

AESCHYLUS *AGAMEMNON* 944–57:  
WHY DOES AGAMEMNON GIVE IN?

The power of the so-called “carpet-scene” in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* is widely acknowledged. It is far from clear, however, why Agamemnon, after explicitly and insistently rejecting Clytemnestra’s request (918–25), quite suddenly and without retracting his former arguments agrees to tread on the purple cloth (944–57). During the first half of this century the unexpected surrender was mostly explained psychologically. The king was claimed to be a vain and arrogant or otherwise hubristic man who had secretly or subconsciously desired to perform the scandalous act,<sup>1</sup> or a gentleman reluctant to get the better of a woman.<sup>2</sup> Reaction against this school of interpretation asserted itself in the early 1960s. It was pointed out that the actors in Aeschylean tragedy “are there in order to enact the plot, not in order to display their individual characters.”<sup>3</sup> At issue, therefore, was the dramatic effect of the carpet-scene and its function in the play (or its trilogy). Thus, for example, Agamemnon’s *prima facie* irrational submission was taken as a demonstration of the working of Zeus;<sup>4</sup> or his walking on the tapestries, as a lucid acting out of the fact that “his homecoming is a harming of his house”;<sup>5</sup> or Agamemnon himself, as “a visual illustration of the man who tramples what is sacred.”<sup>6</sup> The motivation for his yielding was either left in the dark or explicitly denied.<sup>7</sup>

The concentration on the visual effects of the carpet-scene and their contribution to the image-pattern of the trilogy as a whole has become the predominant trend in today’s appreciation of the play.<sup>8</sup> Even so, for those who hold that the conduct of the *πράττοντες* on the Aeschylean stage has to be “humanly intelligible” if it is not to baffle the audience and disrupt the dramatic illusion,<sup>9</sup> Agamemnon’s surrender is a persistent challenge. Hence the pronouncements of the royal couple, in particular the *stichomythia* (931–43) at the end of which Agamemnon yields, are again and again subjected to minute examinations in the search for clues to this unexpected *volte face*, with different interpreters arriving at different conclusions.<sup>10</sup> Whichever interpretation one adopts, there seems to be

1. E.g., J. D. Denniston and D. Page, eds., *Aeschylus: “Agamemnon”* (Oxford, 1957), p. 151.

2. E. Fraenkel, *Aeschylus: “Agamemnon,”* vol. 2 (Oxford, 1950), p. 441.

3. H. Lloyd-Jones, “The *Supplices* of Aeschylus,” *AC* 33 (1964): 373.

4. H. Lloyd-Jones, trans., *Aeschylus: “Agamemnon”* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), p. 67.

5. J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London, 1962), p. 87.

6. A. Lebeck, *The “Oresteia”: A Study in Language and Structure* (Washington, D.C., 1971), p. 76.

7. According to Lloyd-Jones, “*Agamemnon*,” p. 67, “it would not be possible to persuade Agamemnon if Zeus had not sent Ate to take away his wits”; according to R. D. Dawe (“Inconsistency of Plot and Character in Aeschylus,” *PCPS* 9 [1963]: 50), “Agamemnon surrenders . . . because it was dramatically necessary that he should do so.”

8. E.g., O. Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (London, 1978), pp. 79–82.

9. For “human intelligibility,” see P. E. Easterling, “Presentation of Character in Aeschylus,” *G&R* 20 (1973): 3–19, esp. at pp. 6–7 and 15–17.

10. E.g., Easterling, “Presentation of Character,” pp. 10–14: Agamemnon gives in because Clytemnestra made him admit that with some people (barbarians) treading on costly fabric is customary (hence, it cannot be an absolute wrong) and infer that his unusual victory deserves unusual (barbarian) honors; and because—as has to be assumed—walking on purple was a tangible proof that one “has made it to the top” and would be found attractive by any Greek. K. J. Dover, “I tessuti rossi dell’ *Agamemnone*,” *Dioniso* 48 (1977): 55–69, argues that Clytemnestra’s arguments are acceptable in their cultural context: she maintains that damaging one’s own wealth is a kind of sacrifice and will therefore be agreeable to the

room for additional attempts to explain the king's conduct: Clytemnestra gives more than one reason for the murder of her husband in this play (1417–18, 1432–33, 1525–30: Iphigenia; 1438–43: Agamemnon's infidelities; 1475–77, 1500–1505, 1569–70: the evil spirit of the house; 1434–37: her adultery with Aegisthus—a reason not listed as such by Clytemnestra but easily inferred); Orestes, too, in the sequel, supplies several motives for his revenge (*Cho.* 269–307, esp. 298–304: Apollo's order, Orestes' own feelings for his dead father, his poverty, the shameful domination of “two women” over the Theban conquerors of Troy);<sup>11</sup> it stands to reason, therefore, that Agamemnon's decision is also not determined by a single, or even a primary, cause. I shall argue here that one of the main causes for Agamemnon's compliance with his wife's wish is his expectation that she will repay him by graciously admitting his war-prize concubine into the palace. This explanation is based on the phrasing of Agamemnon's surrender (944–57), taken together with the timing and manner of Cassandra's arrival on stage (783).

It is of course obvious that, had Aeschylus introduced Cassandra merely for the sake of her famous scene of visions and prophecies, he could have brought her on stage much later, after Agamemnon's entry into the palace, rather than nearly three hundred lines before her first utterance in 1072. Conversely, had her earlier, silent presence been intended to produce an effect not achieved specifically by her entry at Agamemnon's side,<sup>12</sup> Cassandra could have preceded the king (she might, e.g., have been brought by the herald). From Aeschylus' use of this rare—and therefore conspicuous—simultaneous entry,<sup>13</sup> the audience should expect that Cassandra's further movements will also be linked with those of Agamemnon. Moreover, this staging encourages the audience immediately to speculate how Agamemnon's queen, with her “heart of manly counsel” (11), will react to the public distinction bestowed by her husband upon his concubine. This curiosity intensifies the spectators' apprehension as they look forward to this unusual woman's reception of her long-absent husband on his return from a war for which he had sacrificed their daughter (224–47).

But Clytemnestra completely ignores Cassandra; she is all welcome, ostentatiously protesting her conjugal love and fidelity (855–901). Now, while the sacrifice of Iphigenia was introduced in an early choral ode and may at this point only be lurking in the back of the audience's mind, Cassandra is onstage, in full view of the spectators. The studied lack of reference to her presence—a rather

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gods; and she arouses in Agamemnon the very Greek ambition to outdo one's enemy, by reminding him that Priam would have done it had he been the victor. See also H. Neitzel, “Die Stichomythie zwischen Klytaimnestra und Agamemnon,” *RhM* 120 (1977): 193–208, with bibliography; W. Kraus, “Die Begegnung der Gatten in Aischylos' *Agamemnon*,” *WS* 12 (1978): 43–66.

11. Note that these acts of Clytemnestra and Orestes are “overdetermined” not only in their joining of supernatural and human causes, but also in their attribution to more than one cause on the human level. For “overdetermination” and “multiple explanation,” see E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1951), pp. 7, 16, 30–31, 51, and P. E. Easterling, “Philoctetes and Modern Criticism,” *JCS* 3 (1978): 30, respectively.

12. E.g., to remind the spectators listening to Agamemnon's victory speech of the price paid for that victory, B. M. W. Knox, “Aeschylus and the Third Actor,” *AJP* 93 (1972): 113; or to put her later articulations into strong relief, S. L. Schein, “The Cassandra Scene in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*,” *G&R* 29 (1982): 13. Additional effects caused by Cassandra's presence are not, of course, excluded by the specific effect of her entry together with Agamemnon.

13. O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford, 1977), p. 306.

unusual practice in Aeschylus<sup>14</sup>—is likely to be noticed by and even to intrigue the audience listening to the speeches of the spouses. When it becomes obvious that the queen controls the threshold of the palace,<sup>15</sup> and that under the cover of celebrating the king's victorious homecoming she will refuse him entry until he walks on the purple fabric spread out between his carriage and the palace, Cassandra both puts the conflict into strong relief and complicates it by her very presence. For whatever else the queen hopes to achieve by inducing Agamemnon to enter his home by the purple path, she obviously intends to separate him from his retinue, of which Cassandra is a part: none but the king may tread on the costly tapestries.<sup>16</sup> Clytemnestra cannot, of course, state this motive, but the scene, where the tapestries stretch like a narrow bridge between the king with his attendants and the queen at the palace door, makes it evident. The spectators understand that, should Agamemnon succumb to his wife's flattering entreaties and undertake the crossing, he will have to leave behind the attendants, without whom he will be at Clytemnestra's mercy, and Cassandra, whose arrival with him marked her as his personal concern.

The verbal clash between husband and wife now engages the undivided attention of the audience, which suspects the queen of deceit. The clash comes to its abrupt and surprising end when, upon learning that victory over him is of the utmost importance to Clytemnestra (942–43), the king instantly grants her the victory. The phrasing of his decision is illuminating.

Agamemnon begins: ἀλλ' εἰ δοκεῖ σοι ταῦτα (944a). The phrase, without ταῦτα, is commonly used when one party to an argument realizes that further resistance is useless.<sup>17</sup> In the apodosis this party acquiesces in the conduct desired by the other; the construction of δοκεῖ is completed by an infinitive supplied from the apodosis.<sup>18</sup> Hearing this phrase, the audience understands that the argument is over and expects Agamemnon to conclude by declaring his intention to do what Clytemnestra has been insisting he do since 906: e.g., εἴμ' ἐς δόμων μέλαθρα πορφύρας πατῶν. But they will hear this only twelve and a half lines later (957). Since Agamemnon now says something different, backward-pointing ταῦτα is required in the protasis for the completion of δοκεῖ ("this" = my walking into the

14. Ibid., p. 305: "Attention is normally drawn to an entry and some indication made towards its interpretation."

15. See Taplin, *Greek Tragedy*, p. 33.

16. Interpreters seem to have overlooked this inevitable result and its implications. Wilamowitz (*Aischylos Interpretationen* [Berlin, 1914], p. 172) contends that Agamemnon must arrive unattended, "sonst ist der Mordplan gefährdet." But evidently Clytemnestra foresaw this "danger" and meets it by staging the carpet-scene. Taplin (*Greek Tragedy*, pp. 141–42) holds that after line 957 "all that Ag. has to do is to make his way from the chariot in the *orchestra* across and in through the doors of the palace. The question is whether he will do this on the bare earth or on the pathway of cloth." But the question is rather whether he will do this on the bare earth with his retinue or all alone on the pathway of cloth. Nor does Easterling's statement seem to be quite correct ("Presentation of Character," p. 17), that the carpet-scene "cannot be thought of as having any practical effect on the action: however Agamemnon walks into the house, Clytemnestra can still attack him in the bath." The fact is rather that however Agamemnon walks into the house, he will be murdered; this is the given myth. But how this will be brought about is the choice of the playwright: had Agamemnon not let himself be separated from his attendants by agreeing to take the purple path, the murder would probably have taken another form (e.g., Aegisthus would have had to assist or even take over; cf. *Od.* 11. 409–13).

17. Fraenkel, "*Agamemnon*," 2:429.

18. W. S. Barrett, ed., *Euripides: "Hippolytos"* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 253–54, a detailed discussion with many examples (not including *Ag.* 944, with its additional ταῦτα).

palace while treading on the purple tapestries). The unusual construction also makes the audience wait for the explicit statement of surrender, which they expected to follow the formulaic opening, even while they listen to what Agamemnon is saying instead.<sup>19</sup> And what Agamemnon is saying amounts to two seemingly unrelated requests: first, that his boots be removed (944b–45); second, that Clytemnestra introduce Cassandra graciously into the palace (950b–51a).

The first request arises from the context. The removal of Agamemnon's boots is avowedly intended to avert the evil consequences that may arise from his treading on the costly fabric (946–49; cf. 921–24). Since it is clear that he will not step down from his carriage until his request is carried out, what is in form the apodosis to the opening clause of his speech becomes in substance a condition to his compliance with his wife's wish. His request is fulfilled while he explains why he makes it, and by the end of 949 he is barefoot. The audience now expects him to declare that he is going to take the purple route into the palace.

But Agamemnon again thwarts their expectations. He concludes his request with *τούτων μὲν οὕτω* (950a), “a dry, businesslike formula of transition” of a kind conventionally used for “dismissing a subject as sufficiently dwelt on.”<sup>20</sup> And instead of declaring that he will carry out Clytemnestra's request, he turns to Clytemnestra with a request of his own.

Now the audience at long last hears a reference to the Trojan captive at the king's side. Now, too, Aeschylus brings to actuality the “eternal triangle” whose elements he had prepared by making Cassandra enter with Agamemnon.<sup>21</sup> For even if Agamemnon had needed to give instructions concerning his war-prize (which is unlikely: he gives none concerning his other attendants), he could have given them to a mute attendant (cf. 944b–45; he might, e.g., have ordered his men to depart with her). But he addresses his wife with the request to introduce his captive graciously into the palace and thus reveals his personal involvement with the other woman.

In spite of their very different subjects, Agamemnon's two requests are artfully intertwined. Thus his attempt, in the first request, to conduct himself so that *θεῶν/μή τις πρόσωθεν ὄμματος βάλοι φθόνος* (946–47)<sup>22</sup> is balanced in the second by his advice to Clytemnestra to behave toward Cassandra in a fashion upon which *θεὸς πρόσωθεν εὐμενῶς προσδέσκεται* (952). So, too, Agamemnon's reluctance to “waste the house's substance . . . ruining wealth” (948–49) has its counterpart in his emphasis (954–55) on Cassandra's costliness when he recommends her to his wife: he implies that, like any of the house's other treasures, she must not be wasted. By the time he has finished, the two requests turn out to be of

19. Since *μ' ἐμβαίνοντα* (946) may stand for *εἰ ἐμβαίνομι* (“should I tread”), it is no explicit promise that he will indeed tread on the tapestries.

20. See Fraenkel, “*Agamemnon*,” 2:432.

21. Even if Clytemnestra returns only in 855 (as most editors hold) and is not on stage when Agamemnon enters with Cassandra, still everyone—dramatis personae and audience alike—knows that there is a mistress in the house. Fresh arguments for the view that Clytemnestra is on stage already at 783 are promised by E. H. Pool, “Clytemnestra's First Entrance in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*,” *Mnem.* 36 (1983): 110, n. 79.

22. For the construction of *θεῶν* with *φθόνος*, see Easterling, “Presentation of Character,” p. 11, n. 2. But even if *θεῶν* is taken with *ἀλουργέσιν*, the far-off eye that is feared is that of heaven; cf. 952, and see Fraenkel, “*Agamemnon*,” 2:430; Dover, “I tessuti rossi,” pp. 57–58.

equal length (944b–49, 950b–55). Furthermore, when Agamemnon now explicitly submits, his long-awaited declaration εἰμ' ἐξ δόμων μέλαθρα πορφύρας πατῶν (957) is introduced by a line (956) that looks back to the beginning of the speech (944a), so that the last two lines broadly repeat the idea expressed in the first two, producing a kind of frame.<sup>23</sup> The frame embraces the two distinct components of the speech and formally emphasizes their basic unity.

This artistic structure suggests that the second request is in some way a counterpart of the first. The first request was in substance a condition of the king's still-undeclared submission to his wife. The second request may, then, also be a condition of sorts: Agamemnon will respect Clytemnestra's wish and enter the palace on the understanding that she in return will respect his wish and graciously let Cassandra follow him into the palace. The entry of Agamemnon and Cassandra together, which aroused a vague expectation that their further movements too would somehow be connected, prepared the audience for such a link between the two requests. When Agamemnon started his speech of submission, this expectation seemed to have been frustrated. But now it becomes clear that, although Cassandra will not enter at the king's side, their entries will be interdependent. The audience has been taught by Clytemnestra that not everything this scene signifies is made explicit (thus, the significance of the purple cloth as a means of separating Agamemnon from his retinue). Agamemnon's fatal unattended entry here will be mirrored by that of Aegisthus in the *Choephoroe*; that entry too will be managed by a ruse (*Cho.* 770–71 and 838).

The framing line 956 does not repeat the opening phrase of the speech verbatim, and the difference is significant. Agamemnon now restates the initial ἀλλ' εἰ δοκεῖ σοι ταῦτα as ἐπεὶ δ' ἀκούειν σοῦ κατέστραμμαι τάδε, with forward-pointing τάδε balancing the backward-pointing ταῦτα above. Whereas at the beginning of the speech the king used formulaic—and therefore impersonal—language, his phrasing here suddenly lays bare his feelings about the act he is going to perform. Κατέστραμμαι is a very strong word. It implies that Agamemnon is conscious of doing something he should not do, or would not do under different circumstances. It is impossible to know whether the act that causes his misgivings is the treading on the tapestries or the unattended entry: the one despite the precaution of removing his boots; the other, either because he senses the dangers of entering alone, or (if he does not: see 831–38 following upon 788–89 + 807–9) because doing without attendants means renouncing the insignia of his royal status. As I suggested above, various causes are likely to have acted on Agamemnon down to 943, when he is finally overpowered by their combined effect. Only at 956, however, does he reveal what this surrender means to him, and he does so immediately after he asks Clytemnestra to introduce Cassandra into the palace. The juxtaposition—of the request and his emphasis on the difficulty his own compliance causes him—seems to imply that one of the motives for Agamemnon's surrender is the gracious reception of his captive that he desires to win from Clytemnestra. From this perspective, it is Cassandra, not Clytemnestra, to whom Agamemnon is subjugated.

23. On framing in Aeschylus, see H. Friis Johansen, "Some Features of Sentence Structure in Aeschylus' *Suppliants*," *C&M* 15 (1954): 32–47. On my interpretation the "two distinct subjects" (p. 44) framed here have a common denominator.

Agamemnon's surrender, viewed this way, gains "human intelligibility." It also demonstrates to Clytemnestra Agamemnon's involvement with Cassandra. This foreshadows her later avowal that one of the reasons she killed her husband was the offense she took at the women he enjoyed as warlord (1438–41, and cf. 1263). Moreover, it brings to the foreground the eternal triangle and its important function in the *Agamemnon*, which presents the appalling problem of the *Oresteia*. For the trio here—Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Cassandra—is only one of several such groups of three that will ultimately compel Orestes to kill his mother.

The first triangle, the "destruction (ἄτη) that began it all" (1192), is the adultery of Thyestes with the wife of his brother Atreus (1193), for which the latter took a most horrible revenge. All the males of the next generation are similarly involved, as one triangle brings about the next. There are the two sons of Atreus: Menelaus, whose wife left him for Paris and caused the Trojan war (61–67, and *passim*); and Agamemnon, who leads that war, alienates Clytemnestra by sacrificing Iphigenia for it (224–29, and *passim*), and returns with a concubine to face his wife in our scene. There is also the one surviving son of Thyestes, Aegisthus, who takes advantage both of Agamemnon's absence and of Clytemnestra's resentment to fill the empty place in their marital bed; from there he plots his revenge for Atreus' retaliation against his father (1223–25; 1577–1611, esp. 1604). Before long Agamemnon will have paid with his life for having sacrificed Iphigenia and for having returned with Cassandra, as well as for being the son of the slaughterer of Thyestes' children. And the spilt blood will wait for the avenger, Orestes, and the *Choephoroe*.<sup>24</sup>

Of all these groups of three, only the one treated here appears on stage in the *Agamemnon* in a three-actor scene. Because of the recent introduction of the third actor, the audience is likely to have been aware of the potential of such a presentation. The significance of the actors' number, however, is translated into drama only when the king appeals to his wife on behalf of his concubine. And that, as I have suggested, is part and parcel of Agamemnon's yielding.<sup>25</sup>

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24. See 1646–48. Clytemnestra will kill Cassandra, too, for having been brought by Agamemnon. Her death will also be avenged by Orestes: see 1279–83, 1317–19.

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## SOME PASSAGES IN MAXIMUS OF TYRE

Small words have a nasty habit of disappearing from manuscripts without permission; I begin with a few passages which seem to betray stylistic blemishes due to this cause.

### 2. 4 (p. 22. 4–6 Hobein):

τὸ δὲ βαρβαρικόν, ὁμοίως μὲν ἅπαντες ξυνετοὶ τοῦ θεοῦ, κατεστήσαντο δὲ αὐτοῖς  
σημεῖα ἄλλοι ἄλλα. Πέρσαι μὲν πῦρ, ἄγαλμα ἐφήμερον, ἀκόρεστον καὶ  
ἀδηφάγον κτλ.