

AESCHYLUS' CLYTEMNESTRA: SWORD OR AXE?*

Few portions of Eduard Fraenkel's commentary on Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* have been so influential as the three and a half pages *On the Weapon with which, according to the Oresteia, Agamemnon was murdered*.¹ In contrast with the controversy and disagreement stirred by his remarks on *The Footprints in the Choephoroe*,² his thesis concerning Clytemnestra's murder-weapon has met with almost universal approval³ and the matter is widely regarded as settled. It is symptomatic that within the past twelve months two important books should have appeared⁴ which independently assume the unquestionable rightness of Fraenkel's conclusion: the weapon envisaged by Aeschylus was a sword, not an axe.

This state of affairs is all the more surprising because, as Fraenkel's discussion makes clear, before he wrote opinion had been fairly evenly divided between axe and sword, and scholars of the calibre of Wilamowitz,⁵ Latte,⁶ Schadewaldt,⁷ Deubner,⁸ Lesky⁹ and Snell¹⁰ had plumped for the former. Good arguments must outweigh great names, of course; but it may be felt somewhat strange that the three passages of 'unambiguous explicitness' from the *Oresteia* which Fraenkel took as decisive for the sword should have been sufficiently ambiguous and inexplicit to mislead the scholars just named and others besides. Fraenkel himself proceeds to observe¹¹ that the aforementioned 'unambiguous explicitness... in some measure is counterbalanced by the strange indefiniteness in the mention of the weapon precisely where we might expect special attention to be called to it', and this observation leads to the most important and far-reaching of Fraenkel's conclusions:¹² 'In order to heighten the significance with which Aeschylus invests the unique and characteristic instrument of

* Professors Rudolf Kassel, Hugh Lloyd-Jones, M. D. Reeve and Martin West kindly read and improved earlier drafts of this article. Over the years I have enjoyed and benefited from correspondence with John Prag on matters Oresteian, and I trust he will forgive the present disagreement over an isolated issue.

¹ Appendix B in *Aeschylus Agamemnon* 3 (Oxford, 1950), pp. 806ff.

² Appendix D (pp. 815ff.). For an up-to-date summary of the controversy see the recent commentary on Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* by A. F. Garvie (Oxford, 1986), p. 86ff.

³ Fraenkel's treatment seems to have inhibited further discussion of this subject (let alone disagreement), and the nearest one gets to dissent would seem to be in the Denniston–Page commentary on the *Agamemnon* (Oxford, 1957), which refers (p. 171) to Clytemnestra's 'deadly instrument, her sword or axe'. Note too the muted criticism by Lesky, *WS* 1 (1967), 20f. On Burkert, *GRBS* 7 (1966), 120 ('Clytemnestra throws a net over him and strikes him down with the axe') see below n. 17.

⁴ Garvie's commentary on the *Choephoroi* (see above n. 2) on v. 889 (p. 289); A. J. N. W. Prag's *The Oresteia: Iconographic and Narrative Tradition* (London, 1985), p. 82. Dr Prag's General Index s.vv. 'Axe', 'Sword', and 'Weapon' gives handy access to much information.

⁵ *Aischylos Interpretationen* (Berlin, 1914), p. 173 n. 1 (cf. *Griech. Tragödien* 2.40 etc.).

⁶ *Hermes* 66 (1931), 132 n. 2 = *Kl. Schr.* p. 270 n. 34.

⁷ *Hermes* 71 (1936), 64 n. 1 = *Hellas und Hesperien* (1960), p. 205 n. 2.

⁸ *Abhandl. Preuss. Akad., phil.-hist. Kl.* 1 (1941), 22 = *Kl. Schr. zur kl. Altertumskunde*, p. 628.

⁹ *Hermes* 66 (1931), 193 = *Ges. Schr.* pp. 94f., from an article largely superseded by his later treatment of the topic (cited above, n. 3).

¹⁰ *Die Antike* 20 (1944), 132 = *Die Entdeckung des Geistes*⁴ (1975), p. 109. For further bibliography on either side of the issue see Fraenkel, p. 806. (Add to the proponents of the sword H. Goldman, *HSCP*, 21 [1910], 114.)

¹¹ As cited above (n. 1), p. 808.

¹² P. 809.

woman's treachery, the splendid festal robe which turns into a net of death, he will not allow the weapon which actually deals the fatal blow to obtrude itself in any way upon the consciousness of the audience'.

This perception that Aeschylus directs our minds away from the murder weapon to the net is sensitive and just; it has rightly been accepted or developed by later scholars.¹³ But it introduces something of a contradiction into Fraenkel's argument so far: three passages of 'unambiguous explicitness' refer to the sword, but as for the murder weapon's 'being a sword or some other weapon – we should give as little thought as possible to that; it is the robe, the net, which claims the whole and undivided power of our imagination'.¹⁴ The contradiction is bearable (just) if we confine our attention to Aeschylus' *Oresteia* rather than his predecessors' treatments. But it achieves uncomfortable proportions if, as I hope to show, a sword as Clytemnestra's murder-weapon would be an unprecedented and isolated motif within a traditional representation of Agamemnon's death. For then Aeschylus would simultaneously be introducing a striking innovation in one detail and yet intending the audience not to notice it unduly: a distracting and self-defeating procedure.

Let us first consider the evidence of literature. Fraenkel himself, let it be stressed, does not regard Clytemnestra's use of the sword as 'an unprecedented and isolated motif', for he says:¹⁵ 'The three passages discussed here leave no doubt that, in agreement with the narrative in the *Nekyia* [*Od.* 11.424], Aeschylus thought of a sword as the instrument of Agamemnon's murder.'

Now the reference here is to the account of his death which Agamemnon gives to Odysseus. Taken in context, the relevant passage runs (421ff.):

οἰκτροτάτην δ' ἤκουσα ὅπα Πριάμοιο θυγατρὸς
Κασσάνδρης, τὴν κτείνει Κλυταιμῆστρη δολόμητις
ἀμφ' ἐμοί· αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ ποτὶ γαίῃ χεῖρας αἵρων
βάλλον ἀποθνήσκων περὶ φασγάνῳ· ἡ δὲ κυνώπις
νοσφίσαι, οὐδὲ μοι ἔτλη, ἴοντι περ εἰς Ἀἴδαο,
χερσὶ κατ' ὀφθαλμοὺς ἐλέειν σύν τε στόμ' ἐρείσαι.

The whole passage is full of difficulties and ambiguities,¹⁶ and the significance, indeed the very nature, of Agamemnon's dying gesture is extremely opaque. It has been suggested that instead of a picture of Agamemnon 'dying around the sword', i.e. with the sword thrust through his body, we should envisage him 'throwing his arms around his own (unsheathed) sword' in a final attempt at self-defence or vengeance.¹⁷ Even if the interpretation which pictures Agamemnon as transfixed by a sword is correct,

¹³ See in particular A. Lebeck, *The Oresteia: a study in language and structure* (1971), pp. 66ff. and 81ff. See too G. Devereux, *Dreams in Greek Tragedy: an ethno-psychoanalytical study* (Oxford, 1976), p. 330, R. Seaford, 'The Last Bath of Agamemnon', *CQ* 34 (1984), 247ff., etc.

¹⁴ P. 809.

¹⁵ P. 808.

¹⁶ On these 'Verse voll von Schwierigkeiten' see in particular Lesky, *sup. cit.* (n. 3), 16f.

¹⁷ See Lesky's discussion (*sup. cit.* n. 3). An ingenious idea that is at least as old as O. F. Kleine (*Stesichori Himerensis Fragmenta* [Berlin, 1828], p. 86 n. 2; cf. too Wilamowitz, *Griech. Trag.* 2, p. 40 n. 1 etc.) and has been revived by E. G. Pemberton, *AJA* 70 (1966), 377f., supposes the phrase *δειπνίσσας ὥς τις τε κατέκτανε βοῦν ἐπὶ φάτνῃ* (*Od.* 4.535 = 11.411) to imply the axe version of Agamemnon's death. It is indeed true that one would naturally slaughter an ox with a hatchet rather than a sword (cf. P. Stengel, *Opferbräuche der Griechen* [1910], pp. 113ff., Burkert, *Homo Necans*, pp. 154ff. [Engl. transl. pp. 136ff.]) and it would certainly fit my theory to see here an inadvertent allusion to a tradition which Homer has elsewhere suppressed. But I could not refute the counter-claim that the comparison is with the helplessness of a noble beast, not with the mode of its death. Walter Burkert, *sup. cit.* (n. 3), pp. 119f., observes of Agamemnon's murder 'This is in fact how a bull was killed' with reference to 'the famous gold cup from Vaphio' (cf. Boardman, *Greek Gems and Finger Rings* [1970], p. 100 [pl. 67]) which

there is no clear statement in the text of the *Odyssey* that Clytemnestra has directly killed anyone but Cassandra.¹⁸ Finally and most importantly, I would dispute the relevance of this passage anyway, since it belongs to an Homeric recasting of the story of Agamemnon's end that seems deliberately to exclude the notion of death in a bath. As Fraenkel himself says elsewhere:¹⁹ 'According to the *Odyssey* [11.409ff.] Agamemnon was murdered during the feast.' The great king is slaughtered side by side with his *ἑταῖροι* in a way that has been taken deliberately to reflect or anticipate the killing of the suitors by Odysseus near the end of the epic. Judging from other references earlier in the *Odyssey*,²⁰ the feast is to be understood as occurring at Aegisthus' palace,²¹ whither Agamemnon and his men have been lured in order to be ambushed. Homer characteristically gives Agamemnon as heroic a death as is possible and eschews the frightening,²² sordid and doubtless original²³ tradition of the helpless unarmed king struck down in his bath. Homer's treatment of the story casts no light on Aeschylus', then; the latter cannot be explained by recourse to the former.

A much more relevant pre-Aeschylean poem would seem to be Stesichorus' *Oresteia*, which we know to have influenced the tragic trilogy of the same name.²⁴ Fr. 219 P has often been cited in this context: Stesichorus' Clytemnestra dreamed a dream

ταῖ δὲ δράκων ἐδόκησε μολεῖν κατὰ βεβρωτωμένους ἄκρον
ἐκ δ' ἄρα τοῦ βασιλεὺς Πλεισθενίδας φάνη.

'shows the bull struggling in the net'. His belief that 'the myth of the death of Agamemnon was connected with a sacrificial ritual, a bull-sacrifice – *βουφονία*' is highly pertinent to my argument, though it raises too many issues for discussion here.

¹⁸ One should presumably connect this inexplicitness and reticence with Homer's general reluctance to dwell on stories of killing within the family: see e.g. G. Murray, *The Rise of the Greek Epic*⁴ (Oxford, 1934), pp. 134f. ('The crimes of the great wicked heroines... are kept carefully away from the *Iliad*, and allowed only a scanty mention in the *Odyssey*'), J. Griffin, *JHS* 97 (1977), 44 etc. It will be clear why I think that R. Seaford's question (sup. cit. [n. 13], p. 248) 'Why then did Aeschylus abandon the version, traditional and highly apt for tragedy, of the killing... of Agamemnon at the banquet...?' highly misleading.

¹⁹ In his note on *Ag.* 1382 (sup. cit. [n. 1], p. 648). Note that Sophocles takes over the motif of death at a feast (*El.* 194, 203) but has the axe as murder weapon (99).

²⁰ On which see, e.g., Garvie, sup. cit. (n. 2), p. x, Prag, sup. cit. (n. 4), pp. 68ff.

²¹ *Od.* 3.234, where *ἐφέστιος* must refer to Agamemnon's house, is an exception' according to Garvie, sup. cit. (n. 2), p. x n. 5. The stress in this particular passage (spoken by the disguised Athena to Telemachus) is on the possibility that *Odysseus* may on returning home be killed *ἐφέστιος* ('like Agamemnon'): hence the assimilation of Agamemnon's actual, to Odysseus' feared, fate.

²² Emily Vermeule, *AJA* 70 (1966), 11 refers to the 'unsettling implications' of the story: 'even the scene as the Dokimasia Painter handles it [see n. 32 below] is frightening as 'narrative'. This doubtless helps explain why the murder of Agamemnon was relatively rarely depicted in the visual arts (for further speculation about this theme as 'an undesirable subject for the vase-painter' see Goldman, sup. cit. [n. 10], pp. 114f.).

²³ As J. R. Klima and K. Ranke observe in *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* s.v. 'Bad, baden' (1.1139): 'Badende sind wehrlos'. They quote several instances from myth and folk-tale, including Agamemnon. The source they cite for the latter (1.1141 n. 19) is 'Kl(einer) Pauly 1.112 (nach Stesichoros)'. Although this reminds one of the criticism advanced by Walter Burkert in his review of the first two volumes of the invaluable *Enzyklopädie (Gnomon)* 46 [1982], 713: 'Zu wünschen bleibt, dass mehr noch der direkte Zugang zu den Quellen eröffnet wird, statt der Verweise auf andere Enzyklopädien oder gar elementare Nachschlagewerke wie "Kleiner Pauly"...', in this particular case the emphasis happens, I think, to be right. For further examples of helpless deaths in baths see J. N. Bremmer, *Mnemos.* 39 (1986), 418; cf. n. 43 below.

²⁴ Fr. 217 P from the *Oresteia* makes clear that Stesichorus anticipated the use of a lock of Orestes' hair in the recognition of brother by sister. In the following account I stick to essentials, reserving a more detailed treatment of the fr. for my forthcoming commentary on Stesichorus.

These two lines receive short shrift from Fraenkel, who brusquely dismisses them in a footnote: 'It is arbitrary to conclude from the well-known fragment...that [Stesichorus] represented Agamemnon as having been slain with the axe, as is maintained by Robert, Wecklein, and others.' The others would make a long list were their names written out; longer still if we added those who, since Fraenkel penned his words, have been convinced that the bloody wounds on the snake's head most naturally presuppose an axe as the weapon that inflicted them.²⁵ It is true that A. J. N. W. Prag has recently argued²⁶ that the head is the most natural and obvious part of a snake at which to aim a blow. But the fragment from the Stesichorean *Oresteia* depicts no ordinary snake but rather a highly symbolic one representing the murdered Agamemnon; and it is hard not to infer that the position of the wounds is very significant, and meant to indicate an axe as the weapon used by Clytemnestra: an axe delivers blows to the head, a sword blows to the body.

So far I hope to have shown at the very least that there is no literary evidence before Aeschylus' *Oresteia* of a tradition whereby Clytemnestra used sword (and robe) to despatch Agamemnon in the bath. I hope to have shown further that what little evidence there is suggests that the axe as the murder weapon was pre-Aeschylean.²⁷ This is in itself an important gain, for Fraenkel concludes his discussion²⁸ with the verdict 'It is impossible to say whether [the axe] goes back to an older tradition, which differs from that of the *Nekyia* in this detail...or whether the axe was not introduced till the time of the younger tragedians'.²⁹ In fact the casual and allusive manner in which Sophocles and Euripides mention the axe (and the way in which Euripides³⁰ alludes to the two other important motifs of bath and robe as if they were incidental facts of the story that everyone would recognise) strongly suggests that that weapon (and its association with bath and robe) had already been popularised on the Attic stage.

Let us next turn to examine the evidence of art.³¹ Stesichorus' *Oresteia* offers us a useful mode of transition to this, since the most interesting visual depiction of the murder of Agamemnon, that by the Dokimasia Painter on the famous Boston Krater,³² is sometimes thought to reflect the Stesichorean poem.³³ The vase was

²⁵ See, for instance, the article by Lesky mentioned above (n. 3), 20 n. 33: 'Das Schwert fährt in den Leib des Gegners, die Axt trifft sein Haupt.' Robert's thesis was expressed most fully in *Bild und Lied* (Berlin, 1881), pp. 149ff.

²⁶ Sup. cit. (n. 4), p. 75.

²⁷ As accepted by the scholars mentioned in nn. 5–10 above, Blass in his commentary on Aesch. *Cho.* 886ff. etc.

²⁸ Sup. cit. [n. 1], p. 809.

²⁹ For these see Fraenkel, p. 809 and Tarrant's note on Seneca, *Ag.* 897.

³⁰ *El.* 154; *Or.* 26, 367. Prag, sup. cit. (n. 4), p. 82 finds 'interesting...the speed with which the axe, like the net, got into the tradition of Agamemnon's and Cassandra's deaths after Aeschylus, both in the younger tragedians and in the Marlay Painter's cup in Ferrara' (cf. Fraenkel, p. 138 n. 2). On my interpretation there is no such surprising speed.

³¹ For a recent survey of this see in particular Prag, sup. cit. (n. 4), *passim* esp. pp. 134ff. Also Odette Touchefeu in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae* s.v. Agamemnon (I.1.271f.), and R. M. Gais *ib.* s.v. Aigisthos (I.1.372ff.).

³² Boston, Museum of Fine Arts 63.1246: *ARV*² 1652: Prag Catalogue A6 (p. 135), Touchefeu, sup. cit. (n. 31), B 89 (p. 271). The vase is datable c. 470–465 B.C.

³³ Further detail in my forthcoming commentary on Stesichorus (see above, n. 24). For the present cf., e.g. J. Boardman, *Athenian Red Figure Vases: the Archaic Period* (1975), p. 137: 'The Agamemnon, with the king enveloped in a cloth, recalls Aeschylus' treatment of the story, but on conventional dating the vase is earlier than the production of the *Agamemnon* (456 B.C.) and we should therefore suppose this version of the story to be the invention of an earlier poet'.

unknown to Fraenkel, writing before its first publication in 1963,³⁴ but he was able to refer to a number of other vases that resemble at least partly the Boston Krater. Of these he commented 'Representations of the death of Aegisthus of an earlier date than the [Aeschylean] *Oresteia*, depicting Clytemnestra with a double axe in her hand hurrying to the rescue of her lover who is being attacked by Orestes³⁵. . . do not, of course, prove anything with regard to the way in which Agamemnon's murder was represented at that time'. This was an implied rebuke to Robert³⁶ and other scholars who (by contrast) had assumed that Clytemnestra's use of the axe against her son entailed an earlier use of the same weapon against her husband, both of which episodes could be traced back to Stesichorus' *Oresteia*. Such a version would be at least self-consistent and logical, and the case for it (and against Fraenkel's scepticism) has been very much strengthened by the appearance of the Boston Krater,³⁷ which on one side shows Clytemnestra rushing up to despatch her husband with a double-headed axe (and *Aegisthus* preceding her with a sword), on the other the Queen wielding precisely the same weapon against her son as he kills Aegisthus. Artistic depictions of Agamemnon's murder are relatively rare, so that it would be unreasonable to ask for more than one such piece of evidence, but the Krater is pre-Aeschylean and one such piece of evidence is enough: on it Clytemnestra's use of the axe against her son *does* tell us something about the manner of Agamemnon's murder.

In the same context Fraenkel remarked 'It cannot be proved that the woman running with a double axe to a great wooden door, on the Berlin cup by the Brygos painter. . . ,³⁸ is Clytemnestra about to murder Agamemnon. (On the analogy of other vase-paintings, as Beazley points out to me, one may perhaps see here, too, a representation of Clytemnestra after the surprise attack of Orestes)'. I believe most students of Greek art would now agree,³⁹ though, of course, it could be argued of this depiction, as of the others considered above, that Clytemnestra's attempt to wield the axe against her son presupposes an earlier successful use of it against her husband.

In the *Addenda et Corrigenda* to his commentary⁴⁰ Fraenkel was able to include a reference to an Olympian bronze relief⁴¹ (c. 575–550) which 'represents the murder of Agamemnon. There the weapon with which Clytemnestra kills the king is clearly a sword'. This is so, and one or two other⁴² probable depictions of the murder in which Clytemnestra stabs her husband with the sword have accrued since Fraenkel wrote. But I do not believe Fraenkel's case is advanced one jot by these, since (to recur to an argument outlined above) none of them shows any sign of the tradition involving bath and robe which Aeschylus used.⁴³ Whenever bath and robe feature, there too

³⁴ By C. C. Vermeule, *Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Annual Report* (1963), 40f.; then fully by E. Vermeule, *sup. cit.* (n. 22).

³⁵ For an up-to-date survey of these vases see Prag, *sup. cit.* (n. 4), pp. 136ff., Gais, *sup. cit.* (n. 31), pp. 372ff.

³⁶ *Sup. cit.* (n. 25).

³⁷ See above, n. 32.

³⁸ Prag, *sup. cit.* (n. 4), Catalogue C 17 (p. 140).

³⁹ The artefact is not to be found, for instance, in Touchefeu's list of depictions of Agamemnon's murder (above, n. 31).

⁴⁰ *Sup. cit.* (n. 1), p. 832.

⁴¹ Prag, *sup. cit.* (n. 4), Catalogue A3 (p. 134), Touchefeu, *sup. cit.* (n. 31), 92 (p. 271).

⁴² In particular the famous terracotta plaque from Gortyn c. 630–610 B.C. (Prag, *sup. cit.* [n. 4], Catalogue A1 [p. 134], Touchefeu, *sup. cit.* [n. 31], 91 [p. 271]). Cf. in general Prag, pp. 1ff. and Garvie, *sup. cit.* (n. 2), pp. xiif. and xvif. It should further be noted that none of these artefacts is Attic, and that the only depiction of Agamemnon's murder which *is* (the Boston Krater) gives Clytemnestra an axe.

⁴³ Perhaps axe and bath are inseparably linked motifs. For the axe as an appropriate weapon against a victim in a bath Professor Rudolf Kassel refers me to Schiller, *Wilhelm Tell* I i 90 and

the axe is found – such is the thesis suggested by the available evidence of both art⁴⁴ and literature up to the time of Aeschylus.

So far we have pitched the argument at a very general level, considering factors largely external to the Oresteian trilogy itself. This was essential, since the question of Aeschylus' choice of murder-weapon for Clytemnestra has to be put in perspective and context. We must now turn to the three passages of 'unambiguous explicitness'⁴⁵ alluded to at the beginning of this article. Already, however, the very idea of these passages as guaranteeing the use of sword rather than axe seems a great deal less convincing than Fraenkel himself obviously supposed. Given the almost total absence of any literary evidence for a pre-Aeschylean tradition of the use of a sword, and the comparatively strong literary and artistic evidence for a pre-Aeschylean tradition of the axe, it might appear to many quite inconceivable that a playwright who wished to revise so drastically one central detail should have confined all clear indications of this revision to a mere three passages within a trilogy of over 3000 lines. Were we dealing with a text for private reading that argument would carry a great deal of weight. We have, however, to do with the text of a dramatic poem which was originally performed, one whose verbal hints may have been elaborated visually in production. Those who, like Garvie in his commentary on the *Choephoroi*, believe that 'in the *Oresteia* the weapon used by Clytemnestra to murder Agamemnon is never described as an axe, but always, where it is specified at all, a sword'⁴⁶ are free to suppose (indeed, they surely *must* suppose) that these three meagre references were confirmed in the original production by various visual effects. So Garvie continues 'it is a sword which the audience see in [Clytemnestra's] hand at *Ag.* 1372ff.' and we must make up our minds how we would produce this and other scenes. But of course the only evidence we have for such points of production lies in the text itself,⁴⁷ and we must therefore examine those passages which Garvie and others use as basis for their own views about production.

(1) *Cho.* 1010ff.

ἔδρασεν ἢ οὐκ ἔδρασε; μαρτυρεῖ δέ μοι
 φάρος τόδ' ὥς ἔβαψεν Αἰγίσθου ξίφος·
 φόνου δέ κηκίς ξὺν χρόνῳ ξυμβάλλεται,
 πολλὰς βαφὰς φθείρουσα τοῦ ποικίλου.

I put first what more than one scholar⁴⁸ has regarded as the most decisive piece of documentation for the sword as the murder-weapon. To me, on the contrary, it appears easily the weakest: who, when presented with a reference to a robe dyed by Aegisthus' sword, would understand not 'Aegisthus' sword, drawn and used (of course) by Aegisthus', but 'Aegisthus' sword, borrowed and used (on this occasion

97: 'Ich hatte Holz gefällt im Wald, . . . und mit der Axt hab ich ihm's Bad gesegnet'. Certainly an axe will produce a better performance against a man ensnathed in a sleeveless robe.

⁴⁴ On the technique used in representing Agamemnon's head on the Boston Krater as suggesting the 'dilute strands' of the hair of someone who has just emerged from a bath see Vermeule, *sup. cit.* (n. 22), p. 4.

⁴⁵ Fraenkel's phrasing here (*sup. cit.* [n. 1], p. 807) seems to echo that of Tierney, *CQ* 30 (1936), 103 with his reference to three 'unequivocal passages'. Tierney's brief treatment anticipated much of Fraenkel's argumentation.

⁴⁶ *Sup. cit.* (n. 2), p. 289.

⁴⁷ For a sensible general discussion of the relationship between the text of a Greek tragedy and its effect in performance see O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford, 1977), pp. 12ff. and (in particular) 28ff. (on 'Text and Stage Action').

⁴⁸ Both Tierney, *sup. cit.* (n. 45) and Fraenkel, *sup. cit.* (n. 1) for instance.

only) by Clytemnestra'? Scholars wishing to detect the sword as the murder-weapon, obviously, Fraenkel refers to 'the fact (my italics) that Aegisthus lent his sword to the murderer for the deed which the two of them had planned long before'. Less dogmatically, Garvie states 'We may suppose that Clytemnestra, who as a woman would have no sword of her own, had to borrow that of her lover, who in Aeschylus' version took no part in the actual murder'.⁴⁹ But Wilamowitz long ago⁵⁰ suggested that Aegisthus used his own sword for the mutilation (more precisely the *μασχαλισμός*) of Agamemnon's corpse which is mentioned at *Cho.* 439, and then wiped the blade⁵¹ upon the robe that enfolded Agamemnon. Fraenkel complains that with this interpretation 'something is introduced into the passage of which there is not the slightest indication in the context', but precisely the same charge may be levelled against Fraenkel's own picture of Clytemnestra borrowing Aegisthus' sword. Garvie deems Wilamowitz's interpretation 'improbable', but why? The mutilation is specifically mentioned in the text of the *Choephori* as the loan of Aegisthus' sword is not. If we are dissatisfied with the detail of Aegisthus wiping his sword on the robe we may have sympathy for Lloyd-Jones' adaptation of Wilamowitz's idea⁵² whereby we are to suppose that Aegisthus approached the corpse of his dead enemy and stabbed it, as the Achaeans did Hector's (cf. *Il.* 22.371, 24.420f.; Aesch. TrGF 3 F 264 Radt). Such an action would be completely consistent with the character of the undignified weakling and contemptible coward who appears at the end of the *Agamemnon* and exults over a deed not his own.

(2) *Ag.* 1262f.

ἐπεύχεται, θήγουσα φωτὶ φάσγανον,
ἐμῆς ἀγωγῆς ἀντιτείεσθαι φόνον.

Cassandra's prophecy of Clytemnestra's murderous action seems to me a good deal more promising for Fraenkel's argument than the passage from the *Choephori*. Few will extract much comfort from the notion that the prophetess gets this particular detail wrong or that *φάσγανον* is being employed catachrestically and here means

⁴⁹ Sup. cit. (n. 2), p. 332. Garvie disposes of Paley's notion that Clytemnestra could be subject of the verb *ἐβαψεν* ('she dyed Aegisthus' sword'). In addition to his arguments note that the idiom in question (for which cf. also West, *BICS* 26 [1979], 111) always has the subject 'dipping' a weapon in, on, at or within something.

⁵⁰ In his note on *Cho.* 1011 (*Aisch. Orestie... Das Opfer am Grabe* [1896], p. 244); see too his *Homerische Untersuchungen* (Berlin, 1884), p. 103. There is a similar distinction between axe (presumably wielded by Clytemnestra) and Aegisthus' sword at Eur. *El.* 160ff., where it is hard not to agree with Denniston *ad loc.* that *λώβαν* refers to Aegisthus' mutilation of the corpse.

⁵¹ 'Aigisthos hat nach dem Geschäfte der Verstümmelung sein Schwert an dem Gewande abgewischt: daher der Fleck.' Misunderstood by J. A. Schuurmsma, *de poetica vocabulorum abusione apud Aeschylum* (Amsterdam, 1932), p. 79: 'sc. ita ut Aegisthus Agamemnonem, securis ictu a Clytemnestra adacto iam morientem, gladio insuper vulneraverit': against this compromise see Fraenkel, sup. cit. (n. 1), p. 806 n. 2.

⁵² See his translation of the *Choephori* with brief commentary (*Aeschylus' The Libation Bearers* (Prentice-Hall [1970] = Duckworth [1979]), p. 68). Lloyd-Jones translates the lines in question: 'Did she do the deed or not? This robe is my witness as to how Aegisthus' sword dyed it'. On any interpretation of the passage Clytemnestra must be the subject of *ἔδραcen ἢ οὐκ ἔδραce*; Paley (in his 1855 commentary on Aeschylus) should not have toyed with the idea that 'the subject to *ἔδραce* might seem to be Aegisthus' for he has only once been mentioned (in passing at 989) in the previous part of this episode. But the *δέ* in the following *μαρτυρεῖ δέ μοι* can easily be continuative or contrasting after the rhetorical question about Clytemnestra: 'did she do the deed or not? (Of course she did) and furthermore [or 'but by contrast'] the robe reminds me that Aegisthus (did not do the deed but) stabbed the corpse'.

axe.⁵³ But the sword could be metaphorical:⁵⁴ for Clytemnestra is not in reality *whetting* any weapon ready for use against her husband. Cassandra's prophecy conveys an impressionistic picture, not a factually precise catalogue. Besides, in Attic tragedy the verb *θήγω* is always used of swords or daggers (never axes), so that once Aeschylus had chosen that metaphor his metaphorical weapon was also chosen.

(3) *Ag.* 1525ff.

ἄξια δράσας, ἄξια πάσων
μηδὲν ἐν Αἴδου μεγαλαυχέτω,
ξίφοδλήτῳ
θανάτῳ τείας ἅπερ ἔρξεν.

So Clytemnestra, as she boasts over the corpses of her husband and Cassandra. On the face of it this seems the strongest part of Fraenkel's argument. There is no question of *ξίφοδλήτο*s being at all metaphorical, and the Queen's words, as glossed by Fraenkel, yield appropriate and attractive sense: Iphigeneia 'was slain with the sword (cf. e.g., Eur. *I.T.* 27 *ἐκαινόμην ξίφει*, 785 *φάσανον*): for this sin the murderer, her father, has atoned by death by the sword'. However, it is distinctly odd that for the point about Iphigeneia's death by the sword Fraenkel has to have recourse to a play by Euripides. (The same line of approach could effortlessly be used to prove that the axe was the murder weapon in our play!) But how else are we to explain the contents of these lines? They are in fact rather more difficult than Fraenkel's treatment in Appendix B would lead one to suppose. His note *ad loc.* sets out the problems in great detail; the Denniston–Page commentary does so more clearly and concisely. The MSS' *ἀνάξια δράσας*, kept in the text by Denniston–Page and Page's OCT, may well be right as against Hermann's *ἄξια δράσας κτλ.*, and Fraenkel's assertion "'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth": the *lex talionis* demands the most exact correspondence of execution as between the guilty deed and its expiation' loses some of its force without the exact verbal correspondence of *ἄξια δράσας*, *ἄξια πάσων* to back it up. Furthermore, what is the point of *μηδὲν . . . μεγαλαυχέτω*? Fraenkel's commentary does not discuss the meaning; his translation renders 'let him not pride himself in Hades'. Denniston–Page observe: 'he had better not give himself airs in the underworld as the mighty and blameless King of the Achaeans', and quote Odysseus' remark to Achilles in *Od.* 11.484ff., though there, as the sequel shows, 'Achilles himself is far from happy with his status (488ff.)'.⁵⁵ The notion that 'one's status or occupation in Hades repeats that on earth'⁵⁶ can be paralleled, but the idea that Agamemnon's spirit should dream of boasting about it seems extremely obscure, and the connection between this and what precedes and follows it in the text is very unclear. Enger⁵⁷ punctuated the words as follows: *ἄξια δράσας, ἄξια πάσων μηδὲν ἐν Αἴδου μεγαλαυχέτω ξίφοδλήτῳ θανάτῳ, τείας ἅπερ ἔρξεν*. The sense thereby produced is as follows: 'Agamemnon in inferis se gladio interfectum gloriari non poterit; cum enim securi occisus sit, affectus est ea morte, qua ipse filiam affecit'. The second part of this interpretation is erroneous,⁵⁸ but it is not essential to the whole. Clytemnestra is saying that her dead husband cannot boast of a glorious death by

⁵³ J. A. Schuursma, sup. cit. (n. 51).

⁵⁴ As allowed by T. G. Tucker (a strong supporter of the sword) in his commentary on the *Choephoroi* (Cambridge, 1901), p. 265.

⁵⁵ To quote Garvie, sup. cit. (n. 2) on *Cho.* 354–62.

⁵⁶ Garvie as cited in previous note.

⁵⁷ See Schuursma, sup. cit. (n. 51).

⁵⁸ See Prag, sup. cit. (n. 4), pp. 61ff. for artistic depictions of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia involving a sword; cf. Touchefeu, sup. cit. (n. 31), pp. 263ff.

the sword in battle, having paid for what he did by an inglorious death. For the same contrast (viewed from a very different angle) see Orestes' words at *Cho.* 345ff. For the construction *μεγαλυνχείτω . . . θανάτω* cf. Eur. *I.A.* 412: *κλήπτρῳ νυν αὔχει*.

That the three 'unambiguous' passages turn out to be very ambiguous indeed is surely significant. Let us now consider those parts of the trilogy which some have thought to reflect the tradition of death by the axe. Pre-eminent among these is *Ag.* 1125ff.: *ἄπεχε τῆς βοῆς | τὸν ταῦρον· ἐν πέπλοιςιν | μελαγκέρῳ λαβοῦσα μηχανήματι | τύπτει*.⁵⁹ Fraenkel himself tells us that 'the fact that the prophetess has a clear vision of her coming doom gives especial value to her statement'⁶⁰ but is strangely reluctant to detect any metaphorical reference to the double-headed axe which Clytemnestra swings against her husband in the phrase *μελαγκέρῳ . . . μηχανήματι*. Kurt Latte⁶¹ quoted a parallel Icelandic Kenning: 'Die Frage, welche Waffe bei Aischylos anzunehmen ist, wird wohl durch eine Beobachtung von Frl. Vera Lachmann, die mir Von der Mühl mitteilt, im Sinne von Wilamowitz gegen Blass entschieden: das Beiwort *μελαγκέρως* (*Ag.* 1127) kehrt im Isländischen für die Axt wieder in Kenningar wie *snaghyrnd ox*, scharf (?) gehörnte Axt, *oxarhyrna* Axthorn. So wird auch das "schwarzgehörnte Werkzeug" bei Aischylos als Axt zu verstehen sein'. Fraenkel may have felt too unimpressed by this non-Greek piece of evidence (which partly depends on the word-play between 'axe' and 'ox') to mention it. The feeling that a cow's horns are infinitely more likely to symbolise an axe than a sword may be too subjective. But double-headed axes are associated with bull's horns as early as Minoan Greece⁶² and such an association would explain the otherwise baffling choice of animal imagery in the present passage.⁶³

A more specific reference to an axe is found in Clytemnestra's famous cry of desperation at *Cho.* 889:

δοίη τις ἀνδροκμήτα πέλεκυν ὡς τάχος.

⁵⁹ For a recent discussion of the more general problems raised by these lines see T. W. C. Stinton, *PCPS* 21 (1975), 82ff. Fraenkel on 1127 (sup. cit. [n. 1], pp. 511ff.) had argued, largely on linguistic grounds, that *μελαγκέρῳ . . . μηχανήματι* goes with *λαβοῦσα* and refers to the net/robe. He is followed by Burkert, sup. cit. (n. 3): 'Agamemnon . . . the ταῦρος, caught in the "black-horned device", the net') even though that scholar believes (cf. n. 17 above) the king was struck with an axe. Denniston-Page, sup. cit. (n. 3), objected that *μελαγκέρῳ . . . μηχανήματι* thus explained 'defies all reasonable interpretation'. Stinton seeks to resolve the dilemma by replacing the dative with 'the genitive *μελαγκέρῳ*: "taking him in robes, the (a, her) black-horned one's trap, she smites" . . .' (p. 90). This wins the approval of Seaford, sup. cit. (n. 13), pp. 251f. Though my argument is best served by the simple equation of *μελαγκέρῳ . . . μηχανήματι* with the axe, it is not incompatible with Stinton's approach (see below, n. 63) or even Fraenkel's (p. 514: 'the notion of the cow is continued in a characteristic adjective').

⁶⁰ Sup. cit. (n. 1), p. 808.

⁶¹ Sup. cit. (n. 6).

⁶² See, for instance, A. B. Cook, *Zeus* 2.513ff., M. P. Nilsson, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion* (Lund, 1950), pp. 169ff., 231f., Burkert, *Griechische Religion*, pp. 74f. = *Greek Religion*, p. 38.

⁶³ Animal imagery is common in the trilogy and in the context of oracular language, but why should cow and bull in particular feature here? Pind. *Pyth.* 4.142f. (*μία βοῦς Κρηθεῖ τε μάτηρ | καὶ θρακυμήδεϊ Καλμωνεῖ*) is associated with our lines by commentators Aeschylean and Pindaric, but these two passages alone can hardly suffice to prove the existence of an idiom whereby the word can be used (to quote *LSJ* s.v. *βοῦς* I.2) 'metaph. of any *dam* or *mother*'. Fraenkel, sup. cit. (n. 59) thought of *Od.* 11.411 (see above n. 17) where 'Agamemnon . . . says "Aegisthus together with my wife killed me ὡς τις τε κατέκτανε βοῦν ἐπὶ φάτνῃ"'. But there the circumstances are very different and Clytemnestra's rôle is pushed far into the background (see above, n. 18). The identification of Clytemnestra with the cow does not emerge at all naturally from the Odyssean version.

Scholars who deny that Aeschylus' Clytemnestra wielded an axe against her husband suppose that an axe is likelier than a sword or spear to be found adorning the walls of a Greek palace. At least one scholar who thinks she did use an axe concurs with this explanation.⁶⁴ An alternative reading of the line sees Aeschylus as contaminating his own version of events with the older tradition of the axe as murder weapon.⁶⁵ But in view of the vase-paintings mentioned above it is hard not to suppose that, just as at *Cho.* 554ff. Aeschylus misleads the audience into expecting a familiar tradition whereby Orestes despatches Aegisthus as he sits on the usurped throne, so here Aeschylus temporarily arouses anticipation of an earlier version wherein Clytemnestra actually does get her hands on an axe.⁶⁶ And clearly this strategem will operate much more effectively if the audience have in mind a queen who earlier swung an axe against her husband, and are not being distracted by an alternative (and innovative) version involving a sword.⁶⁷

Little further remains to be said. Of the chorus' address to the dead king at *Ag.* 1495f. = 1519f. *δολίῳι μόρῳι δαμείς <δάμαρτος> ἐκ χειρὸς ἀμφιτόμῳι βελέμῳι* Fraenkel himself observes 'the noun and the adjective are so chosen that both of them (the noun only at a pinch) might possibly refer to a sword, though they are by no means bound to do so'. He adds that 'the same is true of the words with which Cassandra foretells her own death, *χρυσὸς ἀμφήκει δορί*' (1149). His commentary on the latter line rightly states 'although *ἀμφήκες* (and *ἀμφίτομον*) is extremely well suited to a sword, it is not peculiar to it but could be used also of, e.g., an axe'⁶⁸ and concludes (of both passages) that 'these words would not stand for anything more special than 'weapon of attack'''.⁶⁹

The fact that a couple of Aeschylean scholia (*Schol. Tricl. Ag.* 483^A [1.139 O. L. Smith], *Schol. Vet. Ag.* 1149 [1.13 O. L. Smith]) suggest that Aeschylus' Agamemnon was killed by an axe is not, admittedly, of any great importance (though it was perhaps a little harsh of Fraenkel to brand them as 'arbitrary').⁷⁰ Nevertheless

⁶⁴ Latte, *sup. cit.* (n. 6), p. 132 = p. 270 (following and developing Blass's remarks in his edition of the *Choephoroi*). So too e.g. Fraenkel, *sup. cit.* (n. 1), p. 807 (an axe 'is always ready to hand in the inner rooms of the house'), A. Sideras, *Aeschylus Homericus (Hypommemata* 31 [1971]), 22 n. 19, Prag, *sup. cit.* (n. 4), p. 82 ('a typical emergency weapon'). It is strange that none of these scholars cites the closest mythological analogy: when Tereus discovers he has had the flesh of his son Itys served to him for a meal, he snatches up a double axe and chases after Procne and Philomela, the culprits (*Apollod.* 3.14.8, *ἀρπάσας πέλεκυν*; cf. Burkert, *Homo Necans*, pp. 201f. [Eng. transl. pp. 180f.]).

⁶⁵ Tierney, *sup. cit.* (n. 45), p. 103; cf. Lesky, *sup. cit.* (n. 3), p. 21. Tierney thinks that 'it would be very appropriate, and very characteristic of Aeschylus, if the Queen did in fact at this supreme crisis demand, as if unconsciously, the weapon with which she had committed her crime', but his interpretation of the relevant passages will not permit him to acquiesce in his tempting scenario.

⁶⁶ For Aeschylean exploitation of this dramatic device of 'false preparation' see Taplin, *sup. cit.* (n. 47), pp. 94–6, 342, and Index (iii) s.v. 'preparation... false'. The picture of Aegisthus killed on the throne he has usurped is probably derived from Stesichorus' *Oresteia*: cf. Robert, *sup. cit.* (n. 25) etc.

⁶⁷ Cf. Garvie, *sup. cit.* (n. 2), p. 290: '[Aeschylus] doubtless chooses the axe because it is part of the traditional version of Clytemnestra's defence of Aegisthus against Orestes... by his borrowing of the axe-motif he creates a momentary suspense as to whether Clytemnestra will in fact resist her murder'.⁶⁸ See further Sideras, *sup. cit.* (n. 64), pp. 21f.

⁶⁹ See Schuursma, *sup. cit.* (n. 51), pp. 77ff. for a full survey of the other passages which refer to the murder weapon in a similarly inexplicit manner.

⁷⁰ Especially when he is so eager (*sup. cit.* [n. 1], p. 809) to accept the even more arbitrary claim of the scholia on Pindar, *Pyth.* 11.20 (= 25^c (2.257 Dr.)) that *πολιῶι χαλκῶι* refers to a sword (*τῶι πολιῶι ξίφει*).

I trust it will by now be clear why, while I accept Fraenkel's crucial perception that Aeschylus, to focus our attention on the sinister robe, was studiously vague as to the murder weapon, I am convinced⁷¹ that the weapon he was being vague about was an axe, not a sword. 'The precise nature of the weapon with which a purely legendary murder is said to have been committed is in itself a question of little moment', as T. G. Tucker long ago observed;⁷² but we learn something of a poet's dramatic technique; something, too, of the history of a myth.

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⁷¹ This does *not* necessarily entail that in the original production Clytemnestra stood with an axe in her hand at *Ag.* 1372ff. I am not clear why Garvie, *sup. cit.* (n. 46) supposes that Clytemnestra here displays the murder weapon. Given Aeschylus' deliberate vagueness as to its precise nature and the close link between text and performance in Greek Tragedy (see above, n. 47) one would expect the inexplicitness of text to be matched by production, and no weapon to be on view to distract from the sight of the robe. Taplin's detailed analysis of the *Agamemnon*'s 'murder tableau' (*sup. cit.* [n. 47], p. 325f.) has nothing on it, and in discussing the visually similar scene at *Cho.* 973ff. he specifically says (p. 359) 'in *Ag.* there is no sign of a weapon'. I think Prag is wrong, then (*sup. cit.* [n. 4], p. 82), to state 'the actual implement would of course become clear on the stage anyway'.

⁷² *Sup. cit.* (n. 54), p. 266.