

## AGAIN KLYTAIMESTRA'S WEAPON\*

Malcolm Davies, *CQ* 37 (1987), 65–75, has argued strongly for the view, almost universally discarded since Fraenkel's *Agamemnon* appeared,<sup>1</sup> that Aeschylus envisaged Klytaimestra as killing her husband with an axe. He succeeds in establishing a strong probability that, among the various pre-Aeschylean versions of the story of Agamemnon's death, those which had him killed in his bath with the help of an entangling robe always made Klytaimestra use an axe, not a sword, to strike the fatal blows; and Sophocles and Euripides<sup>2</sup> when they specify the weapon invariably specify it as an axe. All that this proves, however, is that if Aeschylus did make Klytaimestra kill Agamemnon in his bath with a sword, he was innovating. We have still to determine whether he *did* in fact so innovate. It is fair to treat the pre- and post-Aeschylean evidence as establishing a presumption in favour of the axe, but a presumption only: if there is unambiguous evidence in the text of the *Oresteia* that the Aeschylean Klytaimestra used a sword, it must be taken as outweighing any amount of external evidence which can show only that other Klytaimestras, imagined by other poets and artists, did not use one.

Three passages were cited by Fraenkel as furnishing such unambiguous evidence: *Ag.* 1262, *Ag.* 1528 and *Cho.* 1010–11. Davies quite rightly argues (pp. 71–2) that *Ag.* 1262 proves nothing, since 'the sword could be metaphorical' as its whetting (*θήγουσα*) certainly is, not to speak of the mixing of poisons in 1260–1 or the lion, lioness and wolf in 1258–9. But the other two passages cannot be disposed of so easily.

In *Ag.* 1523ff. Klytaimestra seeks to justify her killing of Agamemnon by recalling how he slew Iphigeneia, and concludes:

μηδὲν ἐν Αἰδοῦ μεγαλαυχεῖτω  
 ξιφοδηλήτῳ  
 θανάτῳ τείσας ἄπερ ἤρξεν.<sup>3</sup>

1528

I have left the sentence unpunctuated because the point at issue between Fraenkel and Davies depends crucially on how we punctuate – in other words, on whether *ξιφοδηλήτῳ θανάτῳ* should be taken as depending on *μεγαλαυχεῖτω* or on *τείσας*. The 'orthodox' interpretation, adopted by Fraenkel, takes the phrase with *τείσας*. Iphigeneia was killed by the sword;<sup>4</sup> Agamemnon, the king whose glory and wealth and pride are so memorably portrayed in the one scene of this play where he appears in person, has paid for her death by dying himself by the sword (*δράσαντα παθεῖν*) and will be boastful no longer. Davies finds difficulties with this interpretation (to

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<sup>1</sup> E. Fraenkel, *Aeschylus: Agamemnon* (Oxford, 1950), iii.806–9.

<sup>2</sup> Soph. *El.* 99; Eur. *Hek.* 1279, *El.* 160, 279, 1160, *Tro.* 361–2. The reference to a sword in Eur. *El.* 164 is doubtless to be understood, with Davies (p. 71 n. 50), as envisaging Aegisthos stabbing a dead or dying Agamemnon with his sword after Klytaimestra had 'struck the first, and perhaps the mortal, blow' with the axe of line 160.

<sup>3</sup> This is the transmitted reading, for which Denniston–Page cite convincing parallels; Davies prints Spanheim's conjecture *ἔρξεν* without any comment.

<sup>4</sup> cf. A. J. N. W. Prag, *The Oresteia: iconographic and narrative traditions* (Warminster, 1985), pp. 61–7 and pl. 39–43.

which we will return) and construes *ξίφοδὴλήτω θανάτῳ* with what precedes, so that far from proving that the Aeschylean Agamemnon died by the sword, the phrase would imply that he did not; his paraphrase is '[Agamemnon] cannot boast of a glorious death by the sword *in battle*, having paid for what he did *by an inglorious death*' (pp. 72–3; italics mine). Unfortunately the three expressions which I have italicized represent nothing in the Greek; and they can hardly be said to be necessarily implied by the words that are present in the text. Death by the sword need not be martial and need not be glorious: Iphigeneia's was neither, nor (looking ahead) were those of Klytaimestra and Aigisthos. Hence it is nonsense to say, as on this construal Klytaimestra would be saying, that Agamemnon 'cannot boast of a death by the sword'; such a death, in and by itself, was not necessarily anything to boast of. Moreover, the sentence would be making a logical connection between Agamemnon's not being killed by the sword and his paying for what he did to Iphigeneia; which would strongly suggest that Iphigeneia too was killed otherwise than by the sword, and therefore presumably by the axe (as, on this view, Agamemnon was) – an idea for which there is no support elsewhere in the *Oresteia* and no external evidence.

A further objection to Davies' interpretation of this passage has to do with the very rare adjective *ξίφοδὴλητος*, which occurs only here and in *Cho.* 729 and may well be an Aeschylean coinage. On both its appearances it is prominently placed, close to the end of an anapaestic system. In *Cho.* 729 it refers to the impending revenge of Orestes for the death of his father. In *Ag.* 1528, on the 'orthodox' interpretation, it refers precisely to that death itself; on Davies' interpretation it would refer to a hypothetical death which Agamemnon did *not* suffer and which, while it would of course have been deeply lamented, would not have been regarded as tragic or unendurable even by Orestes (cf. *Cho.* 345–53). Thus the orthodox interpretation makes this novel lexical item a part, if a small part, of Aeschylus' structural design; Davies must regard it as mere decoration.

In view of all this, one would need to find very serious difficulties indeed in the orthodox interpretation in order to be induced to accept the other. Davies claims to find two. The first can hardly be said to be a difficulty at all: it is that Fraenkel's insistence on 'the most exact correspondence of execution as between the guilty deed and its expiation' loses some of its force if we keep, as we probably should, the transmitted reading *ἀνάξια δράσας* in 1526. Davies does not claim that this consideration would lose *all* its force: the equality between crime and punishment is still stressed by *ἄξια πάσχων* and *τείσας ἅπερ ἤρξεν*. His other objection to the orthodox interpretation is that *μηδὲν...μεγαλαυχείται* lacks point: 'the notion that "one's status or occupation in Hades repeats that on earth" 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'. Presumably he would not say the same about 532–3, which is the Herald's comment on another act of punishment inflicted, as it happens, by Agamemnon himself:

*Πάρις γὰρ οὔτε συντελής πόλις  
ἐξεύχεται τὸ δράμα τοῦ πάθους πλέον.*

In both passages the point is the same: the wrongdoer cannot boast *that he has escaped the punishment which his actions had earned*. And as there was irony in Agamemnon's servant speaking thus about Paris and the Trojans, when Agamemnon was soon to come home to meet the due punishment of *his* actions, so there is even greater irony in Klytaimestra speaking thus about Agamemnon when she herself, oblivious of the lesson of his fate, has lately been flaunting her assurance that she is

in no danger of suffering for what she has done (cf. especially 1431–7) and believes she can make a businesslike bargain to that effect with the *δαίμων* of the house (1568–76). The audience know it cannot and will not be so, and later in the trilogy the Erinyes, and also Athena, will have much to say about how the proudest and most boastful of mortals cannot evade the consequences of their crimes (*Eum.* 368ff., 553ff.,<sup>5</sup> 935–7).

Thus the attempt to interpret *Ag.* 1526–9 in such a way as to dissociate the phrase *ξίφοδηλῆται θανάτῳ* from Agamemnon's actual death at the hands of Klytaimestra must be judged a failure. The same is true of the third of the passages which Fraenkel had cited as evidence for the sword as the murder-weapon, namely the lines (*Cho.* 1010–11) spoken by Orestes when, after killing Klytaimestra and Aigisthos, he has displayed for all to behold the entangling robe in which Agamemnon died:

ἔδρασεν ἢ οὐκ ἔδρασε; μαρτυρεῖ δέ μοι  
φᾶρος τόδ', ὡς ἔβαψεν Αἰγίσθου ξίφος.

For Fraenkel this was clear proof that Aeschylus envisaged Agamemnon as being killed by the sword; and since it is beyond doubt that the killing is done by Klytaimestra alone, Aigisthos not even being present,<sup>6</sup> the reference to *Aigisthos'* sword must be understood to mean that he lent it to Klytaimestra 'who [notes Garvie ad loc.]<sup>7</sup> as a woman would have no sword of her own'. Davies however (pp. 70–1) argues that when one speaks of a robe being dyed red by X's sword the natural interpretation is that it was X's hand (i.e. here Aigisthos' hand) that wielded that sword, and accordingly deduces that Aigisthos is here envisaged as having dyed the robe in the blood of the *dead* Agamemnon. As to how this is supposed to have happened, Davies invites us to choose between a suggestion by Wilamowitz (that Aigisthos performed the *μασχαλισμός* referred to in *Cho.* 439 and then wiped his blade on the robe) and one by Lloyd-Jones<sup>8</sup> (that Aigisthos stabbed the corpse, as the Achaeans stab Hector's body in *Iliad* 22.369–75).

Neither of these specific 'reconstructions' is satisfactory. That of Wilamowitz is in contradiction with the explicit statement in *Cho.* 440 that the *μασχαλισμός* was performed by *Klytaimestra* (*ἔπρασσε δ' ἄπερ νυν ὧδε θάπτει*); while as far as Lloyd-Jones' proposal is concerned, nothing in the text of *Ag.* 1577–end gives the least hint of any stabbing of the corpse by Aigisthos – rather Aigisthos' supreme triumph over Agamemnon is to *see* him (*ιδὼν Ag.* 1580, *ιδόντα* 1611) enmeshed in the deadly 'net' of Dike and the Erinyes. But beyond this, there is also a more fundamental objection to this whole line of interpretation. Why does Orestes, in *Cho.* 1011, draw attention to the bloodstains on the robe at all? Because they provide him with evidence (*μαρτυρεῖ... μοι*) that Agamemnon was murdered by Klytaimestra – and hence that his own killing of Klytaimestra was a just act (cf. 983–9). But the stains can only serve as evidence of Klytaimestra's guilt if it was she who caused them. Hence when Orestes says that the robe was dyed red by 'Aigisthos' sword', he *must* mean 'Aigisthos' sword

<sup>5</sup> Note especially 561 *τὸν οὐ ποτ' αὐχοῦντ'*: the Erinyes' victim is one who had boasted, as Klytaimestra does, that he *would never suffer* for his acts.

<sup>6</sup> cf. *Ag.* 1608, 1634–7.

<sup>7</sup> It should be said that Garvie, finding it 'hard to see why... Aegisthus is mentioned at all', suspects *Αἰγίσθου* of being 'an explanatory gloss'. But *Αἰγίσθου* seems to be what Euripides read (cf. *El.* 164–5). The suggestion of E. W. Whittle (ap. Garvie) that the mention of Aigisthos is a 'hint of Clytaemestra's adultery [which] adds to the heinousness of her crime' seems a satisfactory explanation.

<sup>8</sup> H. Lloyd-Jones, *Aeschylus: Oresteia. The Choephoroe* (London, 1979), p. 68, on line 1011.

<wielded by Klytaimestra>'; evidence of wounds (of whatever kind) inflicted by the hand of Aigisthos would, if anything, be evidence tending to *exculpate* Klytaimestra and therefore to increase Orestes' own guilt.<sup>9</sup>

Now one can certainly agree with Davies that no audience (unless composed of scholars or detectives) would be able to understand *Cho.* 1010–11 readily and immediately in the sense just argued for – *unless* there had been some adequate preparation for it. What can this preparation have been? Davies has shown that Aeschylus is most unlikely to have been here following a pre-existing tradition; and the single word *ξίφοδλήτω* uttered a whole play ago in *Ag.* 1528 (which in any case gave no indication of *whose* was the sword by which Agamemnon died) cannot be regarded as adequate preparation. Rather the audience's preparation must have consisted in something memorable which they had *seen* in the first play of the trilogy. Thus these few words spoken by Orestes in *Cho.* tell us *two* things about the theatrical realization of *Ag.* They prove that when Klytaimestra appeared on stage after the murder, she was carrying a sword. But how can the audience have been made to understand that it was *Aigisthos'* sword?<sup>10</sup> Only in one way. We must suppose that when Aigisthos himself appeared in the final scene of *Ag.* (1577–end), *he was unarmed.*

Let us consider these two matters in succession. That Klytaimestra appeared armed at *Ag.* 1372 is virtually certain, quite independently of any inferences drawn from *Cho.* 1010–11. Taplin, indeed, asserts that in the *Ag.* scene 'there is no sign of a weapon',<sup>11</sup> and Davies (p. 75 n. 71) argues that since the *text* of *Ag.* is (in his view) inexplicit as to the exact nature of the weapon 'one would expect' the *production* to be inexplicit likewise. As we have seen, the premise of this last argument is incorrect; but even were it true that the text was inexplicit, one would still have to consider what sort of stage-picture it is that Taplin and Davies are positing. Are we to suppose that Klytaimestra appeared *ἐνθ' ἔπαισ' ἐπ' ἐξειργασμένοις* (*Ag.* 1379) in a tableau including all the essential features of the murder – the two bodies, the bath, the robe, even

<sup>9</sup> This consideration tells strongly against Davies' (in any case tortured) attempt to break the close argumentative link between the sentence *μαρτυρεῖ δέ μοι κτλ.* and the preceding question *ἔδρασεν ἢ οὐκ ἔδρασε*; (in which he rightly takes the understood subject to be Klytaimestra) by taking *δέ* to be 'continuative or contrasting' and rendering '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' (p. 71 n. 52). 'Reminds me' in any case will not do for *μαρτυρεῖ*, especially in the *Oresteia* where the theme of the witness (in the full legal or quasi-legal sense) recurs over and over again (twice in this very scene: 987, 1041). Note further that when in *Eum.* 460–1 Orestes again mentions the robe and its silent 'testimony', it is to the murder that the robe is said to have testified (*λουτρῶν ἐξεμαρτύρει φόνον*), not to any injury done to the victim posthumously. To justify his killing of *Aigisthos* Orestes feels no need of witnesses: *Aigisthos* has merely suffered the customary fate of the adulterer (*Cho.* 989f.), and in *Eumenides* his very existence is forgotten.

<sup>10</sup> I am not suggesting that spectators who at the end of *Ag.* saw Klytaimestra with a sword and Aigisthos without one would consciously reason out the conclusion that he must have lent his sword to her; the scene would have its desired effect (see the last two paragraphs of this paper) quite apart from any such inference. It is rather the author, in constructing his plot, who has decided that Klytaimestra shall commit the murder with Aigisthos' sword, and, as one might expect, has seen to it that both the action and the words of his drama are fully consistent with this. And the action in *Ag.*, vividly recalled in retrospect, will make the words of *Cho.* readily intelligible, especially as the stage-picture from the midst of which Orestes speaks (two corpses, the bloodstained robe, the killer making his apologia) is itself so strongly reminiscent of the latter part of *Ag.*

<sup>11</sup> O. P. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford, 1977), p. 359. Fraenkel's discussion of the weapon-problem unfortunately ignores the visual dimension altogether, and treats the text of *Ag.* 1372–end as if it were the script of a radio play.

bloodstains on her own clothing<sup>12</sup> – except the most essential feature of all, the weapon? Or that when she proudly described Agamemnon's death as *τῇσδε δεξιᾶς χερὸς ἔργον, δικαίως τέκτονος* (*Ag.* 1405–6), she displayed an empty hand? The author-director would, to say the least, be running a grave risk of ruining the powerful effects of horror, pity, loathing that the scene was designed to engender. The principle of 'the close link between text and performance in Greek Tragedy' (Davies loc. cit.) must not be distorted into a dogmatic insistence that anything not specifically mentioned in the text cannot have been visible in the theatre.<sup>13</sup> In the present case nothing in the text *directly* indicates that Klytaimestra is holding any weapon; it is none the less true that the text makes no theatrical sense unless she *is* holding one.

Having seen Klytaimestra with her weapon in the murder-tableau, the audience would not subsequently need any explicit information as to the nature of that weapon. They would, however, expect – and so can we – that any reference that might be made to it would be consistent with what they had seen; and the same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to any reference made to the murder-weapon *before* it was seen on stage. This expectation is borne out. Most of the references to the weapon are, as Davies shows, general and inexplicit.<sup>14</sup> Two, as we have seen, speak of it as a sword. Two others (*Ag.* 1125ff. and *Cho.* 889) are said by Davies (pp. 73–4) to suggest an axe as the murder-weapon. Neither does so. In *Ag.* 1125ff. the 'black-horned μηχανήμα' is, as Fraenkel showed, the robe.<sup>15</sup> *Cho.* 889 does not refer to the murder-weapon at all, either directly or indirectly: that Klytaimestra calls for an axe in a

<sup>12</sup> For Agamemnon's body, cf. 1397 *ὅδε*, 1404 *οὗτός ἐστιν Ἀγαμέμνων*, 1414, 1433, 1446, 1500–1, 1522, 1525, 1539 *τόνδ' ἐπιδεῖν*, 1580–1, 1590, 1603, 1608, 1611, 1613, 1634, 1638, 1643; for Cassandra's body, 1440 *ἡ τ' αἰχμάλωτος ἦδε*; for the bathtub, 1539–40 *τόνδ' ἐπιδεῖν ἀργυροτοίχου δροίτης κατέχοντα χάμευναν*; for the robe, 1492 = 1516 *ἀράχνης ἐν ὑφάσματι τῷδ'*, 1580–1 *ἰδὼν ὑφαντοῖς ἐν πέπλοις Ἑρινύων τὸν ἄνδρα τόνδε κείμενον*, 1611; for bloodstains on Klytaimestra's clothing, 1389–90.

<sup>13</sup> When the Sophoclean Ajax appears in *his* grisly 'murder-tableau', the text makes it clear that the slaughtered animals are visible (*Aj.* 346–55, 364–6, 453, 546) but no mention is made throughout the scene of the sword with which he killed them (*Aj.* 10, 30, 95) and which he will later take to the seashore to be the instrument of his own death. Does it follow that in *Aj.* 346–595 the audience saw no sword? In *Cho.* 973–1064, too, nothing in the text shows that Orestes has a sword: the reader (as distinct from the spectator) learns this only at *Eum.* 42–3, where he finds that Orestes as a suppliant at Delphi still has a sword in his hand which he has presumably brought with him from Argos. The classic case of an important property that goes long unmentioned in the text is the Queen's carriage in *Persians*: we know that she entered in a carriage at *Pers.* 150 only because in a later scene (607) she makes a point of mentioning that this time she has come without it.

<sup>14</sup> But it is an exaggeration to say, as Fraenkel does with Davies' enthusiastic approval, that 'in order to heighten the significance with which Aeschylus invests the unique and characteristic instrument of 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.' Even if we ignore the question whether the weapon itself was seen on stage, it and its strokes are frequently referred to, directly or indirectly, in the scene following the murder, namely at 1379 *ἔπαισ'*, 1384–7, 1405–6 *δεξιᾶς χερὸς*, 1430 *τύμμα*, 1433 *ἔφαξ'*, 1496 = 1520; in addition to which we all but hear the two blows at the moment they are struck when we hear Agamemnon's cries (the three lines marking the moment of the murder, 1343–5, contain five words referring to a blow from a weapon: *πέπληγμαί... πλῆγην... πλῆγην... οὐτασμένος... πεπληγμένος*).

<sup>15</sup> Recent discussions of this passage (T. C. W. Stinton, *PCPhS* 21 [1975], 82–93; R. Seaford, *CQ* 34 [1984], 251–2), while finding Fraenkel's interpretation unsatisfactory in some respects, have agreed with him that *μηχανήματι* must be taken as governed by *λαβοῦσα*, not by *τύπτει*; and with *λαβοῦσα* it can only denote the robe. Stinton (pp. 88–9) further argues that in any case *μηχανήμα* would not be appropriate in sense to denote a sword or axe here: 'a weapon is too straightforward an object to be so described, without the assistance of a functional epithet' (such as is present in *Seven* 131 where Poseidon's trident is called *ἰχθυόλω μαχανᾷ*).

sudden and unforeseen emergency has no bearing on the question what weapon she chose to employ in her long-matured plan<sup>16</sup> for the murder of her husband.

What of Aigisthos in the last scene of *Ag.*? If the argument of this paper is valid, he must have entered unarmed, though attended by a λόχος of armed δορυφόροι (cf. 1650, *Cho.* 768–9) who will have had both spears (as one of their appellations implies) and swords (cf. 1651). Nothing in the text of the scene is inconsistent with Aigisthos' being unarmed,<sup>17</sup> though equally nothing positively requires him to be so; and to have him weaponless would be of dramatic benefit in two respects at least. In the first place it would reinforce the portrayal of him as an unmanly man (cf. 1625) who plans or orders deeds of violence but leaves others to carry them out (cf. 1633–5, 1643–6, 1649–51)<sup>18</sup> and who stayed at home while the rest of Argos' young manhood went to fight at Troy (cf. 1625–6). In the second place it would highlight the gender-inversion between him and Klytaimestra: she may have spoken of him as her 'shield of confidence' (1437), but when at the end of the play they go into the palace together, δωμάτων κρατούντε, it is she who holds the sword of dominion.<sup>19</sup>

It thus appears, on the evidence of the *Oresteia* combined with what we know of earlier literature and art, as though Aeschylus' version of the murder of Agamemnon may well have been the *first* in which the motifs of the bath and robe were combined with that of the sword. By means of this innovation Aeschylus was enabled *both* to present his Klytaimestra in the traditional feminine role of the beguiler and entrapper (cf. *Ag.* 1636) *and* to have her, a woman, slay a man and a warrior with a masculine, a warrior's, weapon – the extreme manifestation of the reversal of standard gender roles which she embodies.<sup>20</sup> To replace the sword which he gave her by the axe of earlier and later tradition is to obscure this aspect of his design.

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<sup>16</sup> cf. *Ag.* 1377 ἀγὼν ὅδ' οὐκ ἀφρόντιστος πάλοι.

<sup>17</sup> Unless with the MSS we give him 1652 ἀλλὰ κἀγὼ μὴν πρόκωπος...: but that would require 1651 to be assigned to the chorus-leader, which is impossible since it would entail the chorus wearing swords. In addition to the arguments of Denniston–Page on 1650–3, it may be remarked that the feebleness of the Elders' reaction to the murder (1346–71), which has earned them and Aeschylus a fair amount of criticism as it is, would be quite incomprehensible if they were armed, as indeed would their helplessness before Klytaimestra in the ensuing scene.

<sup>18</sup> If Thomson is right, as he may well be, in attributing 1651 not to Aigisthos (let alone the chorus-leader: see previous note) but to the captain of the bodyguard (see also A. D. Fitton Brown, *CR* 1 [1951], 133–5), a further touch of baseness would be added to the picture of Aigisthos: he not only instigates a massacre (or what would have been a massacre had not Klytaimestra intervened), he does so as if attempting to evade personal responsibility, saying merely τούργον οὐχ ἐκὰς τόδε and leaving the captain to translate this hint into specific action. (This attribution of 1651 is sometimes mistakenly credited to Verrall; Verrall was indeed the first to make the captain a speaking character, but the lines he assigned to him were those now numbered 1650 and 1653.)

<sup>19</sup> Dr Davies comments that he finds it 'hard to parallel the significantly absent sword [here] alleged for Aegisthus'. One may note, however, that at the beginning of *Seven* the crowd of Theban citizens are in armour (the urgent tone of 31 ὁρμάσθε πάντες, σούσθε σὺν παντευχία indicates that they are being ordered to the walls and gates at once, not told to go home first and get their equipment) and Eteokles is not (so rightly Hutchinson on 674–6) – because as the 'helmsman' of the ship of state he does not intend to fight in person. In *Eumenides*, again, Orestes, who at Delphi has a sword (42–3), may no longer have it when he reaches Athens; at any rate when he thinks (746) of committing suicide if the Athenian jury's verdict goes against him (see my *Aeschylus: Eumenides* [Cambridge, 1989] ad loc.), the method he envisages is not the sword but the noose.

<sup>20</sup> On this see R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *JHS* 68 (1948), 130–40 (revised in *Studies in Aeschylus* [Cambridge, 1983], pp. 101–19) and F. I. Zeitlin, *Arethusa* 11 (1978), 150–60.