena redeems another pattern central to the trilogy, that of homecoming. The opening play dramatizes the return of Agamemnon and his fatal entrance into the palace. *Choephori* also features a homecoming, one not fatal to the returning party (Orestes) but to the rulers of the house. However, the son comes back from exile only to flee again, haunted by his crime of matricide. *Eumenides* continues the pattern, opening with the flight of the Pythia from her temple, followed by Orestes' departure for Athens, pursued by the chorus of Furies. After his acquittal, Orestes returns to his patrimony in Argos, while Athena persuades the Furies *not* to leave, but to make their home in Athens. When the chorus do exit from the orchestra at the end of the play, it is to take up residence in their new city as honoured and permanent guests.

The crowning action of *Eumenides*, the Furies' 'departure to remain' fulfils the theatrical possibilities suggested earlier in the trilogy. After the spell of persuasion cast by Athena, the chorus wake to bless the city and her people, and the goddess joins their song halfway, moving into lyric anapaests. A similar metrical scheme operates after the murder of Agamemnon, when the chorus confront Clytemnestra in lyric and she responds in regular speech, a pattern that repeats until she finally shifts to anapaests. At the end of the trilogy, however, Athena moves into the mode of the chorus to reflect a basic

harmony with them, although there are intriguing contrapuntal motifs. While the chorus abandon their retributive tones for the blessings of Eumenides, Athena sounds increasingly like the Furies earlier in the play, emphasizing the need for the old laws and respect for ties of blood.

A subsidiary chorus of women, the attendants of Athena's temple, enter to escort the Eumenides to their new homes. The women bring torches, sacrificial animals, and purple robes that the chorus put on, and they sing a final song in praise of the new residents of their city. The entire company including Athena parades out of the theatre, mirroring two great processions of Athens – the Panathenaic festival, which celebrated Athena as patron goddess of the city, and the City Dionysia, in which the performance of the *Oresteia* itself was a part.[17]

But we needn't look outside the play for the relevance of the costumes and visual detail, since the chorus's dark-red robes re-introduce the colour of the tapestries on which Agamemnon walked. Once a symbol of bloodshed, the colour now celebrates the peaceful inclusion of the Furies into the city. The torch-led procession takes the audience back to the opening scene of the trilogy, where a lone watchman struggled to see a single beacon under the panoply of the stars. The fiery message of conquest broke out like the sun at dawn, only to rise over a scene of destruction. Now, the torchlights signal a different kind of victory, one in which the city truly wins and the defeated party not only shares in the triumph, but is essential to it.

The exit of the Furies from the theatre is not a departure but a homecoming, marked by blessings of fertility, health, prosperity, and hope. Transformed into spirits of birth and regeneration, the Eumenides reunite the animating forces of nature with life-producing marriage, a synthesis that seemed hopelessly shattered in *Agamemnon*. However, the promise of civil concord, of men and women finding their way together, remains only a promise. No secure solution could follow the acts of bloodshed in *Agamemnon* and *Choephori* without trivializing the plays and ignoring the complex network that made the murders necessary. Looking at the Furies, Athena proclaims 'from their terrible faces/ I see great gain for my people' (990–91). Although their bodies are covered in robes of respectability, the horrifying masks remain. The visual dialectic is essential to the *Oresteia*, where good news turns to defeat, homecoming leads to death, and the forces of vengeance and justice are inextricably linked. As the dramatic workings of the *Oresteia* make clear, Aeschylus' trilogy offers at best a provisional resolution, one that must be fought for again and again in the theatre and in the society that produces it.

7

SOPHOCLES' *OEDIPUS TYRANNUS*

Long considered the 'classic' Greek tragedy, Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* holds a special place in the history of Western theatre. In some respects the notoriety of the play helps it work on the contemporary stage, since most audiences know the outline of the story. Compare the lack of familiarity with Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*, or Euripides' *Ion*, or Sophocles' own *Philoctetes*. However, exposure to the Oedipus myth has its drawbacks as well, for much of the modern fascination with the play derives from Freud's use of the story as the paradigm for his psychoanalytic theory of male infantile desire. There is no denying the importance of the Oedipal complex as a psychological and interpretive model, but it sheds little light on the play Sophocles wrote and, when applied to a production, leads the audience down a theatrical blind-alley.

So, too, does the application of psychological realism to the play, epitomized by questions like 'Why did Oedipus marry someone old enough to be his mother?' *Oedipus Tyrannus* is not a cautionary tale of crime and punishment, where the audience are meant to think that Oedipus and Jocasta should have known better. The issue held no dramatic interest for Sophocles since it never is hinted at in the text.

A more insidious form of theatrical reductionism arises from the mistaken belief that the characters in the play are simply puppets in the hands of the gods. Although Oedipus is born to doom, everything he does on-stage he freely chooses. Even while matching his life to the terrible fate inscribed for him, Oedipus continues to act autonomously, following the best information available. Thinking he is the son of Polybus and Merope, he strives to avoid the pollution of parricide and incest by fleeing Corinth; as political leader of Thebes, he struggles to rid his city of the plague by tracking down the killer of Laius; and, when the opportunity arises, he applies his energies relentlessly to untangle the riddle of his own identity.[1]

This last effort, the most compelling in the play, returns Oedipus to the riddle of the Sphinx on which his earlier fame rests. The answer to the question 'What creature goes on two, three, and four feet?' is man. Oedipus himself personifies the enigma, a tragic figure who is more than

Michigan, 1969, pp. 28–35; and J.-P. Vernant, 'Greek Tragedy: Problems of Interpretation', in R. Macksey and E. Donato (eds), *The Structuralist Controversy*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972, pp. 285–87.

15 See B.M.W. Knox, 'Euripidean Comedy' (org. 1970), in his *Word and Action*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979, pp. 250–74.

16 Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1454a.37–1454b.2, faults the ending of *Medea* for arising from the machine and not from the plot. For an in-depth treatment of the convention, see D.J. Mastronarde, 'Actors on High: The Skene Roof, the Crane, and the Gods in Attic Drama', *Classical Antiquity*, 1990, vol. 9, pp. 247–94.

17 See B.M.W. Knox's excellent essay, 'The *Hippolytus* of Euripides' (org. 1952), in op. cit., pp. 205–30.

18 See W.S. Barrett, '*Niobe*: P. Oxy. 2805', in R. Carden (ed.), *The Papyrus Fragments of Sophocles*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 1974, pp. 184–85.

6 AESCHYLUS' *ORESTEIA* TRILOGY

1 Some editors assign the announcement of the Herald's arrival (489–500) to Clytemnestra, arguing that she reappears from the palace at this point. Since manuscripts do not indicate entrances and exits *per se*, and rarely name a new speaker, editors must make such determinations from the dialogue itself and from their sense of the play. Does a production gain more by having Clytemnestra present and silent during the Herald's speech, or by having her appear suddenly and seize control of the scene after he has finished? The latter seems the better choice; the claim that Clytemnestra must be on-stage to learn that her husband has returned is more appropriate to theatrical realism than to Greek tragedy.

2 The question of Menelaus' whereabouts sets up the satyr-play *Proteus* (now lost) that followed the trilogy, telling of Menelaus' shipwreck in Egypt.

3 The Watchman refers to Clytemnestra as 'like a man in thought' (*Ag.*, 11). We meet Apollo the rapist again in Euripides' *Ion*, discussed in Chapter 9.

4 See R. Seaford, 'The Last Bath of Agamemnon', *Classical Quarterly*, 1984, vol. 34 n.s., pp. 247–54.

5 In *Titus Andronicus* Shakespeare draws heavily on Ovid's treatment of the same myth.

6 If the *ekkyklêma* was used, then the platform holding the bodies of Agamemnon (in his tub) and Cassandra was rolled out, with Clytemnestra standing above them. If the device was not yet available (it may have been introduced later in the fifth century), then servants carried out the bodies and dumped them on the ground, while Clytemnestra took up her position behind them. See O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977, pp. 325–27, 442–43.

7 See A.F. Garvie (ed.), *Aeschylus, Choephori*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, pp. 201–23, for an analysis of the stasimon and a discussion of the dramatic device called a priamel, where a series of examples are used as a foil for the point of particular interest.

8 The Greek word is 'parent', but the masculine article implies the father.

9 It is uncertain if the bodies were carried out or revealed on the *ekkyklêma*. See above, note 6.

10 The staging of the opening section has generated endless controversy; the scenario adopted here takes cognizance of the fact that the orchestra was a far stronger playing area than the space back by the façade. It makes clearest sense of the action and enables the prologue of *Eumenides* to forge strong visual links with other key moments in the play and the trilogy as a whole. For a full treatment, see R. Rehm, 'The Staging of Suppliant Plays', *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies*, 1988, vol. 29, pp. 290–301.

11 If Aeschylus had four actors available, as some scholars argue, then Clytemnestra could have been part of the cancelled entry before the prologue, rising from the orchestra floor when it was time for her 'entrance'. A fourth actor also would simplify staging problems in *Choephori*, especially in the final confrontation between Clytemnestra, Orestes, and Pylades, when the servant has just left the stage.

12 To have a stagehand carry on a separate piece of stage-furniture to represent the cult-statue of Athena would disrupt an otherwise smooth transition from Delphi to Athens – the Furies exit at 231, Apollo leaves at 234, Orestes arrives at 235. Those who believe that the *ekkyklêma* was used for the *omphalos* and for Athena's cult-statue fail to consider the problems of upstaging that result, or the fact that such an arrangement pulls the action back to the façade, a relatively weak acting area given its distance from the audience. Moreover, movement is severely restricted if the *omphalos* and the cult-statue are placed on the roll-out machine – the Furies cannot surround Orestes in their binding song, drastically reducing the visual and emotional impact of their dance.

13 A.J. Podlecki (ed.), *Aeschylus, Eumenides*, Warminster, Aris & Phillips, 1989, pp. 17–21, and A.H. Sommerstein (ed.), *Aeschylus, Eumenides*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989, pp. 25–32, offer clear and persuasive accounts.

14 The idea that a crowd of spectators, in addition to the jurors, came on-stage is dramatically redundant, given the presence of thousands of Athenians in the audience.

15 Sommerstein, op. cit., pp. 184–85, pictures smaller urns on a table, but such props might be lost in the enormous theatre of Dionysus. Moreover, a solid table would arrest the movement of the jurors when they came to vote. It would be more effective if the jurors could stop between the urns, vote, and then pass through, suggesting the fluidity of the democratic legal process.

16 As a virgin goddess, Athena never subjected herself to sexual domination, a qualification that compromises her apparent subordination to the masculine point of view. R.P. Winnington-Ingram, 'Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena' (org. 1949), in his *Studies in Aeschylus*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 124–31, and S. Goldhill, *Language, Sexuality, Narrative: The Oresteia*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 258–59, offer interesting analyses of the complex and transgressive character of Athena.

17 Athena's prominence indicates that the primary association was the Panathenaia, but resident aliens, referred to as 'metics' (as the Furies are at line 1011), wore purple robes at both festivals.

7 SOPHOCLES' *OEDIPUS TYRANNUS*

1 Excellent discussion of this aspect of the play can be found in E.R. Dodds, 'On Misunderstanding the *Oedipus Rex*', *Greece and Rome*, 1966, vol. 13, pp. 37–49; G. Gellie, *Sophocles: A Reading*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1972. pp. 79–105, 201–08; R.P. Winnington-Ingram, *Sophocles: An Interpretation*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 150–204; and B.M.W. Knox, 'Introduction' to R. Fagles (transl.), *Sophocles: The Three Theban Plays*, New York, Viking, 1982.

2 Many different ideas have been proposed for the staging of the opening scene. Perhaps the most interesting alternative to the one I suggest is that *no* suppliants accompany the old Priest, and he and Oedipus both use the theatre audience as the crowd who has gathered to seek relief from the plague. Although this scenario handsomely links the plague in the play to the one in Athens around the time of the production (see following note), the Priest orders at least some of the suppliants

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