CONFLICT AND CHARACTER
IN AESCHYLUS’ AGAMEMNON

by

PETER JOEL GAINSFORD

B.A. (Hons.), Victoria University of Wellington, 1993

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS
in
THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
(Department of Classics)

We accept this dissertation as conforming to the required standard.

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
August 1995
© Peter Joel Gainsford, 1995
In presenting this thesis in partial fulfilment of the requirements for an advanced degree at the University of British Columbia, I agree that the Library shall make it freely available for reference and study. I further agree that permission for extensive copying of this thesis for scholarly purposes may be granted by the head of my department or by his or her representatives. It is understood that copying or publication of this thesis for financial gain shall not be allowed without my written permission.

Department of Classics

The University of British Columbia
Vancouver, Canada

Date Sept. 19, 1995
Abstract

Beginning with the position that Aeschylus expresses in *Agamemnon* a conflict between the character of Agamemnon and his wife Clytaemestra, it is discussed what form that conflict takes, how it is depicted, and how it is understood by its intended audience. Next the function of the idea of character, and of individual characters, in that conflict and in the presentation of that conflict is examined. Finally the definitions formulated in these sections are used to examine the interdependence of the two ideas of conflict and character in the cases of the two main characters in that conflict, Agamemnon and Clytaemestra.

It is found that the conflict is schematised as a cyclical sequence of acts of vengeance, rather than an intellectually articulated opposition of viewpoints as might be expected. It is, however, treated as such an opposition for dramatic convenience, and this is achieved by a two-party system of allegiances in which Agamemnon and Clytaemestra are involved. It is then found that characters maintain individualised identities as flesh-and-blood personae while participating in this conflict, by the coincidence (‘overdetermination’) of the two sets of motivations implied by this dichotomy. It is then found that the intellectual functions and emotive realism of Clytaemestra and Agamemnon respectively justify and condemn the character Clytaemestra within the context of the conflict, and respectively condemn and justify Agamemnon. It is concluded that the style of the play is intentionally ambiguous and that events in the play serve multiple functions so as to create an impressionistic structure through which the audience perceives the above aspects of the play.
# Table of contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of contents</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1. Conflict</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1. ‘Conflict of viewpoints’ vs. ‘enactment of vengeance’</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2. The emotive vs. the intellectual</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3. Conflict and continuity: a ‘party system’</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4. Polarising the conflict: emphasising contrast</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.1. Gender</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.2. Focus</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.4.3. Aegisthus</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2. Character and motivation</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1. Internalised motivations: personality</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2. Externalised motivations: rôle</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3. Coherence of motivations: overdetermination</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3.1. Inconsistency of motivations: <em>Philoctetes</em></td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3. Clytaemestra</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1. The emotional: condemning Clytaemestra</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2. The intellectual: justifying Clytaemestra</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>4. Agamemnon</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1. The emotional: justifying Agamemnon</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2. The intellectual: condemning Agamemnon</td>
<td>89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Conclusion</strong></td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Bibliography</strong></td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the University of British Columbia, which granted the funding necessary for me to pursue this degree, in the form of a University Graduate Fellowship; Green College UBC and its founder, Dr. Cecil Green, for providing an astonishing and unique (and above all, habitable) environment of interdisciplinary discourse with other graduate students; Kate McInturff (Department of English, UBC) and Joanne Woolway (Oriel College, Oxford) for assistance in elucidating some aspects of literary theory and its terminology; Dr. Janet Watson (Department of Classics, Victoria University of Wellington) for inspiring me to continue my studies in Classics at the graduate level; Kaley Walker (Department of Chemistry, UBC) for her moral support; and last but not least, Professor Anthony Podlecki, for his willingness to undertake the supervision of a dissertation written under somewhat unusual conditions.
Introduction

This is a study in intelligibility. It examines the interdependence of the intellectual and the emotive, the abstract and the specific, the dramatic function and the dramatic persona, by considering in detail the interdependence of conflict and character. To a large extent Aeschylus’ play Agamemnon is simply an example for this type of study. Of course, it is a very *good* example, and for a wide variety of reasons. Its wealth of ambiguous meanings and lack of clear distinctions, its multivalence at all levels (both semantic and symbolic, microscopic and macroscopic), is one such reason. The perennial disagreements over certain aspects of Agamemnon’s character and motivations are another; and, not least, it is a very involving and intelligently composed drama (my favourite play, as it happens).

The multivalence of Ag. is perhaps its most bewildering characteristic. There may be protracted passages in which every word can have up to three or four meanings. A whole choral stasimon may be telling the story of Paris, or it may be condemning Agamemnor’s impiety. Agamemnon himself might be a sympathetically portrayed victim or a violent monster. An action may be necessary but also an atrocity, while an atrocity may be an act of justice. Goldhill’s recent studies of this play pay close attention to the uncertainty of its
language, but it is not just language that is unreliable.

This naturally presents a problem for anyone who attempts to analyse the factors that contribute to bringing about the events we see onstage. A dichotomy between the intellectual and intuitive is one way of doing this, breaking the play up into conflict and character: on the one hand, an opposition which defines the rôle of each character in a particular way, and on the other, how the more personal side of each character affects the nature of the conflict.

I have thus broken this study up into four sections. The first two, on the subject of conflict and character respectively, examine those two aspects in isolation, and give a detailed account of them. I have attempted in Chapter One to give as full as possible a treatment of how the conflict in Ag. is defined and depicted; but in the case of character in Chapter Two, I examine only what is necessary to understand how the idea of the persona functions in the dialectical context described in Chapter One. (I do not examine characterisation per se.) In the latter two sections I discuss in turn the two characters who are in conflict with each other, Clytaemestra and Agamemnon, taking into consideration how these characters qua characters, in terms of their personal motivations, are integrated into the conflict. Section 4.2, on how Agamemnon's side of the conflict is condemned, raises some particularly popular questions about how Agamemnon is to be perceived.

I should point out that I approach the play not with the intention of trying to come up with a schema that explains the constructed world underlying the play; nowhere do I pay any attention to internal consistency, unless it is in order to provide evidence to argue another point. It is my feeling that one of the most important goals of classical literary
criticism is to understand and explain the effect that a play had on its intended audience. Even reference to the original intentions of the author is only relevant to this goal insofar as it helps explain a point that is misunderstood by modern critics but would have been clear to a contemporary live audience. The finer subtleties of proving or disproving internal consistency have even less to do with the play's intelligibility to its audience.

In drama, impressions can be just as important as pure logic in examining the audience's understanding of explanations behind events in the play. Sometimes impressions can be independent of, or even overturn, hard facts. For example, from a purely logical point of view, the institution of the Areopagus court in Eum. does not end the cycle of vengeance that has been apparent throughout the trilogy; for even after Orestes is acquitted the Furies continue to rage and threaten punishment. Logically, it is Athene's personal intervention, in the form of what is effectively a bribe, that ends the Curse. However, in terms of impressions, Athene's intervention and the Areopagus court are not clearly distinguished; each has the authority of the other. In these terms it is the establishment of legal recourse that puts an end to the seemingly insoluble feud.

This brings to our attention another important fact about Ag.: it is only the first play of a very coherent trilogy. The quotation at the beginning of this introduction singles out one element that runs throughout the trilogy, that in the Oresteia, no act of justice is isolated from the views of its opponents and the consequences that those divine opponents impose on it. What is just in the eyes of one god, or character, merits vengeance in the eyes of another. "The Furies represent a real, objective law—blood will have blood."1 The

---

1Fagles 1975 p. 23.
repetitive cycle of vengeances that this system inspires is resolved in *Eum.*, but *Ag.* is still filled with gloom, pessimism and uncertainty. *Cho.* is more intelligible, for the cyclical nature of the vengeance is more obvious in its second repetition, but that intelligibility renders it even darker. Fagles in his excellent reading of the *Oresteia*, “The Serpent and the Eagle”, believes that “Aeschylus is optimistic, but he would agree with Hardy: ‘if way to the Better there be, it exacts a full look at the Worst.’”

Likewise, Fagles agrees with the enigmatic statement of *Ag.*’s Chorus “that we must suffer, suffer into truth.” The Furies and all the forces that side with them (most importantly Clytaemestra) represent the Old; Apollo, Athene and Orestes represent the New. At one level, then, the trilogy represents a progression from the Old to the New.

In *Ag.*, we still have as yet to see what vengeance leads to before we understand the advance, from the Old to the New, from vengeance to conciliation.

One final point. Throughout this study I use the term Tragedy with a capitalised ‘T’ to refer specifically to the genre of Greek Tragedy, and to particular Tragedies in that genre. I wish to avoid the more popular senses of ‘tragedy’ and ‘tragic’ because there is no single generalised definition of what is ‘tragic’. It is easy to fall into traps: when Heath writes, “When I write ‘tragedy’ from here on, I will mean Greek tragedy…. I am sceptical of broader generic categories…”, even so he observes five pages later “that the repertoire of the Homeric bards [such as Demodokos in the *Odyssey*] is tragic in tendency” (my emphasis), where it is clear from the context that he is not referring to the genre of Tragedy

---

2 Fagles 1975 p. 16.
3 Fagles 1975 pp. 24f., a translation of *Ag.* 177.
but means simply 'serious, and provoking sympathetic sorrow'.\textsuperscript{4} The problem is only complicated by Aristotle (to whom Heath refers, p. 50), who asserts that those Tragedies which have an unhappy ending (εἰς δυστυχίαν τέλευτωσιν) are the most 'tragic' (τραγικῶταταί αἱ τοιαῦτα φαίνονται), and that on this account Euripides is the 'most tragic' poet.\textsuperscript{5} This implies that Aristotle himself has some general idea of what is 'tragic'; but precisely what that might be in this context is not clear from his definition, given earlier in the Poetics, of the genre of Tragedy (1449b23-27). It seems safest, therefore, to use another adjective and avoid 'tragic' altogether, and refer only to the genre of Tragedy.

\textsuperscript{4}Heath 1987 p.1 n. and p. 6.
\textsuperscript{5}Ar. Poetics 1453a23-9.
1. Conflict

Conflict is an element essential to the full impact of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. The pathos of Agamemnon’s death is a result of the conflict; the horror of Clytaemestra’s murderous subversion and masculine strength is seen in the conflict; her deception is a tool that is used in the conflict; the pathos of Iphigeneia’s sacrifice is a cause of the conflict; and the risibly weak Aegisthus is weak precisely because he takes no active rôle in the conflict.

My treatment of the relationship between character and conflict in *Ag.* involves an interpretation of Agamemnon and Clytaemestra as embodying the two dialectically opposed poles of the conflict. To discuss the relationship between person and rôle, it is necessary first to settle on a clear interpretation of just how the conflict is formulated. Unfortunately, it is not so simple as a dynamic opposition of viewpoints that ends up with one viewpoint dominating by main force.

1.1. ‘Conflict of viewpoints’ vs. ‘enactment of vengeance’

Even in the first paragraph above, where I described the relation of conflict to various types of emotive impact, there may be observed a dichotomy between the intellectual and the emotive: between an understanding of the intellectual basis for the conflict, its pros and cons, on one hand, and on the other hand a more emotional appreciation of the *drama*
which portrays the conflict. This emotional, intuitive impact consists of the audience’s empathy and horror and disgust, in response to the drama; their φόβος and ἔλεος, the two (specifically emotional) responses on which Aristotle concentrates in his treatment of the poetics of Tragedy. It is indeed possible to give a purely intellectual account of the conflict between Agamemnon and Clytaemestra; this is what I mean when I speak of a dynamic or dialectical opposition of viewpoints. Underlying the audience’s emotional appreciation of the drama there is an intellectual opposition, and this opposition is ostensibly based on the issue of the justice of Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter Iphigeneia ten years before the play begins.

By sacrificing Iphigeneia, Agamemnon implied a certain set of ethical priorities which required that act (I do not discuss until Chapter Four whether he adopted these priorities voluntarily). These priorities insist that the avenging of Paris’ violation of the laws of guest-friendship, demanded as that vengeance is by Zeus, takes precedence over Agamemnon’s need to guard and preserve his family; and thus Iphigeneia dies, in order that vengeance may be fulfilled. Clytaemestra, by killing Agamemnon, implies an alternative set of priorities, by which Agamemnon’s action is condemned; according to these priorities, it is the family that takes precedence, and late in the play she expressly discusses how her action proceeded out of Agamemnon’s filiacide (1395-1559).[^3]

[^1]: *Ar. Poetics* 1449b26, etc. Aristotle appears to have been influenced by Gorgias’ *Encomium of Helen*, where he defines the reactions of an audience to poetry in general as φρίκη περίφοβος καὶ ἔλεος πολύδακρος καὶ πόθος φιλοπένθος, as Taplin 1978 p. 168 notes.

[^2]: Agamemnon and Menelaus are the δίδυμον Δίος τιν... (43ff); ἦ τις Ἄπολλων ἦ Πᾶν ἦ Ζεὺς (55f.) sends the spirit of vengeance, the ᾿Ερέμων (59); and above all, οὕτω δ’ Ἀτρέως παῖδας ὁ κρέασιν ἐπὶ Ἀλεξάνδρῳ πέμπει ἔλεος Ζεὺς (60-2, my emphasis). The three strophai devoted to Zeus later in the parodos (160-83) reinforce the audience’s conception of Zeus as the motivator of these events.

[^3]: Throughout this passage she presents her rationale for the murder, while the Chorus attacks her and,
This is, of course, not the whole story of the play; nor is this a full account of the
conflict, which is also associated with the Curse of Thyestes (another conflict, between
Atreus and Thyestes). Certainly there is more behind the conflict than just the death of
Iphigeneia. But even considering the conflict purely in terms of Iphigeneia’s death, it is not
so simple as the dialectical opposition of priorities outlined above: an argument between
the (perfectly valid) priority of upholding the laws of guest-friendship on the one hand, and
the alternative (but also perfectly valid) need for the security of the family on the other.
Nowhere in the play are these two opposing viewpoints formulated in such a way that
Agamemnon and Clytaemestra (or anyone else) could argue about which of these two
values should take priority over the other. There is a brief depiction (205-17) of
Agamemnon’s internal debate before actually committing the act, βαρεία μὲν κηρ τὸ μῆ
πιθώθαι, βαρεία δὲ εἰ τέκνων δαίξω..., but these thirteen lines are the closest we get to a
weighing up of alternative values. In Clytaemestra’s argument with the Chorus after
Agamemnon is dead, one might expect some semblance of an agon; but, though she
presents a coherent argument in an attempt to justify her action, the opposing viewpoint
goes unheard. Instead of defending Agamemnon, the Chorus simply attacks Clytaemestra
as a husband-killer, and offers no answer to her explanation.

The basic problem is that the conflict is not static. It is a diachronic sequence, of action
and consequent counter-action. The conflict between Agamemnon and Clytaemestra is not
focussed on one specific issue, neither on the issue of whether Agamemnon was justified
towards the end of the passage, itself becomes somewhat uncertain as to who is in the right (1530-2,
1560-4; see section 3.2). On Iphigeneia in this passage see particularly 1395-9, 1413-21, 1432, 1521-9,
1535f., 1555-9.
in killing his daughter, nor on whether Clytaemestra is justified in killing her husband. Once Iphigeneia is dead, the issue of whether Agamemnon should have killed her is largely an academic question; the simple fact is that Clytaemestra sees a necessity for vengeance. This is why Agamemnon’s viewpoint goes unmentioned in the face of Clytaemestra’s argument at 1395-1559. For while Clytaemestra is indeed attacking him in these lines, she does so primarily in order to defend her own action, in the face of the Chorus’ attack on her. The focus has shifted from the defensibility of Agamemnon’s action to that of Clytaemestra’s. Technically, the conflict which results in Agamemnon’s death does not primarily consist of a dialectical opposition over a single arguable issue, so much as of a partisan hostility based on the need for vengeance: an emotional opposition, not an intellectual one.

Although Agamemnon and Clytaemestra certainly do disagree, and it is necessary to extrapolate the dialectical opposition I have described in order to apprehend the basis of their hostility, nevertheless the reason that Clytaemestra kills Agamemnon is not because she believes that he was unjustified in killing their daughter, but rather simply because he did kill her. παθεῖν τὸν ἔργαντα, the Chorus admits after she has concluded her attack on Agamemnon; θέσμον γάρ (1564). The hostility between Agamemnon and Clytaemestra is primarily a matter of vengeance, not of disagreement.

1.2. The emotive vs. the intellectual

This formulation of the conflict, as a matter of vengeance and non-rational hostility, is
consistent with Malcolm Heath's recent attempt to reassert the emotional importance of spectating Tragedy, as opposed to the interpretation of Tragedy in terms of intellectual significance. However, Heath strongly attacks the notion of interpreting Tragedy in any sort of intellectual light. He argues that an intellectualised understanding of Tragedy is always an inappropriate subject for consideration; its emotive (and, presumably, spiritual) impact is the only criterion for appreciation.

...serious issues are [not] coherently formulated or purposefully explored in the [any] play: the dramatist need do no more than is necessary to make his audience aware of their proximity; and certainly, he need have no interest in the issues as such, beyond their contribution to the emotive force of his play.

This is a view which can easily be applied to Ag. I have already described the conflict in the play as *primarily* expressing a partisan hostility rather than an intellectual disagreement (though over the issue of Iphigeneia's death it is clear that Agamemnon and Clytaemestra do disagree). The only passage in which an intellectual weighing-up of alternatives becomes relevant, Agamemnon's deliberation at 205-17, is surely intended primarily to provoke an *emotional* response in the audience at the pathos of Agamemnon's horrific dilemma; for even there Agamemnon does not enter into any detailed ethical discussion. It is the fact that he is faced with a dilemma that is emphasised, as is shown by 206-8 (quoted above), 211 τί τῶνδ' ἀνευ κακῶν, and by his resignedly washing his hands of the matter in 217 εὐδ' ὑπαρχεῖν.

Heath's approach has the problem that it uses a narrow definition of what constitutes 'intellectualisation', but applies it broadly. He rejects the idea that Tragedies contain any "profound or original insight into international politics, ethics and theology", or any

---

4 Heath 1987 *passim.*
6 Heath 1987 p. 72.
exploration of ideas. But when he makes his distinctions between types of intellectualisation later in the book, it is revealed that the idea that he is rejecting is specifically that a playwright might intend some meaning in the play to have an external application or purpose; he acknowledges that a Tragedy may have intellectual content in that it presupposes some awareness in the spectator of the play’s discourse, the cognition of certain moral, theological and metaphysical propositions. (One is tempted to add, some knowledge of the language which the actors speak would perhaps also be useful.) In other words, he rejects any intellectual activity beyond the confines of the activity of watching the play, while accepting the possibility of intellectual comprehension internal to watching it. This categorisation is too simplistic; there is more to be said on the subject of intellectualisation internal to the play. The intellectual activity that Heath accepts as valid is not the content of the play, but the audience’s presupposed familiarity with the play’s discourse. Within the play itself he leaves unexplored the possibility of the intellectual interplay of ideas and viewpoints, an intellectual basis for the praxis, and an intellectual response to the cognition of these ideas.

None of the above categories of intellectualisation of a play are very clearly


8Heath 1987 pp. 72, 77, 88. Heath 1987 pp. 40f. totally rejects the fifth-century evidence of Aristophanes Frogs (971-9 τοιαύτα μέντοιγώ φρονείν / τούτοις [the audience] εἰσιναμένην, etc.) for the suggestion that a Tragedy could be intended to get its audience to think about things differently, by approaching a subject in a novel way (as Euripides, the speaker of the above lines, does frequently). Although this evidence comes from a Comedy, its validity is supported by the fact that it is used as the object of a parody in the following lines spoken by Dionysus, 980-91. This parody can hardly be funny if it is not based on a credible (if not literally true) proposition. A joke can be dismissed as evidence only if “it is a joke rooted in an interpretative practice which we know to have been unsound” (Heath 1987 p. 64), which is certainly not the case here: Aristophanes in this passage is exploiting interpretative practices which a good Tragic playwright would have expected from his audiences.

distinguished, in practice; more importantly, intellectual responses are not always clearly
distinguishable from emotional responses, as one tends to lead to the other. It is not a
matter of either intellectualisation or an emotional response, in spite of Heath’s argument
“that we should not try to reconcile the two.”10 In many cases intellectualisation is
coordinate with an emotional response; the discomfort that must surely have been
provoked by some of the more subversive passages in Euripides’ plays is provoked
because they intellectually subvert social norms, such as in the agon of Alcestis when
Admetus treats his father as an enemy, cursing him because of his refusal to die in
Admetus’ place.11 Taplin had already answered Heath’s outright dismissal of the
intellectual element of Tragedy, and I cannot do better than to quote him:

They [some modern critics] think that if tragedy is essentially an emotional
experience, it must be solely that; and they think this because they assume that
strong emotion is necessarily in opposition to thought, that the psychic activities
are mutually exclusive. But is this right? Understanding, reason, learning,
moral discrimination—these things are not, in my experience, incompatible with
emotion…: what is incompatible is cold insensitivity.12

This is so not just in Euripides, but even in Aeschylus, even in Ag.; in short, an
emotional response to the horror of Clytaemestra’s vengeance is not just compatible with an
intellectual cognition of the hostility between them and the reasons for that hostility;
indeed, such an intellectual response is essential to appreciating (for example) the kommos
after Agamemnon’s death between Clytaemestra and the Chorus, which focuses on the
intellectual basis for her action. The Chorus’ emotional horror at 1530-2 and 1560-4 is
because of their intellectual comprehension of Clytaemestra’s argument; the pathos of

Agamemnon’s dilemma at 205-17 is painful precisely because he does not know which is
the better argument, which course of action has the best ethical justification. Treating the
Oresteia’s conflict as an ongoing, sequential one is not incompatible with intellectualising
the basis for that conflict, and the arguments underlying this particular episode of the
conflict.

1.3. Conflict and continuity: a ‘party system’

While intellectualisation of the play’s conflict has a possible (I would say a necessary)
rôle in the interpretation of Ag., this is far from saying that an intellectual dilemma is the
focus of the play, as some have occasionally taken to be the case in certain other Tragedies,
particularly Antigone. The praxis of this play remains an act of vengeance: an act which,
while having an intellectual rationale behind it, is most remarkable for its horror.

As I have argued above (1.1), the conflict in Ag. and the Oresteia is not founded in a
simple dialectical opposition. However, for dramatic purposes it is often treated as if it
were. Polarising the opposing parties in the conflict, in this case Agamemnon and
Clytaemestra, as if they were thesis and antithesis, is an effective means of depicting their
hostility, by emphasising and clarifying the conflict that is there. Polarising characters to
one side of the conflict or the other also underlines a supposed dialectical opposition which
gives extra definition to our perception of the opposition.

The cyclical nature of the conflict actually furnishes the means for polarising the
characters. Because in each cycle of the vengeance a new character replaces one that died
in the last cycle—Clytaemestra takes the place of Iphigeneia, Orestes takes the place of Agamemnon—one may say that each of these characters takes his or her place as belonging to a 'party', and that the opposing forces, or 'parties', act on each other through a sequence of representatives. Each participant in the conflict thus belongs to one 'party' or the other, acts, and then becomes passive as the other 'party' responds. One of these 'parties' consists of Zeus, followed by Agamemnon, Orestes and Electra, and finally Apollo and Athene; the other consists of Artemis, followed by Iphigeneia, Clytaemestra (and Aegisthus, who represents Thyestes), and the Furies. Zeus begins the action, sending the expedition to Troy (this is narrated at the beginning of the Chorus' account, 55f., 62, emphasising Zeus' inceptive rôle); Artemis responds, demanding the sacrifice of Iphigeneia from Agamemnon; he responds, killing his daughter; Clytaemestra responds, killing Agamemnon; Orestes responds, killing Aegisthus and Clytaemestra; the Furies respond, hounding Orestes; and Apollo responds, purifying him and leading him to Athens, where Athene secures his life and ends the feud.

The conflict at any given point in the trilogy is between these two 'parties'. Though the focus of the conflict shifts from one representative to the next, there may still be held to be a polar opposition, not between viewpoints, but between 'parties'. The alternation between one 'party' acting and then the other emphasises the opposition between them.

This alternation is also what gives Athene's intervention in Eum. its significance. At each cycle, the 'party' representative who has just acted expresses a hope that this will be the end of the series of disasters. The Chorus narrates Iphigeneia's death (αἰλινον
but hopes that all may end well (Ag. 129 and 159 τὸ δ᾽ εὖ νικάτω), as does Agamemnon (217 ἔδαρχος η). Clytaemestra admits her guilt but claims her action was just, and hopes that with her alliance to the Curse (1569 δαίμονι τῷ Πλεισθενίδαν, meaning her marriage to Aegisthus) the troubles will end (1575f., πῶν ἀπόχρη μοι μανίας μελαθρῶν / ἀλληλοφόνων ἀφελούσῃ). Orestes assumes that Apollo's assurance will signify the end of the conflict (Cho. 1029-32 τὸν πυθόμαντιν Λοξίαν χρήσαι ἐμοὶ / πράξαντα μὲν ταῦτ'...παρέντι δ᾽ οὐκ ἔρω τὴν ζημίαν). The point is that in each case, the other 'party' will always attempt a reprisal; it is not just a series of disasters that is ended by Athene's conciliation with the Furies, but a series of reprisals, one 'party' against the other; it is the conflict that Athene (and the institution of the Areopagus legal system) ends.

1.4. Polarising the conflict: emphasising contrast

The 'party system' outlined above is a useful tool for emphasising the conflict that takes place in Ag., by opposing Agamemnon and Clytaemestra on the basis of the 'parties' to which they belong. Because one 'party' is continually opposed to the other throughout the trilogy, it is possible to use certain factors to contrast the two parties, in order to emphasise their opposition. Below I select three particularly important factors: the first, gender, is the most fundamental way by which the opposition between the 'parties' is depicted; the second, Aeschylus' manipulation of focus, trains our attention on the active 'party' in Ag., Clytaemestra; and the third, Aegisthus, is virtually a personification of the 'party' hostility.
1.4.1. Gender

Gender opposition is a particularly useful tool for clarifying the conflict through contrast, because it is such a fundamental characteristic of the opposing forces throughout the trilogy. Artemis, Iphigeneia, Clytaemestra and the Furies are all female; Zeus, Agamemnon, Orestes and Apollo are all male. The conflict of genders ultimately reaches its climax in the trilogy when the female Athene paradoxically emphasises her masculine qualities at *Eum.* 736-40: τὸ ἀνδρὸν αἰνῶ πάντα... κάρτα ἐμὲ τοῦ πατρός.

There are exceptions to the gender division: Cassandra and the Chorus of *Cho.* are female, and Aegisthus is male (biologically, at least); but the former two are hardly key agonists in the system of reciprocal vengeance throughout the trilogy, and the third has an entirely different rôle (on which see 1.4.3). One important study of gender in the *Oresteia* is that of Winnington-Ingram 1948, though in many respects it has been superseded by Goldhill 1984; but neither of these comments substantially on the use to which gender is put, to emphasise the contrast between two dialectically opposed ‘parties’.

Because Athenian society and, it is supposed, Aeschylus treated the masculine as the norm, significant references to gender in the *Oresteia* tend to focus on the more marked gender, the female. In *Ag.*, they revolve around Clytaemestra, defining her by opposition to Agamemnon’s unmarked masculinity. In general, Clytaemestra tends to be referred to in terms of masculine qualities. This paradox serves two functions: firstly, it reminds us that she is in fact female, and reinforces our perception of what her rôle as a woman is
supposed to be, thus strengthening the partisan opposition between her and the male side (Agamemnon); secondly, to give her characteristics normally associated with unmarkedness, that is to say male characteristics, is to validate her position by identifying her as a (masculinely) strong character, who is thus a fitting dialectical opponent for Agamemnon.

I shall now proceed through the play, noting and commenting on passages in which the playwright manipulates societal norms of gender.

§1: lO. Watchman. ὥδε γὰρ κρατεῖ
γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον ἐλπίζον κέαρ.

In these ominous lines the masculinisation of Clytaemestra is underlined by the juxtaposition of γυναικὸς and ἀνδρόβουλον. Fraenkel compares Cho. 626 γυναικόβουλος, where the compound refers (explicitly) to the treachery of women. The attribution of a masculine characteristic validates the authority (κρατεῖ) of her ἐλπίζον κέαρ, in anticipation of the Chorus’ doubt of her authority in the first and second episodes in the matter of the reliability of the beacon. However, this validation has a two-edged significance: since the audience, knowing in advance what sort of character Clytaemestra is (from such sources as the Odyssey; see section 1.4.2), is predisposed to regard her as a villain, this attribution of strength makes her seem all the more dangerous. We respect her more, but we also fear her more. This being the case, ἐλπίζον is most ominous as well: is it her innocent ‘expectation’ (of the fall of Troy and Agamemnon’s return) or her far more dangerous ‘hope’ (that she will succeed in murdering him)? The ambiguity is characteristic of the first half of the play: as often, there is on the surface a mask of innocence, but behind the

13Fraenkel 1950 ii p. 10 on 11.
deception we can always perceive Clytaemestra plotting.

§2: 26. Watchman. 'Αγαμέμνονος γυναίκι

The ominous use of this periphrasis to avoid her name (she is not named until 84; even this mild anticipation increases tension) also has the effect that by identifying Clytaemestra specifically by her rôle as the King’s wife (the rôle she should be fulfilling), her subversiveness if emphasised. Her ideal rôle is defined in terms of Agamemnon: she and he should be complementary, but they are opponents. There is a second ominous ambiguity: by naming Agamemnon, there is an ironical implication of the man whose ‘wife’ she really is, namely Aegisthus.

§3: 61-3. Chorus. ...ἐπ’ Ἀλεξάνδρῳ πέμπει ξένιος Ζεὺς, πολυάνορος ἀμφὶ γυναῖκος πολλὰ παλαιόματα...

πολυάνορος on the surface refers to Helen, the cause of the expedition; but it can be taken as implying Clytaemestra. In this case, what is emphasised is the opposition between Zeus and Clytaemestra: they are polarised to their respective ‘parties’ in the conflict. The fact that Helen is not named (“nor will she be until the chorus expressly deals with the process of naming her (681-7)” facilitates this ambiguity. It is possible that a further ambiguity is intended, and that ξένιος is intended to remind us of Atreus’ breaking of ξένια with Thyestes. This would constitute a further ‘party’ polarisation; but that would be a very obscure ambiguity at this point in the narrative.

---

14Cf. Stesichorus fr. 223 Page: Aphrodite makes all Tyndareus’ daughters διγάμους τε καὶ τριγάμους... καὶ λεπαδόρας.
15Goldhill 1984 p. 14. Goldhill’s further comment, “When she [Helen] places herself outside society by her action of adultery, it is as if she loses her name in and for society...” reads too much into the absence of a name; it is not conspicuous by its absence, it merely allows a certain ambiguity, in that any unspecified ‘she’ may potentially be either Helen or Clytaemestra.
§4: 83f. Ch. οὐ δέ, Τυνδάρεω
θύγατερ, βασίλεια Κλυταιμήστρα

Clytaemestra is again identified by the rôle she should be fulfilling, that of Queen and wife
(again defined by her relationship to her counterpart, Agamemnon); even in this address
her name is postponed to the end.

The arguments as to whether Clytaemestra is visible to the audience at this moment are
endless, and not especially relevant to a consideration of the rôle of gender in polarising
Agamemnon and Clytaemestra. Whether she is visible or not, her gender is being used
to define her rôle.

§5: 114-21. Ch. [the eagles] βοσκομένω λαγέναν ἐρικύμωνα φέρματι
γένναν... (119)

In this strophe and the following antistrophe, the pregnant hare appears to signify Troy and
the Atreidai the eagles. This portent already lays a foundation for the female/male ‘party’
conflict to be carried through the whole trilogy by suggesting several examples of the
opposition: Artemis/Zeus, the hare/the eagles, Troy/the Atreidai, and, in each of these
to define her rôle.

§6: 150-5. Ch. [μή] σπευδομένα θυσίαν ἐτέραν ἄνομον τιν’ ἄδαιτον,
νεικέων τέκτωνα σύμφυτον, οὐ δει-
σήνορα μένιε γὰρ φοβερὰ παλένορτος
οἰκονόμος δολία, μνάμων Μήνις τεκνόποινος.

Somewhat later, at 83 (Denniston-Page 1957); others, not until the end of the
parodos, at 255 (Fraenkel 1950) or 258 (Lloyd-Jones 1970, Taplin 1977); an entrance with the Chorus at
40, or even one as late as 264, could probably be argued with equal plausibility to these others. The
arguments tend to revolve around this address, around 87 θωοκές (arguing that her act of sacrificing must
be visible to the audience), and around the subject of ‘Aeschylean silences’, described disparagingly by
Euripides in Aristophanes Frogs 89-94, and discussed almost as disparagingly by Taplin 1972.
This extraordinary passage is packed with ambiguities, and very rich in the range of ideas it evokes, some of which have already been discussed by Conacher.\(^\text{17}\) It may be read in a variety of ways:

(a) “May she [Artemis] not demand another sacrifice [in addition to the ‘sacrifice’ of the hare—\(\thetaυμἐνολοιν\), 137],” as argued by Fraenkel, who cites Pauw for this interpretation.\(^\text{18}\)

(b) It is unclear until 156 whether it is still Calchas that is speaking; at 156, \(\tauοι\deltaε\ Kαλχας\) suddenly resolves the meaning of the passage down to (a) above, but up to that point the ambiguities steadily increase, reaching a climax of evocativeness in these lines. If the audience supposes that it is now the Chorus that is speaking, then the lines are to be interpreted as a prayer for the present moment: “May she [Artemis or Clytaemestra?] not demand another sacrifice [in addition to the sacrifice of Iphigeneia],” referring to the future death of Agamemnon, which is suggested by \(\deltaεισπνωρα\), and which is a \(νεικέων τέκτονα\) in a way much more familiar to the audience than is Iphigeneia’s death (since in previous versions of the story the rationale behind Agamemnon’s death appears to have been the vengeance of Aegisthus, unrelated to Iphigeneia), in that it brings Orestes’ matricide to mind.

(c) There is a third level of meaning: the words \(\tilde{\delta}αιτον\) and \(\piαλινροτος\) / \(οικονομος\ … \tauεκν\ποινος\) strongly suggest the Curse itself, thus also suggesting that the \(\thetaυσιαν \ \epsilonτεραν\) will be a reiteration, namely, a repetition of the \(\tilde{\delta}αιτον\) feast of Thyestes:

“May she [Clytaemestra] not demand another sacrifice [in addition to the ‘sacrifice’ of

\(^{17}\text{Conacher 1987 pp. 10f.}\)

\(^{18}\text{Fraenkel 1950 ii p. 91 on 151.}\)
Thyestes' children].” Though this precise meaning would be inappropriate in the context, the horrific, recurrent, and familial nature of the Curse is certainly evoked by the lines.

Almost every word in 150-5 can thus be read in a variety of ways, so as to be consistent with each of the above three interpretations. For example: τεκνόπολνος can mean (a) avenging the children of the hare, and thus of Troy, since the hare is a mantic referent to Troy; (b) avenging Agamemnon's child, Iphigeneia; (c) avenged by a child (Orestes).

In every one of these cases, there is a strong polarisation of gender to one side or the other of the conflict, since under all these interpretations the ambiguous ‘she’ may refer to any one of the female partisans: in (a) Artemis and the hare, in (b) either Clytaemestra or Artemis and Iphigeneia, in (c) Clytaemestra (and the effeminate Aegisthus?). In all three interpretations the implied opponent (from whom the ἐτέρων θυσίαν will be demanded) is the male Agamemnon.

§7: 259f. Ch. δίκη γαρ ἐστι ἄρηγγοι τίειν
γυναῖκ τημώβεντος ἄρσενος θρόνον ...

Clytaemestra is again defined by her position as wife, and Agamemnon by his gender. The term ἄρσενος is a carefully un-loaded term to use: it implies nothing more or less than his gender. Similarly Goldhill, commenting on 1231f. θῆλυς ἄρσενος φονεύς / ἐστίν, states: “The use of the generic terms ‘male’ and ‘female’ indicates the generalised opposition of the sexes” (see my note later in this section on 1231f., §21).

19 When Fraenkel 1950 ii p. 93 on 154f. argues that “the poet has no thought of such play with a double meaning” he is referring specifically to a double meaning in the word Μήνις, which is indeed best taken as abstract, meaning “wrath” in general. The assertion of Denniston-Page 1957 p. 82 on 150, in agreement with Lloyd-Jones (CQ n.s. 3 [1953] p. 96), that ἄνομον means only “unaccompanied by the flute” is too limiting in this pervasively ambiguous context.

20 Goldhill 1984 p. 86.
Fraenkel debates whether the Chorus has been summoned or come of its own volition.\footnote{He decides that it has been summoned: Fraenkel 1950 ii p. 147 on 258.} For the purposes of defining and polarising the conflict, this point does not make much difference either way; whichever is the case, it is clear that Clytaemestra holds the κράτος (258) and that the Chorus, loyal as it is to the throne, honours that (258 σεβίζων).

§8: 277. Cl. παιδὸς νέας ὡς κάρτες ἐμυμήνω φρένας.

Clytaemestra denies ‘childish’ foolishness (later modified to ‘womanly’ foolishness; cf. 348, 1401).\footnote{Lloyd-Jones 1970 i p. 36 notes the reminiscence of this line at 348.} Her character is thus strengthened: given more authority as an authentic representative of her ‘party’, and made more dangerous. Other than the similarity of 348 and 1401, there is no obvious connection with gender here, though it certainly adds definition to Clytaemestra.

§9: 348-51. Cl. τοιαῦτα τοι γυναικὸς ἐξ ἐμοῦ κλύεις·
   τὸ δὲ ἐὰν κρατοῦν μὴ διχορρόπος ἵθελν·
   πολλῶν γὰρ ἐσθλῶν τὴν ὄνημν εἰλόμην.
Ch. γύναι, κατ' ἀνδρα σῶφρον' ἐφόρονσι λέγεις' ...

Here Clytaemestra’s masculine strength is emphasised. Denniston-Page describe 348 as “ironical or indignant”\footnote{Denniston-Page 1957 p. 100 on 351.};\footnote{If so, then it is the same irony that appears at 1661 (cf. on §34 later):} if so, then it is the same irony that appears at 1661 (cf. on §34 later):

δὲ εἶχε λόγος γυναικὸς, εἰ τις ἄξιοι μαθείν.

Note, however, that Clytaemestra does not argue that her gender is irrelevant in determining her authority. She may be a villain, but in the characterisation given her by
Aeschylus (the patriarchy she acknowledges is the one her author lives in) she is not ignorant or defiant of the social norm that she is expected—indeed, expects herself—to fulfil; there is a definite concessive sense to γυναικός in 348. She acknowledges that she possesses authority (and thus the ability to participate in the conflict) *in spite of* the fact that she is a woman.

§10: 401-17. Ch. [Paris] ἕχοινε ἔξενιαν τράπε—
ζαν κλοπάδοι γυναικός. = (401f.)

[Helen] λυποῦσα (403) ...ἀγούσα τ’ ἀντίφερμον Ἰλίῳ
φθοράν (406) ...βεβάκει θήμφα (407) ...ἀτλητα τλάσσα (408)

[The prophets of Menelaus' house:]
"ὡ λέχος καὶ στύβοι φιλάνορες" (411)

"εὐμόρφων δὲ κολοσσῶν
ἐχθηται χάρις ἄνδρι [Menelaus] ..." (416f.)

After 400, all personages in this passage are referred to not by their names but by their gender roles. Referring to this aspect of them is considered sufficient to define the whole: either male or female, one side or the other. Helen is never named in this stasimon (she is not named in the play until 681-7); in 403-8 “the subject is...unnamed and inherent only in the feminine form of the participles.” At 402 she is (the) γυναικός, a particularly emphatic gender-reference, coming as it does at the end of an antistrophe. Paris is the unnamed object of φιλάνορες; Menelaus is simply ἄνδρι. The consequent ambiguity suggests Clytaemestra in place of Helen (both are treacherous and φιλάνορες), and Agamemnon in place of both Paris (divine wrath awaits both of them) and Menelaus (both are cuckolded husbands, and brothers).

---

24 Goldhill 1984 p. 45.
§11: 483-7. Ch. γυναικὸς αἰχμὰ πρέπει
πρὸ τοῦ φανέρως χάριν ξυναίνεσαι
πίθανός ἄγαν ὁ θῆλυς ὅρος ἔπινεμεταί
ταχύπορος· ἄλλα ταχύμορον
γυναικογήρυτον ὀλυταῖ κλέος.

The Chorus assumes on the basis of social norms that because Clytaemestra is female, her authority is unreliable. This renewed distrust (a dramatic turnaround from 351, where her masculinity gives her authority) may seem confusing; Lloyd-Jones observes the grim, foreboding mood towards the end of the stasimon and gives psychological reasons for the shift, internal to the Chorus’ ‘psychology’:

Saddened by the realization of this fact [the change of mood], the Chorus revokes its earlier acceptance of Clytemnestra’s assurance.... Seeing that the conventions of Greek tragedy...are wholly remote from modern naturalism, we should not be unduly perplexed by this volte face.... 25

It is true that the poet does not intend us to search hard for a logical reason for the Chorus’ change of mind; it is evidently felt that reference to Clytaemestra’s male authority and female lack of authority (she has the potential for both, because of her ἀνδρόβουλον κέαρ on the one hand and her physical gender on the other) is enough to justify both views expressed by the Chorus, both that before and that after the stasimon. Aeschylus’ purpose behind the Chorus’ change of mind is to reinforce the uncertainty in the Chorus’ perception of Clytaemestra’s authority, so that the final vindication of her interpretation of the beacon by the Herald at 503ff. will be the more striking. 26

§12: 592. Cl. ἡ κάρτα πρὸς γυναικὸς αἰρεσθαί κέαρ.

Now that Clytaemestra’s authority has been vindicated by the Herald’s report, she taunts

26 Clytaemestra’s authority in interpreting the beacon-message is much discussed by Goldhill 1984.
the Chorus, describing how she was rebuked by it for her supposed credulity. This line is reminiscent of 276f., though the element of 'mistrust of the female' did not appear explicitly until 348ff. κέαρ is repeated from 11, where it was ἀνδρόβουλον; it seems that gender can be closely associated with κέαρ.

§13: 594-6. Cl. ὁμως καὶ ἱθνον, καὶ γυναικεὶς νόμῳ
ὅλολυγμὸν ἄλλος ἄλλοθεν κατὰ πτόλιν
εἰσικον εὐφημοῦντες ...

"This widens the opposition to men v. women in the city, not merely Clytemnestra and the chorus."27 The masculine forms ἄλλος, εὐφημοῦντες may perhaps suggest that it is the men of the city that are behaving like women (γυναικεὶς νόμῳ), with their effeminate ὅλολυγμὸν. The Chorus has attacked Clytaemestra for her 'feminine' credulity (483-7), whereas in fact it is the men who have been 'femininely' credulous.

§14. 601-4. Cl. τι γὰρ
γυναικὶ τούτῳ φέγγος ἕδον δρακαῖν,
ἀπὸ στρατείας ἄνδρα σώσαντος θεοῦ,
πόλας ἀννίξας;

Clytaemestra, as part of her deception, defines herself in terms of her husband, as she does throughout 598-614: it is her mask of fidelity. She refers to Agamemnon as πόσις in 600 and 604, but here he is ἄνδρα. Goldhill suggests that the loaded word ἄνδρα is avoided in referring to the specific instance of Agamemnon; it is reserved for her lover, Aegisthus.28 This is possibly intended by Aeschylus' (cf. the definitive 1404f. οὗτος ἐστὶν Ἀγαμέμνων, ἐμὸς πόσις), but is not very obvious to the audience. A tautology of πόσις repeated three times within five lines would be far more striking than this subtle distinction.

27 Goldhill 1984 p. 54.
§15: 606-8. Cl. γυναικα πιστην και έν δόμοις ευροι μολὼν
οιαννηρον οὖν ἔλειπε, δωμάτων κύνα
ἐσθλὴν ἐκεῖνψ...
κύνα is associated with vigilance and faithfulness (606 πιστήν), as in the tradition of
Odysseus’ dog Argos. This association has already been used in Ag. by the Watchman,
implying his own vigilance, and his loyalty to his master Agamemnon (3 κυνὸς δίκην).29
This time, however, the speaker is lying. Goldhill sees an ambiguity in this word;30 one
may compare 1228, where Cassandra refers to Clytaemestra as a “hateful bitch”. The
association of dogs with faithfulness is therefore not invariable. In view of the lies
scattered throughout this part of the speech and which are intended to be perceived by the
audience, as I argued above, Goldhill is probably right.

§16: 613f. Cl. (MSS Herald). τοιόσον ὁ κόμπος, τῆς ἀλθείας γέμων,
oὐκ ἀλυσχρός ὡς γυναικὴ γενναῖα λακεῖν.
Clytaemestra emphasises the qualities of the ideal woman, as part of the deception which
runs throughout this speech. Every word in these two lines is of course heavily ironic.

§17: 856f. Cl. οὖκ ἀλευφυόμαι τοὺς φιλανοράς τρόπους
λέξαι πρὸς ὑμᾶς...
Fraenkel is impatient with the ambiguity perceived in φιλανοράσ by Headlam,
Schneidewin, and Snell: “φιλάνωρ no more possesses a secondary meaning here than in
411 or Pers. 136.”31 Denniston-Page are silent and presumably agree with him.
Goldhill assumes otherwise, without argument, that it ironically refers to the difference in

29 He may simply be referring to his position or posture (ἀγκαθεν, in the same line); his
faithfulness is also suggested by the length of his vigil (2 ἔτεας μήκος), as well as by 14-17 and 31-5
later in the prologue.
30 Goldhill 1984 p. 56.
31 Fraenkel 1950 ii p. 390 on 856.
usage of πόσος and ἀνήπ (on which see my note on §14).

Now there is indeed an ambiguity (apart from the one observed by Goldhill): Fraenkel's argument that φιλάνωρ possesses only a single meaning at 411 and Pers. 136 ignores the fact that at Ag. 411 it refers specifically to adultery, a connotation which is entirely appropriate to this occurrence of the word. This alternative interpretation is supported by the context, which may likewise be interpreted in more than one way.

Clytaemestra (according to this alternative interpretation) states οὐκ ἀλοχυνὸμαι as something surprising (rather than the surface meaning, “I am proud to tell you...”, which is not immediately apparent); and when she continues ἀποφθείνει τὸ τάρβος (857f.), it sounds as though she is about to admit her adultery (unmentioned as yet) openly. This impression is not dispelled by δύοφορον βίον (859): because of the rough time she had, at home alone, ἄρσενος δίχα (861), she had an affair with another ἄρσην. At 863 she mentions κληρόνασ παλιγκότους; under this interpretation, our inclination must be to take these as the ἐπίψωγον φατέν (611) of adultery. It is only in the following lines (864ff.) that the surface meaning becomes apparent (the κληρόνασ are those of Agamemnon’s death); then our alternative construction of the subtextual meaning (her adultery) collapses, though not before enough of an impression has been made upon us to realise how deceitful the rest of the speech is.

§18: 861-3. Τὸ μὲν γυναῖκα πρῶτον ἄρσενος δίχα
ἤσθαν δόμοις ἐρήμων ἐκπαγλον κακῶν,
πολλάς κλύσωσαν κληρόνασ παλιγκότους ...³²

The ambiguity in these lines, intended for the audience, not for Agamemnon, has been

³²863 is athetised by some editors.
observed in the above note; κληδόνας παλιγκότους is reminiscent of 611f., οὐδ’ οἶδα τέρψιν οὐδ’ ἐπίφογον φάτιν / ἄλλον πρὸς ἀνδρός .... Both the surface and subtextual meaning are governed by the norm of Clytaemestra’s gender: The man leaves, while the woman remains abandoned at home; though cf. 412-19, where the one abandoned is the male, Menelaus left by Helen.

§19: 918f. Ag. καὶ τὰλλα μὴ γυναικὸς ἐν τρόποις ἐμὲ ἀφρονε, μηδὲ βαρβάρον φωτὸς δίκην ...

His refusal to Clytaemestra is threefold: (a) do not make me effeminate; (b) do not grovel as if I were a barbarian king; (c) do not invite me to commit this act of hybris (ἐπιφθονον, 921). The association of these three ideas is standard in Greek thought; one may think of the barbarian Amazons, the hybris of the barbarian Xerxes, and so on. Agamemnon is most certainly no woman normally (unlike Aegisthus, as we find out later); but his refusal to become effeminate strengthens the male/female opposition, while his weakening shortly afterward, his effeminisation, signifies the victory of the female ‘party’.

§20: 940. Ag. οὗτοι γυναικὸς ἐστίν ἴμελειν μάχης.

Fighting, he implies, is masculine (cf. the φιλόμαχοι male chiefs at 230). The rôles of the two genders are reinforced, emphasising the polarisation of gender.


Goldhill’s interpretation has been quoted above, on §7. The words θῆλυς and ἄρσεν remove the connotations of ‘wife’ and ‘husband’ and their relationships, and bring it down to a bare opposition of gender, and an overturning of the assumption of male dominance.
Elsewhere it is possible to take male/female oppositions as referring to difference—male and female have different rôles, but both are integral elements of society—but here the idea of dominance emerges prominently for the first time; and by being referred to as simply “the female”, Clytaemestra becomes a paradigm for female wickedness alongside the amphisbaina and Scylla (1232f.). The theme of Clytaemestra as a byword is picked up again in Cho., where Scylla is also mentioned (613-22).

§22: 1251f. Ch. τίνος πρὸς ἄνδρος τούτ' ἀχος πορούνεται;
Ca. ἤ κάρτ' ἄρ' ἄν' παρεκόπης χρησμῶν ἐμῶν. 33

The breakdown in communications (characteristic of this play) depends on gender, as it did in the case of the Chorus’ doubt in the beacon-scene and in Clytaemestra’s deceptive speech to the Herald.

§23: 1317-9. Ca. ἀλλ' ὡς θανοῦσῃ μαρτυρήτε μοι τόδε,
ὅταν γυνὴ γυναικὸς ἄντ' ἐμοῦ θάνη
ἄνὴρ τε δυσδάμαρτος ἄντ' ἄνδρος πέσῃ.

Both Clytaemestra’s and Aegisthus’ genders are emphasised. The reciprocity of the vengeance, here based on gender, is characteristic of the pre-*Eum.* system of justice: an eye for an eye, gender for gender. In fact, the genders are the other way round: it is the man-minded female that falls in exchange for the male, and the effeminate male who falls in exchange for the female; but the juxtaposition of male with male, female with female, indicates the reciprocity of the system more effectively.

§24: 1399f. Ch. θαυμάζομεν σοι γλῶσσαν, ὡς θρασύστομος,
ητίς τοιόν' ἐπ' ἄνδρι κομπάζεις λόγον.

Clytaemestra’s actions are seen in terms of the husband-wife relationship between her and

---

33 Denniston-Page 1957 ἦ κάρτα λαν.
Agamemnon. The subversiveness of the reversal of normal gender rôles is emphasised by Clytemnestra’s boasting, an activity more appropriate to a male; ἐν’ ἄνδρε, signifying that he is in her power, also suggests subversion. These lines maintain the theme of Clytemnestra’s power over communication: earlier in the play her authority was established, then used for her deception; now it is used to proclaim the justice of her actions.34

Cf. 277 παιδὸς νέας ὡς κάρτ’ ἐμομήνω φρένας, and 351 γύναι, κατ’ ἄνδρα σώφρον’ εὐφρόνως λέγεις. Throughout the play, criticism and approval are closely related to references to gender and to mind: γυναικὸς ἀφράσμονος, φρένας, ἄνδρα σώφρον’, 11 ἄνδροβουλον, etc. Fraenkel notes, “She rejects the application to her of accepted ideas as to what is womanly....”35Rather she does not deny her physical gender (that would be absurd), but declares that she has surpassed its supposed limitations (similarly my note on §9 above).

§26: 1451-4. Ch. ...δαμέντος
φύλακος εὐμενεστάτου [καὶ]
pολλὰ τλάντος γυναικὸς διαζ;
πρὸς γυναικὸς ἐὰν ἀπέφθιεν βίον.
Agamemnon endured a long war on account of a woman; now he is dead at the hands of another, her sister. Women, the Chorus laments, are the root of evil. This idea, familiar from Pandora and Od. 24.199-202 (referring to Clytemnestra), is continued in Cho. 596-638; more immediately, the Chorus continues on the subject of Helen (1456f.),

34Goldhill 1984 p. 90.
35Fraenkel 1950 iii p. 659 on 1401.
Helen was as destructive as Achilles’ wrath, οὐλομένην, ἦ μυρὶ 'Αχαίοις ὀλγει έθηκε / πολλὰς δ’ ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς "Αἴδη προῖαφεν / ἡρώων... (Iliad 1.2-4; the similarity is almost certainly intentional). Clytaemestra, defending her sister a few lines later, reverses the same idea (1466f.), ὡς μὰ πολλῶν / ἄνδρῶν ψυχὰς Δαναῶν ὀλέασσο...; she uses the same fact, that Helen destroyed countless lives, but states it as a virtue. Exploiting the standard motif of blaming women for evil is, needless to say, a very effective way of defining the female, marking it as an antithesis to the male ‘norm’.


There are multiple levels of meaning here. The ἄνδρος could be Agamemnon, in which case the blood may be either his own (which is visible onstage), that of Iphigeneia (suggested by τότ’), or that of Thyestes’ children (‘first and foremost’ this, according to Lloyd-Jones); but the Helenic context (Helen is addressed through 1454-7, and Clytaemestra’s response to the epode focuses on her) suggests that the ἄνδρος might also be her husband, Menelaus. The ‘Ερευνεῖ would then be that between his house and that of Paris, and the blood that of the πολλὰς ψυχὰς she destroyed (1456f.). His sorrows have already been the subject of one pair of strophai (404-36). ἄνδρος is conveniently and deliberately ambiguous, chosen because it stresses the person’s rôle as defined by his gender; in this context that focus emphasises his rôle as a man, as a husband and head of a household, and most strikingly as a sufferer of ills on account of women.

36West 1991 νῦν τελεύατεν.
37Lloyd-Jones 1970 p. 96 on 1459.

As mentioned above on §26, Clytaemestra uses the same facts used by the Chorus to attack Helen, but uses them to defend her. 1456f. μία τὰς πολλὰς, τὰς πάνυ πολλὰς / ψυχὰς ὀλέσας ὑπὸ Τροία (my emphases) is countered by 1465f. ύς ἀνδρολέτειρ, ύς μία πολλὼν / ἀνδρῶν ψυχὰς Δαναῶν ὀλέσας; and 1459ff. νῦν ὅδε τελείαν πολύμναστον ἐπηνθέω / ... ἀνδρὸς οἰκῦς by 1467 ᾧξυστατον ἄλγος ἐπραξεν. She is of course defending herself as well: she too, Helen’s sister, is an ἀνδρολέτειρα and ἄλγος ἐπραξεν applies to her as well.

§29: 1468-71. Ch. δαίμον...
κράτος: τῇ ισόφυχον ἐκ γυναικῶν
καρδιόθηκτον ἐμοὶ κρατοῦσα.

The occurrence of γυναικῶν seems unnecessary and therefore deliberate; but because the meaning of ισόφυχον here is uncertain, it is difficult to tell what effect is intended. Denniston-Page argue that the adjective is transferred and means “two women of like spirit”; Fraenkel argues that in ισο- compounds of this type, which mean ‘equal to each other in respect to’ (as opposed to the other type, meaning simply ‘equal to’, as in ισόθεος, ‘equal to a god’), the point of comparison must be strictly quantitative.\(^{38}\) The correct word for “two women of like spirit” would in Fraenkel’s eyes have been ὄμοφυχον. In neither of these interpretations, however, is there much point to the presence of γυναικῶν. That being so, the somewhat unusual interpretation “equal in spirit <to a man>” (??—this interpretation may be supported by analogy with ἀνδρόβουλον) is tempting, since it gives a significance to the mention of their gender; though it is still, perhaps, rather unlikely.

§30: 1543-6. Ch. ἥ σὺ τὸς ἔρξις τελήσῃ, κτείνας
ἀνδρὰ τὸν αὐτὴς ἀποκωκῦσαι
ψυχῇ τ' ἀχαίρων χάριν ἀντ' ἔργων
μεγάλων ἀδίκως ἐπικράνας.

It is possible that these lines might be making the point that under normal circumstances, if Clytaemestra had not had some reason to kill Agamemnon, she would have been a model wife. That would be a striking point in justifying her action. Her capability to be a model wife is supported by her authority and intelligence as evidenced in the matter of the beacons. Against this interpretation, Denniston-Page on the ἀχαίρων χάριν judge that such a “tribute, coming from Clytemnestra, would be no tribute but an insult; cf. Cho. 43 [χάριν ἀχάριτον].” 39

§31: 1625-7. Ch. γυναῖκε σὺ τοὺς ἥκοντας ἐκ μάχης νέον—40
οἰκουρὸς εὐνὴν ἀνήρ ἀλαχύνων ἁμα
ἀνδρὶ στρατηγῷ τὸν ἐβούλευσας μόρον;

The Chorus addresses Aegisthus. Words which underline Aegisthus’ effeminacy in various ways are italicised (my emphases). He is effeminate in contrast both to Clytaemestra (the dominant partner in their affair, and the true doer and planner of the murder) and to Agamemnon (the ἀνὴρ and στρατηγὸς who was at the war, while Aegisthus remained behind as οἰκουρὸς). Aegisthus is neither truly male nor truly female, not on one ‘party’ or the other; that he is not a participant in the action fits with his ambiguous gender-definition.

§32: 1636. Aeg. τὸ γὰρ δολῶσαι πρὸς γυναικὸς ἢν σαφῶς...
The female is identified with deception: the feminine is thus inherently bad. δολωσαι is not part of the planning (1627) but of the action, and is therefore rightly attributed to Clytaemestra. Fraenkel’s commentary comes appropriately close to the Chorus’ own disgust at Aegisthus:

The sorry wretch, who owes all that he now is to the enterprise of Clytemnestra and to her ἄνδροσουλωλον κέαρ, is unchivalrous enough to insinuate that he, the man, was too good for the δολωσαι.41

§33: 1643f. Ch. τι δὴ τὸν ἄνδρα τὸν ἄπὸ ψυχῆς κακῆς
οὐκ αὐτὸς ἡμάριζες, ἄλλα οὖν γυνὴ...42

Although it is Aegisthus that is being attacked here, notice that the gender opposition is still that between Agamemnon (ἄνδρα) and Clytaemestra (γυνη). Aegisthus is so weak that ‘even’ a woman is stronger than he. Denniston-Page warn against a possible misinterpretation of 1644, that by making Aegisthus the subject and Clytaemestra in apposition the Chorus is attributing primary responsibility to Aegisthus:

Aegisthus has claimed the full credit for the deed: it is therefore only to be expected that the Chorus will retort ‘then why did you let a woman associate herself with you?’, even though they may think that Clytemnestra’s part was much the more important.43

§34: 1661. Cl. δὲ εἴχει λόγος γυναικός, ἐπὶ τις ἀξιοὶ μαθείν.

An ironical conclusion to Clytaemestra’s speech, and in the same spirit as 277, 348 and 1401. It is now the men who are the ἄφρασμονες (1401), “and it takes a woman to bring them back to their senses.”44 Fraenkel thinks she is no longer being rebellious, provocatively saying, “I told you so”;45 and it is true that asserting herself over the

41Fraenkel 1950 iii p. 775 on 1636.
42Fraenkel 1950 νυν for οὖν, for the sake of an antithesis.
44Denniston-Page 1957 p. 223 on 1661.
45Fraenkel 1950 iii p. 796 on 1661.
Chorus would be redundant at this stage. But Clytaemestra is hardly one to be humble. There must be some irony, even if it be directed only at Aegisthus. Certainly there is a contrast to Aegisthus' lack of λόγος and πειθω; the Chorus has dismissed his words, 1612 Αἰγισθ. ἔβριζοντ' ὅπε οἴβω, whereas it had been genuinely upset by Clytaemestra's rationalisations.

§35: 1671. Ch. κοίμασον θαρσῶν, ἀλέκτωρ ὡσε θηλείας πέλας.

This final insult is indeed in the bomolochic style of Comedy; Fraenkel has already noted Aegisthus' “vulgarity of dragging in Orpheus and the forced βωμολοχία of ἡγε and ἀξις” at 1628-32. The patent irony is that it is not the hybristic ἀλέκτωρ who is the danger; it is the far more restrained ‘female’, Clytaemestra. We may also be intended to think back to Agamemnon's own strutting before Clytaemestra, agreeing to tread the tapestries ostensibly in order to please her. Whether the reminiscence is deliberate or not, the reversal of gender rôles (the following two lines, the last in the play, depict Clytaemestra instructing and dominating Aegisthus) gives a final emphasis to the dominance not just of Clytaemestra but of the female ‘party’ in general at this moment in the conflict.

Some reference should be made to gender separation later in the trilogy, since its significance in emphasising the conflict is maintained. The stasimon Cho. 585-651, for example, gives a catalogue of corrupt women, and, after the model of Od. 24.199-202, concludes (635f.):

θεοστυγήτω δ' ἄγει

βροτοίς ἀτυμωθέν οἶχεται γένος [i.e. the female ‘race’].

46Fraenkel 1950 iii p. 773 on 1628.
In *Eum.* gender becomes particularly important. Herington notes that the (female) Furies several times call on two further female deities other than those mentioned above as belonging to the female ‘party’, namely Night and Fate (Moĩpa). In *Eum.* there also arises the association of female and chthonic, male and heavenly (hinted at even in *Ag.* by Clytaemestra’s invocation of Hades while Agamemnon’s blood, like rain, spurts forth onto her, a field, 1385-92). The association of the female with the older gods is observable even in the opening lines of *Eum.*, where the Priestess invokes the earliest three oracular gods at Delphi, all female (beginning with Gaia), followed by its present god, the male Apollo. Furthermore, on three separate occasions blood-relation is explicitly used to attack or defend a character; the third time Apollo makes a connection between blood-relation and gender. The Chorus of Furies say that they did not hound Clytaemestra for her husband-murder because it οὐκ ἄν γένοιθ' ὁμαίμοις αἰθέντης φόνος (212), for which they are strongly denounced by Apollo. Later they give the same answer to Orestes, and he pursues the matter of his own blood-relation to Clytaemestra (605-8). Then Apollo denies any blood-relation between a mother and her children, thus lightening the charge of Orestes’ matricide: οὐκ ἐστι μήτηρ ἢ κεκλημένη τέκνου / τοκεῦς... (656ff.). Finally, and perhaps most importantly for her rôle in ending the seemingly unstoppable feud, Athene defines herself as primarily male in all things (736-40): only someone who does not fully belong to either ‘party’ can end the conflict. Gender, used throughout to emphasise the ‘party’ opposition, at last becomes a tool to finish it.

---

47 Herington 1986 p. 135.
1.4.2. Focus

In this section I presuppose some awareness in the audience of some manner of received version of the story of Agamemnon's death, which Aeschylus has adapted to his purposes. This received story did not, I would hasten to add, have a rigidly-defined plot, known to everyone; in any case, I agree with Taplin that even if the received story were that rigid, it "would still be of minimal consequence for the literary criticism of tragedy." Rather, I would argue, there would be various familiar motifs, or plot-elements, to the story; the playwright might deliberately modify these, and might also modify them with the intention that the audience should be conscious of this modification. By doing this he subtly alters the significance of that motif's context, and points the audience in a new direction. If the audience is predisposed by the 'received story' to expect one motif—say, the setting of Agamemnon's home in Mycenae—then altering that motif (setting the play in Argos), and doing so noticeably (simple omission of an element will therefore not usually have this effect), then the audience will naturally be led to focus their attention on that variation as being significant.

I argue that Aeschylus carefully adapts his telling of the story of Agamemnon's death so that the audience is led to 'focus' on Clytemnestra and Agamemnon as the representatives of 'parties'. Agamemnon is automatically cast as a 'focus' of attention because his murder is the praxis of the play; as an opponent to him, Clytemnestra has light

48 Taplin 1977 p. 163.
49 As it happens, the setting of Ag. in Argos is anything but obvious; it is mentioned as early as 24, but is never stressed. It is presumably, therefore, not a significant variation.
cast most emphatically by Aeschylus on her rôle as a protagonist and on her motivations.

As Heath says, by placing any character in a focal position, the tragedian invites and encourages a competent and cooperative audience to distribute its emotional attachments accordingly; thus the structure of focal prejudices in a play or a scene becomes the fundamental determinant of appropriate evaluation of and response to the characters: to their arguments and actions, to their moral qualities, and of course to their conflicts.  

I should point out that what Heath means by focus and what I mean by focus are not the same thing. In Heath’s usage, ‘focus’ pertains to “any character who is serving as a centre of sympathetic attention”, whereas I am concerned with how the audience is encouraged to ‘focus’ on Clytaemestra and Agamemnon as the representatives (foci, if you will) of two opposed ‘parties’ in an ongoing conflict.

Understanding how the received story predisposed Aeschylus’ audience to the rôle of Clytaemestra in particular requires first a discussion of how the received story may have run. For earlier known versions of the Oresteia Garvie’s introduction is a particularly valuable collection of sources.

The most important extant earlier versions of the death of Agamemnon, and in particular for Clytaemestra’s rôle in his death, are allusions scattered throughout the Odyssey (where Orestes is a positive paradigm for Telemachus, and Clytaemestra a negative one for Penelope), and one fragment from Hesiod’s Catalogue, fr. 23 (a) M-W. The one reference to Clytaemestra in the Iliad, at 1.113-5, where Agamemnon declares that his concubine Chryseis is in no way inferior to Clytaemestra, has the effect of defining

---

50Heath 1987 pp. 91f.
51Heath 1987 p. 91.
Agamemnon’s character for the purpose of that scene (the argument with Achilles) rather than characterising his wife, and it is clear from Il. 9.142-5 and 284-7 that in that version Iphianassa (=Iphigeneia) is still alive and was not sacrificed at Aulis, since Agamemnon offers her, with his other daughters, as a wife for Achilles. Not enough of Stesichorus’ Oresteia survives to be of much help, though it was certainly an influence on Aeschylus. The citation of Stesichorus fr. 217 Page attests to this:

...ο τε Στησίχορος ἐχρήσατο διηγήμασίν [sc. of Homer and Hesiod?],
tὸν τε ἄλλων ποιητῶν οἱ πλέονες πλαίς ἀφορμαῖς ταῖς τούτων.

[This sentence alone is a strong argument that Stesichorus’ version would have a significant influence on the audience’s awareness of the story.] μετὰ γὰρ

"Ομηρον καθ’ Ἡλέων [οὕδεν] μᾶλλον Στησίχορος [οὐμφωνάμουσι]

Αἰσχύλοις μὲν γὰρ Ὀρέστες[α]ὶν ποιησάς τραγικὰν [Ἀθα

χεφοῖροις] Εὐμενέδας . . . . . . ἄναγγελοις διὰ τοῦ

βοστρύχου: Στησίχορος γὰρ ἐστιν [...]

Stesichorus Helen fr. 223 Page, however, agrees that she is unfaithful (Aphrodite made Tyndareus’ daughters διγάμους τε καὶ τριγάμους). The Od. and Hesiod fragment, then, are our only useful literary sources for the pre-Aeschylean story of Agamemnon’s death. Depictions of the story in art (cited by Garvie) are not particularly helpful. Pindar Pyth. 11.17-37, dated to either 474 or 454, may possibly represent a strand of the pre-Aeschylean tradition, whichever date is correct (Aeschylus’ Oresteia was performed in 458/7). Herington 1984 argues convincingly that Pyth. 11 is to be dated to 454. In the version used by Pindar, Clytaemestra alone is responsible for the murder of Agamemnon; in this respect and in many others he and Aeschylus agree. It seems likely from the

53 This line is also used to help define Agamemnon (and not Clytaemestra) in Ag., when Clytaemestra refers to Agamemnon’s faithlessness at Troy, 1439: Χρυσήδων μελλύμα τῶν ᾧν Ἦλεοι.

54 The recognition mentioned, Electra’s of Orestes by the lock of hair he had left on their father’s tomb, is at Aes. Cho. 164ff.

55 Sandys 1961 p. 296.
resemblances that one directly influenced the other, especially as *Pyth.* 11 was performed in Thebes (line 1 Καδμος κωμαί);\(^{57}\) presumably the influence of a work such as *Ag.* could spread from Athens to Thebes without much difficulty, especially given the comings and goings between Attica and Boiotia in the 450s.\(^{58}\) In spite of the close relationship with Pindar, however, the versions in Homer, Hesiod, and Stesichorus must be the main versions of which Aeschylus could expect his audience to be substantially aware, as implied by Stesichorus. fr. 217 above. Of these three authors, it is clear from hints within *Ag.* that the version of the *Od.* was the one which Aeschylus was most concerned with adapting, as I shall discuss shortly when I come to the play itself.

The Clytaemestra of the *Od.* may simply be summed up as a bad and unfaithful woman, not specifically a murderess. At 3.310 and 24.200 she is στυγερή. At 4.92 Menelaus describes Aegisthus as killing Agamemnon λαθρη, ἀνουσίτι, δόλῳ οὐλομένης ἀλόχος. Clytaemestra is again οὐλομένη ἀλόχος in both the *Nekyai*, at 11.410 and 24.97. At 11.422 she is δολομήτης, an adjective which is only ever a term of condemnation in Homer.\(^{59}\) In the Hesiod fragment, she is described as κυανώπην (Cat. 56) *Pyth.* 11.26-8: Adultery is καλωψία: τ' ἀμάχανον/ ἀλλοτρίατις γλώσσαις/ κακολόγοι δὲ πολιταί. Cf. *Ag.* 611f., 861-5. *Pyth.* 11.33 μάντιν τ' ὀλεσσε κόραν and 33f. ἀμφ' Ἑλένῃ πυρωθέντων/ Τρώων ἐλεεῖ δόμοισ is also strikingly similar to elements in *Ag.* Herington 1984 pp. 143f. observes various other similarities.

\(^{57}\) Herington 1984 p. 145 argues for direct influence of Aeschylus on Pindar: “The possibility that Aeschylus might have structured his greatest masterpiece around a couple of totally uncharacteristic lines thrown out for some inexplicable reason by Pindar in or shortly after 474 B.C. [Pyth. 11.22-5, focusing on Clytaemestra’s motivations] seems, to put it temperately, remote. Almost as many difficulties arise if we postulate that Aeschylus and Pindar were impelled independently to ask...questions about Clytaemestra’s motive by some earlier—and totally hypothetical—common source. Especially if that source was Stesichorus’ *Oresteia...*, we should have to explain how Stesichorus, long before the formation of tragedy as we know it, could have slipped into what appears to be a specifically tragic mode of vision.”

\(^{58}\) Diodorus 11.81-3 and 11.85.1, Thucydides 1.108.

\(^{59}\) The word is used in the *Iliad* of Zeus when berated by Hera for keeping secrets from her, 1.540; in
fr. 23 (a).14; cf. Ag. 1228) and ἴππερνον (30; cf. Ag. 11, 1399, 1426).

We are given many more details to tell us that she was a villain. Menelaus states that at first, after Agamemnon left, she was in fact faithful, φροέω γὰρ κέχρητ' ἀγαθοῖ (3.265), because of the bard whom Agamemnon had left to guard her (3.267f.); but after removing him, Aegisthus seduced her easily and she welcomed his advances, τὴν δὲ έθέλων έθέλουσαν ἀνήγαγεν ὀνδὲ δόμονόε (3.272). It may be noted that although she is a villain, έθέλουσα, the limelight is on Aegisthus; Clytaemestra is totally passive, her responses being controlled externally, first by the bard and then by Aegisthus. Later, in the first Nekyia Agamemnon reveals that she did not give him death honours (11.424-6); she is έξοχα λυγρα λέων (11.432); and both she and her deed (ἔργον ἀεικές) are paradigms of moral corruption, shaming all her gender (11.427-30 and 24.199-202, as in Cho.).

However, it is somewhat difficult to tell exactly what she did do, in the version of the story used in the Od. Is she simply an unfaithful wife, as 3.265-72 seems to indicate, or did she have a part in Agamemnon’s murder? The uncertainty arises because most of the time the poet is concentrating on the similarities between Agamemnon’s and Odysseus’ situations: the men making trouble at home, their wooing of the wife, the virtuous son.60 Therefore Aegisthus is portrayed as the sole agent of the murder; it is inappropriate to discuss Clytaemestra as a villain since, if the Od. usually compares the stories of Odysseus and Agamemnon for the purpose of noting similarities, she would then reflect the Od. 1.300, 3.198, 3.308 and 4.625 it refers to Aegisthus, and here at 11.422 to Clytaemestra.

60 Pace Garvie, who states (1986 p. xi), “The parallel between Orestes and Telemachus is not forgotten…, but the main point [in the Od.] is the difference between the respective wives.” Rather, it is that when it is suitable, the wives are compared (as at 11.444-6, 24.199-202); when it is suitable, the sons are compared (as at 1.298-302, 3.193-200, 11.448-53); when it is suitable, the nostoi are compared (as at 1.44-50, 3.313-6, 11.454-6). The emphasis of the comparison depends on the context.
badly on Penelope. Aegisthus receives the lion's share of the blame, and to this end Clytemestra is portrayed as passive, as at 3.265-72.

In the last passage mentioned above (24.199-202), however, where the point is a contrast between Penelope and Clytemestra, we are told that she κακὰ μήσατο ἔφαγα, / κουφεῖον κτείνασα πόσιν (24.199f.). She is more than just unfaithful; she at least is one of the participants in the murder of Agamemnon, albeit not the primary one. This impression is supported (if not actually proved) by 11.410 [Aegisthus] ἐκτὰ οὐν οὕλομένη ἄλοχῳ (which merely proves complicity, though it might also connote co-agency); and we are told at 3.309f. that Orestes, after returning and taking vengeance, buried both Aegisthus and Clytemestra, implying that he had killed his mother; and surely only her participation in Agamemnon's murder could warrant matricide. In Hesiod's version, she is identified more clearly as the murderer of Agamemnon. Listing the children of Agamemnon and Clytemestra, Hesiod mentions the sacrifice of Iphimede (=Iphigeneia) at Aulis, though she was rescued by Artemis (Cat. fr. 23 (a).17-26); and also mentions that Orestes took vengeance for the murder of his father and killed his mother (28-30). The juxtaposition implies a causal relationship between the events, namely that the vengeance for Agamemnon's murder consists of Clytemestra's death. Aegisthus is not mentioned in the fragment as it survives; it is thus Clytemestra who is primarily responsible for the murder, as in Aeschylus.

To sum up: in the received story of Agamemnon's death, Clytemestra is vilified, not

---

61 Even if the second Nekyia is a late addition to the Od. (I do not think the arguments are compelling), it is still presumably pre-Aeschylean and is therefore a factor in determining how Aeschylus' audience were predisposed.
just as an unfaithful wife but as a participant in the murder; however, in the *Od.*, it is still Aegisthus who has the limelight; the conflict is between Agamemnon and Aegisthus, and Clytaemestra is an accessory. In Hesiod she takes the main blame for the murder.

I shall now go on to discuss how Aeschylus, aware of this background (and, it seems, assuming some degree of awareness in his audience too), modifies his presentation of the story so as to focus on his own adaptations, and he thus draws the audience's attention to his intentions for the play. Most importantly, he makes Clytaemestra the protagonist of the action, while Aegisthus is (almost literally) an afterthought. In this Aeschylus follows the version that appears in Hesiod; but his careful focusing on Clytaemestra as opposed to Aegisthus (it is most emphatic that she is stronger than he; he is not simply absent, as in Hesiod and Pindar) and on the motivations for her action strongly suggest that it is the version used in the *Od.* that he expects his audience to be most familiar with. He encourages the audience to focus on an Agamemnon-Clytaemestra opposition, even though the more intellectual, dialectical aspect of that opposition does not become clear until Ag. 1395-1559, when Clytaemestra’s deception is ended and she states the rationale for her actions and makes an explicit connection between Agamemnon’s murder and the sacrifice of Iphigeneia.

The modifications become apparent as early as the prologue. The trilogy takes the audience *in medias res* (signified by 2 φορομας έτελας μηκος); the Watchman is appointed to his post, and the fall of Troy is being eagerly awaited...by Clytaemestra (10f.). In the *Od.*, it was Aegisthus who posted a watchman (4.524-7); but here it is clear that he is one of Agamemnon’s men, from his eager (one might say naïve) devotion to
his master (30-5). Even if the audience were not familiar (39 οὗ μαθοῦσι) with this detail (though all the other characteristics of the Watchman are reproduced from the Od.), the mentions of Clytaemestra (10f., 26), without any reference to Aegisthus, nevertheless focus our attention all by themselves on Clytaemestra as Agamemnon’s opponent. He concludes with a note of foreboding (36-9). One might think that here, if anywhere, Aegisthus might be hinted at; indeed, ὁκος ἄντος... σαφέστατ’ ἄν λέξειν hints at the family Curse, but he is more a shadow than an opponent for Agamemnon, never being clearly alluded to again until Cassandra’s scene.

Now the Chorus enters and presents us with the background, the facts of the past, the departure of the fleet and the sacrifice of Iphigeneia. These will eventually enable the events of the present-that-is-about-to-be (Agamemnon’s murder) to be understood as a result, in part, of that sacrifice; but for the moment, these facts ostensibly do no more than explain where Agamemnon is, and continue to establish an atmosphere of grim foreboding.

But notice that we are deluded into thinking that with this news we have all the facts at our command. Here we have the Chorus, the locals, the ones-who-know (39 μαθοῦσιν) to whom the Watchman speaks (αὕῳ), and who, the audience is to suppose, understand (μαθοῦσιν) what he has said (αὐδὼ); they enter and tell us just what it is that they know, and explicitly encourage our faith in the authority of their words (104 κύριος ἐμύ θροεῖν). Most importantly, the Chorus is an unmarked character; its members are old and venerable. They are ordinary people, the general populace. Because they are unmarked it

---

62 The observant editor of one manuscript (the corrector of Laurentianus XXXII.9, whose alterations are denoted in Fraenkel’s edition as ‘m’) makes a note of this alteration in the Spweiaoma: the Watchman is listed as θεράπων ἀγαμίμουος ὁ πρὸλογιζόμενος, οὐχ ὁ ὀπό αἰγίθου ταχείς. Fraenkel 1950 i p. 89 adds, “haec olim argumenti fabulæ partem fuisset appareat.”
is easier for the audience to identify with them, and this gives them their greatest authority. And so the Chorus carries on the interplay of apparent authority and true authority, of deception and truth, from the Watchman’s foreboding closing words.

And there, too, is Clytaemestra, calling out in triumph or making sacrifices onstage or whatever it is she is doing, seemingly unobtrusively but by the shadow of her presence (since she was first mentioned at 11) firmly attracting our attention to herself, preparing the audience to construct an Agamemnon-Clytaemestra opposition in their minds. Nowhere in the parodos is there any mention of certain important events even further back in Agamemnon’s past (by which I refer to his family’s past), long before the Trojan War. At this point it is all Clytaemestra, Clytaemestra; and the Curse is but a dimness in the background, not the hand that strikes. Thus Aeschylus follows through with the focus on Clytaemestra already established in the prologue.

By the apparent authority of the Chorus during the parodos, our attention is focussed on the events at Aulis (thus preparing us for the argument presented by Clytaemestra at 1395-1559) rather than on Aegisthus and the Curse. Our attention is fixed on the horrific vengeance contained within the nuclear family—which also fits into the schema of an unstoppable cyclical vengeance—, rather than on the less horrific vengeance of Thyestes’ Curse, which is less horrific in that it is imposed from outside (in Aeschylus’ cyclical schema the Curse represents the abstract principle underlying each individual act of

---

63Cf. on §4 in section 1.4.1 above.

64The Curse is in fact subtly alluded to in the parodos at 150-5; see section 1.4.1 on §6 above. However, rather than concluding that the ideas of the agency of Aegisthus and of the Curse are in fact not avoided in the parodos, I would suggest rather that these lines are suggestive of how confused and closely-interrelated all the different acts of vengeance are. Certainly no audience member could possibly extract all the meanings I observed earlier while the lines were being sung: it is the evocation of impressions that is being attempted by this allusive style.
vengeance in the cycle, as I argue below in section 1.4.3). Rather than continuing to contradict the audience’s expectations of certain motifs (such as a watchman posted by Aegisthus) as the prologue does, the parodos turns our attention to a matter which at first seems to be a digression, but gradually becomes more ominous. The shift of focus away from Aegisthus is much more subtle, and so, in the long run, more persuasive.

In hindsight the Chorus may be seen to possess little real authority, in spite of the ease of identifying with them as people and in spite of κύριος είμι θροειν. The Chorus is characterised as an apparent authority, and we are made to think that they are reliable and μαθησιν; and thus we too are deceived, thinking we know everything. Clytaemestra now begins to show us that this is not so: only she (not the Chorus, not Agamemnon—and certainly not Aegisthus) has total authority over the truth, and total control of the situation: she is the protagonist, she is the opponent of Agamemnon (and representative of her ‘party’). Now she demonstrates her knowledge (her authority): first of the journey of the signal (264-316) and then of the fall of Troy (317-50).

Next the Chorus is shown to possess no authority. The change in the Chorus’ mood between the beginning and the end of the first stasimon shows its uncertainty, entirely unlike Clytaemestra’s certainty. In spite of its earlier unqualified support of Clytaemestra at 351-4, it begins dithering and expressing misgivings at 475-87. In the following episode it is contrasted with the real authority of Clytaemestra, when the Herald’s account (503-82) shows her interpretation of the beacon to be correct and authoritative; the Chorus admits that it does not know everything (583-6 νικώμενος λόγοιν οὐκ ἄναίνομαι...) and she replies, “I told you so” (587-97). The Chorus has been defeated (νικώμενος) by her
The following speech (587-614) by Clytaemestra presents a problem for the audience, though critics, with the help of hindsight, have never seen it as such. When she begins talking about her husband and how eager she is to see him again, how convincing is she supposed to be? Is the audience supposed to hiss venomously at her lies, or be confused by her apparent fidelity in this speech, ἀληθείας γέμων (613)? Up to this point in the play there has still been no clear indication that she is in fact going to kill Agamemnon. The atmosphere has been very ominous, and the remarks I have made above only make sense if she does kill him; but to an audience seeing the play for the first time, nothing is clear as yet. It is a real possibility (as far as the audience can tell at this point) that Aeschylus has chosen to fell a version of Agamemnon's nostos in which he will be killed by Aegisthus, while Clytaemestra is a virtuous wife! The whole of the first two episodes emphasise strongly Clytaemestra's reliability; perhaps she is still telling the truth now. If we could observe the actor's gestures and tone of voice, perhaps it would be clear that we are supposed to hiss and disbelieve her; it is not so certain as that.

In his examination of the authority of Clytaemestra's words and of language in general in Ag., Goldhill (even before he begins to discuss this speech) suffers from the assumption (based on hindsight and second-readings) that everything Clytaemestra says is lies from beginning to end: "The uncertain status of language in messages is further brought to the fore by the speech of Clytemnestra that follows..."65 This is in spite of the fact that the messages he questions—the beacon-message, Clytaemestra's interpretation

65Goldhill 1984 p. 53.
of it, the Herald’s message, and Clytaemestra’s rebuff to the Chorus in this speech—are all true, and that the whole point of the Herald’s message is that it validates the earlier messages. Aeschylus has gone to some trouble to validate Clytaemestra’s reliability and authority.

This is the clue to how the speech should be interpreted. Throughout lines 587-597, Clytaemestra acknowledges (thereby proclaiming, for the audience) this validation of her authority; this much is clear from her mild gloating at the Chorus, “I told you so.” The Chorus’ doubt is finally dispelled, once and for all; she is a reliable interpreter and source. At 598 there is a change. She suddenly moves from the subject of her own authority to that of her relationship to Agamemnon; and this is when the true deception begins. Through the rest of the speech, she proclaims her fidelity. The speech is thus divided into two sections. In the first, Clytaemestra announces her vindication; she follows this with a sharply-contrasted pack of utter lies. We (the critics, not the audience) know from hindsight that they are lies; the contrast between the two halves of the speech is therefore deliberately intended by Aeschylus. But such a contrast is pointless if the audience is oblivious of it; so it follows that the audience is supposed to be aware of it, and does know (presumably from the actor’s tone of voice, gestures, etc.) that she is lying through her teeth. The audience, after being convinced of Clytaemestra’s authority by her reliability and control so far, now sees her beginning to abuse that authority. Her strength begins to become the tool by which Agamemnon is killed.

The following stasimon (681-781) on the subject of Helen, who is at last named here, contributes to the effect of focusing on Clytaemestra and her motivations by continuing to
focus on the Trojan War, as did the parodos and first stasimon. Concentrating on the War permits concentrating on Agamemnon's actions at the beginning of the War. It is the grudge that Clytaemestra has against Agamemnon that is important, not Aegisthus'. This is underlined by the close parallel that may be drawn between Clytaemestra and Helen: both represent an 'Ἑρώις (749), and above all they are sisters.

Agamemnon enters, and the spectacle of Agamemnon in all his majesty hindered at the door of his house by Clytaemestra is the clearest and simplest sign of the opposition between them in the entire play. As if the visible opposition between them were not enough, they proceed to engage in an agon—not on the issue of Iphigeneia's death, but still an agon—in the standard format of two long opposed speeches (855-913 and 914-30) followed by a lively and argumentative stichomythia (931-43). The issue being argued in the agon is whether or not Agamemnon should walk into his house on the tapestries Clytaemestra has laid out. Unlike the usual agon, however, it ends with one party being convinced by the other's argument; usually the loser would walk off in a huff, nothing being resolved.66 Agamemnon's subordination to Clytaemestra is emphasised by this striking adaptation to the usual function of an agon, which is not so much an exercise in persuasion as a presentation of both sides of an issue and the rational basis for their disagreement. Clytaemestra's 'party' wins its victory as Clytaemestra wins the agon. The importance of this scene for depicting the opposition between the two sides is obvious, but cannot be overemphasised.

66 For example, as in Soph. OT, Ajax, Eur. Alc., Medea, and so on. In some cases the agonists whose arguments come across as weaker cannot walk off in a huff because they are restrained, as in the cases of Antigone in Soph. Ant., Helen in Eur. Tro.
By this time it has become clear that Clytaemestra and not Aegisthus is Agamemnon’s opponent. There is still some effort at emphasising her rôle. With Cassandra’s scene we are at last given a character who can act as a focus in Heath’s sense, as a centre of sympathetic attention, albeit only for a time; it is hardly possible to have a sympathetic attachment to any of the characters that have appeared until now. Cassandra’s suffering in anticipation of Clytaemestra’s dreadful deed heightens the repugnance that we are to feel at that deed, because it is Clytaemestra’s, his wife’s, deed, rather than some outsider’s; here the Curse is named explicitly for the first time (1095ff.), but naming it and the ‘Epivus’ (1119, 1186-90) only adds to the horror of Clytaemestra, rather than shifting attention away from her. Rather than being an alternative cause of Agamemnon’s murder, it is now one of Clytaemestra’s personal attributes. The Chorus cannot understand Cassandra’s words; they are now the οὐ μαθῶσι (39).

Clytaemestra’s re-appearance and kommos at last make explicit the opposition that Aeschylus has been preparing all along; at last her argument is stated openly, and the presentation of her as a focus of the conflict, as the representative of the ‘party’ that opposes Agamemnon’s, is completed. The final scene, where Aegisthus finally appears, brings a new light to bear on the conflict, even apart from the fact that his weakness suggests Clytaemestra’s strength; and I wish to treat him separately.

1.4.3. Aegisthus

Aegisthus is a puzzling character. Depicted in previous versions of the story as the
protagonist in the murder of Agamemnon, as described in 1.4.2 above, here he is passive in contrast to his lover Clytaemestra's activeness, and he can claim responsibility for no more than helping in the planning of the murder (τοῦδε τοῦ φόνου ῥαφεύς, 1604; μόνος...βουλεύσαι φόνον, 1614; έβουλεύομαι μόρον, 1627 and 1634; there is irony in the Chorus' φης ἐκὼν κατακτανείν, 1613) and he is strongly criticised by the Chorus (often in terms of his gender, as discussed in 1.4.1 above; see notes on §23, §31-33).

Because of his weakness, to many his scene at the end of the play comes as a confusing anticlimax after Clytaemestra's argumentative and rational kommos. His boasting and threats are indeed an odd way to end a play that is otherwise so full of strength, and I am unable to give any certain account of the dramatic effect Aeschylus intended this ending to achieve. Perhaps ending the play on a degrading note, such as that sounded by Aegisthus, portrays the degradation of Argos under the rule of the Curse.

In spite of his weakness and non-participation, he is still very relevant to the conflict, and Aeschylus' depiction of him does have an influence over how the conflict is to be perceived. For I argue that instead of participating in the conflict, in a sense he symbolises the conflict. The son of Thyestes, he represents Thyestes' Curse, the destructive principle (δαίμονι τῷ Πλευθενίδαν, 1569) that underlies each of the individual acts of vengeance in the trilogy. Aegisthus is the Curse, while Clytaemestra, the protagonist of the praxis, is the agent of the Curse; her alliance with him by 'marriage' suggests this affiliation.

Fagles' reading of the Oresteia excellently depicts the symbolic function of Aegisthus. Cassandra's prophecies foretelling the death of Agamemnon have dwelt on the Curse that is ravaging the house of Atreus; it is implied there that the murder is a disaster brought on by
the Curse. Aegisthus appears, “called forth, it seems, by Clytaemnestra’s evocation of the spirit” at 1567-77:67 she states that she wishes to make a pact with the Curse, after carrying out this one act of vengeance in the hope that the house will be troubled no longer.

Aegisthus narrates his grievance against Agamemnon (1577-1611). From one point of view this is redundant, because we have already heard an explanation from the true doer of the murder, Clytaemnestra. What we are hearing from Aegisthus is not the reason for this particular murder (though that is how Aegisthus himself appears to see it); rather it is the history of the Curse (his own history). Fagles interprets the speech thus:

We have never heard its [the Curse’s] history told so fully, not because Aeschylus has been saving it for last but because Cassandra, Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra have embodied it so uniquely.68

This description hits upon an important trend that is apparent throughout the play (and indeed throughout the trilogy as a whole): a movement from the specific to the general, the obscure to the clear. When the play begins, we do not fully understand the significance of what is happening. But as the play progresses the opposition becomes clearer: as Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra meet face-to-face, as Cassandra brings the Curse to our attention as a context for Agamemnon’s death, and so on. Similarly, the specific case of Agamemnon’s death, unexplained at first, is in the end related to the underlying principle, the Curse, in the final scene of the play. By the time we reach the end of the trilogy, the process of clarification has gone on to the extent that the opposition is portrayed in clearly opposed arguments; it is at last seen as a true dialectical opposition.

This movement towards clarification and revelation proceeds in step with a gradual

---

67 Fagles 1975 p. 44.
68 Fagles 1975 p. 46.
increase in tension: Agamemnon’s return, eagerly awaited from 39 onwards, does not materialise until 809, and the obvious next step, his death, is also delayed until 1343. Clytaemestra’s *kommos* is the climax to the play, where the long-awaited expectation of Agamemnon’s corpse is fulfilled. The inactive Aegisthus, appearing after this, is indeed a remarkable piece of bathos, and yet it is with his appearance that all finally becomes clear.

This is the importance of Aegisthus in a nutshell: where Agamemnon and Clytaemestra each represent poles of the opposition (by their affiliation to their opposed ‘parties’), Aegisthus represents the opposition itself, the general principle underlying all the acts of vengeance in the play. This is an aspect of him that is (as far as I can see) unrelated to his weakness and arrogance. The symbolism caps the contrast between the two ‘parties’ that has gone before; he polarises their opposition simply by existing, and by appearing onstage.
2. Character and motivation

In drama character is defined by observed behaviour; and behaviour in drama is inevitably linked to the character's function as conceived by the author. That function may be seen in terms of the character's role within the plot, the dynamics of character interaction, any message the author may be trying to convey, and perhaps other intentions as well. In the case of Ag., characters are linked in a variety of ways to (among other things) an ongoing conflict.

The meaning and function of 'character' in Tragedy is problematic. If theoreticians continue to debate about the nature of character, meaning, and authorial identity in modern literature, we should not expect immediately to come upon the perfect key to understanding literature written by people who lived in a very different country, a very different society and very different times to any that are familiar to us. The way that Aeschylus (and, it must be supposed, his audience) conceptualises character and identity in his drama does bear certain differences from the way we as modern readers are accustomed to think of them. Some of these differences are key ones, others less important; none, it must be said, actually prevent the modern reader or theatre-goer from appreciating the play, nor do they necessarily hinder an accurate critical interpretation of the play. However, an understanding of the precise nature of these differences can help prevent misinterpretation and unnecessary searches for elements or motivations that are not intended to be found, or even sought.
2.1. Internalised motivations: personality

When we, twentieth-century readers, think of a character in a play, novel, or other form of story, we will probably first try to conceptualise the character primarily in terms of the character’s personality, and in terms of its internalised motivations and characteristics generally. We expect to have a character presented to us as a construction of a rounded, flesh-and-blood persona. We do not just expect internal consistency; we want the character to have a life off the page. The present-day interest in character for its own sake, even when a character’s personality is not especially relevant to the ‘plot’, presents a problem for the modern reader approaching Tragedy.

This is especially so when we consider that the relentless search for personality and a means of conceptualising a character in terms of internalised motivations is demonstrably one that comes to a modern reader, and writer, automatically. For example, near the beginning of one recent novel by A.S. Byatt, a writer not renowned primarily for her depiction of character, we find the following sentences:

It may seem odd to begin a description of Roland Michell with an excursus into the complicated relations of Blackadder, Cropper and Ash, but it was in these terms that Roland most frequently thought of himself. When he did not think in terms of Val.\footnote{Byatt 1990 p. 10.}

The assumption that an explicit statement not just of Roland’s character, but even of the terms in which he conceptualises his own identity, is necessary, is one symptom of the current tendency to focus on the internalised aspects of characters. Even before this explicit statement, we have been presented with clear indications of Roland’s personal interests and
thoughts (pp. 1-4). And all this is concentrated into the first ten pages of a 511-page novel.

Likewise (to take a less recent though better-known example) Hamlet, in Shakespeare’s play, probably means to us a person who is cautious but intelligent; indecisive; witty and competent, while introverted and secretive. We do not think of him so much in terms of his political situation, the dynamics of his relationship with his mother, Ophelia and Horatio, and the problems of identity raised by his pretence of insanity. Even in this comparatively modern example the tendency to construct flesh-and-blood personae may not be justified; Garton refers to the extreme case of Bradley’s inquiry “to establish where Hamlet was when his father died.”

This mode of thinking has inevitably carried over into classical scholarship. To take one especially problematic example, in regard to Ag., Goldhill has noted that “the two most distinguished modern editions” of the play (Fraenkel 1950 and Denniston-Page 1957) both interpret Agamemnon’s act of stepping onto the tapestries at Ag. 944-57 with reference to his internal motivations, dependent entirely on their perception of his personality. The danger of this practice is demonstrated by the fact that the two editions espouse wildly different conceptions of Agamemnon’s character. Fraenkel fascinatingly declares, “Even in the moment of his defeat Agamemnon appears as the true gentleman he always is”; while Denniston-Page argue that his submission to Clytæmestra is merely an excuse to commit “an act of ἀφετερία which he knows to be sacrilegious”, and Agamemnon himself “is at the mercy of his own vanity and arrogance”. Now Agamemnon is indeed

---

²Garton 1957 p. 249.
committing an act of ὀφείλει, but it is misleading to present his motivations primarily in terms of his personality, as I shall argue in section 2.3.

The modern "preoccupation with idiosyncrasy"⁵ is in general well recognised by classical scholars. Also recognised is the fact that its applicability to ancient literature is very restricted in many ways. Its applicability is especially tightly defined in the case of Tragedy, because Tragedy, even more than Homeric epic, is inevitably very closely concerned with the character and its relation to its context; even more so if there are only two or three characters onstage at once, and only two of them ever converse at any given time. In spite of this recognition, unwary comments by critics on characters' actions, comments that extrapolate the character's hidden motives, continue to abound. They range in significance from poetically phrased comments in the manner of the scholiasts ("Clytemnestra's pretended fears are obviously her secret hopes"⁶) up to serious misinterpretations which miss an important point, or focus on a minor issue when there is a major issue waiting to be apprehended ("He [Agamemnon] is tired to the utmost, worn out by the unceasing struggle, overpowered by the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune"⁷). Internalisations not specifically warranted by the text are, I suppose, permissible, provided that we never lose sight of the fact that in the study of the drama of Tragedy, what we are trying to analyse is first and foremost the audience's response and how that response is evoked. Even if we believe that realism is one of a playwright's goals, it is still audience recognition of that realism that is intended.

This is not to say that Tragic characters are not rounded in any way; a glance at the

---

⁵Easterling 1977 p. 140.
⁶Lloyd-Jones 1962 p. 64.
prologue of Ag. reveals a noticeably three-dimensional characterisation of the Watchman. It is perfectly reasonable to compose studies on what there is “to say positively about character portrayal in Greek tragedy”.\textsuperscript{8} such studies, if they approach characterisation from the perspective of a first-time, live-action spectator (rather than an armchair reader), can only heighten our appreciation of the drama in which the characters take part. But for an understanding of how character functions within the context of the drama, some sort of theoretical basis is needed. I find Garton 1957 a particularly insightful discussion of modern habits of thought, and of the dichotomy of internalised character as opposed to externalised; though even Garton seems to regard “successful introspection, and...the great new possibilities of drama in the mind” as the ultimate \textit{telos} of any drama.\textsuperscript{9} That attitude might perhaps have been welcomed by Euripides, but for Aeschylus it is somewhat anachronistic in its assumptions.

Now I do not propose to analyse how characterisation in Tragedy works. Rather, I examine how ‘character’ functions in the context of the dialectical opposition outlined in Chapter One. For this purpose, a theoretical approach to the relationship between character \textit{qua} persona and character \textit{qua} participant in the conflict is what we want. The psychological approach, which would treat solely the characters’ personal, internalised responses to that conflict, is not in itself sufficient, as is evident from the matter of the Ag.’s carpet-scene. That example showed us that understanding the interaction between internalisation and externalisation of behaviour, and thus of personal identity in the audience’s minds, is not just an abstract problem, removed from actual performance and

\textsuperscript{8}Easterling 1977 p. 140.
\textsuperscript{9}Garton 1957 p. 254.
appreciation of Tragedy. An anachronistic perception of identity and of the idea of dramatic character can obscure much of the author’s intentions for the audience’s understanding of the play. It is thus fortunate that the psychological approach is not the only option open to us.

2.2. Externalised motivations: rôle

Because of the lack of any regular practice among ancient authors of giving explicit character descriptions, there has been a long-standing reaction against reading personality into Greek Tragedy and against the relevance of character-studies in its context. The usual alternative is to define characters in terms of their function. According to this approach, the way the audience is expected to identify the character—the character’s motivations, even apparently internalised elements such as the character’s personal feelings on a given matter—is defined with primary attention to the dialectical and relational context of the character, rather than to internalised realism. Snell’s depiction of Homeric personal identity as being closer to an assemblage of interdependent but clearly distinct parts comes close to this.\(^\text{10}\) In Homer, and also to a lesser extent in later Greek literature, personal identity tends to be conceptualised in terms of relationships: Telemachus and Penelope are seen in terms of Odysseus, Agamemnon in terms of his rôle as a supreme commander, the suitors in terms of Penelope. None of these characters has much of a distinctive personal identity, an independent existence outside those relationships and rôles; even Penelope’s quiet

\(^{10}\)Snell 1953 pp. 1-22; note especially pp. 7f., 20f.
resoluteness, easy for modern readers to interpret as a personality trait, exists primarily for the sake of Odysseus. Similarly Goldhill refers to the linguist Benveniste, who "begins by noting that in Homer all the vocabulary of moral terminology is strongly permeated with a force that is not personal but relational." Specifically referring to Tragedy, Goldhill cites G.W.F. Hegel, K. Reinhardt, Tycho von Wilamowitz, E. Howald and J. Jones as representatives of a school of thought (a 'party' in this debate) that perceives characters in Tragedy in this way, with sole reference to externalised elements of the character.

Emphasis on conflict carries much weight in this argument, for almost any play may be shown to represent some sort of opposition to which all the events of the play, and all the characters, may be related. The popularity of the agon-motif is a consequence (or conceivably a cause) of this. The case of Antigone is an excellent example, and one which I should like to spend some time on, much of the debate having focussed on this play.

Antigone is the play chosen by Hegel as "the most excellent and satisfying work of art" on account of the force of the dialectic expressed in the play. The conflict consists of the opposition between Creon's and Antigone's viewpoints; Creon is the thesis, and Antigone is the antithesis, her viewpoint to a significant extent being defined in response to and in terms of Creon's. Hegel asserts that

Creon is not a tyrant, but rather the champion of something that is also an ethical power. ... Each of these two sides actualizes only one of the two, has only one side as its content. That is the one-sidedness, and the meaning of eternal justice is that both are in the wrong because they are one-sided, but both are also in the right.¹⁵

---

¹³Goldhill 1986 pp. 170f.
¹⁴Hegel 1920 iv p. 324.
The rationales used by Creon and Antigone to support their positions, and the attacks they make upon each other, may be seen throughout the play. Creon’s first speech states the principles which he is following (175-7 and 182f.):

\[\text{δὲ παντὸς ἀνδρὸς ἐκμαθεῖν} \]
\[\text{ψωχὴν τε καὶ φρόνημα καὶ γνώμην, πρὰν ἄν} \]
\[\text{ἀρχαῖς τε καὶ νόμοισιν ἐντριβῆς φανῆ}. \]
\[\text{καὶ μείζον' ὥστε ἀντὶ τῆς αὐτοῦ πάτρας} \]
\[\text{φίλον νομίζει, τοῦτον οὐδαμοῦ λέγω}.\]

As the audience has already seen in the prologue to the play, Antigone is doing precisely what Creon is describing. Since Creon’s principles as stated are perfectly legitimate per se, he is giving a rationale; he is defending his decree and attacking Antigone’s position.\(^{16}\)

When Antigone meets Creon, she argues that the claims of her own flesh and blood take precedence (511 οὐδὲν γὰρ ἀδερφὸν τοὺς ὀμοσπλάγχνους σέβειν\(^{17}\)), claims the support of popular opinion (504f. τοῦτοις τοῦτο πάσιν ἀνδάνειν / λέγοιτ’ ἄν, εἰ μὴ γλῶσσαν ἐγκλήνοι φόβος\(^{18}\)), and attacks Creon powerfully as a tyrant (506f. ἀλλ’ ἡ τυραννίς πολλά τ’ ἀλλ’ εὔδαιμονεῖ / κάξεστιν αὐτῇ δρᾶν λέγειν θ’ ἄ βουλεται\(^{19}\)).

Both claim the justification that their actions are based on a priority valued by


\(^{16}\)Cf. 162f., 282-8, 672-6 (and the Chorus’ agreement with Creon at 681f.).

\(^{17}\)Cf. 45-48, 453-5; at 937-43 she tries to combine a justification of her actions with a burst of patriotism.

\(^{18}\)Cf. 509.

\(^{19}\)Cf. 323, 688-91, 705-9, 734-8. Creon again defends his political position at 661-72 to Haimon, arguing that anyone who can run his household well can run a state, thus lending a democratic air to his office; however, this is bitterly ironic, since his own family end up committing suicide.
contemporary society: in Creon’s case the importance of the security of the polis, in Antigone’s case the importance of kinship. Each claims the authorisation and support of the city and the gods (Goldhill includes even Haimon in this, observing that all three, Creon, Antigone and Haimon all make “assertions of the support of the whole city in their actions”20). Each, moreover, attacks the other on grounds which the audience would consider very powerful. Creon attacks Antigone on the grounds that she is disruptive to the polis, that she is hybristic; Antigone attacks Creon, on the grounds that he is a tyrant who is abusing his power. As for the subject of their argument, Polynices, he is in theory simultaneously φιλος and ἔχθρος to both Creon and Antigone, being both a relative and a traitor. But to Creon, as a ruler, Polynices’ ἔχθρος aspect takes precedence, while to Antigone, as a woman, it is his φιλος aspect. “The tendency towards binary opposition, always easy in Greek thought and syntax, is especially marked in this polarizing language of philos and ekhthros” in Antigone.21 Both sides are in the right (725 εὖ γὰρ εἰρήται διηνά, says the Chorus, referring to the agon between Creon and Haimon). Yet Hegel is also right to see each position as one-sided: Creon expresses his anger at the rationale given by Antigone, thus showing his unwillingness to consider any other point of view, at 495f.: μισῶ γε μέντοι χῶταν ἐν κακοῖς τις / ἄλοις ἔπειτα τούτῳ καλλύνειν θέλη. Antigone expresses a similar sentiment just three lines later and then explicitly states both sides’ one-sidedness (499-501):

τί δῆται μέλλεις; ὡς ἔμοι τῶν σων λόγων ἀρεστῶν οὐδέν, μὴ ἀρεσθείς ποτὲ ὀφέω δὲ καὶ σοὶ τῷ ἀφανθάνοντ’ ἔφυ.

20Goldhill 1986 p. 89.
21Goldhill 1986 p. 93.
In the following stichomythia (508-25) the immovability—the *extremity*—of each position in spite of the other’s argument, is evident *because of* the force of the other’s argument. The juxtaposition of the two arguments emphasises their implacability and absoluteness.

Of course there has been much resistance to Hegel; and many other factors complicate the play, such as the repression of the female implicit in Creon’s political victory over Antigone, Creon’s mistaken attack on the Sentry, the character of Haimon, the oracle delivered by Teiresias (1064-76), and the possibilities of reading incest into Antigone’s relationship with Polyneices, or a quasi-heroic death-wish into her refusal of Ismene’s support. But the terms in which the purely intellectual side of the conflict is established are those set out above, in which Creon and Antigone participate, and are seen as acting as the poles of a dialectical opposition.

It is on the basis of the above textual evidence that Hegel and others have read Creon and Antigone not primarily as ‘characters’ so much as immovable ethical forces coming into conflict. A similar interpretation could well be made of *Ag.*., on the basis of the material discussed in Chapter One.

2.3. Coherence of motivations: overdetermination

There has of course been significant resistance to the ‘Hegelian’ reading of *Antigone*. Whitman, a member of this resistance, cites Reinhardt as “the first to protest against the existence of any such conceptual antinomy in the play at all.”

Whitman himself goes too far in the opposite direction, however, when he writes:

---

22Reinhardt *Sophokles*, Frankfurt (1933) pp. 75, 88, 97; cited by Whitman 1951 pp. 84f.
If any conceptual contrast fits the *Antigone*, it is the contrast between true and false authority, between the ideal citizen and the lawless ruler.\textsuperscript{23}

Although the fact that Creon abuses his power is important in the play, he should not be seen *solely* as a total villain; as we have seen, Sophocles is careful to make sure that both he and Antigone have their principles (flawed though they may be in their execution). Kitto, aware of this, defends Creon, but still focuses on Creon’s personality, thoughts and feelings rather than on the intellectual opposition:

> Creon may be what you like, but he is neither unintelligent nor irresponsible. He has his own field of action and his own principles; impulse, unwritten laws, are, he feels, not for him; he cannot move in this ampler region, and he sincerely feels he has no business to. In his own field he has thought things out and is confident of himself. ...True, a native stubbornness is given him, that he may defend his position to the dramatic end, but it is not from folly or wilfulness that he originally takes up this position.\textsuperscript{24}

Heath takes a somewhat different approach. Having already argued against the importance of any intellectualising element in Tragedy at all,\textsuperscript{25} he instead concentrates on dramatic focus.\textsuperscript{26} In the first part of the play, Antigone is the centre of sympathetic attention, and Creon is thus the adversary; but after she is dead, sympathy moves away from her and is attached to Creon for the rest of the play. He (rightly, I think) sees this as “a genuinely climactic movement” because of Creon’s higher status and his harsher and more intensely expressed suffering.\textsuperscript{27} But in focusing on the dramatic potential of each character, Heath ignores the opposition that has been established in the clearest terms between them. Des Bouvrie even tries to have it both ways without reconciling the different impressions of

\textsuperscript{23}Whitman 1951 p. 85.
\textsuperscript{24}Kitto 1961 p. 134.
\textsuperscript{25}Cf. my counter-arguments to this position in section 1.2 above.
\textsuperscript{26}Heath 1987 pp. 90-8. On *Ant* see especially pp. 92-5 and 97.
\textsuperscript{27}Heath 1987 pp. 95.
character, those imposed by conflict (intellectual) and the personal (emotive) respectively:

Interpretations of Greek tragedy most often centre on human conflicts, either a struggle within the individual's psyche or a conflict between two individuals. The focus is upon one or more individuals, through psychology and their motives for speaking and acting. 28

The focus, it seems, is upon both a conflict and upon the individual at the same time. Although I do agree with this statement, Des Bouvrie offers no explanation for how this might be the case.

Goldhill, however, draws on the literary theorist and critic Roland Barthes to provide the basis for a coherent scheme to describe how the two approaches can be reconciled. He uses as an example the problem of why Oedipus in Soph. OT does not seem to take any notice of Teiresias’ first revelation of Oedipus’ identity, 29 but the approach has a very wide applicability. I shall shortly return to the example used earlier, of Agamemnon’s motivations for stepping onto the tapestries in Ag., using this approach.

Writing on a passage in Balzac's short story Sarrasine, where one character has just interrupted another, Barthes theorises:

If we have a realistic view of character, if we believe that Sarrasine has a life off the page, we will look for motives for this interruption.... If we have a realistic view of discourse, if we consider the story being told as a mechanism which must function until the end, we will say that since the law of narrative decrees that it continue, it was necessary that the word castrato not be spoken. Now these two views, although derived from different likelihoods and in principle independent (even opposed), support each other... Sarrasine is impassioned because the discourse must not end; the discourse can continue because Sarrasine, impassioned, talks without listening. 30

---

28 Des Bouvrie 1990 p. 112.
30 Barthes 1970 p. 178 sub "Character and discourse". It may be observed, for comparison, that Barthes’ own approach to (Greek) Tragedy is very firmly based on intellectualising the drama, as his critique of a 1950’s Paris production of the Oresteia shows (Barthes 1964 p. 63): “Only Marguerite Jamois [Cassandra] seems to me to approach this art of the evident which should have enveloped the entire tragedy:
In motivating Sarrasine the 'discourse', as Barthes calls it, is coordinate with the internalised, psychology-driven, depiction of the character. This idea of the coordination of motivations is one that has already had a major influence in Homeric studies, though in somewhat different terms. In regard to Homer it is a theological concept which is used to describe the relation between the poetically-constructed action of a god and the physical action of a human to produce a given event. This concept is called *double motivation* or *overdetermination*. I should mention, however, that the use of this word by Homerists is markedly different from that used in other fields (notably psychology, literary theory, political studies and history). In these fields, an event is *overdetermined* if it is the result of two or more unrelated causes.31 In Homer, the causes are related in a way that is perhaps a little difficult to grasp.

The meaning of *overdetermination* in Homeric theology is explained in Janko's introduction to his commentary on Books 13-16 of the *Iliad*, in the section "'Double motivation' and human responsibility", pp. 3f.

The answer, formulated by Lesky ["Göttliche und menschliche Motivierung im homerischen Epos", *SHAW* 1961 Abh. 4; cf. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* 2ff.; Whitman, *HHT* 248.], lies in the idea of 'double motivation' or 'overdetermination'; gods and men cause the same actions and impulses simultaneously, and both can be held responsible. In his 'apology' Agamemnon...offers full restitution, 'since I suffered atē and Zeus took away my wits' (19.86ff., 137f.). ... It is a remarkable paradox that nearly every important event in the *Iliad* is the doing of a god, and that one can give a clear account of the poem's entire action with no reference to the gods at all.32

There is more than one cause or motivation to produce a given result, as in the general she sees and speaks, she speaks what she sees, there is no more to it than that." The "political context of the heroic passions," he argues, "governs their entire interpretation."

usage of the word ‘overdetermination’; but although the motivations are distinguishable in terms of their respective origins, they are not separable in terms of how the origins of the motivation perform the overdetermined action. The ostensibly separate motivators combine to produce one single action and one visible result. The two (or more) causes involved are basically just different ways of referring to the same thing. Each motivator is, in effect, a metaphor for the other: to say, “Athene guided the spear to its target,” is effectively a metaphor for “The warrior threw a good shot” (only effectively a metaphor, because both statements are in fact literally true). In this example, Athene overdetermines the action of the warrior. (It could also be said that the warrior overdetermines the action of Athene; but since the focus in the Iliad is on events in the mortal world, this is a less likely way of putting it.) In theological terms, overdetermination refers to the immanence of supernatural action in the natural world; and in philosophical terms, it refers to the relation of a metaphysical motivation to a physical event, or, more generally, to the relation between two or more distinct but functionally indistinguishable causes.

This same principle, of the gods overdetermining human actions in Homer, may be applied in literature to the way the author overdetermines a character’s constructed personality, to produce the character’s visible behaviour. The character’s externalised motivations overdetermine the internalised motivations. The motivation for a character’s behaviour can thus be interpreted in either way, either in terms of the character’s externalised or internalised motivation, provided that those two sets of motivations are

---

33This is so not only in Homer, but also in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Yahweh, or God, repeatedly “made Pharaoh stubborn” in Exodus 9.12, 10.20, 10.27, 11.10, 14.8, for example; and in Christian theology predestination may be considered to overdetermine a decision made by free will, at Romans 8.29f. for example.
consistent; which they will almost always be in good writing.

Let us now apply this concept to the example used earlier, of Agamemnon submitting to Clytæmestra and stepping onto the tapestries. Both Fraenkel and Denniston-Page, as we saw, interpreted the reason for this action of Agamemnon's entirely in terms of internalised motivations. However, it is surely clear that the emphasis here, the raison d'être of this whole scene, is to provide a visible example of Agamemnon's hybris and establish a visible rationale for his death. The emphasis is thus on an externalised motivation for his action, namely the author's intent for the scene; it is this motivation that is determined first. Since there is no reason for supposing that his internalised motivation is not coordinated with this primary motivation, overdetermining it as it were, it is not necessary for a separate internalised motivation to be contrived. The audience is thus free to construe Agamemnon's internalised motivation, his private reason for submitting, in any way they like; so long as it is not inconsistent with his external aspect and with his personality as portrayed elsewhere.

This being the case, both Fraenkel and Denniston-Page are justified in their interpretations, as far as they go: both interpretations are consistent with the externalised element of Agamemnon (and with the internal aspect of his character as presented elsewhere), since both are consistent with the fact that he is here committing an act of hybris. Both are incorrect, however, to focus on his private motivation as the central problem in interpreting this scene. The internal aspect of Agamemnon is not irrelevant, for it must be a human that is committing these actions; but it is the external element that is the focus of attention. παθεὶν τὸν ἔργαντα, says the Chorus (1564), not τὸν φρονήσαντα.
Interestingly, Fraenkel and Denniston-Page are in conflict in precisely the same way that Hegel argues Antigone and Creon are: both are correct, for their views are justified, but both are wrong because they are one-sided.)

We thus have a coherent scheme in which the requirements of the conflict and of internal consistency function together. Far from being opposites, the intellectualisation of the drama and our emotive, intuitive impressions are coordinated as one. One or the other may have the emphasis at any given moment, depending on the author’s intentions, as long as they are not made to exclude each other. I said earlier that this mode of interpretation has a wide applicability; not only does the intellectual, the conflict, overdetermine the emotive, our φόβος and ἔλεος, but in a play such as Ag. where characters often seem to be in the right and in the wrong simultaneously, we may also say that elements which are used to justify a character or viewpoint likewise overdetermine the condemnation of that same character or viewpoint. Sometimes even the same attribute may be used to justify and condemn simultaneously. This is an application which we shall see more of in Chapters Three and Four.

2.3.1. Inconsistency of motivations: Philoctetes

It has by now been established that it can be misleading to approach Tragedy (or any literature) solely from the perspective of internal consistency or of externalised significance. The two go together and depend on one another. Their consistency with each other is what allows the drama to be at the same time intelligible (externalised, intellectual) and also
interesting (internalised, emotive). There are further distinctions that may be drawn within the categories of internal and external, however.

There are various types of externalised factors that can go to define a character, for example. One such factor is the requirement that the character fulfil a rôle in a conflict; then there are the playwright’s hidden intentions for the ‘message’ (if any) that he wishes to be conveyed. Another is the audience’s expectations of the character as based on their prior familiarity with a story. This last factor, in particular, can present dramatic possibilities for a playwright using a *praxis* drawn from well-known myths. A mythological setting automatically predisposes the audience towards focusing primarily on externalised aspects of character: on how a character corresponds to or differs from the received story, and thus on the dynamics of the play. This teleological focus imposes an aura of Fate on the proceedings of the play.

In the *Iliad*, it is hardly too simplistic to regard fate as simply ‘what happens’, almost the needs of the tale or of the tradition.... If stress is placed on the inevitability of an event...then fate is invoked; if the emphasis falls on an action’s power or strangeness, then it tends to be the work of a god.\(^\text{34}\)

In *Ag.*, as in the *Iliad*, the gods act as *visible* enforcers (or overdeterminers) of the plot, the myth, the externalised aspect of causality, as Janko describes. In everything that happens, Zeus’ will is fulfilled (*Il. 1.5 Διὸς ἀπὶ τῇ ἔτελεία ἅπευλῆ*). But there is another, *invisible*, enforcer: the author or storyteller.

Compare the historians. Both Herodotus and Thucydides demonstrably work their material to conform to their interpretation of the whole. They each come up with a macroscopic schema (the externalised interpretation of the sequence of events described)\(^\text{34}\)Janko 1992 p. 6.
and then make actors and events conform to that schema. In Herodotus' case, he opens his history by associating isolated mythological events (the rapes of Io, Europe, Medea and Helen) to produce a connected series of causes for the Persian Wars; in Thucydides' case, he infamously states his principle of writing speeches for historical figures to conform to what he thought was appropriate to the occasion.\textsuperscript{35}

As I suggested, particular externalised determinants of a play's action can actually be manipulated to produce a dramatic effect. This is particularly evident in Sophocles' \textit{Philoctetes}.

In this play there is presented (as often) a dialectical opposition. This opposition is between the viewpoints of Philoctetes, who refuses to do anything to help the Achaians (and Odysseus in particular) in the Trojan War, and Odysseus, who will do anything, no matter how ruthless, to secure the help of Philoctetes. The conflict here, the externalised determinant of the interaction between the two characters, is closely related to their internalised motivators: the hostility between them is a very \textit{personal} one, since it was Odysseus' idea that Philoctetes should be left behind on the desert island on which he has remained for the last ten years, nursing his wound. The character of Neoptolemus, wavering between the two ethical forces which each of them represents, acts as the battleground in whose mind they fight out the issue.

Now the characters' internalised motivations are very closely associated with the dynamics of the play; there is full consistency and coordination between them. The personal hostility of Philoctetes and Odysseus works very well in conjunction with the

\textsuperscript{35}Hdt. 1.1-4; Thuc. 1.22.1.
ethical forces they represent (Odysseus' ruthless pragmatism against Philoctetes' resolute grudge). However, there is a strong inconsistency between (a) the visible dynamics and personalities in this play (both our externally- and internally-oriented perceptions of what is taking place) and (b) the plot, as adapted by its hidden motivator, the author. What we can see is that Philoctetes hates Odysseus and, since he has the power to do so, can and does refuse to go to Troy; but what we are predisposed to know is that he does go, he must go anyway. We (the audience) know from our mythology that Philoctetes did go to Troy.

The actual result of the suspense raised by the inconsistency is that Philoctetes is even more defined as a character when at the very end of the play he submits immediately and unquestioningly to the command of Herakles to go to Troy. This submission underlines the resolve in his character by reference to his devotion to Herakles; ironically, his sudden turn-around emphasises his immovability. It is thus quite possible for motivations to be inconsistent and still succeed in producing an effective piece of literature, as long as the intuitive impressions that we form are ultimately resolved by observable facts.
3. Clytaemestra

The argument of these last two chapters is that the characters who represent the two poles of the conflict, Clytaemestra and Agamemnon, are dealt with by Aeschylus both in terms of their emotive value, by which Clytaemestra horrifies us (φόβος) and we feel pity for Agamemnon (ἔλεος); and also in terms of their intellectual positioning within the conflict, by which Clytaemestra’s action is in fact justified under her terms, and Agamemnon’s fate is seen as deserved. In particular, I argue that these seemingly contradictory elements of each character are actually coordinate: both the emotive and the intellectual work together to produce the results we see onstage. The intellectual basis for the characters’ actions explains why the events we see have happened; while the emotive side prepares us for the consequences of those actions.

3.1. The emotional: condemning Clytaemestra

As we saw earlier in section 1.4.2, the audience is predisposed by the received story to regard Clytaemestra as a villain. This is the intuitive reaction to her as a character; it is the *emotional* reaction. Since Aeschylus wishes to emphasise that her action does have a logical rationale behind it—that there is reason to her maleficent rhyme—, this intuitive reaction is not to be *emphasised*; but it cannot be wholly suppressed, because she must indeed pay the penalty for Agamemnon’s murder in the following play in the trilogy.
The fact that there is a rationale for her action (namely, to take vengeance for Iphigeneia's death) only increases the horror of the murder. It turns the world into a world of nightmare where reason; far from being a bulwark against chaos, actually demands more suffering. In its hymn to Zeus the Chorus says cryptically, τῶν πάθων μαθος (177), a phrase translated with a different meaning by every translator: "By suffering they shall win understanding" (Fraenkel), "through (or by means of) the πάθος appropriate to any given μαθος" (also Fraenkel), "experientia malorum erudimur" (Wilamowitz), "by suffering they shall learn" (Lloyd-Jones), "learning through suffering" (Denniston-Page), "through suffering, learning!" (Herington), "knowledge is intimately connected with experience" (Goldhill), "we must suffer, suffer into truth" (Fagles), "man must suffer to be wise" (Vellacott), "wisdom comes alone through suffering" (Lattimore).\(^1\) Whichever of these the phrase means (if any), the sentiment is applicable to the nightmarish world expressed through Ag.: reason (the rationality of Clytaemestra's position) demands suffering (vengeance, chaos, the Curse). For the audience, this means that the play both makes sense and is also at the same time horrifying. Implacable vengeance (πάθος), evoking φόβος, goes hand-in-hand with reason (μαθος), the element that permits ελεος.

Clytaemestra is a villain, as the audience knows from familiar sources such as the Od.; but Aeschylus, although he takes care to make her as strong a character as possible and rationalises her position, also makes sure to make her villainy obvious to the audience.

Furthermore, her villainy is more than just participation in the murder of her husband: she is the protagonist of the deed (see section 1.4.2).

To begin with, her frequent presence onstage makes her ominous; indeed her shadow is cast over the prologue as well (10f., 26, 35-9). The exact times of her entrances and exits are unclear, and it is not absolutely certain that she leaves at all between her first entrance and her exit with Agamemnon at 974; but both possibilities, either frequent entrances and exits, back and forth (as in Taplin), or her constant presence onstage, silent for most of the time, would exert a strong dramatic influence over the first half of the play, casting a shadow of foreboding.²

Her attempts at deception and persuasion at 598-614 (on which see section 1.4.2), 855-974 and 1035-68 are a further sign of her villainy. What need would a faultless hero have of deception, or of persuasion?

Moreover, in the second of these passages, the deception is coupled with her evil influence on Agamemnon: she leads him into hybris, corrupting others as well as herself.

Agamemnon brings this to the audience’s attention, berating Clytaemestra (918-22):

...μη γυναικός ἐν τρόποις ἐμὲ ἀψήνε, μηδὲ βαρβάρον φωτὸς δέκην χαμαιπτεῖς βόαμα προσχάνῃς ἐμοί, μηδὲ ἐξασθεῖ στρῶσαι ἐπίφθονον πόρον τίθειν ...

(My emphases; the repetition of the injunctions accentuates Agamemnon’s castigation of Clytaemestra.)

Her strength and authority are curiously ambiguous elements, in that they give her character both the forcefulness necessary to represent a credible opponent to the hero

---
²A full discussion is to be found in Taplin 1977 pp. 288-90, 299-302, and 306f.
Agamemnon, and yet also an extra element of subversiveness that adds to her horror. The domination of her husband in this way, and even more of Aegisthus at the end of the play,\(^3\) signifies the danger presented by this strength and authority. So too does the fact that she is successful in her attempts at persuasion in the first two of the three passages mentioned above. All her attempts at persuasion throughout the play, of the Chorus, of the Herald, of both her ‘husbands’, are successful; she is always dominant. (The only exception is her failure to persuade Cassandra in the third of the above passages, 1035-68. The refusal of Cassandra to give in frees her from Clytaemestra’s dominance, so that she can speak her prophecies with an untainted and un-subordinated authority. But it does not diminish Clytaemestra’s dominance, for it is not necessary for Clytaemestra’s purposes that Cassandra should be intellectually dominated by persuasion; Cassandra is already in Clytaemestra’s power.)

She is intimately connected with the Furies in Cassandra’s scene, both by explicit reference (1119f. and 1186-93) and by association with the background story of Thyestes (1085-99, 1117f., 1184-93, 1214-22, 1242-4, 1307-12). The Furies, while technically agents of Justice, are nevertheless fearsome monsters. The Chorus is ‘not cheered’ by their presence (1119f., an understatement indeed), and their song is οὐκ ἐξωφωνος· οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶ λέγει (1187). Their appearance in Eum. 34-59 (and presumably also their costumes in that play) is truly fearsome. By this association too Clytaemestra is made the more terrifying.

The most graphic depiction of Clytaemestra’s villainy is reserved for last. After the

\(^3\)She acts, while he does not (1643-6); instead he boasts and is ‘womanly’. She directs (not quite commands) his actions without any argument from him at 1654-61 and 1672f. (the last lines of the play).
murder of Agamemnon, she enters standing over the bloody corpses of Agamemnon and Cassandra, Agamemnon’s in its bath; she presumably still holds her sword,⁴ and the tableau as a whole emerges from the maw of the accursed house on the ekkyklema.⁵ The impact of this moment is devastating, and Herington is right to emphasise the dramatic effect of the corpses’ constant presence from 1372 until the end of the play.⁶

Even worse is her description of the death of Agamemnon. She accepts responsibility for the deed (1372-81) and goes on to describe it in detail. Her mention of the πλούτων εἴματος κακόν (1383) employs the topos of the robe used by a woman to kill her victim.⁷ And she takes a perverse delight in narrating the murder, blow by blow (1384-7), a delight that becomes overtly sexual and utterly perverse towards the end (1388-92):

οὐτω τὸν αὐτόν θυμὸν ὄργανεν p eso -
kάκφυσιῶν ὀξίαν αἴματος οφαγήν
βάλλει μ’ ἔρεμήν ἑρακάθ’ θοινίας ὀρὸσοι,
χαίρουσαν οὐδὲν ἡσσον ἦ διοδότῳ
γάνει σπορητὸς κάλυκος ἐν λοχέωμαιν.

There are few moments in extant Tragedy that can compare with the morbidity of these lines, until the plays of Seneca.

⁴The weapon may well have been an axe. Fraenkel 1950 iii pp. 806-9, discussing this matter, strangely ignores the parallel of Cho. 889, where Clytaemestra, upon learning of Aegisthus’ death at Orestes’ hands, demands: δοεὶ τις ἀνδροκρήτα πέλεκυν ὡς τάξος. Garvie 1986 pp. 289f. on 889 denies that this refers to the murder weapon, but I find his arguments unconvincing, although I do recognise a contradiction between this and Cho. 1011 where the murder-weapon is a ξίφος.


⁶Herington 1986 p. 120.

⁷The obvious parallels are Medea’s use of a robe to kill Creon and his daughter in Euripides, and Deianeira’s accidental murder of Herakles with a robe poisoned with the blood of Nessos. The use of the motif in the Medea story seems to originate with Euripides (Page 1938 intro. p. xxvi), thus post-dating Aeschylus, so a reference to her cannot be intended; but the motif in the story of Herakles dates back to Hesiod (Easterling 1982 intro. pp. 15f., Hesiod Cat. fr. 25.18-25 M-W).

⁸MSS ὄρμαινεν.

⁹MSS δος νότω / γάν εἶ.
These lines represent the climax of the presentation of Clytaemestra's perversity. After this she *immediately* changes tack and turns to her rational, intellectual reasons for committing the murder (1394-6). The dramatic presentation of her villainy is thus complete; and so it is to her reasons that we must now turn.

3.2. The intellectual: justifying Clytaemestra

Clytaemestra's rationale for committing the murder, whether it actually *justifies* the murder or not, is nevertheless logical and clearly (if passionately) explained. It is an act of vengeance for the murder of her daughter Iphigeneia, τὴν τέλειον της ἐμῆς παιδὸς Δίκη (1432); her victim, Agamemnon, is ἄξια δράσος, ἄξια πάσχων (1527). I should emphasise that Aeschylus does indeed make an effort, not perhaps exactly to *justify* Clytaemestra, but at least to *rationalise* her action, to make it comprehensible, one with a genuine basis. This is essential to the depiction of a genuine opposition to Agamemnon in the play. This statement of Vellacott's, therefore, seems to me misleading:

Aeschylus does not justify his murderess, any more than Euripides justifies his Medea or Ibsen his Hedda Gabler; but he reiterates the dangerous anomalies which must occur when, in a social framework giving every freedom to men and none to women, a passionate and strong-willed wife confronts a weak but arrogant husband.\(^\text{10}\)

This statement takes the ultimate victory of patriarchy in the trilogy and emphasises that element to the exclusion of other concerns. The relative status of the male and female, like the character/conflict interrelation for which I argue in this study, is a perfectly valid element of this multi-layered and intricate set of plays; but the theme of the trilogy is

\(^\text{10}\) Vellacott 1959 p. 21.
entirely subjective, and largely depends on what the individual spectator happens to 'get out of' the play.

Because of the polar opposition between the two characters and their 'parties', because each one is to a large extent defined in terms of the other, Clytaemestra's vengeance is to that same extent justified by the condemnation of Agamemnon (on this opposition see section 1.4 above). That condemnation takes on a wide variety of forms, as will be discussed in the next chapter; it is not just to do with the death of Iphigeneia, which is technically the only logical justification for his death. However, Agamemnon's condemnation certainly makes a significant emotive contribution to the intellectual justification of his death (on which see section 4.2), thus helping intellectually to justify Clytaemestra. But Clytaemestra's rational justification is emphasised in other ways as well. Some of this justification continues into Cho., where she is opposed to Orestes.

Aeschylus prepares for the ultimate rationalisation of Clytaemestra's position beginning in the parodos, where the Chorus gives us the necessary background information regarding Iphigeneia's death (taking up the entire parodos, 40-257). It is upon this information, emphasised by its lengthy narration near the beginning of the play, that she will draw when she comes to defend herself against the Chorus. The information, which reaches its climax at 224-49, is closely associated with her by being juxtaposed to her first words at 264. Even more significantly, her first words follow immediately upon an implicit condemnation of Agamemnon (250-4), which as noted above contributes to the rationalisation of Clytaemestra's position.

Throughout the next few scenes there is much that concerns Agamemnon; but
underlying that Clytaemestra’s authority is presented to us vividly (see section 1.4.2 above). This, as already noted, is an ambiguous quality. Just like the references to her masculine qualities, her strength makes her dangerous (emotive), but also validates her credibility as an opponent to Agamemnon (intellectual). Also among these episodes there may be noted her emphasis (858-95) on how difficult it was remaining at home without her husband (861f.):

τὸ μὲν γυναῖκα πρῶτον ἄρσενος δίκα
ῥοθαὶ δόμως ἔρημον ἐπαγλον κακόν.

This is the same point that she uses in the next play to defend herself against the charge of adultery made by Orestes (Cho. 919-21):

ἀλγὸς γυναιξίν ἀνδρὸς ἔργεσθαι, τέκνον.

She asks for comprehension (if not forgiveness) there, as here, instead of automatic condemnation.

The kommos is where she at last states openly her true argument: references to Iphigeneia are scattered throughout it, especially at 1395-9, 1413-21, 1432, 1521-9, 1535f., and 1555-9. The first of these passages is particularly important, juxtaposed as it is to the passage where she reaches the climax of her perversity:

εἰ δὲ ἦν πρεπόντως ὡστ’ ἐπιστενδειν νεκρὰ,
τάδ’ ἂν δικαίως ἦν, ὑπερβίκως μὲν οὖν ... 

The Chorus is at first incredulous, and understandably so. She acknowledges this (1403-6: οὐ δ’ αἰνεῖν εἴτε μὲ ψέειν θέλεις; / ὁμοίον ... τάδ’ δὲ ἐχει), and goes on to complain of the Chorus’ (viz. the general populace’s) inconsistency in blaming her now, but not Agamemnon when he killed his daughter (1413-21 οὐδὲν τότ’ ἄνδρ’ τῷ δ’ ἐναντίον φέρον...). This is the first explicit connection between Iphigeneia’s and
Agamemnon’s deaths. Clytemnestra defies the Chorus to stand up to her authoritative control, to which the Chorus counters by insisting that she is a murderess and must pay the penalty (1427-30). She emphasises that this is a just act of vengeance (1432 τῆς ἐμῆς παιδὸς Δίκην). In case that is not sufficient, she names Aegisthus as her protector (1434-7) and goes on to emphasise how Agamemnon had condemned himself anyway (1438-47), drawing on the antithesis between their positions, as outlined above.

The Chorus’ resolve begins to weaken, and thus provides an additional justification to Clytemnestra’s position. It ceases arguing and starts despairing instead; in particular, in a morbid echo of its hymn at 160-83 it despairingly names Zeus as the origin of this situation (1485-8):

ıt γὰρ βροτὸς ἄνευ Διὸς τελεῖται;
ıt τῶν οὐ θεόκρατῶν ἑστὶν.

It then continues to despair, lamenting for the king. After another speech from Clytemnestra, the Chorus sounds almost panicked (η, η) at the possibility that she might actually be justified (1505-12):

ዊς μὲν ἀναίτιος ἐξ
τοῦτο φόνου, τῆς ὁ μαρτυρήσῳν;
ὡ, χω;

Clytemnestra speaks again, relentless in her insistence that Agamemnon was just as much of a monster as she is: ἰξία ὁδάσας; ἰξία πάσχων (1527). Now the Chorus does not know who is in the right. (Neither, it is to be expected, does the audience.) The answer, of course, is that no one is; both are guilty. The Chorus wavers (1530-2):

ἀμηχανῶ φροντίδος στερηθεῖς
ἐυπαλάμων μεριμνᾶν
ὅπαι τραπωμαι, πίτνοντος.
It hesitantly acknowledges the validity of the murder as an act of vengeance, and that it was fated (1535f.):

\[ \text{δίκην σὲ ἑν' ἄλλο πράγμα θηγάνει βλάβης} \\
\text{πρὸς ἄλλαις θηγάναιοι Μοῖρα (my emphases).} \]

Clytaemestra assures it that funeral honours will be carried out for Agamemnon (1551-9), but included in this assurance there is the addendum, spine-chilling in its sarcasm and cold bitterness, that he will not be lamented:

\[ \text{ἀλλ' Ἰφιγένειά νὲν ἀσπασίως} \\
\text{θυγατηρ, ὡς χρῆ,} \\
\text{πατέρ' ἀντιώσασα πρὸς ὁκύπορον} \\
\text{πόρθευ' ἀχέων} \\
\text{περὶ χεῖρα βαλοῦσα φιλήσει.} \]

The Chorus admits it is beaten. From this the audience knows that the issue of who is justified and who is not is ultimately irresolvable (1560-4):

\[ \text{ὁνείδος ἢκει τὸδ' ἀντ' ὀνείδους} \\
\text{δύσμαχα δ' ἑστὶ κρίναι.} \\
\text{φέρει φέροντ', ἐκτίνει δ' ὁ καίνων.} \\
\text{μίμνει δὲ μίμοντος ἐν θρόνῳ Διὸς} \\
\text{παθεῖν τὸν ἐρξαντα' θέσμον γάρ.} \]

With this, the set of ethical priorities to which Clytaemestra attaches herself is seen as fully justifiable, even if the extreme to which she has taken it does not appear as laudable. The nature of those priorities has now been thoroughly explained to us: she sees that the taking of vengeance for the death of her daughter takes precedence over the taboo against killing her own husband. Vengeance is indeed a strong motivation; it is the same motivation which demands that Orestes kill his own mother in the next play. No audience-member would be able to deny its importance and urgency. Plutarch once asked, "Which would be the greater misdeed, to omit the punishment of an enemy...or to slay a
child...? This is the right sort of question to ask. Clytaemestra takes the motivation of vengeance to an extreme, but it is still a valid motivation in and of itself.

What is most horrifying is that this perfectly respectable, societally-acceptable value, namely to avenge one’s family-members, should in this case necessarily require the murder of a husband: not just a violation of the same priority, to do good to one’s φιλόσ and harm to one’s ἐχθρός (Agamemnon is simultaneously a φιλός and an ἐχθρός to Clytaemestra\textsuperscript{12}), but also a subversion of normal male/female relationships. Clytaemestra herself is terrifying, but it is more terrifying that the act of killing her husband could be rationally justified. This is symbolised in the play by the co-agency of her and the Curse, as in the kommos: the nightmare Curse also has the rational explanation that is explained by Clytaemestra. The reasonable and the horrible are side by side: they are the same thing.

The situation is similar in Cho., though the ‘parties’ have exchanged sides. This is why the ultimate resolution of the nightmare in Eum. is so welcome when it comes.

Her alliance with the Curse ultimately seals her own doom. By contributing to the nightmare, she brings vengeance on her own head as well; in doing what she must, she too dons a ‘yoke of necessity’. On her encouragement to the Chorus to accept the situation for what it is, in the hope that things will get no worse (1658-61; cf. 1567-76), Fagles notes:

Now she accepts her union with Aegisthus for what it is, a coupling of righteousness and degradation. ...She cannot end the suffering, she knows that she must suffer most.... [But] Clytaemnestra is at last no more conciliatory than Oedipus or Lear.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11}Plu. Mor. 33c, cited by des Bouvrie 1990 p. 69.
\textsuperscript{12}Cf. Cho. 234, where Orestes refers to Clytaemestra (and Aegisthus!) as φιλάτους. Garvie 1986 p. 103 on 234 cites several parallels in that play and elsewhere, including Ag. 1272f. where Cassandra is speaking of her relatives’ disbelief of her prophecies.
In this she is just like Agamemnon. She is depicted as more of a monster, true; but like him, she is both justified and unjustified at the same time. The part of her that is rational works to explain her deed and how it came to pass; and from the perspective of this rational aspect the Curse is little more than an attribute of her deed; the emotive aspect of her, the horror she represents, works to explain why she must suffer for it.

\textsuperscript{13}Fagles 1975 p. 45.
4. Agamemnon

Agamemnon can hardly help but be a central figure in the play that is named after him. His death forms the *praxis* of the play. He is the only ‘hero’ in the play. (By this I mean ‘hero’ in the Homeric sense, rather than the dramatic sense; a grandiose warrior-figure, rather than a focus of sympathetic attention.) The spectacular scene of his *nostos* forms the centre-piece to the structure of the play (it is visually spectacular because of the tableau of the purple tapestries laid out for him to walk on in triumph). In view of all this, it is quite surprising to realise that he himself has fewer lines even than Cassandra and the Herald; only the Watchman and Aegisthus have fewer still.\(^1\)

The reason for this is that during this stage in the cyclical conflict, Agamemnon is the passive party; in the next stage Orestes, his successor in the conflict, assumes the active rôle and Clytaemestra receives correspondingly less attention. The *effect* of this for the audience is that the perception we form of him, both as a character and as a participant in the conflict, is defined by what others say about him more than by anything else. He is defined by externally imposed characteristics. The impression we have of him before the play begins is an influence as well, just as in the case of Clytaemestra; but that impression is modified not by his own adherence to or variation from that pre-formed characterisation, but by how the other characters speak of him and of matters related to him.

This mode of portrayal, defining him in terms of externally imposed characteristics,

\(^1\)Agamemnon speaks eighty-four lines, including his death-cries, and Aegisthus has sixty-four according to Fraenkel’s line-distribution. The Herald has 126.
functions naturally in the context of polar oppositions. In such a dialectical opposition the passive party naturally has its position defined by negatively-stated rather than positively-stated characteristics: if Agamemnon's antithesis Clytaemestra represents one quality, then he will be polarised to the opposite extreme. Like her he is defined both in emotive and in intellectual terms, but the emotive and intellectual aspects function the other way round in his case. We are emotionally, intuitively disposed to regard Clytaemestra as a villain; it is by intellectual rationalisation that she is defended. On the other hand we are intuitively disposed to regard her antithesis, Agamemnon, as a paragon of heroic virtue; but intellectually he is condemned. Also like Clytaemestra, these two sides of the character explain the events surrounding the character. In Clytaemestra's case, the emotive side justifies her doom at the hands of Orestes, and the rational side explains why she acts as she does; in Agamemnon's case, the emotive side explains why he acted as he did (in killing his daughter) while the rational side prepares his doom at Clytaemestra's hands.

4.1. The emotional: justifying Agamemnon

If Clytaemestra is the villain, as we have seen her to be in Chapter Three, then it is intuitively natural to polarise Agamemnon to the other extreme, as a hero (in the 'dramatic' sense). This is another case of defining Agamemnon by externally-imposed characteristics, but it is the basic opposition from which a description of his rôle in the conflict must begin: good/bad, male/female, warrior-hero/villain. He is placed in this position by the aura of foreboding surrounding Clytaemestra (thus being defined by his opposite) but also by the
received characterisation of him as a hero in such legends as the *Iliad*.

Lloyd-Jones observes this side of him, drawing upon how the audience is predisposed to his character on the basis of received legend:

Aeschylus' Agamemnon is like Homer's, proud, stern, and irascible, but a good king and a brave soldier. The audience sees that he is being punished both for his father's hybris and for his own; but as a noble king, a hero, and a man doomed from birth by his father's crime, he evokes despite his faults a measure of sympathy which is not extended to his murderers.²

Fraenkel, too, focuses on this side of him when he discusses how Agamemnon portrays himself in the scene in which he actually appears:

The king is, at least up till now [915], completely composed, he speaks with the gracious dignity of a great gentleman. ... The *gentilezza* of the utterances of king and queen [931ff.].... ...it is not surprising that an age deaf to the notes of true nobility read into their words assertiveness, contention, and the scorn of the plebeian. ... Even in the moment of his defeat [944] Agamemnon appears as the true gentleman he always is. In this [940-5], as in everything else, he proves a great gentleman, possessed of moderation and self-control (the first reaction of Agamemnon to be mentioned in the play, 186 μάντιν οὔτινα ψέγων, is highly significant).³

Now it may be misleading to apply these comments to the contexts in which Fraenkel applies them; for example, it is quite possible to disagree with his interpretation of 916 μακράν γαρ ἐξέτεινας as "not at all unkind, let alone irritable."⁴ But the heroic image of Agamemnon that underlies these comments is a perfectly valid one, and the application of that emotive image in a modern critical interpretation does not deserve astonishment. By virtue of his depiction in Homer as ᾿Ηρως ᾿Ατρείδης εὐρυ κρεῖων Ῥᾴδαμέμνων (II.

---

⁴ Denniston-Page 1957 make a point of offering entirely opposite interpretations of lines commented on thus by Fraenkel. P. 149 on 915ff.: "This does not seem to us a gracious, let alone a cordial, way to address [Clytaemestra].... ...the coldness, indeed the hostility, of Agamemnon's demeanour is openly avowed; ...." P. 151 on 931ff.: "Up to 930 Agamemnon's response is rudely negative."
1.102), he *does* possess a substantial grandeur. Heath likewise emphasises ‘tragic dignity’ as a characteristic of Tragedy, in particular of Aeschylus’ poetry in contrast to Euripides’ more ‘democratic’ style.⁵

This grand view of Agamemnon, extended only to him, being the only warrior in the play, is validated by dramatic evidence within the play. There is the grandiose scene of his entrance at 783-809, standing in a chariot and perhaps followed by a sizable train. Furthermore, a sort of heroic pathos attaches itself to him through his double sorrow. The first of these sorrows is when he is faced with a terrible dilemma at 184-217, whether to sacrifice his daughter or face the vengeance of Zeus; it is while narrating this that the Chorus describes him as μάντιν ὀντίνα ἡγεσὺν (186), in contrast to his venomous attack on Calchas in II. 103-15.⁶ The second sorrow is of course his death in ignominy: killed by a woman, his own wife no less, while in the bath. Pathos, his suffering, increases his grandeur as a hero (though both these cases of pathos are undermined by his guilt and hybris, as seen in the next section).

Grandeur is of course not incompatible with grounds for condemning him. Even in the *Iliad*, in spite of receiving epithets such as κυδιστος and φερτερος,⁷ Agamemnon is sometimes arrogant, temperamental, and occasionally almost cowardly.⁸ Even Achilles has his faults; and Aeschylus’ portrayal of Agamemnon is no exception. But it should not

---

⁵Heath 1987 pp. 33-5.
⁶Fraenkel 1950 ii p. 115 on 186 also cites Hector’s reproach of Polydamas at II. 12.230ff.
⁷For example, 1.122 and 281.
⁸For arrogance consider 1.22-32 (his address to Chryses). For intemperance consider his dramatic mood-shifts within each speech in his quarrel with Achilles in Book 1, such as the contrast between 1.106-15 and 116-20. For cowardice consider 14.74-102 (his plan to flee in the ships, criticised in the harshest terms by Odysseus).
be forgotten that the man that is being condemned is a hero, a great man. He is first and foremost a warrior. That is part of why he needs to be condemned so strongly, so as to counter the more respectable side of him.

His status as a warrior represents both his glory and his doom. It is his glory for obvious reasons; it is his doom in that it contributes to his motivations for killing Iphigeneia, for he must kill her to carry out his holy war. Agamemnon's *andreia* is two-edged, like so many other things in this play (not just Clytaemestra's sword).

4.2. The intellectual: condemning Agamemnon

This section discusses how Agamemnon's death is justified within the play: it is a penalty for his offences. This should be distinguished from the aim of section 3.2. There I was concerned with how Clytaemestra's deed was justified, or rather rationalised. The justification of Agamemnon's death and that of Clytaemestra's action are not the same thing: he might merit death, but it could never be *right* for a wife to kill her husband. The paradox, that he must die but the only person who can take responsibility for carrying out the sentence *must* not do so, is one of the many paradoxes in the play.

Agamemnon's guilt has already been discussed in detail by Lloyd-Jones 1962, and many points contained in this section receive a fuller treatment there. The immediate cause and the main justification for Agamemnon's death is his sacrifice of his daughter. Like Clytaemestra's performance of funeral honours for the man she murdered (1545), it is an *οἶνος κάρπον*, in that it is the proper thing to do—*χάρις*—to carry out the will of the gods,
but ἐχάριν because it is impious in other respects; it is what makes us sympathise with him, but undermines its own justification by its impiety. This damning deed is first and foremost among his crimes, and especially important because it is the fact that is also used to attempt to justify Clytaemestra. It is therefore the most essential piece of background information to understand the praxis of the play, and as such is given a very full narration in the parodos. The narrative there, being as complex as it is, raises a number of other issues too.

The parodos emphasises Agamemnon’s position as a warrior even as it describes how that position leads him to destruction. His and Menelaus’ τιμή is stressed from the outset (42-4, my emphases):

Μενέλαος ἄναξ ἡ Ἀγαμέμνων, διορόνοι Διόθεν καὶ δισκήπτρον τιμής ὀχυρὸν ζεύγος Ἀτρείδαν...

Their kingship is especially emphasised; and alongside that, their τιμή and the fact that they are on a mission from Zeus. Zeus ἔνιος (61f.), Zeus ὄσις πότ’ ἔστιν, ...Zeus who must be obeyed. It is because he cannot abandon the Zeus-sent expedition that Agamemnon must kill his daughter (212f.); for he is a warrior, not a λιπόναυς, and it is θέμις to carry out the sacrifice (217).

ἔτλα δ’ οὖν
θυτήρ γενέσθαι θυγατρός,
γυναικοποίων πολέμων ἀρωγάν
καὶ προτέλεια ναῦν (224-7).

Even as the focus of pathos moves from Agamemnon and his dilemma to Iphigeneia herself and her death, it is underlined that the chiefs are warriors, in direct contrast to her, a maiden (229f.):

παρ’ οὖδὲν αἰῶνα παρθένεσον τ’
φιλόμαχος is practically 'bloodthirsty'. Warriorhood has lost all its charm and become mere ruthlessness. This is an aspect of the warrior that we will see repeated in the first two stasima.

The mere fact of filiacide is, as we can see, not the only charge against Agamemnon. Already his greatest virtue, that of a warrior, has been corrupted into another crime, ruthlessness. He is even worse than ruthless, though; he is almost berserk, πνέων 

dυσοεβή τροπαίον / ἀναγνον ἀνίερον (219f.). I mentioned above that the pathos shifts: at this point, when he goes mad, taken over by ἅτη, all sympathy is removed from Agamemnon, the victim of Calchas' oracle. It instead goes to Iphigeneia, the victim of Agamemnon. The original victim, Agamemnon, has become the criminal. The transferral of this pathos condemns him still further.

The question of Agamemnon's responsibility for this situation is one over which much ink has been wasted;⁹ after Lloyd-Jones 1962 pp. 61-3, hopefully not much more remains to be said on the matter. Could Agamemnon have chosen not to kill Iphigeneia? The most obvious answer is no: it is necessary (218 ἀνάγκας). In real life, it might be possible to choose the other way, but this is drama, and the audience already knows what will happen. He must pursue Zeus' cause, to avenge Menelaus; and yet in the passage

⁹For example, Denniston-Page 1957 introduction pp. xxiii-xxix, Lloyd-Jones 1962 pp. 61-3, Lesky 1966 pp. 16-19; Lesky cites several other critics (Dodds, Kitto, Page, Rivier). The confusion as to how Agamemnon could possibly have merited having this situation forced upon him seems mostly due to an unwillingness to suppose that the wills of Artemis and Zeus could be opposed to one another (which they most definitely are). Denniston-Page 1957 p. xxv: "Artemis is angry, it is said, because the killing of the hare symbolises the future destruction of Troy: so it does; but it is the will of Zeus that Troy shall fall." I see no inconsistency between those two facts. Zeus wills that Troy shall fall, Agamemnon obeys, Artemis the Trojan partisan resents this and demands vengeance (in advance). Agamemnon thus takes the consequences of his own actions. Lloyd-Jones 1962 pp. 61-3 presents an argument roughly similar to this.
where Agamemnon deliberates (206-17), neither Menelaus' nor Zeus' cause is mentioned, for Agamemnon has already assumed his position as a polar opponent to Artemis' (the Trojan) 'party'. It is taken for granted that he is an agent of Zeus, and that he must therefore carry out Zeus' will at all costs.

Some have difficulty with the idea that Agamemnon could be placed in such an unjust situation (Denniston-Page 1957 and Lloyd-Jones 1962 state this problem most articulately). This is part of the horror of this trilogy's scenario: one does what one must, and one suffers for it. Agamemnon does what he must, though at the same time the bloodthirstiness necessary to contemplate such a crime condemns him. Clytaemestra does what she must, and she too is bloodthirsty. Orestes does the same in Cho., and he, being the last in this chain of criminals, is not portrayed as bloodthirsty; Aeschylus reserves his virtue to be untainted, so that the chain may end.

The questions of Agamemnon's responsibility and whether he had a choice are in fact separate issues, for the fact that he acted under duress does not mitigate the repugnance of the crime. The duress described is responsible for Iphigeneia's death at one level, but at another level Agamemnon must take ultimate responsibility: the 'yoke of necessity' overdetermines his own bloodthirstiness. Externalised necessity overdetermines Agamemnon's internalised choice, without taking away from him the appearance of choosing.\(^\text{10}\)

The matter of whether Agamemnon actually has a choice, or whether the situation is

\(^{10}\)Lesky 1966 comes close to this interpretation: p. 22 "...the close union of necessity imposed by the gods and the personal decision to act. This union leaves a certain space for the will of the individual but at the same time limits it." Rather, Necessity and personal choice are not here to be seen as being in opposition to one another: they are different ways of describing the same thing.
fair, is thus a moot point. The audience knows in advance, from the received myths, that these events had happened (even if Iphigeneia had not been associated with Agamemnon’s death before watching this play, though she probably was; cf. the version used in Pindar *Pyth.* 11); and as expected, it happens. If that particular event took up an entire play, we might be expected to explore the situation more fully, but the (comparatively) concise account given in the parodos does not encourage us to search very deeply into the ethics of the situation; moreover, it is a situation that took place ten years ago. The only ethical point to note is the obvious fact that an opposition is established between Zeus and Agamemnon on one hand and Artemis and Troy on the other. Agamemnon’s alternatives are not seriously considered or explored either in 207-17 or anywhere else; his wavering is not true wavering (the vengeance of Zeus ξένος is inevitable), but is intended to show us the pain involved, the magnitude of the crime that is inherent in the fulfilment of (Zeus’) justice. In fact Agamemnon is only responsible for his choice (inasmuch as that responsibility is a relevant concern) in the same way that the gods are μετατίτικοι for his victory (811). Fagles observes that in the matter of Iphigeneia, “Agamemnon and his gods are metaitioi, co-responsible”;12 his rôle as a ‘party’ representative, as an agent of Zeus (his *intellectual* aspect), overdetermines his personal ‘choice’ (his *emotive* aspect), thus allowing it to remain a ‘choice’, condemning him even as he is laid under a compulsion. His justification is Zeus’ will, but his condemnation, his ἄτη, is all his own. Right and

---

11Cf. the choice of Pelasgos in Ἄες. *Danaïdae:* he must choose, in a scene that takes place *onstage,* between denying shelter to the suppliant Danaids (thus incurring Zeus’ wrath) or taking them in and thus provoking war with Egypt. As Athene does in *Eum.,* he puts the matter to a vote.

wrong, side by side; again, as in Clytaemestra’s case, they are the same thing.

After the parodos, the Achaian forces (and Agamemnon in particular) are further condemned by the ‘tragic irony’ in the words of Clytaemestra and the Herald in the first and second episodes respectively. In her account of the fall of Troy, Clytaemestra strongly emphasises the dichotomy between the fortunes of the opposing forces in the war (321-37).

She goes on to insist cheerfully that provided that the Achaians have done nothing to offend the gods, they will return home safe and sound. The audience is of course perfectly aware of the Achaians’ impiety in the sack of Troy.⁵³ Agamemnon’s nostos is thus further condemned by impiety in his capacity as a warrior: again his virtue is corrupted to doom him. Clytaemestra encourages this interpretation when she reminds the audience of this new impiety of Agamemnon’s (341f.):

In the second episode the Herald, questioned about the whereabouts of Menelaus, confirms that the gods have turned utterly against the Achaians (648-80).

Among the more notable acts of impiety are the lesser Ajax’s rape of Cassandra in the temple of Athene, and the brutal murders of Astyanax and Priam (in some versions Neoptolemus beat Priam to death with Astyanax’s body). At Ag. 527 the Herald makes a report of the βωμοι  ἄξιοι καὶ θεῶν ἱδρύματα, a line that is, as Lloyd-Jones 1962 p. 66 says, “most unconvincingly obelized by Fraenkel”; the similarity of Pers. 811 is hardly a persuasive argument against authenticity, and Ag. 527 is hardly a “mere hint” (Fraenkel 1950 ii p. 267 on 525ff.) of something the audience knows well.

¹³Their impiety was presumably recorded in great detail in the Iliou Persis. Among the more notable acts of impiety are the lesser Ajax’s rape of Cassandra in the temple of Athene, and the brutal murders of Astyanax and Priam (in some versions Neoptolemus beat Priam to death with Astyanax’s body).
πυρ καὶ θάλασσαι also refers metaphorically to the partisan opposition between the gods in the War, gods who supported the Achaians and the Trojans respectively: all the gods have combined forces against the impious Achaians.

At the end of the parodos an open condemnation had been made gnomically, though it was not explicitly applied to Agamemnon (250f.):

\[Δίκα δὲ τοῖς μὲν παθοῦσιν μαθεῖν ἐπιρρέπει.\]

The Chorus ominously adds (251-3):

\[τὸ μέλλον ὅπεπε\]
\[ἐπεὶ γένοιτ' ἄν κλώνῃς πρὸ χαρέτων ἦσον δὲ τῷ προστένειν ...\]

These words clearly look forward to the penalty to be paid by Agamemnon for the act that has just been described, Iphigeneia's murder; as Fraenkel says, "The context leaves no doubt which deed it is, and which doer, that draws down the suffering." The first two stasima maintain this trend of veiled condemnations of Agamemnon, even as in the episodes Clytaemestra validates her authority to the Chorus. The references are more veiled than the above lines, however, referring as they do to Agamemnon's situation by analogy rather than by a γνώμη as above.

The first stasimon (355-487) is ostensibly on the subject of the vengeance that has been exacted against Paris for the rape of Helen. Though no explicit analogy is drawn, it is clear that Agamemnon's situation is parallel. He too has offended the gods (by his filiacide, if by nothing else) and must pay the penalty; and his doom is brought on him by

---

14 There may be a very subtle reference here to the battle between the gods Hephaistos (Achaian supporter, fire) and Xanthos (Trojan supporter, water) in Iliad 21.328-82.

15 Fraenkel 1950 ii p. 142 on 250.

16 Athanassaki 1994 is a recent detailed analysis of many aspects of this stasimon.
a woman, just as Paris’ is. The parallel is drawn by means of ambiguity. Earlier, in section 1.4.1 on §10, some ambiguities were noted; the conclusion there was that Helen, referred to only by her gender, stands for Clytaemestra, since both are treacherous adulteresses, while Agamemnon may be seen in both Paris (both are doomed to divine vengeance) and Menelaus (they are brothers, and both are cuckolded husbands).

Much of the ambiguity is achieved simply by not naming names; Aeschylus allows the ambiguous meaning to remain unresolved for protracted passages. In its first stanza the Chorus refers to Alexandros as the object of the expedition to Troy (363). But in the second and third stanzas the Chorus speaks only in γνώμαι, naming none of the participants in their narrative of the execution of vengeance.

On the surface these words refer to Paris’ trampling the bonds of guest-friendship; but the same words can be applied to Agamemnon’s impiety, dishonouring the gods in the sack of Troy, for the meaning is not resolved into an explicit reference to Paris. The gods, it is promised, will not overlook Agamemnon’s impiety in the sack of Troy. The tension mounts with the ambiguities, as the meaning is still unresolved without any reference to the surface referent, Paris (381-4):

Agamemnon is not just impious; his doom is predicted by these words. Another stanza
continues relentlessly, and by this time Paris, the surface referent, is all but forgotten (396-8):

\[
\text{of a guilty man] } \delta' \ \delta' \text{ou\i} \mu\varepsilon \ \nu\upsilon \upsilon \upsilon \ \delta' \ \text{epistrefon} \ \tau' \ \nu
\phi\omega \tau' \ \delta' \text{ikou kathairei.}
\]

This is the doom of the guilty; this is the doom of *Agamemnon*. It is at this moment, as the tension reaches its climax, that the ambiguity is broken and the meaning of the stanzas is suddenly resolved (399-402).

\[
\text{o} \delta \sigma \varepsilon \ \kappa\alpha \ i \ \text{P\a} \rho \varepsilon \ \varepsilon \lambda \theta \omega \nu
\varepsilon \ \delta \mu \mu \text{on} \ \tau' \varepsilon \ \text{A} \text{t} \text{reid} \text{a} \nu\n\text{\eta} \sigma \chi \nu \nu \ \delta \varepsilon \varepsilon \iota \text{v} \text{i} \nu \ \tau \rho \alpha \pi \varepsilon -
\text{\zeta} \alpha \nu \ \k\lambda \text{\o} \pi \alpha \text{ou} \ \gamma \nu \nu \alpha \iota \kappa \kappa \sigma \nu \ (\text{my emphasis}).
\]

And the applicability of the previous two stanzas resolves into a condemnation of Paris.

By this time, however, the surface meaning has almost been lost; the audience has already realised that Agamemnon is condemned by these *γυναίκια*.

There follows a lament for the faithlessness of Helen; this runs into a complaint of the evils of war (429ff.), in which much resentment against the Atreidai is expressed (450-8).

There is evidence to suggest a new ambiguity here in the figure of Helen. The war, we are told, is *\alpha \lambda \lambda \omega \tau \rho \iota \alpha \varsigma \ \delta \iota \alpha \ \gamma \nu \nu \alpha \iota \kappa \iota \varsigma \varsigma \ (448f.),* and the resentment is based on this fact; the unnamed woman in question is Helen. She is thus characterised at this stage by (a) her faithlessness, and (b) her lack of identity: for she is not named until 687. The vagueness that this latter point leaves regarding her identity opens up the possibility of a cross-reference to an alternative version of the Helen story. The version I refer to is that of Stesichorus’ *Palinodes*, which are unfortunately not extant, but in which it seems that Stesichorus recanted the condemnation of her as an adulteress that he had expressed in his
earlier work the *Helen*. In the *Palinodes*, rather than faithlessly running off with Paris, it is told that she in fact went to Egypt; the Helen that went to Troy and for whom the Achaians fought (ἁλλοτρίας διὰ γυναικὸς) was only a phantom (εἰδωλον). This is the story that is later employed by Euripides in his play *Helen*. For textual evidence of this version of the story within the first stasimon, we need look no further than the passage immediately after Helen’s departure (403-11), where the prophets of Menelaus’ house speak of Menelaus’ love-sickness thus (415-9):

φάσμα δόξει δόμων ἀνάσσειν
eὐμόρφων δὲ κολοσσῶν
ὁμμάτων δ’ ἐν ἀχνίας
ἐρρει πᾶσ’ Ἀφροδίτα.

The prophets continue in the antistrophe (420-6):¹⁷

όνειρόφαντοι δὲ πενθήμονες
πάρεισι δόξαι φέρουν-
οσι χάριν ματαιαν
μᾶταν γάρ, εἰτ’ ἄν ἐσθλά τις δοκοῦνθ’ ὂρα,
παραλλάξασα διὰ
χερών βέβακεν ὄψις, οὐ μεθύστερον
πτεροῖς ὀπαδοῦσ’ ὕπνου κελεύθοις.

The passage is filled with references to images, ghosts, likenesses, visions, and seeming: φάσμα, δόξει...δόξαι...δοκοῦνθ’, ὄψις, etc. This stress on illusion, juxtaposed to Helen’s departure, encourages reminiscence of Stesichorus’ striking re-writing of the received story where it is her εἰδωλον that leaves. The reminiscence is of course dependent on the version used in the *Palinodes* being a familiar one; Euripides’ use of the story and Stesichorus fr. 217 Page suggest that it was.

¹⁷It is not immediately clear to the audience whether the words of the prophets are still being quoted, or if this is now the Chorus speaking in its own voice again; Athanassaki 1994 argues that this is deliberately left unresolved.
The *Palinodes* not being extant, it is not familiar to modern readers; it is therefore hardly surprising that this is not a well-known interpretation.

This connotation of Helen is, I argue, suggested to the audience not with the purpose of actually using the \( \epsilon\bar{d}\omega\lambda\nu \) story—it is made clear in the parodos that Zeus *does* require the fulfilment of vengeance,—but rather simply to remind the audience of it so as to make the War *seem* all the more unjustifiable. The resentment at Agamemnon’s fighting \( \lambda\lambda\lambda\lambda\tau\rho\\varsigma\delta\tau\alpha\ \gamma\nu\nu\alpha\iota\kappa\varsigma\) is already strong enough; imagine how strong it would be if it turned out that she were not even a woman, but a ghost. Then indeed there would be a \( \beta\alpha\rho\varepsilon\iota\alpha \ \delta\ \dot{o}\varepsilon\tau\omega\nu\ \phi\acute{\alpha}t\iota\varsigma\ \sigma\nu\ \kappa\omicron\tau\omicron\) (456).

Once again, Agamemnon’s doom is assured by implication (461f.):

\[ \tau\omega\nu\ \pi\lambda\omicron\kappa\tau\omicron\nu\omega\nu\ \gamma\dot{a}r.\ \dot{o}\dot{k}.\ \dot{a}\dot{k}\kappa\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron.\ \theta\epsilon\omicron\omicron. \ldots \]

One is tempted to add that the gods are also \( \tau\omega\nu\ \pi\alpha\delta\omicron\kappa\tau\omicron\nu\omega\nu\ \sigma\omicron\ \dot{a}\dot{k}\kappa\omicron\omicron\omicron. \]

The cross-reference to the \( \epsilon\bar{d}\omega\lambda\nu \) story, tainting the holy war fought by Agamemnon, continues to be evident in the next episode and stasimon, where Helen and Menelaus still feature strongly. The Herald’s long narrative explaining the unknown whereabouts of Menelaus (617-80), apart from the rather banal effect of confirming the gods’ intent to punish the Achaians, more importantly attracts our attention to *where Menelaus has actually gone* according to the received story. In the *Od.*, he went to Egypt after being blown off course (4.351ff.); but according to the \( \epsilon\bar{d}\omega\lambda\nu \) story, he found the real Helen there (as in Eur. *Helen*, set in Egypt). The inconclusiveness of the Herald’s report on Menelaus encourages us to think of his fate and to recall this, further emphasising
the impression that the War was wasted effort and hardship; the hardship suffered by the army while fighting has already been stressed by the Herald (553-74). The moment the Herald leaves, hoping that Menelaus may return home safely, the Chorus launches into a vicious attack on Helen the destroyer (689 ἑλέναις ἑλανθρος ἑλεπτολις), which occupies the whole second stasimon (681-781). The audience, thinking of the alternative version, is inclined to be more favourably disposed to her.

At the end of this stasimon Agamemnon is once again implicitly condemned, this time for ὅβρος (750-81). The surface meaning refers to Paris’ fateful deed which spawned ruin for his house; the subtext speaks of Agamemnon’s ὅβρος which brings ruin on his, though perhaps Atreus is alluded to as well. The ὅβρος consists of all the wrongs that Agamemnon has committed: killing his daughter, impiety in the sack of Troy, and carrying on a protracted war that earned the enmity both of his people and of the gods (for being πολόκτονος). As Herington says,

By the moment of Agamemnon’s triumphal entrance into the theater at line 782, he appears about as guilty as a man could be—guilty as a commander and guilty as a father and husband.18

One may add that he is also guilty as a king, criticised in the first stasimon for abandoning his people.

Agamemnon enters, and his guilt does not prevent him from appearing a grand figure indeed; they are by no means incompatible. It is a common thing for heroic dignity and guilt to coincide, since both involve a measure of excess. Reminding us of this, the Chorus spends seventeen lines (782-98) considering how to address him

μὴ ὑπεράρος μὴ ὑποκάμψας

18Herington 1986 p. 113.
καὶ ὁ χάριτος.

It finishes by stressing its continued loyalty to him, in spite of the general resentment they say they felt for his pursuit of the War (799-809).

This scene is the only first-hand information we get about Agamemnon, and so it has the potential to overturn the impression of guilt that we have already formed. And indeed Agamemnon begins piously. His first nineteen lines (810-28) are spent revering the gods; for, he says, it is only right (811 δίκης προσεπείν). Calling the gods μετατίθεν (811) is not arrogance; it is a statement of plain fact. At one level it is true to say that Agamemnon conquered Troy, and equally true at another to say that the gods fulfilled their plan. The gods overdetermined—or μετά-determined, if you will—Agamemnon’s victory. Fraenkel comes the closest to this idea of parallel agency in his assessment of μετατίθεν.19 Agamemnon goes on to acknowledge the Chorus’ desire to avoid hybris (829-44); he shares the same desire, he says, and admires the absence of envy in their words. Agamemnon in person may not be precisely a sympathetic character (his violent words about the capture of Troy at 824-8 hardly encourage sympathy) but here, at least, he appears to have his priorities right.

Now the formal structure of the agon begins (the ‘carpet scene’): two long speeches by Clytaemestra and Agamemnon followed by a brief but lively stichomythia. Clytaemestra’s speech, as noted earlier in section 1.4.1 on §17, begins ambiguously, referring to her adultery (855-63) beneath the surface meaning of emphasising her loyalty to her husband (855-902). In this loyalty, she lies, there is no deceit (886 οὐ δόλον

19Fraenkel 1950 ii pp. 371-4 on 811. In spite of Denniston-Page 1957 p. 149 on 810f., it is hardly ‘singular’ for a hero not to attribute the primary responsibility of an action to a god, as Fraenkel’s citations show (especially Eur. Her. 1134f.).
The true issue of the *agon* becomes clear at 906ff., namely that of whether or not Agamemnon should process into his palace walking on the tapestries she has laid out for him. He argues against this suggestion on three grounds, (a) that it would be womanly (918 γυναικὸς ἐν τρόποις), (b) that the idea is fit only for a barbarian (919 βαρβάρου φωτὸς δικην), and (c) it would be an act of hybris (921 ἐπίφθανον πόρον, picking up on Clytaemestra's assurance at 904: φθόνος δ' ἀπέστω). It is on this last point that he spends the remainder of his speech, expounding on its extravagance and wastefulness and picking up on the Chorus's implicit condemnation at the end of the second stasimon of the action he is about to take (750-62 and 776-81). In all this he remains consistently restrained and pious.

It is in the brief stichomythic argument that follows (931-43) that he surrenders, and commits the act which his words have emphasised is one of hybris. Denniston-Page are quite right to point out that "His change of mind is most unexpectedly rapid"; even Agamemnon's staunchest defender, Fraenkel, refers to "Clytemnestra's dialectical fencing." Why does Agamemnon give in? In an *agon*, it is natural to look first for the logical argument that convinces him. But Clytaemestra's 'argument' is, quite simply, not logical. It is irrelevant that Agamemnon *might* have made a vow to do this very thing; the fact is, he did not. Failing that, the next recourse is to "draw our inferences from the general picture of his personality." This is not much better. Leaving aside the notion of supposed hidden motives or priorities, we require a clear sign of the hybris that would lead him to commit this action. But as we have seen, throughout this scene from his very first

---

21 Fraenkel 1950 ii p. 441.
words at 810 up to the beginning of the stichomythia, Agamemnon has consistently expressed the most pious and moderate of priorities and opinions. The effect of this has been to counter with first-hand evidence the impression of impiety given by the reports of him before his entrance. It is his surrender to Clytaemestra that makes him hybristic.

In Chapter Two, I used this problem as an example to demonstrate the dichotomy between different types of motivations for characters' actions. Goldhill’s answer,\(^\text{22}\) which is the correct one, is that there is no clear distinction made between Agamemnon \textit{qua} person (internalised motivation) and Agamemnon \textit{qua} creature of Aeschylus (externalised motivation).

...it is surely clear that the \textit{emphasis} here, the raison d'être of this whole scene, is to provide a visible example of Agamemnon’s hybris and establish a visible rationale for his death. The emphasis is thus on an \textit{externalised} motivation for his action; it is this motivation that is determined first. Since there is no reason for supposing that his internalised motivation is not coordinated with this primary motivation, \textit{overdetermining} it as it were, it is not necessary for a separate internalised motivation to be contrived. The audience is thus free to construe Agamemnon’s internalised motivation, his private reason for submitting, in any way they like; so long as it is not inconsistent with his external aspect and with his personality as portrayed elsewhere.\(^\text{23}\)

The rapidity of Agamemnon’s change of mind, and also the difficult language of the stichomythia, do not encourage us to look very closely for hidden motivations. I imagine that a first-time spectator of this play would be startled by Agamemnon’s suddenness (though it has been obvious ever since the tapestries were spread out for him that he would end up walking on them), and might perhaps wonder why he did give in. But I very much doubt that this spectator would wonder for very long, there being other matters to attend to;

\(^{22}\)Goldhill 1986 pp. 173f.
\(^{23}\)Quoted from section 2.3 above.
namely, the *consequences* of Agamemnon’s surrender.

Agamemnon leaves and we do not see him alive again. After this, the focus shifts entirely to Clytaemestra. Even when she returns to the death of Iphigeneia in her *kommos* the point is not to condemn Agamemnon (he is lying dead at her feet, anyway) so much as to justify herself; and the frequent allusions to the Curse do not draw attention to Agamemnon’s inherited guilt so much as to the co-agency of the Curse with Clytaemestra. The one exception to this shift is in the resentment expressed against Agamemnon by Clytaemestra on account of his liaison with Cassandra; this charge could not have been laid earlier because, for the sake of an ‘Aeschylean silence’, no verbal attention must be paid to Cassandra until the beginning of her scene, when Clytaemestra returns (1035-68). The charge of the resentment he has earned becomes clear at 1438-43, when Clytaemestra bitterly refers to her, abusing Agamemnon as the Χροσηδων μελεγμα τῶν ὑπ’ Ἡλίθω. On the other hand, it is not absolutely certain that a liaison with a captive would constitute a serious charge against Agamemnon; such things may have seemed perfectly normal to Aeschylus’ audience. If not, then the bitter reference to Cassandra at 1438-43 might instead indicate an intolerance in Clytaemestra beyond that which would be warranted in the eyes of an Athenian audience. It is not possible to tell for sure.

The condemnation of Agamemnon throughout the first half of the play has fulfilled admirably its task of preparing us for his death. We have been presented with several factors which doom him. First, there was his slaughter of Iphigeneia (his failure as a father; the most important point, and same one that is used to defend Clytaemestra); then, successively, his impiety in the sack of Troy (failure as a commander) and his provocation
of public ill-will (failure as a king). Along the way, the subtle reminiscences of the story of
Helen’s εἰδωλον have further weakened the argument that the Trojan War was a just one.
Finally, we are presented with first-hand evidence of a pious man’s guilt, a visible example
of hybris, to let us know that hybris can co-exist with dignity.

Agamemnon’s dignity and andreia help explain his past fault, the filiacide (though as
in Clytaemestra’s case, that does not take away his responsibility for it); and his
condemnation prepares us for the doom that is to come. He is thus simultaneously
a character of light and shade. This conclusion is confirmed by a comparison of
Aeschylus’ Agamemnon with that of Homer; the two are remarkably alike.
Homer’s Agamemnon is not, on the whole, an agreeable character.
...But...defects cannot blind the reader to his magnificent heroic qualities.24

The good and the bad co-exist; so do the emotive and the intellectual. Admittedly, it is not
possible to draw so clear a distinction between the two as it was in Clytaemestra’s case; the
reasons for which he is condemned are all highly emotive ones. But they are societal
norms: these values are adopted in the play as axiomatic and absolute. It is thus possible
to base a rational argument upon them. A coherent emotional and intellectual framework is
thus constructed into which Agamemnon fits. He is justified even as we are prepared for
his end.

24Lloyd-Jones 1962 p. 67. In the Iliad it seems to be Agamemnon’s majesty which is his greatest
virtue, rather than heroism. He receives only a brief aristeia (11.15-46 and 92-283), at the end of which he
is wounded and spends more than half of the Iliad out of action.
Conclusion

In the introduction I referred to the multivalence of many aspects of Ag. as a factor which thoroughly bewilders attempts to pin the play down. I doubt that Aeschylus himself would have much success if he tried; so many elements of the play, seemingly opposed but actually overdeterministically related, seem specifically intended to make the world of Ag. one of chaos. "It is what Eliot calls ‘the backward half-look / Over the shoulder towards the primitive terror.’”¹ It is anything but “fixed in a formulated phrase” (as Eliot also said).

What I have attempted is perhaps not to clarify the bewilderment and resolve the ambiguities so much as to indicate where some of the ambiguities lie, and where some clear distinctions do not lie. The key to an intellectual articulation of these unclear distinctions and to the frequent presence of the just and the doomed in each other’s company, and how they function, seems to lie in the concept of overdetermination. Any element, such as Agamemnon’s slaying of his daughter, may have more than one value. On one hand it condemns Agamemnon; on another it is the result of his particular set of priorities as a

¹Fagles 1975 p. 51.
warrior. In addition to these, it is also a punishment sent on Agamemnon by Artemis. It also rationalises Clytaemestra’s action. The justification of Clytaemestra overdetermines the condemnation of Agamemnon; the punishment by Artemis overdetermines Agamemnon’s andreia.

The effect of this process, which is by its nature not immediately observable to the audience, is to create not a sharp image of how the conflict works but rather a set of impressions, gradually built up into an impressionistic structure. This structure is what the audience perceives. It is indeed impressionistic, like those exceptionally multivalent lines in the parodos spoken by Calchas, 150-5. It is naturally bewildering to an uninvolved critical eye trying to dissect the dialectical structure of the play; but to the audience, impressions are all that are needed or desired.

The nature of the conflict expressed in Ag. has here been thoroughly discussed, with an examination of how it is portrayed by means of oppositions between two ‘parties’, which are in turn established as opponents by various contrasting factors. Minor characters, such as Cassandra or Aegisthus, contribute to the polarisation of the conflict in other ways. All the characters have their rôles in portraying the conflict, while also maintaining individual identities in the minds of the audience, allowing the evocation of pathos and horror. This co-existence of the intellectual and emotive aspects of the characters is also employed by Aeschylus to simultaneously rationalise and condemn the main participants in the conflict, Agamemnon and Clytaemestra. Clytaemestra is condemned by societal norms but explained (not excused) by her motivation of vengeance, another value normalised by Athenian society; Agamemnon is approved by societal norms
but condemned by his failures as a father, as a leader, as a king, and as a husband. Furthermore, I argue, some of these elements are expressed by articulate argument, but the ambiguities in the play also reveal them through the language of allusion. The audience would thus be able to assimilate this large range of elements by means of a cumulative set of impressions.
Bibliography

Abbreviations:

\[\text{UP} = \text{University Press; } \text{OCT} = \text{Oxford Classical Texts series; } \text{Loeb} = \text{Loeb Classical Library series; } \text{ed.} = \text{edition/commentary by; } \text{tr.} = \text{translation; } \text{intro.} = \text{introduction; } \text{comm.} = \text{commentary; } \text{orig.} = \text{originally.}\]

\[\text{CJ} = \text{Classical Journal; } \text{CQ} = \text{Classical Quarterly; } \text{G&R} = \text{Greece and Rome; } \text{HSCP} = \text{Harvard Studies in Classical Philology; } \text{JHS} = \text{Journal of Hellenic Studies.}\]

Editions and translations

Aeschylus. *Oresteia*:
- Fagles 1975, below (tr., intro.).
- Lattimore 1953, below (tr., intro.).
- Vellacott 1959, below (tr., intro.).

*Agamemnon*:
- Fraenkel 1950, below (text, literal tr., comm.).
- Denniston-Page 1957, below (text, intro., comm.).

*Libation-Bearers*:
- Garvie 1986, below (text, intro., comm.).

*Eumenides*:
- Sommerstein 1989, below (text, intro., comm.).


Euripides. *Alcestis*: Dale 1954, below (text, intro., comm.).


*Odyssey*: Stanford 1959, below (text, comm.).

Pindar: *Odes*. Sandys 1919, below (text, tr.).

Sophocles. *Antigone*: Jebb 1902, below (text, comm.).

*Philoctetes*: Webster 1970, below (text, intro., comm.).

*Trachiniae*: Easterling 1982, below (text, intro., comm.).


**Modern texts cited**


137-46.


