

POSTSCRIPT TO SACRIFICIAL IMAGERY
IN THE ORESTEIA
(Ag. 1235–37)

FROMA I. ZEITLIN

Columbia University

References to sacrifice open and close the great Cassandra scene in the *Agamemnon*. It is prefaced by Clytemnestra's invitation to Cassandra to participate in the rituals to be performed at the hearth of the house (1035–38, 1055–57),¹ and it draws to an end with ironic allusion to these very same rites (1309–12), which the audience and Cassandra know will culminate in her death and that of Agamemnon.

As a dramatic device, the Trojan princess' outburst of prophecy is a delaying action that intensifies the climax by postponing the accomplishment of sacrifice until she enters the house (1313–14) through those *pylas Haidou* (1291). As a poetic device, Cassandra's articulation of vision extends the dimensions of the tragedy of the house beyond the borders of time in the unification of present, past, and future. She, Apollo's priestess, is the bridge between human and divine, between the particular and the universal; she is undisputed agent of oracular truth. Although doomed to be disbelieved by the chorus, her utterances demand credence and recognition from the audience.

The interior of her monologues as well as her interchanges with the chorus are shot through with fitful images of ominous sacrifice, obscure and enigmatic at first but gaining in strength and clarity as she progresses to the end of her prophetic trance. It is in these terms that she views the murders committed in the house of Atreus (1090–92), the banquet of Thyestes' children (1096–97), and the imminent doom of Agamemnon (1117–18). It is in these terms that she sees her own death coupled with the fall of Troy (1166–69, 1277–78) and the chorus accepts her insight (1297–98).

¹ Line references are to the *Agamemnon* unless otherwise marked. Citations are from Gilbert Murray's OCT² (Oxford 1955) unless otherwise noted.

These instances have been discussed at length in a recent paper of mine which dealt with this sacrificial motif throughout the *Oresteia*.² There was one reference, however, which I did not treat earlier, essentially because the difficulties and ambiguities of the passage seemed then to preclude coherent analysis. But time has only strengthened my conviction that this passage must be included with the rest of the textual evidence of sacrificial imagery and that some attempt must be made to resolve the complexities involved.

One recent critic has observed, "It should be a basic principle in interpreting Aeschylus that when language and syntax are most difficult, the poet is attempting to condense the largest volume of meaning into the smallest possible space."³ The passage in question is an excellent example both of the difficulty of Aeschylus' thought and language and of the need to accept the ambiguity and density of texture in order to reach a modicum of genuine comprehension.

In view of the confusion and helplessness of the chorus in the face of Cassandra's elliptical prophecies, she has promised to speak more plainly, without veils of obscurity (1178-83). She begins at the very beginning with clear reference to Thyestes' offense of adultery (1191-1193), the *prôtarchos atês*. After a brief stichomythia with the chorus concerning her prophetic gifts and her relationship with Apollo, she continues the story in logical fashion with the vengeance exacted from Thyestes' children (1217-22).⁴ The reminiscence of the feast upon their flesh leads to a natural association with their prime avenger, Aegisthus (1223-25), while the allusion to Aegisthus draws her on still further to Clytemnestra, his paramour, and she recalls the hypocrisy and treachery of the *misêtê kyôn*—not the faithful watchdog, as Clytemnestra describes herself (607). What could she call this woman and be right? A dangerous beast, an amphisbaena, a Scylla lurking in the rocks, a bane to sailors? And she continues to the crest of her hyperbole (1235-37):⁵

² Froma I. Zeitlin, "The Motif of the Corrupted Sacrifice in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*," *TAPA* 96 (1965) 463-508.

³ Anne Lebeck, "Image and Idea in *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus" (unpublished diss., Columbia 1963) iii.

⁴ The context here directly refers to Thyestes' children (1220-22), but the image of the tender nestlings refers also to other children, those of Agamemnon (*Cho.* 501).

⁵ I cite the text of D. C. Young, "Gentler Medicines in the *Agamemnon*," *CQ* 14 (1964) 17.

θύουσαν "Αιδου μητέρ' ἄσπονδόν τ' Ἀρὰν
 φίλοις πνέουσαν; ὥς δ' ἐπωλολύξατο
 ἡ παντότολμος, ὥσπερ ἐν μάχης τροπῇ.

Essentially there are three terms of sacrifice here—*thyousan*, *epóloluxato*, and to a lesser extent, *aspondon*. With the exception of Verrall,⁶ and more recently of Lebeck,⁷ *thyousan* is uniformly derived not from *thyô* ("to sacrifice") but from *thýô* ("to rage or seethe") and *epóloluxato* is denied its ordinary sacrificial connotation. Fraenkel states, "It is better to keep at a distance the thought that the *ololygê* is often raised at the beginning of the act of sacrifice proper, since it is obvious that the whole stress here falls on the complex 'cry of exultation (to the gods) *re bene gesta*'. "⁸ *Aspondon*, too, suffers from narrow interpretation. It is a word which in its primary connotation defines a god to whom no drink offering is made (i.e. Death, as in Eur. *Alc.* 424) and which in its secondary and more secularized meaning is the equivalent of truceless, implacable, admitting of no *spondai*. To ensure the applicability of this secondary meaning, an emendation has been adopted by most editors, the alteration of *Aran* to *Arê*. A perfect technical phrase emerges, meaning "truceless warfare," which comforts the prosaic reader but diminishes Aeschylus.⁹ I would like to suggest that a re-examination of the content and context of these three words will provide a sounder interpretation of this passage.

It cannot be denied that a translation of *thyousan* as raging is eminently possible. A hellish mother would be characterized by furious rage; this is the simplest explanation. Yet the context of this passage, containing two other suggestive words, and the imagistic structure of the play as a whole demand the more vital, the more meaningful interpretation of this vivid word, which is placed emphatically at the head of the verse. For not only is Clytemnestra associated with *thyô* and the act of sacrifice earlier in the play (87–103, 262, 594–97, 1037–38, 1055–57), but the association is continued after the murder of Agamemnon in the most unmistakable terms. The chorus, belatedly

⁶ V. W. Verrall, *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus*² (London 1904) 147.

⁷ Lebeck (above, note 3) 87 cites this passage as an example of sacrificial imagery but without comment or justification.

⁸ Eduard Fraenkel, *Aeschylus, Agamemnon* (Oxford 1950) 3.573.

⁹ Verrall (above, note 6) again provides exception to the general rule and retains *Aran* (p. 147; see also 57 and 164–65).

enlightened by Cassandra's prophecies, call her deed a *thyos*, and she in turn equates her act with the king's sacrifice of his daughter (1417-18). The moment of greatest insight occurs when Clytemnestra renounces her role of wife to assume that of *alastôr*, the supernatural avenger of the house, and states explicitly *epithysas teleôn nearois* (1504).

Yet the alternative meaning "raging" is not wholly lost—it is simply subordinated in this passage of startling dichotomies. The word is intentionally equivocal. As Verrall aptly says, "*Thyousan* refers primarily to the sacrifices which play so important a part in the plot, but *Haidou* suggests also the sense raging from the other *thÿo*. The point lies in the ambiguity. Her sacrifice is the ritual of a Fury."¹⁰

There is still stronger support for Verrall's position in the sensible restoration of the manuscript reading, *Aran*, by D. C. Young. He translates it "Curse-Fiend" (i.e. close kin of Erinyes and Alastôr) and applies it to Clytemnestra in syntactical balance with *mêter' Haidou*.¹¹ The rendering, combining Young's hypothesis and mine, emerges as "a sacrificing hellish mother and a Curse-Fiend blasting trucelessly against her near and dear ones." This interpretation, which personifies the queen as Ara, will enhance and illuminate the problematic *thyousan mêter' Haidou*. At the same time, the recognition of its validity here increases the cogency of sacrificial allusion. For both the chorus (1409) and Clytemnestra herself will accept Cassandra's equation of sacrifice and curse. Eventually the two will be wholly inter-

¹⁰ Verrall (above, note 6) 147.

¹¹ Young (above, note 5) 18-20. He argues persuasively for the use of *Ara* here as a personification of Clytemnestra in order to justify Cassandra's rejoinder to the chorus' misunderstanding of her prophecies (1252), "Truly you were viewing incorrectly the Curse-Fiend in my prophecies." He defines *Ara* as the "superhuman Curse-Fiend that arises from a human *ara* and can incorporate herself in human or animal form to accomplish the purpose of the imprecation." (See *Cho.* 406, 692; *Sept.* 70, 695, 954; *Eum.* 417; cf. *Ag.* 1498-1502, 749). It is his contention that, "though not everyone in an Athenian audience would be able to discriminate between an *Ara*, an *Erinyes*, and an *Alastôr*, it would mean something immediately to them all when Cassandra twice alluded to Clytemnestra with the word *Ara*."

I am aware that *Aran* can well be understood as the direct object of *pneousan* ("blasting her kin with implacable curse"). This construct is both syntactically unobjectionable and intellectually valid. Furthermore, this reading does not change my interpretation of the passage in any radical way, although the introduction of the Curse-Fiend is perhaps more effective dramatically. However, I have accepted Young's hypothesis because thereby 1252, an otherwise corrupt line, can be made intelligible with only minor alteration of the word division.

changed; the *thyma leusimon* (1118) will give way to *arai leusimoi* (1616; cf. also 1409).

Consider in fact the entire passage in which *thyma leusimon* occurs—the earlier lyrics of Cassandra and the chorus referring to the death of Agamemnon (1114–24)—and the sacrificial bias of 1235–37 becomes irresistible.

In both passages *thyma*, *ololygmos*, and Hades are featured. In both there is allusion to a supernatural spirit of vengeance (*Ara*, Erinyes). The *mêter* *Haidou*, which has proved such a hellish burden for philologists to bear, gains clarity when compared with the *diktyon Haidou* (1115). The emphasis has only shifted from the instrument to the agent of death. The subtle allusions there to the sacrifice of Iphigenia¹² readily explain the characterization of the queen here as mother. Yet once again the strangeness of the phrase which has puzzled so many is deliberate on the part of the poet.

The hellish mother is, of course, Clytemnestra, outraged at the death of her daughter—her motive for killing Agamemnon. Full flowering of maternal grief has blighted conjugal loyalty. Yet the phrase looks ahead to the *Choephoroi*, that drama intimately concerned with the relationships of parent and child, in which the offended mother of the *Agamemnon* reverses her role to one of unnatural hatred of her other two children, Orestes and Electra (*Cho.* 190–91, 421–22, 430). It extends still further to the last play of the trilogy, where the ghost of Clytemnestra spurs on her Erinyes to take vengeance on her son, to blast him with their bloody breath (*Eu.* 137–39). She reminds the Erinyes of the sacrifices she made to them in underworld rites (*Eu.* 106–109) and they, in turn, as her representatives, demand the sacrificial offering of Orestes (*Eu.* 264–66, 304–5, 325–28, 341). Quite literally in the *Eumenides* Clytemnestra is the *mêter* *Haidou*, the mother crying out from beyond the grave.

¹² Cassandra herself makes no specific reference to the sacrifice of Iphigenia, but the chorus, in almost subconscious reaction to the *thyma leusimon*, recalls another sacrifice in the subtlest of terms. *Krokobaphês stagôn* (1121–22), an unusual phrase, is a delicate echo of her whose garments were *krokou baphas* (239). In addition, I am indebted to Young (above, note 5) 17 for further corroboration. He contends that “in Eur. *El.* 819, the word *dôris* (sc. *kopis*) means a ‘sacrificial knife’ and that *dôria* could mean the same, especially in this context where Cassandra’s *thymatos* (1118) evokes the idea of a sacrifice and so of a sacrificial knife, *dôria*.”

On the purely metaphorical level the phrase is poignantly fitting, for Clytemnestra is indeed the mother of death—author, architect, progenitor of destruction—destruction which in the fulfillment of the curse of the house of Atreus is perpetrated in the name of sacrifice. The parallel *Aran* clearly demonstrates this idea. Calchas expresses the same idea in more masculine and more abstract terms (151–55):

. . . σπευδομένα θυσίαν ἑτέραν, ἀνομόν τιν' ἄδαιτον,
 νεικέων τέκτονα σύμφυτον,
 οὐ δεισήνορα· μίμνει γὰρ φοβερά παλίνροτος
 οἰκονόμος δολία μνάμων μῆνις τεκνόποιος.

By her act Clytemnestra will avenge her child but will compel her other child to continue the pattern of violence and vengeance, although ironically she will provide him with the victim. She is the paradigm of creative destructiveness, of nihilistic generation. This is one of the important themes in the *Oresteia* which is expressed in continuing imagery of perverted fecundity (cf. *Ag.* 750–71).¹³ This verbal nexus is one manifestation of the corruption of the natural world, while corruption of sacrifice is a vital indication of dislocation in the relationship between the human and the supernatural.

Thus there is a place too on the mythopoeic level for the conjectures of other commentators, for Sidgwick's Dam of Death and for Rohde's primitive ogress.¹⁴ For in this passage Cassandra has characterized the queen in increasingly non-human terms until she passes the boundaries of the natural world to the monsters and demons of the supernatural.

At first, her images fall within the animal sphere—hateful bitch, then a menacing animal whose danger lies in its bite, and finally a two-headed amphisbaena, who, with its particularly virulent and quasi-mythological nature, lies coiled on the threshold between the legendary and the real.¹⁵ Next Cassandra passes on to Scylla, more monster

¹³ See Robert F. Goheen, "Aspects of Dramatic Symbolism in the *Agamemnon*," *AJP* 87 (1955) 113–37, for a discussion of this theme.

¹⁴ For an excellent exposition of these and other conjectures by earlier commentators, see Fraenkel (above, note 8) 3.569–72. See also Denniston Page, *Aeschylus, Agamemnon* (Oxford 1957) 182–83.

¹⁵ It should be noted that these words, *kyôn*, *dakos*, and *amphisbaina* are more than spirited terms of opprobrium. The Erinyes are described in images of both dog and snake; they are *enkotoi kynes* who track down the hapless Orestes like hounds on the scent (*Cho.* 924, *Eu.* 246) and they are described as "wreathed in a tangle of snakes"

than canine, skulking in the rocks to destroy unwary sailors. The passage culminates finally in the mysterious *mêter' Haidou* and its chilling counterpart, the *Aran* (Curse-Fiend). Larger than life, more monstrous still than Scylla, they are both spawned by dark chthonic forces. The phrase possesses an opacity, but yet an instinctive rightness which the intuitive reader will grasp. We find the same quality in *hiereus atas*, priest of woe, which characterized the lion cub in the parable (735-36). The phrase, in an ironical sense, also bears close resemblance to the god to whom Clytemnestra offers the third libation of Agamemnon's blood (1386-87): τοῦ κατὰ χθονός, "Αἰδου, νεκρῶν σωτήρης.

The unnaturalness of the queen, her almost complete divorce from humanity, is stressed. In addition to metaphors from the animal and demonic realms, the repetition of *tolma* underscores the point (1231, 1237). This *tolma*, the undertaking of action which is contrary to normal human behavior, will be echoed again in the ode in the *Choephoroi* (preceding the entrance of Orestes into the house) which deals with the monstrous crimes of other women (*Cho.* 585-651). Among the many parallels in this ode to *Ag.* 1228-38, note the theme of the monstrous prodigies of nature which is more fully developed in *Cho.* 585-92. Note too a small detail. Although the Scylla there is the Scylla, daughter of Nisus, her epithet *kynophrôn* (*Cho.* 621) is a subtle reminder of the Scylla here. Finally, and most significant, at the end of the ode in the chorus' gnomic utterances on the retribution of evil-doing with specific relevance to the house of Atreus, the maternal theme in the context of the supernatural avenger is introduced again (*Cho.* 648-51).¹⁶

The foregoing analysis demonstrates then that the phrase *thyousan mêter' Haidou* is susceptible of several different interpretations. Its

(*Cho.* 1050). Snake imagery is especially prominent in the *Choephoroi*, characterizing both Orestes and Clytemnestra (*Cho.* 527, 928). The deadly *amphisbaina* is a counterpart of the venomous *muraina* and *echidna* in Orestes' description of his mother (*Cho.* 994-96). The *dakos*, abstraction of any wild creature whose weapon is its teeth, is used three times in the *Oresteia*, once of the Trojan Horse where the generalized term rapidly yields to the particular image of the ravening lion, once here, and once referring to the snake of Clytemnestra's dream, *neogenes dakos* (*Cho.* 530), i.e. Orestes. Cf. also *Cho.* 995, 843; *Eu.* 638.

¹⁶ See R. P. Winnington-Ingram, "Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena," *JHS* 68 (1948) 138-39, for similar suggestions.

effectiveness is based on the coexistence of three elements: the savage human mother all too willing to sacrifice her loved ones, the metaphorical representative of the enactment of the curse in the house, and the mythopoeic supernatural embodiment of evil and vengeance conceptualized in terrifying primitive terms. In all these elements the two notions of sacrifice and rage both blend and diverge, yet complement and reinforce each other.

In contrast to the complex ambiguity of *thyousan*, the word *epôlolyxato* presents far fewer problems for interpretation. It is true that in the narrow context of *Ag.* 1236 the *ololygmos* is a specific reference to the triumphal cry uttered by Clytemnestra at the victory sacrifices she performed over the fall of Troy (as shown by the past tense of the verb, the qualifying phrase *en machês tropêi*, and the unequivocal statement of 1238). But the wider angle of Cassandra's prophetic vision permits, even demands the transcendence of limited meaning in the connection of the queen's past actions with her future ones, all placed within the larger framework of the crimes of the accursed house.

Fraenkel's understanding of this word as a "complex cry of exultation" with no sacrificial overtones¹⁷ is based on several erroneous assumptions. First, he insists that this *ololygmos* is only a reference to Clytemnestra's recent prayer to *Zeus teleios* uttered in Cassandra's presence (753). Not only is that prayer to Zeus an ironic plea for success in her coming enterprise rather than an *ololygmos*, but Clytemnestra herself has been specifically connected with the *ololygmos* earlier in the play. The watchman mentions it (28), but the important reference is in Clytemnestra's jubilant speech in response to the herald's news of the fall of Troy and the homecoming of her husband (587-97).

This earlier scene, in fact, is the firm basis for Cassandra's imagery here. Not only are the two corollary ideas of thanksgiving sacrifice and the concomitant *ololygmos* stressed, but Clytemnestra's reference to herself as the faithful watchdog (607) is undoubtedly echoed in Cassandra's more realistic portrayal, *misêtê kyôn* (1228)—the phrase which launches her entire description of the queen (1228-36). Surely Cassandra, the prophetess, need not have been there to tell the tale.

Secondly, Fraenkel states that, "Apart from the blasphemous utterance of the queen herself (1386 f), Clytemnestra's bloody deed is never

¹⁷ See above, note 8.

compared with an act of sacrifice." The text, as I have shown above, amply refutes this argument. But even aside from this point, Cassandra here is referring literally to a past action, although there are strong implications for the future.

Aspōdon, ambiguous in meaning, as I have mentioned earlier, is also ambiguous in form and position. Young translates the neutral accusative with adverbial force, "a Curse-Fiend trucelessly blasting her loved ones." But it can be interpreted *apo koinou* both with *mēter* *Haidou* and with *Aran*. As mother of Hades, quite literally, she is not approached with libation, and as hellish mother she will not be placated. The Curse-Fiend's appetite is unappeasable and accepts no truce (e.g. *Cho.* 577-78). The theme of libation and of *spondai* is a double one in the *Oresteia*. Blood is the libation of Agamemnon; the real libations which Clytemnestra sends to her dead husband in the *Choephoroi* avail not; and the Erinyes seek a libation of blood once again from Orestes. But at the close of the *Eumenides*, once divine intervention has put an end to the chain of guilt and curse, appeasement in the form of truce-libations and a joyous *ololygmos* is heard (*Eu.* 1044-47).

In conclusion, then, this passage ought to stand as an important example of sacrificial imagery in the *Oresteia*. Rich in implication and ambiguity, it assumes a fluidity of thought and meaning which challenges purely logical analysis, but is Aeschylean poetry at its best, "poetry of clustering, of agglutination, in which thought is continually in dynamism, meaning in suspension."¹⁸

¹⁸ William H. Matheson, *Claudel and Aeschylus* (Ann Arbor 1966) 101.