OBSERVATIONS ON SOME RECURRENT METAPHORS IN AESCHYLUS' ORESTEIA

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The vividness and daring of Aeschylean metaphors is well-established, but less attention has been paid to their function and, in the case of the recurrent metaphors, to the way in which they may bind plays together, throw certain characteristics of the protagonists into relief or emphasize contrasts inherent in the action.

Aeschylus' apparently casual reference to the Greek host pursuing Helen as κυναγοί (hunters — Ag. 694) gains depth later in the ode through the elaborate fable of the lion cub, tenderly reared by a man and a delight to all around with its winning ways, but eventually, when grown big, a destroyer on a vast scale (Ag. 717 f.). The general allusion to Helen's career and the resultant Trojan war is manifest, and certain aspects of the lion (φαινόμενος . . . σαί-βοιν, — fawning bright-eyed — Ag. 725–6) may be suggestive of Helen's appearance or behaviour.1 The further metaphor ἕκκατον δέντας τις Ἀττικής (a god-sent priest of ruin — Ag. 735–6) is an appropriate reminder of the gods' involvement in every phase of the doom-laden myth. The theme of destruction by a lion is continued in Agamemnon's speech. With a remarkable switch of rôle, the Greek army at Troy is now depicted as a flesh-eating lion lapping its fill of royal blood (Ag. 827–8). It has, ironically, just issued forth from a highly personified Trojan horse — Ἀργείων ἄλογος/πταινον νεκροσος (the Argive beast, brood of the horse — Ag. 824–5). The strong word ἄλογος as well as the lion metaphor itself fit the ὀβεπος of the Greeks, which is a factor in one's assessment of Agamemnon's guilt, and the adjective τυραννικοῦ is pointedly used by him in order to dissociate himself from despotism.

Cardinal events preceding the action of the play are, thus, illustrated by lion metaphors. But the personal drama of Agamemnon's homecoming is, also, viewed — by Cassandra — in terms of a trio of lions. Aegisthus (Ag. 1224) is a mixture of savagery (ἄλοντες) and cowardice (ἄναλκιν) He does his prowling (πταῖνον) not in a forest, but in Agamemnon's bed. To Cassandra, Clytemnestra is δίπους λέανα (a two-footed lioness — Ag. 1258), human only in appearance, but savage in her heart, while Cassandra's feeling for Agamemnon is conveyed by λέανος εὐγένευς (of the noble lion — Ag. 1259) — he is noble in spirit, despite his involvement in the collective savagery of the Greeks at Troy. The phrase συγκομιμάνης/λύκα (sleeping with a wolf — Ag. 1258–9) suggests not only the mean savagery of Aegisthus, but also the grotesqueness of Clytemnestra's union with him. Finally, as if parodying δίπους λέανα, the
chorus reflects in ὑπλοῦς λέον, ὑπλοῦς Ἄρης (a twofold lion, twofold slaughter — Cho. 938) that Justice has come at last to Agamemnon’s house, as it did to Priam’s. Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus are the twofold lion, united in their savagery, and they have been overtaken by two-fold slaughter. Lion images thus bind the essential elements of the story together: the playful whelp that eventually causes destruction, the flesh-eating lion at Troy seeking vengeance, Cassandra’s imagined trio of lions with sharply differentiated characteristics, and the chorus’ pithy, moralising summary of the events on stage when Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus have been killed.

The Oresteia opens with a dog image: the guard on the roof of Agamemnon’s palace likens his weary watch to that of a dog (Ag. 3), and the closing play of the trilogy has repeated comparisons of the Erinyes to hounds (e.g. Eum. 131 f., 246 f.), which are foreshadowed in Clytaemnestra’s warning to Orestes: φυλάξαει μητρός ἐγκύτος κύνας (beware of a mother’s malignant hounds — Cho. 924). Cassandra, too, follows the trail of blood in the house of Atreus like a keen-scented hound: the chorus’ simile θυόμενον ἥξειν κυνὸς δίκηψεινα, ματαίοι δ’ ἀνεμφήσει φόνον (the foreign woman seems to be keen-scented like a hound and seeks the blood of those she will find slaughtered — Ag. 1093–4) is embodied in Cassandra’s own metaphor τὸν πάλαι πεπραγμένων (following close and scenting the track of ancient crimes — Ag. 1184–5). However, the most significant dog images are used to reflect on the character of Clytaemnestra. Assuring Agamemnon of her faithfulness in her pretended welcome of him, she calls herself ἠκτυρόν κυνὰ (watch-dog of the house — Ag. 607), and the addition πολεμίαν τοῖς δύσοροσιν (an enemy to ill-wishers — Ag. 608) has a particularly wry twist. Dogs may be hostile to malevolent intruders, but Clytaemnestra has in reality the closest possible relationship with Agamemnon’s arch-enemy Aegisthus. One recalls this piece of hypocrisy when Clytaemnestra later addresses Agamemnon as τὴν σταθμῶν κυνὰ (watch-dog of the fold — Ag. 896). This is in fact the first of a string of insincere compliments to Agamemnon, in which there is a crescendo of extravagance. Clytaemnestra’s true nature is aptly represented in the metaphor of the hateful bitch (Ag. 1228), applied to her by the ever clear-sighted Cassandra. Denniston and Page3 appear to dispute the need for much textual emendation at this point, but the suggested reading λείζασα κάκτεινας φαιδρὸν ὀδός (licking and stretching forth its ears in joy), a combination of Tyrwhitt, Canter and Ahrens, would yield a more elaborate sketch of affectionate canine behaviour rather in keeping with Clytaemnestra’s professions as opposed to her actual feelings and intentions. Finally, it is not without irony that Clytaemnestra dismisses the taunts of the chorus as μάταια ὀλάγματα (vain yelpings — Ag. 1672).

Clytaemnestra has a penchant for dog images, and Cassandra turns the tables on her by referring to her as a hateful bitch. However, just after, she combs the repertoire of odious monsters to which Clytaemnestra may be likened. The first to emerge is ὀμφίσβατα (Ag. 1233), a serpent moving in two directions.
Considering the ease with which Clytaemnestra passes from Agamemnon to Aegisthus and vice versa, the comparison is by no means inept. There are, moreover, a number of echoes and variations, the simplest of which is perhaps Cho. 1047, where the chorus rejoices that Orestes has lopped off the heads of two serpents (δρακόντων), namely Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus. Of more interest is the way in which Orestes represents his helpless position in his prayer to Zeus (Cho. 246 f.): he and Electra are fledglings, the orphaned brood of an eagle which has been killed by a viper — the traditional enmity of eagle and serpent, as in Il. 12. 280 f., is here applied to Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra — and they are unable to feed themselves, a reference to the deprivation of their exile. In order to kill the viper, Orestes must become one himself — a popular tradition had it that young vipers killed their mothers — and this transformation is foreshadowed in Clytaemnestra’s dream (Cho. 527 f.): she has given birth to a viper, which draws blood together with the milk from her breast. Orestes gains vast encouragement from the chorus’ account of this dream. Taking each detail of the baby viper’s behaviour singly, he identifies himself with it utterly — ἐκδρακοντολέχεις (having turned serpent — Cho. 549) is his striking word. He then boldly declares his intention of killing Clytaemnestra. Once she is dead, he sees her again as a woman in reality, but as one who inspires him with such loathing that he reflects how, had she been born a sea-snake or a viper (μύριστα γῆς ἄρα Ἑχιῶν’), her very touch, let alone her bite, would have caused corruption (Cho. 994 f.). Such at least appears to be the sense of these somewhat disputed lines.

Finally, the ghost of Clytaemnestra, helpless in itself, sees her avengers the Erinyes as a dread serpent (δεινῆς δρακάνης), though she laments that their strength is impaired by sleep and toil (Eum. 127–8). The metaphor adds point to the play on words in which Apollo threatens the Erinyes with his arrow, described as a winged, glistening snake (πτηνὸν ἄργητσην ὄφιν, Eum. 181). This is an allusion not only to its sting but to ὴς in its separate meanings of ‘arrow’ and ‘poison’ (especially of a snake).

Metaphors of constraint abound in the Oresteia, which is hardly surprising, since so many characters are forcibly subjected to an evil doom. The image of a bit unites three of Agamemnon’s victims. Each of them suffers in a different way, and the application of the metaphor has in each case striking characteristics which are distinct from one another. Where the victim is the city of Troy, the chorus prays οἶνον μὴ τις ᾧγα θεόθεν κνεφά-ση προτυπέν στόμον μέγα Τροιάς/στρατωθέν (only let no malice from the gods darken the great bit of Troy, struck beforehand, marshalled as an army — Ag. 131–3). The deliberation of the Greeks emerges in προτυπέν, and the essentially animate nature of the bit in στρατωθέν, an allusion to the marshalling of the Greek army at Aulis. Whether the idea of divine envy darkening the bit enhances Aeschylus’ linguistic daring, or jeopardises clarity even further, will depend on the judgment of the individual reader. Later in the same ode Iphigenia appears at her sacrifice with a bit upon her mouth, lest a curse be uttered against Agamemnon’s house (Ag. 235 f.). Iphigeneia’s helplessness is suggested especially by the strong personification of
the bit and the transferred application of ὀντωφόρος· φυλακαί·.../βίμ χαλανόν τ' ὀντωφόρο μένει (lit. with a guard . . . the force and voiceless might of the bit).

Lastly, Aeschylus uses the image of a bit in order to give us some insight into Cassandra's feelings on arrival in Argos, or at least into Clytaemnestra's interpretation of them: χαλανόν δ' οὐκ ἐπίσταται φέρειν / πρίν αἰματηρόν ἔξ- αφρικευθαὶ μένος (she does not know how to endure the bit until she has foamed her strength away in blood — Ag. 1066–7). To Clytaemnestra Cassandra is just like a wild animal. The image could hardly convey her physical and emotional struggle more vividly, with the blood from her mouth possibly foreshadowing her eventual doom.

Cassandra’s plight as a slave is elucidated also by the metaphor of a yoke, which recurs without elaboration in the words of Agamemnon (Ag. 953), of the chorus (Ag. 1071) and of Cassandra herself (Ag. 1226). Troy, too, has had a yoke cast upon it by Agamemnon (Ag. 529). The herald thus represents the city as a living entity, using ξυκτήριον for ζυγόν, a striking variant. Agamemnon, the imposer of a yoke on others, has previously had to submit to a different kind of yoke — the necessity of sacrificing his daughter — in the most painful way possible. The chorus' metaphor ἀνάγκης ἐδο λέπαδ'ν (he put on the yoke-strap of necessity — Ag. 218) serves the purpose of stressing the conclusion of Agamemnon’s preceding soliloquy, namely that there was no alternative to the sacrifice. One should assume that Aeschylus' own moral view is here being stated, and the question is the most fundamental in the play, affecting our judgment not only of Agamemnon’s action, but also of Clytaemnestra’s response to it. The substitution for ζυγόν of λέπαδ'ν, a broad leather strap fastening the yoke to the neck, is more than the simple device of pars pro toto or a case of Aeschylus’ striving to surprise by an unexpected word. One visualises something that adheres closely to the body, that makes escape impossible, and so the notion of inevitability is reinforced all the more tellingly.

When finally triumphant Aegisthus threatens in his sinister way τὸν δὲ μὴ πειθάνωρα / ζεύξω βαρεταῖς (the disobedient I shall yoke with a heavy collar — Ag. 1639–40). From the verb ζεύξω one must supply ζεύγλαιας. Properly speaking, ζεύγλη is the loop attached to the yoke through which the beast’s head was put — again an intensification of the less colourful ζυγόν. In elaborating, Aegisthus underlines the degree of subjection by adding οἵ τι μὴ σεμαφόρον / κριθόντα πῦλον (no barley-fed trace-colt — Ag. 1640–1). The trace horse, which was pampered with a diet of barley, was spared the yoke and heavier tasks. Aegisthus’ words gain further colour if one recalls and contrasts what Agamemnon has said about his harmonious partnership with Odysseus: ζευγάρις ἑτοῖμος ἦν ἔμοι σεμαφόρος (once harnessed he was my willing trace-horse — Ag. 842).

The chorus of the Choephoroe applied a couple of yoke metaphors to Orestes, both of them representing him, though in a different sense, as one who is not in command of his situation. Likening Orestes to a colt ζυγόντι ἐν ἀρμασίν / πηγάτον (harnessed to the chariot of woe— Cho. 795–6), the chorus elaborates the equestrian metaphor into a prayer for moderation on his part and eventual
success. Then, after the killing of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, the chorus praises him but urges him μὴ ἐπιζευγθῆς στόμα / φῆμη πονηρά (and do not yoke your mouth to inauspicious words — Cho. 1044-5). Here one imagines Orestes' mouth as the chariot and ill-omened words as the horses which may run away with it. The metaphor has presumably been inspired by Orestes' earlier comparison of himself to a charioteer carried afield by his restive wits (Cho. 1022 f.).

Perhaps no form of constraint is as complete as that caused by a net encompassing one's body, and metaphors involving varieties of nets are especially numerous in the Oresteia. Night is pictured as casting στεγανὸν δίκτυον over Troy (a covering net—Ag. 358), the adjective suggesting a mesh so close that the net acts as a roof or lid. — Ag. 358), the adjective suggesting a mesh so close that the net acts as a roof or lid. Here Aeschylus introduces a note of paradox: a whole city has been enveloped by γάγγαμον, normally a small, round net, used especially for catching oysters. The application of the rare specialised term in a metaphorical context comes as a further surprise. One should take the net as betokening slavery (δουλεῖας is genitive of quality), and as belonging to all-catching destruction (ἀτης πανύλιατος is genitive of possession).

The word ἄγρεμα, transferred from a hunter's catch to his means of catching, i.e. net, is applied metaphorically both to Cassandra caught in the net of destiny — ἐντὸς . . . μορφήμων ἄγρεματον (Ag. 1048) — and to Agamemnon killed ποικίλος ἄγρεματον (Eum. 460). One assumes that the adjective serves the double function of describing the net and of alluding, by transference, to the craftiness of the murderer. Clytemnestra is herself called a (hunter's) net—ἀρκος (Ag. 1116) — by Cassandra just after her vision of δίκτυον . . . Ἄιδου (a net of Death), and in exulting over her killing of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra compares her earlier hypocrisy to nets fenced too high to be leapt over (Ag. 1375-6) — ἄρκυστα suggests a somewhat elaborate setting up of nets. In the following description of the actual murder she calls the robe thrown over Agamemnon ἄμφιβληστρον (Ag. 1382 and cf. Electra's echo at Cho. 492). This is normally a casting net, and the addition ἄς ἀνὰ ἱκίθων (as of fish) has the effect of diminishing Agamemnon's stature even further. Aegisthus, too, associates Agamemnon's death with a net, though from an altogether different point of view, when he speaks of him as τῆς Δίκης ἐν ἔρκεσιν (in the toils of Justice — Ag. 1611) — ἔρκος may refer to a variety of enclosing structures, but the plural is here used in the specialised sense of a net for the catching of birds. The metaphor is especially striking when the net either belongs to Justice or represents it. With such great emphasis on various types of nets, one is naturally inclined to interpret the βρόχος that Orestes is preparing for Clytemnestra and Aegisthus (Cho. 557) not in its first meaning of 'noose' but rather in its secondary one of 'net' (either for birds or beasts). Then, in revealing his victims' corpses, he seems almost to review the earlier metaphorical usages by speculating grimly whether their covering should be called ἄγρεμα (Cho. 998), δίκτυον (999)4 or ἄρκος (1000).

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Finally in a story of a continuing blood feud, it is hardly surprising that in turn Orestes is seen by the Erinyes as a wild beast escaped ἑξ ἀρκόν (Eum. 147).

Metaphors taken from archery and medicine, though recurrent in the Oresteia, have not the obvious binding effect of those treated above. Their contribution to the themes of the trilogy is less marked, and conspicuously neat patterns are not always discernible. However, some classification is possible, and a few instances stand out from the rest. Archery metaphors may be associated with hitting the mark in conversation or thought (Ag. 628 and 1194; Cho. 1033), or with attempts at vengeance: Zeus is depicted as bending his bow at Alexander so that his shaft will neither fall short of its mark nor fly beyond the stars in vain (Ag. 363–6), and Orestes, echoing Apollo, attributes σκοτεινὸν . . . βέλος (a dark shaft) to the infernal powers moved by a murder victim’s appeals for vengeance (Cho. 286). Other types of striving, too, are illustrated by metaphors derived from archery: on learning of Orestes’ pretended death, Clytemnestra speaks of the curse on her house as subduing things from afar with unerring arrows (Cho. 694); the Erinyes declare their indictment of Orestes finished with the words τοι ἐκαστοὶ βέλος (every shaft has been shot — Eum. 676). However, the most suggestive applications of βέλος are to glances from the eye, especially as they create a contrast between the pitiful last glances of the virgin Iphigeneia at her sacrifice and, by inference, the wanton, seductive looks of Helen, from whose misconduct so many sufferings arose: cf. ἐβαλλ’ ἐκαστὸν θυτή- / ρων ἀπ’ ὀμίμος βέλος φιλοίκτω (she struck each of her sacrificers with her eye’s piteous shaft — Ag. 240–1) and μάλακον ὀμίμος βέλος (a gentle shaft darted from the eye — Ag. 742). If one thinks of the two passages side by side, Iphigeneia becomes all the more pathetic, Helen all the guiltier.

Aeschylus’ interest in medical phenomena is most memorably apparent in Orestes’ description of some wasting disease (Cho. 280–2), and metaphors from medicine, comparatively rare in other plays, are frequent in the Oresteia. While the application of one to the fuelling of torches by oil may be contrived (Ag. 94–6), a happy example occurs in Ag. 1003–4. Here the personification of νόσος (disease) as γείτον ὀμίμος (a neighbour [to health], sharing a party-wall) is particularly striking. The metaphor is subservient to a paratactic simile, a comparison being drawn between the thinness of the dividing line between prosperity and calamity and of that between good health and disease.

The watchman’s ὕπνου τὸ δ’ ἀντίμολον ἐντέμινον ἄκος (Ag. 17) is a remarkable example of Aeschylus’ indifference to ἡθοποίησις. Such bombastic language might have been less startling had it come from Agamemnon’s lips. ‘Incising this cure, song-substitute of sleep’ evidently means ‘singing to ward off sleep’, but the expedient of song is hardly radical enough to warrant the strong metaphor from surgery. Agamemnon’s ὑπὸ δὲ καὶ δεὶ φαρμάκα παιονίων, / ἦτοι κέλευτες ἦ τεμόντες εὐφόρως / πειρασόμεθα π’ ἀποστρέψας νόσου (Ag. 848–50), if interpreted literally, would mean that, where healing drugs were called for (in affairs of state), we would use cautery or surgery, but φάρμακα may here be being
applied in its broader sense of 'remedy'. The force of παυοντων would, in that case, be somewhat weakened. Surgery alone lies behind the chorus' sarcastic remark that Clytaemnestra hopes, after her dream, that her libations will cure her woes: as if by surgery ὀκος τομαίον ἐλπίσασα πημάτων (Cho. 539). The superficiality of her gesture and the misguidedness of her belief are exposed through the addition of τομαίον to the otherwise colourless ὀκος.5

Metaphors in the Oresteia are, generally speaking, more numerous and more striking than in Aeschylus' other plays.6 While occasional infelicities have been illustrated, the metaphors have more often contributed something of worth to the dramas. A number of evident leitmotivos have been supplied. The fate of the oppressors has been linked with that of their victims, so that the continuity of the wrongdoing has been underlined. But, above all, the recurrent metaphors have given the reader valuable additional insight into the characters' way of regarding themselves and those about them.

NOTES

1. All quotations and references are based on the text of D.L. Page (1972), in the Oxford Classical Texts series.
2. For an analysis of this fable see Denniston and Page's commentary on Agamemnon (Oxford 1957), p.135. The editors stress aspects of the fable which are inapplicable to Helen.
4. It is worth drawing attention to the use of ὀκος in a metaphor not involving constraint. As she crouches at Agamemnon's tomb, Electra says that children are like corks buoying up a net, since they perpetuate the family (Cho. 505–7). Agamemnon, though dead, is not really dead, thanks to his children. Thus, the victim of a net has himself become a net, though the idea is quite different from that of Cassandra's equation of Clytaemnestra with one. Another interesting parallel is Clytaemnestra's grotesque statement that Agamemnon would be more riddled with holes than a net if he had, at Troy, received in reality as many wounds as he was reported to have received (Ag. 866–8).
5. cf. Cho. 471–2 Εἰηνος . . . ὀκος, where the adjective, possibly referring to lint, appears to contribute little, but the text itself may need curing.
6. The following is a small selection with which comparisons could be drawn: bit – P.V. 672; yoke: Pers. 50, 72 and 594, Sept. 75, 471 and 793, P.V. 108 and 578; net: P.V. 1078; medical: Suppr. 268, P.V. 249 and 499.
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