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THE SEXUAL STATUS OF AESCHYLUS' CASSANDRA

PAULA DEBNAR

FROM ITS OPENING SCENE, *Agamemnon* builds toward the return of the king from Troy. Midway through the play (783) he finally enters, and with him is a young woman.[1] For an audience steeped in Archaic Greek poetry, the physical details identifying the female character as a prophetess—her scepter, sacred fillets, and costume[2]—would suggest that before them was the beautiful Cassandra, youngest daughter of the Trojan king Priam, Agamemnon's war-prize, en route to her death in the palace of the Atreïdae.[3]

In addition to a female character's age, ethnos, and social status or genealogy, a fifth-century Athenian audience was likely to have been alert to her sexual status. In the case of a young woman, this would mean asking whether she had yet to marry, which (in theory, at least) meant whether she was a virgin.[4] When, for example, Sophocles' Deianira singles out Iole from among the captive women whom Heracles has sent back to Trachis, she draws attention to sexual status as an essential component of the young woman's identity (*Trach.* 307–9):

> O pitiful young woman, who are you?
> Are you without husband or are you a mother? By your appearance
> you have no experience of all these things, but you are noble.

The alternatives ("without husband" or "mother") imply that "these things" include sexual matters.[5] Marriage means, among other things, the loss of sexual innocence, and Deianira thinks Iole is a virgin. She soon discovers her error: "I have received a girl [κόρην]—no, I think this no longer, but a woman joined in wedlock [ἐζευγμένην]" (536–37).[6]

As is often the case in tragedy, the audience of *Trachiniae* knows more than the characters within the drama. The obvious strains of deceit in Lichas' protests of ignorance about the young girl draw attention to Heracles' true

1. References to the *Oresteia*, unless otherwise noted, are to the text of West 1990. All translations are my own.

2. Not mentioned until 1264–70, but likely to have been visible to the audience.

3. Cf. the five objective questions that Taplin (1977, 5) says are raised by the entrance of any character: "who? when? how? whither and whence?"

4. On virginity as a sexual rather than a purely sociological matter in ancient Greece, see Sissa 1990, 73–86; contra, Calame 1997, 27.

5. Easterling 1982, ad 308; contra, Davies 1991, ad 309.

6. See also 1224–26.

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relationship to Iole and strengthen the audience's inference that she is yet another of the hero's many sexual conquests.[7] Nonetheless, Deianira's reaction implies that tragic conventions offered no conclusive visual clues to signal virginity. It also suggests that an Athenian audience would not have thought Deianira's uncertainty about Iole unusual—despite her being the captive of the most sexually voracious of all Greek heroes.

The parallels between the Iole scene in *Trachiniae* and the confrontation between Clytemnestra and Cassandra in *Agamemnon* are striking.[8] Unlike Sophocles, however, Aeschylus is evasive about the sexual status of Agamemnon's war prize, and the tradition concerning Cassandra's virginity is ambiguous, even contradictory. Consequently, some scholars assume that she is virginal, others that she has been raped.[9] Moreover, those who believe that Aeschylus' Cassandra has lost her virginity disagree about who took it, with Ajax, Apollo, and Agamemnon the most likely suspects.[10]

Yet this is a trilogy in which virgins, both divine and human, figure prominently. Their actions—or suffering, as the case may be—reflect the conflict between male and female forces, on both human and cosmic levels, that the trilogy must resolve. Thus, determining whether Aeschylus' Cassandra is virginal when she enters the house of Atreus is likely to affect one's understanding of her position in this conflict. My first aim, then, is to establish whether Aeschylus' audience could have imagined a virginal Cassandra. After briefly reviewing the external literary and visual evidence concerning her accused defilers in order to recover the kinds of preconceptions Aeschylus' ancient audience might have brought to the theater, in each case I will turn to the clues about Cassandra's sexual status within *Agamemnon*. The second part of the article will explore the implications of Cassandra's virginity for the understanding of her role in *Agamemnon* and in the *Oresteia* as a whole.

AJAX

Ancient sources offer radically different stories about familiar mythical characters, and narratives involving Cassandra are no exception.[11] A prominent part of the mythic tradition is her so-called rape by Locrian Ajax (that is, the "lesser" Ajax, son of Oileus),[12] an incident that was especially popular among Greek vase painters in the late Archaic and Classical periods. Ancient literary and visual sources, however, are not clear about the precise nature

7. On (now lost) epics that focused on Heracles, see Easterling 1982, 15–19, and Davies 1991, xxii–xxvii.

8. Davies 1991, ad 307; Easterling 1982, ad 293–313. Kapsomenos (1963, 68–79) provides a detailed comparison.

9. Virginal: Vermeule 1966, 6; Wohl 1998, 114–15; Mossman 2005, 355; Rehm 1994, 47. Sexually experienced: Vickers 1973, 374; Gagarin 1976, 95; Wohl 1998, 107. My anonymous referees expressed diametrically opposing views.

10. Mitchell-Boyask (2006, 273) tries to cut the knot: "she is first and foremost an unmarried woman, a *parthenos*. But Cassandra is, paradoxically, a *parthenos* maritally linked to two separate males [Apollo and Agamemnon] (three if we include her rape by Oilean Ajax, an event seemingly excluded by Aeschylus)." His "maritally linked to," however, seems to mean "has had sex with," in which case there is only a genuine paradox if being a *parthenos* is a matter of sexual innocence, not just marital status.

11. On Cassandra in ancient art and literature, see Davreux 1942; Touchefeu 1981; Paoletti 1994; Mazzoldi 2001a; and Neblung 1997.

12. On Ajax and Cassandra in particular, see Rösler 1987; Mazzoldi 1997, 31–61.

of Ajax's crime or "outrage" (τόλμημα).[13] Most, including the oldest, merely say that during the sack of Troy Ajax "seized" Cassandra or "dragged her away" from Athena's sanctuary (or statue).[14] No doubt Ajax intended to do more, but, as Anderson (1997, 51 n. 8) suggests, the episode could have had a different outcome in different epics. Moreover, tearing a supplicant away from a sanctuary or altar was in itself a sacrilege. Even in *Troades*, performed more than forty years after the *Oresteia*, Euripides could ask his audience to imagine a virginal Cassandra after her confrontation with Ajax.[15] Not until the third century B.C.E. does an extant source refer explicitly—or as explicitly as Lycophron's style allows—to Ajax's sexual violation of Cassandra (Lycoph. 357–58).

If the audience of *Agamemnon* came to the theater with the Ajax–Cassandra story (or stories) in mind, they must have been disappointed, or at least surprised, since the hero is conspicuously absent. No one mentions Ajax by name or alludes to his encounter with Cassandra. Agamemnon's Herald does describe the storm that kills many of the Greeks returning from Troy, a storm that Archaic poets associated with Athena's anger, most likely directed at Ajax.[16] But while he concedes that there was a connection between the disaster and divine wrath (649), the Herald does not mention a specific god or expand on the reason for the god's (or gods') anger.

Earlier in the play, Clytemnestra proleptically associates the misfortunes of the returning army with impious behavior during the sack of Troy. After positing that if the Greeks reverence the city's gods, they might not "be taken in turn" (ἀνθαλοῖεν, 340), she exclaims, "May some lust [ἔρως] not sooner fall upon the army / to plunder what they should not, overcome by gain" (341–42). As the ancient audience knew, many of the Greeks were caught in a deadly storm and failed to return home safely. When Agamemnon's herald announces that Troy's "altars and seats of the gods are gone / and the seed of the entire land is completely destroyed" (527–28),[17] the audience can complete the syllogism implied by Clytemnestra's fear. Still, there is no explicit reference to Cassandra and Ajax. Clytemnestra's use of the word "lust" may hint at sexual crimes, but that is all it is, a hint. As is typical of the first half of *Agamemnon*, the links between cause and effect remain stubbornly obscure.

APOLLO

Had Cassandra already lost her virginity to Apollo before the fall of Troy? Early Christian writers emphasize the sexual nature of Apolline inspiration.[18] They had much to gain rhetorically, however, from depicting the relationship between a pagan prophetess and god in sexual or, as Sissa describes them,

13. Touchefeu 1981, 336–37; see also Mason 1959, 81–84.

14. E.g., Proclus, *EGF* 62.23–24 (*Iliupersis*); Alc. frag. 298.6–8; Eur. *Tro*. 70 and 617; Verg. *Aen*. 2.403; Hyg. *Fab*. 116.

15. *Tro*. 69–70, 253–54, 324. On *Hecuba*, see pp. 133–34 below.

16. *Od*. 3.130–46, 4.495–510, 5.108–9; Proclus, *EGF* 67.18–19 (*Nostoi*).

17. Denniston and Page (1957, ad loc.) defend 527 (bracketed by West), as does Judet de La Combe (2001, ad loc.).

18. Chrysostom *In Epist. I ad Cor.* (*MPG* 61.242.11–18); see also Origen *C. Cels.* 7.3.25–28.

"pornographic" terms.[19] There is no convincing evidence to suggest that in the fifth century B.C.E. the Pythia was believed to be Apollo's bride or concubine.[20] Moreover, when comparing Cassandra to the Pythia—or even the Sibyl—we should keep in mind that Cassandra was not a real-life seer, but "a relatively late poetical creation not a reflection of an existing type of prophetess."[21]

In the iconographic tradition Apollo rarely, if ever, appears with Cassandra. A wreath or branch of laurel may connect a female figure with the god, but the association does not confirm that the figure is Cassandra.[22] No particular incident involving Cassandra and Apollo seems to have inspired painters or fit both their repertoire and the tastes of their patrons. Of the extant sources, *Agamemnon* is the first to mention her physical encounter with Apollo. Aeschylus may have invented it.[23]

In *Agamemnon*, Apollo's connection with Cassandra is pronounced, and the god plays a significant role throughout the *Oresteia*.[24] After almost three hundred lines of silence, Cassandra's first articulate cry is "Apollo, Apollo." According to Victoria Wohl, in the scene that follows, Cassandra reveals to the Chorus that she is not a virgin because of her encounter with Apollo (1206).[25] But does she? The Chorus are certainly curious about the relationship. During a temporary respite from her prophetic visions, they ask, "It cannot be, can it, that, although a god, he is struck with passion [for you]?" (μῶν καὶ θεός περ ἰμέρῳ πεπληγμένος, 1204).[26] Initially Cassandra demurs, but then admits that Apollo "was a wrestler [ἦν παλαιστής]" and that he "greatly breathed delight [χάριν] for me" (1206).[27]

The first part of her response evokes an image of a physical contest.[28] Indeed, combined with χάρις, the struggle seems erotic, as Wohl (1998, 115) suggests. But the expression "greatly breathed delight for me" remains puz-

19. Sissa 1990, 23. Later (52), she contends that "The Greeks ask us to view the oracular pronouncement as the effect of impregnation by a god, hence as something akin to giving birth, perhaps an 'oral birth,'" but she stops short of arguing that Apollo engaged in physical intercourse with the Pythia.

20. Contra, Halliday 1913, 82, and, more recently, Roth 1982, 47–49 with nn. 77 and 78. Mitchell-Boyask (2006, 274) posits that Cassandra initially thinks that Apollo has brought her as a bride to his own house. Cassandra, however, does not ask "To what"—in the sense of "whose"—house she has been brought, but "To what kind of [ποίαν] house?" (1087). Her question may be rhetorical, and her correction (1090–92) of the Chorus' mistaken response precludes the house of Apollo.

21. Bremmer 1993, 152. On Cassandra as an artistic creation, see Graf 1985, 348–49.

22. Davreux's positive identifications (1942, 102–4; nos.1–6) are all late.

23. Davreux 1942, 31: "a version yet unknown or at least not well known by his public." However, both Latte (1940, 16–17) and Parke (1967, 30) think that the story was familiar.

24. Roberts 1984, esp. 60–72.

25. Wohl 1998, 114–15. She observes that Cassandra is "referred to throughout as γυνή (a mature woman, not a virgin)." "Throughout," however, means just twice. At 1296, the Chorus address her as γύναι. But Dickey (1996, 87) observes that in poetry γύναι is used for married and unmarried women and that in tragedy it is "the usual way of addressing unrelated women." Sophocles' Orestes, for example, uses γύναι to address his virginal sister (*El.* 1106). The word appears a second time in Cassandra's prediction that a woman will die in exchange for a woman, a man for a man (γυνὴ γυναικός / ἀνήρ . . . ἀντ' ἀνδρός, 1318–19). But here the emphasis seems to be on gender, rather than sexual or marital status.

26. The dispute about the line order and about a possible lacuna here does not affect my argument.

27. "For me"? "Upon me"? Fraenkel (1950, ad 1206) explains: "The divine χάρις was directed towards, and at the same time worked upon, Cassandra."

28. Fraenkel (1950, ad 1206) thinks the metaphor is literal, although he believes "it is not merely brute force which is here at work"; similarly, Morgan 1994, 126.

zling. The Chorus seem as mystified by Cassandra's reply as many modern readers are—and, I suspect, as Aeschylus' audience was as well, especially if the story was an innovation. They want to know if there was a sexual encounter, so their next question is more direct. In fact, this chorus of old men could scarcely be more explicit: "Did you come, as a couple [dual], to the act of producing children as is usual [νόμῳ]?" (1207).[29]

Cassandra deflects this question too. She says that she consented, but deceived Apollo (ἐψευσάμην, 1208), and as a consequence no one believed her prophecies (1212). Exactly how she deceived him, Cassandra never explicitly reveals. The usual (and most plausible) interpretation of this exchange is that she lied: she agreed to have sexual intercourse with him and then broke her word. That is to say, she never had sex with Apollo, at least in any usual, human sense of the act.[30] And this seems to be what the Chorus mean by νόμῳ.[31] After all, despite Apollo's notoriously lackluster record with sexual prey, he did sometimes succeed and, as with Creusa, father a child.

AGAMEMNON

The connection between Agamemnon and Cassandra is at least as old as the *Odyssey*.[32] Concerning their relationship, however, little can be inferred from Archaic literature or art.[33] Cassandra may appear on a Classical red-figure calyx-crater by the Dokimasia Painter depicting the death of Agamemnon,[34] but the date of this vase in relation to the *Oresteia* and the identification of figures are matters of debate.[35]

Even Pausanias, alert as he was to vestiges of the Classical period, found few items of interest concerning Agamemnon and Cassandra. In Amyclae, he saw a sanctuary and statue of Alexandra, identified by locals as Cassandra (3.19.6), and a temple and statue of Alexandra-Cassandra in Leuctra (3.26.5), but he provides no descriptions of these works. More interesting is the tomb in Laconia of the two children Cassandra is said to have borne by Agamemnon (2.16.7). According to Pausanias, in this otherwise unknown version, Aegisthus killed the children and the parents at the same time.

One of my students once asked me how likely it was that the king would have kept his hands off Cassandra between the capture of Troy and his arrival in Argos. To judge by Euripides' *Hecuba*, he did not: Agamemnon

29. Fraenkel (1950, ad loc.) and Judet de La Combe (2001, ad loc.) offer persuasive cases for retaining νόμῳ.

30. See, for example, Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.12.5. Even Wohl (1998, 116 n. 52) leaves open this possibility. Kovacs (1987) suggests that the deception consisted of being unfaithful to Apollo or of aborting his child; however, he admits that either would be "mythically unique" (333).

31. γυναικείῳ νόμῳ (*Ag.* 594) means "as women usually do." In Herodotus (1.61.1), the creation of children νόμῳ is also what Pisistratus did *not* do (οὐ κατὰ νόμον) with the daughter of Megacles (Judet de La Combe, 2001, 517 n. 212). Fraenkel (1950, ad loc.) and Kovacs (1987, 332–33) both link νόμῳ with marriage or concubinage.

32. *Od.* 11.409–23. On Agamemnon's death in the iconographic tradition in particular, see Prag 1985, 1–5, and Touchefeu and Krauskopf 1981, 271–72.

33. Indeed, in the figurative tradition "the subject of Cassandra as captive is . . . a very rare one" (Prag 1985, 58).

34. Boston 1863.1246; Vermeule 1966, 3; contra, Gantz 1993, 672–73.

35. Vermeule (1966) dates it post-*Oresteia*; contra, Davies 1969.

is said to have engaged in sex with Cassandra before the sacrifice of Polyxena (120–22, 127–29, 826–29).[36] Compared to Aeschylus, however, Euripides handles time more realistically, at least in *Hecuba*, where the emphasis falls on delay: once again stalled by unfavorable winds, the Greeks are unable to leave the Thracian Chersonese. At the opening of the play (30–34), Polydorus' ghost reveals that he has been flitting over Hecuba's head for three days.

Aeschylus, on the other hand, often demands a radical suspension of disbelief, and in *Agamemnon* in particular the poet handles time freely.[37] Despite the weeks that must have elapsed—by a realistic standard, that is—between the destruction of Troy and the return of the surviving troops, the beacons signaling the fall of Troy travel virtually timelessly to Argos and, when Agamemnon enters, the audience is asked to believe that Troy is freshly fallen, its ashes still smoldering. The king himself asserts that in Troy the "winds of destruction [ἄτης] live" (819). It is easy to imagine, then, that Agamemnon has only recently received Cassandra as his prize, "a flower, chosen from among much wealth" (954–55).[38]

How the audience was to imagine the relationship between Agamemnon and his captive would have been conditioned in large part by the staging of their entrance. As Jenkins and Seaford have shown,[39] it is likely that the scene would have offered spectators in the theater of Dionysus an ambiguous tableau: not only the return of a victorious king with his war prize, but also the arrival of a bride and groom. In *Agamemnon*, the couple is announced by an untraditional procession of torches, the beacons that signal the fall of Troy. When the Chorus ask Cassandra to come down from her "wagony throne" (ἁμαξήρη θρόνον, 1054), they may refer to the special seat with which a bridal cart was probably fitted.[40]

Images of brides and captives could easily be conflated, in part because of the parallels between wives and slaves.[41] Both were outsiders who had to be incorporated officially into the new household by means of sacrifices and ceremonies at the hearth,[42] and both seem to have participated in the *katachysmata*, a ritual in which Athenians poured nuts, dates, coins, figs, and dried fruit—symbols of the household's prosperity—over a newcomer's head.[43] So, too, representations of the Greek wedding seem to include gestures that are "residues of an original mock-abduction ritual."[44]

36. Later poets were also inclined to eroticize the bond between Agamemnon and Cassandra; Mazzoldi 2001a, 66–67.

37. On Aeschylus' handling of time see De Romilly 1968, 77–82; see also Fraenkel 1950, 2.254–56; Taplin 1977, 290–94; Anderson 1997, esp. 109–13; and Otis 1981, 58–65.

38. The description emphasizes her delicate beauty and therefore her value as the prize chosen for him by the army; it need not imply that Agamemnon has "deflowered" her. To much different effect, in Euripides' *Hecuba* Agamemnon chooses Cassandra for himself; Scodel 1998, 143–44.

39. Jenkins 1983; Seaford 1987, 127–28.

40. Seaford 1987, 128 n. 220. We have no example in tragedy of a married woman's being presented as Cassandra is here.

41. Rehm 1994, 44.

42. E.g., the *amphidromia* (Jenkins 1983, 142).

43. Oakley and Sinos 1993, 34.

44. Sourvinou-Inwood 1973, 17 (and n. 52), with reference to the Sabouroff painter. Jenkins (1983, 138–41) argues that the parallels between abduction and bridal scenes are meaningful in that they represent the social act of transferring a (powerless) woman from one group to another and that they express the bride's own experience.

We do not witness a performance of the *katachysmata* in *Agamemnon*, but the delicate red cloth that Agamemnon spoils as he enters the palace symbolizes (among other things) the wealth of the house of Atreus.[45] Moreover, standing before the entrance of the palace Clytemnestra resembles the groom's mother, who on a number of wedding vases poses at the door of the house ready to greet the newlyweds.[46] Strange as this view of Clytemnestra may seem, it is but one of several inverted roles she plays in this trilogy.

A fifth-century Athenian audience was likely to have assumed that a young bride was virginal, and the exchange between Clytemnestra and the Chorus strengthens the impression of Cassandra's virginity. When the old men compare Cassandra to a newly captured wild creature (1063), Clytemnestra responds, "She does not know how to bear the bit, before foaming away her blood-stained strength" (1066–67). The comparison of virgins to animals to be tamed, especially to fillies, is familiar from other ancient texts.[47] Cassandra's "blood-stained strength" hints at the blood to be drawn when she is "tamed," that is, sexually initiated.

Cassandra herself employs bridal imagery in her exchange with the Chorus.[48] Shifting from lyric to iambs, she announces, "Now, my prophecies will no longer look out from under veils, like a girl just married" (1178–79), a reference to the unveiling of a bride to the groom during the *anakalupterion*.[49] During a final prophetic seizure, Cassandra throws away her scepter and wreath, signs of her dedication to the god (1264–68), telling them—implicitly Apollo as well—to "go to destruction" (1267). Her gestures and words are startling. Equally startling is her sudden cry, "Look, Apollo himself strips me of my prophetic dress" (1269–70).[50] Scholars have paralleled this part of the Cassandra scene with the shedding of Iphigenia's robes en route to her sacrifice.[51] Whether the saffron-colored cloth recalled by the Chorus (*Ag*. 239) refers to Iphigenia's robes or a bridal veil (or both), the passage associates the young girl with marriage.[52] Iphigenia's imminent marriage appears to have been a persistent part of the poetic tradition.[53]

At the same time, Cassandra's "divestment" indicates that she is no longer dedicated to the god. The significance of her gesture becomes clearer when compared to Euripides' *Troades*, where Cassandra removes the insignia of Apollo while still in Troy (451–54), that is, before she has been handed over to Agamemnon and long before her arrival in Argos. Aeschylus' Cassandra, on the other hand, crosses the threshold of the palace just after she has been

45. Jones 1962, 85–90; Taplin 1977, 313–14.

46. Jenkins 1983, 138; Rehm 1994, 48–49.

47. Loraux 1987, 34–37; on taming, see Calame 1997, 238–44, and 239 n. 120; see also Seaford 1987, 111 (with 128 on Cassandra). On the bridle in the Iphigenia scene, see Wohl 1998, 72 with n. 71.

48. Seaford 1987, 124.

49. Fraenkel 1950, ad 1179; Seaford 1987, 124; Rehm 1994, 47–48; Wohl 1998, 114–15. For a reassessment of evidence for the *anakalupterion*, see Ferrari 2003, 32–35.

50. Morgan (1994, 129) infers, "It is Apollo who has led her away from her old home and now undresses her for a mortal consummation."

51. E.g., Sider 1978, 16; Connelly 1993, 121.

52. Sourvinou-Inwood (1988, 132–33) perceives an allusion to the final stage of the *arkteia*. Armstrong and Ratchford (1985, 1) as well as Cunningham (1984) detect an allusion to the *anakalupterion*.

53. E.g., Proclus *EGF* 32.58–60 (*Cypria*) and Eur. *IA* 87–105.

released (or has released herself) from the guardianship of one male, Apollo, but before she has been incorporated into the household of another. Furthermore, if at this point in the play Clytemnestra is the real master of the household,[54] Cassandra does not succumb to the queen's seductive powers, as did Agamemnon when he walked along the delicate red cloth. Nor is Cassandra subdued or carried to her sacrifice, like Iphigenia, but she goes into the palace of her own will: "I will lead the way. I will have the courage to die" (1289). If she enters both autonomous and virginal, the sacrifice of Cassandra, although corrupt, is the first in the *Oresteia* in which the victim is both perfect—in a ritual sense—and willing.[55] It is therefore one of the first hints in the tragedy of a transition from utter despair to hope.

There may be yet another allusion to the marriage ceremony in this scene. Heroic as Cassandra's pronouncement is, she balks three times before she enters the palace. Her fear prompts her to pray that her death be easy (1292), perhaps echoing the fears of a bride as she was about to enter the *thalamos*.[56] Cassandra's wish seems to have been granted. The only cries—in the text, at least—are Agamemnon's.[57] If scholars are correct in arguing that at the entrance of Agamemnon and Cassandra Aeschylus' audience would have been reminded of the Athenian wedding ceremony, then this sequel to Cassandra's exit offers yet another example of a reversal in gender. According to a scholium on Theocritus 18, when newlyweds entered their house, celebrants pounded on the door of the wedding chamber and sang "so that the voice of the virgin might not be heard as she is violated by her husband, but might go unnoticed, covered by the maidens' voices."[58] Here it is the male, not the female, who cries out (1343, 1345).[59]

VISIONS AND REVISIONS

Clytemnestra's ominous remarks about the bit and foaming blood are not her last words about Cassandra. One of the most powerful figures in *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra is also the figure who most strongly demands that we consider—or reconsider—Cassandra's sexual status. How should the audience understand her description of the slain prophetess (1440–43)?

> And [so lies] this captive of his spear and seer
> and sharer of this man's bed [κοινόλεκτρος], a prophet,
> a faithful bedmate [ξύνευνος], and one who rubs the mast [ἱστοτρίβης]
> among the sailors' rowing benches.

54. As is implied by Clytemnestra's control of the threshold, which is striking, even if, as Hamilton (1987) argues, the permanent *skene* representing the palace was not a recent innovation.

55. Iphigenia is perfect, but unwilling. Although Agamemnon walks on the tapestries and enters the palace willingly, and Clytemnestra implies that she, at least, thinks her husband is a perfect victim (ἀνδρὸς τελείου, 972), he is not, in fact, ritually perfect. On corrupt sacrifices in the trilogy, see Zeitlin 1965 and 1966.

56. On the bride's expression of fear, see Jenkins 1983, 141–42; see also Oakley and Sinos 1993, 33–34, on the loutrophoros-hydria by the Sabouroff Painter (c. 460 B.C.E., Copenhagen 9080).

57. Taplin (1977, 323) points out that the cry from offstage is found in Aeschylus only in the *Oresteia*.

58. Oakley and Sinos 1993, 37. They also mention the guard (*thyroros*) posted at the door who, according to Pollux (3.42), was to "prevent the women from helping the screaming bride."

59. On Clytemnestra's feminizing of Agamemnon, see Winnington-Ingram 1983, 106–7; Zeitlin 1996, 92–93.

Twice in this short passage Clytemnestra refers to Cassandra as Agamemnon's "bedmate" (κοινόλεκτρος, ξύνευνος); soon after she calls her "the lover of this man" (φιλήτωρ τοῦδ', 1446). Should we infer from her words that Cassandra had shared Agamemnon's bed or even that, as ἱστοτρίβης implies, she was the sailors' whore?[60]

Tone and intent are the keys to this passage. Clytemnestra's boast over her victims resembles epic "flyting," verbal abuse aimed at an opponent—or his corpse.[61] The goal of such a performance is to express contempt, not truth[62]—even if Clytemnestra genuinely experiences sexual jealousy. Clytemnestra grimly taunts her victims by playing on the ambiguity of εὐνή, which can mean both "bed" and "bier."[63] Indeed, in her mantic visions Cassandra thought that she saw the king trapped in the net of Hades (1115), but corrected herself using the very word Clytemnestra applies to Cassandra in the final scene: the net is Clytemnestra, "his bedmate [ξύνευνος], the joint-cause of murder" (1116–17). But Cassandra also saw that it was the robe (ἀμφίβληστρον, 1382) with which Clytemnestra would trap Agamemnon—a robe that turns out to be his shroud.[64] In this sense, Clytemnestra's mockery is on target: Cassandra now shares Agamemnon's deathbed and has no choice but to remain eternally his "faithful bedmate" (πιστὴ ξύνευνος). Perhaps the prophetess lay draped over his corpse like the net.[65]

Clytemnestra's accusation that Cassandra was "one who rubs the mast [ἱστοτρίβης] / among the sailors' rowing benches" (1442–43) is even more disturbing. The obscenity of this charge is surpassed only by that at the end of her speech. Although the text is problematic, the gist of her words is clear: "and for me she has brought / a delicacy to the luxury of my bed" (1446–47).[66] As Simon Pulleyn has shown, the image of murder as a "delicacy," literally a "side-dish," allows us "to understand Clytemnestra as implying that she derived from the murder of Cassandra a pleasure that was both sexual and akin to that derived from food."[67] Her "relish" for murder raises another possibility. If Cassandra enters the palace a virgin, as I think she does, then Clytemnestra, whose blood-lust is equated with sexual appetite, metaphorically violates her—behind the *skene* with her weapon and before the

60. On ἱστοτρίβης, see Young 1964, 15; Koniaris 1980; Tyrrell 1980; and Borthwick 1981.

61. Moles 1979, 180.

62. See Martin 1989, 66–77, on "flyting." It is also relevant that Clytemnestra's speech loses its persuasive power and correspondence to reality over the course of the play. On the increased directness of Clytemnestra's language as a reflection of her loss of dominance in *Agamemnon*, see Thalmann 1985, 230.

63. Seaford 1984, 251 with n. 31. Equally clever is the plural Χρυσηίδων, which Fraenkel (1950, ad 1438) calls "venomous."

64. Seaford 1984, 250–51. Similarly, Vickers (1973, 392) refers to the net in *Choephoroe* as "a trap for an animal, a winding sheet, a highway robber's net."

65. In contrast, Orestes' pronouncement over the corpses of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus (*Cho*. 906–7) is accurate.

66. Either "he" (Agamemnon) or "she" (Cassandra) could be the subject of ἐπήγαγεν. But, as Pulleyn (1997, 565–66) points out, whether Cassandra brings herself or is brought by Agamemnon, it is Clytemnestra who enjoys her.

67. Pulleyn 1997, 566. See Moles 1979, 1389–92 on the sexual imagery in Clytemnestra's description of Agamemnon's murder.

audience of the theater with her coarse sexual accusations.[68] This interpretation of Clytemnestra's deeds accords well with other imagery of gender reversal associated with this extraordinary character, whom the Chorus call a woman with "a heart of manly counsel" or "manly will" (ἀνδρόβουλον, 11).[69]

A cylix by the Marlay Painter (Ferrara 2482 [T 264]), the only vessel to portray two episodes from Cassandra's life, captures the inversion. On the outside of the cylix, Ajax pursues the prophetess toward a statue of Athena. On the tondo, Cassandra, clothed in a sheer himation, kneels at an altar and looks back to her left. Behind her Clytemnestra lunges forward with ax raised. Connelly specifically associates the tondo scene with *Agamemnon* 1277–78 and concludes: "But here she [Klytaimnestra] takes on the male role in sacrifice, the actual killing of the victim. . . . The transformation is complete. Klytaimnestra assumes the position of Ajax while Kassandra falls toward the altar rather than toward the safety of the Palladion."[70]

"WHY THUS?"

After weighing the preconceptions that Aeschylus' audience might have brought to the theater against the tragedian's treatment of Cassandra in *Agamemnon*, I have concluded that it is likely, if not entirely provable, that she enters the palace a virgin. Here, I address the interpretive question, "Why thus?"[71] Why would Aeschylus have wanted his audience to imagine a virginal Cassandra? To answer this question I will trace the strands linking Cassandra to the *Oresteia*'s other virginal figures, noting some of the important functions of both Cassandra and virginity in the trilogy.

The richness of the *Oresteia*'s imagery is well known, as are the ways in which Aeschylus merges the literal and metaphorical, in particular by bringing verbal imagery before the theater audience's eyes through staging and dramatic action. The complex interweaving of imagery—of light and dark, fire, fertility, sacrifice, nets and robes, to mention but a few examples—ties the three plays together. As these imagistic clusters gradually shift and develop, they help to propel the trilogy toward its resolution.

Strange as it may seem, the final image of the trilogy, the torchlight procession and the establishment of the Furies in their new home, brings to mind not just the homecomings of Agamemnon and Orestes, but also the theme of marriage and the wedding imagery of the opening play. As Helen Bacon

68. See Loraux 1987, 38–41 on the metaphorical loss of virginity implied by the blood sacrifice of female victims. Wohl (1998, 108) equates the sacrifice of Iphigenia with rape and Agamemnon's murder with intercourse. But while allowing that Clytemnestra derives sexual pleasure from Cassandra's murder (which "reenacts the sacrifice of Iphigenia" [107]), Wohl stops short of seeing Clytemnestra's murder of Cassandra as metaphorical rape; similarly, Vickers 1973, 381–82.

69. On Clytemnestra's assumption of traditionally male roles, see Winnington-Ingram 1983; and Zeitlin 1996, 91–92.

70. Connelly 1993, 122. Given the date of the cup (c. 435–425 B.C.E.), it could have been inspired by a performance of the play. Prag (1985, 59–60) thinks that the vase painter was influenced by a wall painting inspired by the play.

71. Taplin 1977, 5.

points out (2001, 58), the *Oresteia*'s finale represents a change, not in the Erinyes' identity, but in their status—from outsiders to members of a new sacrificial community. In other words, their transformation is much like the change that a young woman underwent in marriage.[72] The position of a virgin on the cusp of this change of status—a transition that channels the potentially disruptive sexuality and fertility of a young girl toward the perpetuation and prosperity of both the *oikos* and the *polis*—gives virginity and its symbols their potency.

The incorporation of the virgin-outsiders into a new abode is, in fact, one of many examples of how "the *Eumenides* catches up many specific elements that were initiated in the *Agamemnon*."[73] Iphigenia, of course, is the most obvious virgin in *Agamemnon*, and, as critics have noted, parallels between Cassandra and Iphigenia abound.[74] Less obvious, but equally important, are their differences, for they register a gradual progression within *Agamemnon*. Both young women, for example, are ritually pure victims, but unlike Iphigenia, Cassandra is not completely innocent. To be sure, as the only Trojan to appear in the tragedy, she represents the many innocent Trojan victims of Paris' crime and of the war.[75] But, as Cassandra herself admits, she also deceived the god (1208), and she understands that Apollo brings her to Argos for punishment.[76] Standing before the doors to the palace, she proclaims that Apollo has "exacted his due" (ἐκπράξας, 1275), a legal term used for calling in a debt.[77] Her life has been on temporary loan: the god has finally brought her to the house of Atreus for reckoning. Although Aeschylus' Apollo cruelly arrogates the role of both prosecutor and judge, he also has his justification, as he does in the trial at the end of *Eumenides*.[78] In this sense, Cassandra provides an intimation of a new kind of justice in the trilogy.

Iphigenia and Cassandra also differ in the way they see and are seen,[79] and their speech further distinguishes the two young women. Iphigenia is gagged to prevent her from cursing her father. Cassandra, on the other hand, is free to speak, but neither curses her murderers nor calls upon the Erinyes.[80] Instead she prays to the sun (1323–26). In the *Oresteia*, the Erinyes are concerned only with the shedding of kindred blood (*Eum.* 212). Cassandra pleads for an avenger, but unlike Iphigenia—or, for that matter, Agamemnon—she

72. Bacon (2001, 54 and 58), however, emphasizes the link between the Erinyes' change of status and that of Orestes.

73. Goheen 1955, 122, in reference to "the red-robed, torch procession" at the close of *Eumenides*.

74. E.g., Rehm (1994, 50–52; 2002, 81), Wohl (1998, 110–17), and Tarkow (1980 157–58), who also perceive some of their differences.

75. Leahy 1969, 151.

76. See Leahy 1969 on the complexity of Cassandra's guilt and innocence.

77. See Fraenkel 1950, ad 1275, with reference to πράσσω at *Ag.* 812 and 823; see also Wohl 1998, 111; and Mazzoldi 2001b. See Robertson 1939, 210–11 and 213–14 on the legal connotation of πράσσω (and its compounds) in Aeschylus; see Ferrari 2003, 29 on the "loaning out" and "calling in" of a woman as a bride by her *kyrios*.

78. Feichtinger (1991, 62) detects intimations of divine justice in the Cassandra scene.

79. See Fletcher 1999, 23–29 on Cassandra's vision.

80. Tarkow 1980, 157.

has no kin to requite her death. Orestes, directed by Apollo, goes to Argos to avenge Agamemnon's murder, not Cassandra's.[81] After the Cassandra scene, the trilogy contains no further mention of the prophetess. To use her own words, she is like a picture wiped away by the strokes of a wet sponge (1329). Bleak as this simile is, it offers some hope—for the community of the trilogy if not for Cassandra herself.

In the face of Clytemnestra's bullying, on the other hand, Cassandra stubbornly remains silent. Her powerful language and willfulness—as well as her deceit of a male—seem to associate her with Clytemnestra (another outsider brought to the house of Atreus) and with the cycle of female violence central to the first play.[82] Yet far from aligning herself with female power, Cassandra sympathizes with Agamemnon. Absent from her speech is any mention of the sacrifice of Iphigenia,[83] and she is appalled by the unnatural monster who will murder the king (e.g., 1233–34).[84] Moreover, in contrast to Clytemnestra's transgressive, deceptive language, Cassandra's lamentation and her truth-revealing prophecies fall within the proper bounds of female speech.[85] There is another difference: Cassandra's words precipitate no action. To be sure, the prophetess both stirs the Chorus emotionally and explains her visions rationally, so that at some level the Chorus perceive what her words portend. But they resist this understanding: she cannot prevent the impending murders.[86]

On the other hand, Cassandra's allegiance to Agamemnon helps to move the drama toward yet another cycle of violence,[87] for it provides a hinge on which the trilogy swings back to the hierarchy of male over female.[88] In *Choephoroe*, Agamemnon is a successful commander as well as a good king, father, and head of his *oikos*.[89] Thus, like Cassandra, the virginal Electra laments Agamemnon's death. She, too, is prevented by Clytemnestra from making a successful transition from her natal house to the house of a new husband. But unlike Cassandra, who once promised herself to Apollo—and unlike her own mother, who took Aegisthus as her lover—Electra does not give herself to any male. She awaits the return of her brother, her lawful guardian, to reclaim his rights as head of the house, including the right to give her away in marriage.

81. Morgan 1994, 137. *Cho.* 1042 echoes Cassandra's prediction that the avenger will be an exile (1282), but in *Agamemnon* Cassandra speaks of "one who exacts atonement for the father" (ποινάτωρ πατρός, 1281).

82. On the cosmic implications of the sexual conflict in the play, see Otis 1981, esp. 87–93.

83. Vickers 1973, 377; Feichtinger 1991, 56.

84. Vickers 1973, 377–80. For a very different interpretation of Cassandra's pro-Agamemnon position, see Wohl 1998, 111–14.

85. McClure 1999, 97. She does not mention prophecy; however, the speech of Cassandra, like that of the Pythia, is sanctioned by Apollo. On the contrast between the language of Clytemnestra and Cassandra, see Thalmann 1985, 226–29.

86. Thalmann 1985, 221–24.

87. On the transitional nature of the Cassandra scene, see Feichtinger 1991, 54–60.

88. *Agamemnon* also shifts from the female virgin Artemis, whose opposition to Zeus precipitates the sacrifice of Iphigenia, to her brother Apollo, who brings Cassandra to Argos and in the final play opposes the female Erinyes.

89. Vickers 1973, 394–99.

Electra enlists Orestes' help in lamenting their dead father, calling upon Agamemnon in order to draw forth the chthonic power necessary for the grim task of murdering Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. In this play, lamentation is a language of agency,[90] and Electra's cooperation with Orestes, foreshadowed by Cassandra's sympathy for Agamemnon, again points toward the reconciliation of male and female with which the trilogy will conclude.

But Orestes is also linked with Cassandra.[91] When he cuts and dedicates his hair at Agamemnon's grave (*Cho*. 6–7),[92] he signals not only his grief but his readiness to make the transition to manhood,[93] a critical period that was the male analog of female virginity. Orestes, like both Electra and Cassandra, is able to resist Clytemnestra's persuasive power. A subtle transfer of the role of Cassandra's counterpart from Electra to her brother reveals yet another progression in the trilogy. Like Cassandra, Orestes communicates with Apollo. In contrast to her, however, Orestes willingly consults the god and willingly obeys him.[94] On the verge of murdering his mother, he seems about to fail Apollo. Yet when Pylades asks, "What, hereafter, of the prophecies / uttered by the Pythia and our sworn oaths?" (*Cho*. 900–901), Orestes obeys.[95]

Although Orestes survives his entrance into the palace, he cannot secure his rightful place as master of the *oikos*. As is true of Iphigenia, Cassandra, and Electra, his change of status is incomplete. At the end of *Choephoroe*, discord resurfaces as the Erinyes turn upon the matricide, driving him away from his *oikos*, back into exile.

Eumenides opens at Delphi with another prophetess, and old as the Pythia is in this play (38), the audience is likely to have associated a female prophet with virginity—especially if, as ancient sources suggest, the Pythia wore the white dress of a young girl.[96] At the very least, she would have been thought to be chaste.[97] The Pythia's dedication to Apollo contrasts with Cassandra's rejection of the god,[98] as does the successful incorporation of the priestess into Apollo's temple with Cassandra's failed transition to her new abode. But the Pythia's consecration to the male god also marks her break from the world of families and blood feuds, and in this sense it points toward Athena.[99]

There are hints of this movement even in the Cassandra scene. As I noted earlier, the extinction of her own family eliminates the possibility of blood vengeance. When she prays that her death, too, be avenged, she calls upon

90. On words in relation to action in *Choephoroe*, see Thalmann 1985, 229.

91. For a fuller discussion of the parallels between Cassandra and Orestes, see Morgan 1994.

92. These lines, however, are supplied by Stanley from schol. Pind. *Pyth*. 4.145.

93. Vickers 1973, 389 and 398.

94. Feichtinger 1991, 61.

95. On Orestes' obedience, see Morgan 1994, 131–33 and 141. Pylades' question may mark another shift from female to male: Morgan (141) calls it a "quasi-oracular pronouncement."

96. Parke 1967, 30. On the Pythia's putative virginity, see Sissa 1990, 33–40. Few modern scholars accept Diodorus Siculus' claim (16.26) that the white dress stems from the original practice of choosing the Pythia as a young woman; contra, Latte 1940, 17.

97. Parke (1967, 73) surmises that the (real) Pythia's white dress emphasized her purity and abstention from sexual activity during the period of her service.

98. Feichtinger 1991, 64.

99. Feichtinger 1991, 65. For Gantz (1977, 37), Athena's hearth in Athens (*Eum*. 440) is an extension of Apollo's at Delphi, while that hearth itself marks a shift in fire imagery from violence to salvation.

the sun (1323–26), not the chthonic gods.[100] Clytemnestra's invitation to Cassandra to join a sacrifice at the palace's "mid-navel hearth" (ἑστίας μεσομφάλου, *Ag*. 1056) points toward Delphi. Indeed, in *Eumenides* Orestes finds refuge at the "navel" (ἐπ' ὀμφαλῷ, 40) of Apollo's temple.[101] Nonetheless, when the Pythia discovers the Erinyes—themselves ancient virgins (*Eum*. 68–70)[102]—and retreats from Apollo's temple "crawling on hands and knees like a baby" (37–38),[103] she points to a divine family feud yet to be resolved. Even after purification by Apollo, Orestes is hounded by the Erinyes. Promising to act as his advocate, the god sends his suppliant to Athens for judgment under Athena's supervision.

The Athenian episode of *Eumenides* suggests yet another connection between Orestes and Cassandra and another reason for Aeschylus' suppression of the Ajax episode earlier in the trilogy. As instructed by Apollo, Orestes seats himself at the shrine of Athena on the Acropolis, entwining his arms around the statue of the goddess (80, 242, 259, 409, 446). In other words, he offers a tableau reminiscent of Cassandra in the many images of her assault by Ajax—possibly including the scene in the nearby Stoa Poikile. At least, Pausanias' succinct description of the painting in the Stoa (1.15.1) makes it likely that Polygnotus depicted Cassandra much as he did in his painting in the Lesche at Delphi, where "she sits on the ground and holds the statue of Athena" (10.26.3).[104] The similarities would have been all the more striking if Orestes retained the suppliant's branch wrapped in wool mentioned at *Choephoroe* 1035—in Kathryn Morgan's view (1994, 136), a parallel to the staff and fillets signaling Cassandra's dedication to Apollo. Again, Aeschylus reverses male and female roles: the male Orestes is in danger of being torn away by the female Erinyes.[105] In this story, however, there is no doubt but that Athena will save her suppliant.

One of Cassandra's most important roles in *Agamemnon* is to foreshadow the intervention of the goddess in the final play. Prior to Athena's appearance, female deceit, prophecy, and lamentation, as well as the incantatory speech of the Erinyes—the embodiment of "negative virginity"[106]—have all failed to end the cycle of violence. By establishing an independent court of law requiring rational argument and by assuaging the Erinyes and persuading them

100. The text of her request is corrupt, although the general sense seems clear; Fraenkel 1950, ad 1324f. Feichtinger (1991, 53) is right to detect evidence of the trilogy's shift from darkness to light in her prayer; however, she is likely wrong to identify the sun explicitly with Apollo; Morgan 1994, 130 n. 25.

101. Somewhat differently, Morgan (1994, 130) thinks that μεσομφάλου metaphorically "establishes Apollo's operative presence right from the beginning of the episode [the Cassandra scene]."

102. Aeschylus is obligingly unambiguous about their sexual status: they are "Old maidens, ancient children, with whom no god, nor even human or beast, mingles" (*Eum*. 68–70).

103. Sommerstein 1989, ad 33. Alternatively, she may have been crouching or supporting herself against the temple entrance; Podlecki 1989, ad loc.

104. See Stansbury-O'Donnell 1999, 181–82, on the function of Cassandra in the *Iliupersis* painting at Delphi.

105. Orestes' successful transition, under Apollo's guidance, to the hearth of Athena offers another gender reversal. Bacon (2001, 56) adds that in *Eumenides* Apollo inverts the traditional association of the female with nature and the male with culture.

106. Zeitlin 1996, 97: "Their virginity is negative virginity, as Clytemnestra's sexuality is negative sexuality, and in each case the fertility of the land is threatened (cf. *Ag*. 1390–92)."

to accept her decision, Athena ends the conflict at all levels. Legal terminology in Cassandra's speech gestures in this direction. I have already referred to her claim that Apollo has "called her in" (ἐκπράξας). When in the same passage Cassandra cries out, "You have led [ἀπήγαγες] me to such a deadly fate" (1275–76), the word ἀπήγαγες may have reminded the audience of ἀπαγωγή, a legal process whereby the victim of fraud could bring an accused criminal into court.[107] So, too, Fraenkel sees in Cassandra's appeal to the Chorus as witnesses before she enters the palace (1317–19) an allusion to the principle in Athenian law that if victims did not call out for witnesses at the time of an assault, they could not claim injury.[108]

In the world of the *Oresteia*, however, human beings cannot perceive or communicate a vision of justice sufficient to resolve the trilogy's conflict.[109] The combination of Athena's virginity, unique birth from a male god, and intelligence make her the ideal mediator between male and female deities and between divine and human realms. Thanks to Athena, the virginal Erinyes, transformed into the "Kindly Ones" (992), are led away in a torchlight procession reminiscent of the arrival of the beacons from Troy.[110] As the audience knows, they will successfully cross the threshold of their new abode, where they will reside by their hearths (ἐπ' ἐσχάραις, 806) and bring good to the city (*Eum.* 1003–9). Only the virginal Athena can confirm her father's allotment of prerogatives to both old and new deities, female as well as male, and restore the precarious balance and hierarchy in the trilogy's cosmos. Nonetheless, Aeschylus' virginal Cassandra helps to prepare the way.[111]

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107. Fraenkel 1950, ad 1276: "ἀπάγειν here probably = 'to arrest and carry off' "; cf. ἤγαγες at 1087 and 1138, both possibly addressed to Apollo, and 1263 where Cassandra refers to her ἀγωγῆς. Legal language in *Agamemnon*, however, is often metaphorical. Robertson (1939, 209) observes that the absence of specialized legal terminology in Greek can make it difficult to detect technical uses of a term. In *Eumenides*, juridical terminology and allusions to procedures are easier to discern, even if they do not necessarily accurately reflect contemporary Athenian practice; Podlecki 1989 203–10.

108. Fraenkel 1950, ad 1317. He points to Hecuba's assertion that Helen never cried out when she was abducted (Eur. *Tro.* 998–1000) and compares Antiphon 1.29.

109. On divine as opposed to human speech in the *Oresteia* and the limits of even the poet's language, see Thalmann 1985, 232–37.

110. Peradotto 1964, 393; Gantz 1977, 38.

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