

Clytemnestra's Net: Aeschylus' *Oresteia* and the Text of Tapestries

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Ripe with incarnations of the Greek word *telos* (meaning in its variations: end, sacrifice, goal), the *Oresteia*, not surprisingly, engenders teleological readings from its scholars. Particularly in the case of gender, such readings take a typical stance in lambasting Aeschylus for creating a trilogy that promotes a restoration of patriarchy. Froma Zeitlin, in her article "The Dynamics of Mythology: Myth and Mythmaking in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*," most famously traces the progression of social forces in the trilogy from the "matriarchy" of the monstrous Clytemnestra to the "patriarchy" of the male-born Athena's democracy.¹ Subsequent readings have followed her work,² causing much of feminist scholarship surrounding the *Oresteia* to take up the same plot derived, theme based evidence as fact-citing performative moments only to reinforce the teleological reading originating from Zeitlin. Her article, a breakthrough in feminist scholarship, has subsequently become a fixed entity, producing a wealth of similar methods of interpretation. Feminist classical scholarship especially has ignored the terms that evaluation of the performance spectacle can offer. My task is to reverse this trend; exploring the trilogy though its performative moments, I use language and props to re-imagine the spectacle of the *Oresteia*.

One of the strongest visual moments in Greek tragedy occurs when Clytemnestra lures Agamemnon to his death by persuading him to walk into the palace on delicate tapestries. Naturally, the tapestry section of *Agamemnon* has generated a tremendous amount of discourse in classical scholarship, though the tapestry has not been evaluated as a prop within a performance. Andrew Sofer's book *The Stage Life of Props* describes a prop as "something an object becomes, rather than something an object is."³ In a society without industrial manufacturing, the cultural significance of the object outside of its stage meaning may yield a tension in the object's becoming a prop. The prop presented cannot be artificial; in other words, unlike props today, it is not something of lesser value meant to *represent* something that is fine. Instead, the work must be the fine thing itself, woven perhaps by many women in preparation for its one time use in the production. The tapestry

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is a liminal entity that signifies in the process of its becoming a prop, which in this case means that the prop signifies in the process of its ruination by Agamemnon. But what is being ruined here? Because weaving in ancient Greece was women's work, the prop itself would be connected to women. And the ruination of the tapestry would signify the ruination of women's work, leading possibly to the idea of the ruination of women. In this essay, I offer an alternative feminist perspective: concentrating on the construction of the feminine through materiality, I argue that the tapestry creates a connection between textiles and women, which reverberates throughout the trilogy as a representation of women's plight.

Thinking about women's representations in Athenian performance means thinking about the audience as well. Although women were probably permitted to attend religious festivals such as City Dionysia,⁴ they still suffered severe restrictions under patriarchal Athens at the time of the *Oresteia's* presentation (458 BCE). Wives especially, it seems, were subject to the whims of men. Evidence suggests that most of the time wives were required to stay at home, both as part of their work, and as a social custom. They were to obey the will of their guardians, or *kyrioi*: women's fathers, husbands, or closest male relatives (including their sons).⁵ Female Athenian citizens were confined to the home because they were the only women in Athens who could bear legal heirs to their husbands.

This type of cloistering is reflected in the *Oresteia* by a fascination with feminine space and work. Many props used in the trilogy—including tapestries, robes, and jars for pouring libations—operate as signs that recall the work and duties of women. Space is similarly associated with women. In *Agamemnon*, the setting implies a conflict between the interior female space of the house and the exterior space of men. As Blundell smartly suggests, “the backdrop which divides men and women becomes the focal point of their confrontation—the point at which public and private concerns intersect.”⁶ Confrontations are caused by women's revolt against the laws that restrict them to the house. The external space in the play is thus usurped by women, causing a disruption in gender norms. The importance of this spatial conflict to the play is enhanced by the possibility that this trilogy was the first to make use of the *skene façade*.⁷

Gender antitheses reinforce the topsy-turvy side of the feminization of the external space. At the beginning of *Agamemnon*, the Watchman refers to Clytemnestra's fortitude as “a lady's male strength of heart” in lines 10-11,⁸ thus setting up the premise in the play that Clytemnestra's actions perform a gender crossover. The power Clytemnestra wields is mounted theatrically when she makes her first appearance onstage. Scholars dispute where exactly Clytemnestra enters during the Chorus's speech, but it is probable that she enters at line 83 of the play and remains onstage, silent throughout the Chorus's vivid description of her daughter Iphigenia's slaughter.⁹ When the Chorus traces Agamemnon's dilemma—whether to slaughter his child or forego the war against Troy—Aeschylus' language inspires

a moment of pity in the spectators for Agamemnon as he ponders what to do. This momentary empathy surely wanes as Agamemnon chooses to slay his daughter and Aeschylus makes the man into a monster who is “reckless,” “emboldened with base designs,” and “wretchedly mad.”¹⁰ Contrasted with this depiction of Agamemnon is the image of Iphigenia, a delicate maiden child, the perfect picture of innocence in the Greek mind, calling out to her father in protest. W.B. Stanford contends that the *emotional impact* of the scene “is as powerful as any in Greek tragedy.”¹¹ The retelling of the tale is even more poignant when one imagines Clytemnestra standing silently on the stage as the Chorus paints the horrifying picture of her daughter’s death.

Initially, the spectators may find themselves identifying with the Chorus. Preconceived notions associated with the tale set them against Clytemnestra. But Aeschylus soon disrupts these preconceived notions by associating the Chorus’s distrust of the Queen with misconception. When Clytemnestra finally speaks, she tells the Chorus she received notice that Troy was conquered by the Greeks and that Agamemnon and company are on their way home. But the Chorus of male elders doubts her message. Almost immediately following their protestations, a herald appears confirming Agamemnon’s voyage home from Troy. With the proof of Agamemnon’s return, Clytemnestra rebukes the Chorus for formerly disbelieving her tale. As their doubts are extinguished, so too are those of the spectator. At least for this moment, Aeschylus reverses the expectations of the spectators (who know of Clytemnestra’s deceit) by positioning the Queen as one to be believed, while discrediting not only the male elders but more specifically their misogynist notions of women.

Given the opportunity to empathize with the Queen after hearing of the atrocious sacrifice of her daughter, while admiring her challenges to the misogynistic Chorus, the spectators now await the arrival of the previously ridiculed Agamemnon, who enters with Cassandra and an entourage of soldiers. Following the King’s speech detailing his return to the Chorus, Clytemnestra speaks of her own sufferings in 866-868, waiting out the war without her husband: “and if this man had met with all the wounds that rumor had conveyed into this house, he had been cut full of holes like a fishing net.” The word used here for net is the neuter *diktuon*.¹² Translated as fishing net, the word not only discloses Clytemnestra’s supposed fears, but also prefigures the circumstances surrounding Agamemnon’s death, when he is ensnared in a robe functioning like a *diktuon* and then cut full of holes by his wife.

The use of *diktuon* in this speech also predicts the entrapment that commences with Clytemnestra’s command to the hesitant serving women to lay the fine tapestries before Agamemnon. Language and spectacle both play key roles in prompting the tapestries’ connection with the feminine. When first mentioned, the word used for tapestries is *petasmata*¹³ meaning “anything spread out.” Immediately following this is *porphurostrôtos* or “spread with purple cloth.” Here the terms are rather

general, but when Agamemnon refuses to step on the tapestries, he refers to them as *heimata* meaning garment or carpet, and then as *en poikilois kallesin*—wrought in beautiful colors. Later on, in 959-960, Clytemnestra refers to the tapestries as *kêkis porphyras* or dye of the murex and *heimata*.

But why would Clytemnestra specify the dye here, and why would Agamemnon emphasize the color of the carpet in protesting his wife's suggestion? The contrasting terms *porphurostrôtos*, *poikilois kallesin*, and *kêkis porphyras* have yielded many opinions with regard to the color of the cloth. In "Aspects of Dramatic Symbolism: Three Studies in the *Oresteia*," R.F. Goheen evaluates the dialogue and concludes that the tapestry "was almost certainly an ambiguous blood-color, probably the dark purplish red or deep reddish brown which blood takes on after it is exposed to the air."¹⁴ This color, deemed purple, possessed tremendous significance in the ancient world. Recounting the genealogy of purple's status in ancient culture, Meyer Reinhold claims that purple garments "were valued and displayed in many societies as a symbol of economic capability, social status, and official rank."¹⁵

In the play's text, the value of the tapestries continues to increase as the tension unfolds in Agamemnon's refusal to walk on the tapestries, especially in relation to the fine workmanship that went into them. The words that follow in 936, 946, and 949 that refer to the rich tapestries are: *poikilos*, wrought in various colors; *halourgesin*, purple clothing wrought in or by the sea; and *argurônêtous th'huphas*, woven robe or web purchased with silver. Despite the numerous possibilities of duplicating words in the meter, Aeschylus never references the "tapestries" using the same word. Taplin has pointed out that "it may be no accident that the exact nature and function of the cloth are unclear." He also claims that even the color has double significance; *porphyra* both indicates the expensiveness of the cloth and recalls blood.¹⁶ The cloth may remain enigmatic to enable its association with other textiles that appear (sometimes covered in blood) throughout the trilogy. But one aspect of the tapestry is emphasized from the start. Each choice Aeschylus makes seems to move the tapestry closer to something that is made. Beginning as just some kind of object spread out, it transforms into a garment or carpet, then a garment. Finally the tapestry emerges as something *woven*.

For modern audiences, the tapestry has little value other than that assigned to it by the importance of the staging. The prop is most probably machine-made. Thus, the spectator is hardly concerned with the worker whose fine artisanship is being trampled by Agamemnon's foul feet. In the ancient Greek theatre, however, the experience would be quite different, especially for those in the audience who spent the majority of their day weaving textiles such as the one presented onstage. Blundell explains the connection between women and weaving:

Women of all social classes would have engaged in the important task of woolworking. . . . Weaving in particular was viewed as

the quintessential female accomplishment, and it was common for women to honour a deity with a gift of a fine piece of work. . . . Much of the interior decoration of a home was also supplied by its womenfolk in the form of wall-hangings, bedcovers, and cushions. . . . Weaving must have been back-breaking and laborious work, but there can be no doubt that for Athenian women their handicrafts would have been a source of pride.¹⁷

The “back-breaking” work Blundell refers to was physically taxing because the Greeks used an upright warp-weighted loom. This means that the lengthwise threads, or warps that are fixed under tension to the loom, were attached to a wooden bar at the top and then weighted at the bottom or on the ground to fulfill the tension. To weave, women *walked* back and forth across the loom interlacing the wefts, or the threads perpendicular to the ground, to the warp and then beat the threads upward into the rest of the cloth.¹⁸ Woven cloth was used as clothing, decoration in the house, and tributes to the gods.¹⁹

Weaving was not only a quintessential female accomplishment but also an art from which men were socially ostracized. Kathryn Kruger has pointed out that men depicted as weavers in literature were characterized as feminine, or weak.²⁰ The only locale known to employ male weavers was Egypt. Herodotus makes reference to this anomaly:

The Egyptians, along with having their own peculiar climate and a river with a nature different from all other rivers, have established many habits and customs which are almost the complete opposite of the rest of mankind. For example, the women go to market and keep shop, while the men stay at home and weave.²¹

The wonder expressed in his remarks implies that he is presenting new information to his readers (the Athenian public). Because his *Histories* were not published until approximately 440 BCE—eighteen years after the first performance of the *Oresteia*—the general Athenian consciousness must have assumed that foreign garments as well as local ones were woven by women.

Extant textiles are too limited to determine (a) what the designs looked like and (b) how they functioned in association with their creators. There are, however, vases and literary evidence suggesting that the designs in fabric could have imparted great meaning. Wives were not educated to be literate so it is possible that they communicated through their weaving.²² Maria Pantelia has also suggested that evidence from literature characterizes weaving as an escape from “domestic disorder.”²³ Women poured their thoughts and feelings into the fabric;

it was a rare outlet or form of expression for wives living in societies where they were cloistered.²⁴

Perhaps this sentiment toward the cloth accounts for the maidens' delay at spreading out the tapestries before Agamemnon's feet. Even if the tapestries were, as Agamemnon states, "purchased with silver," the textile would still be associated with women and women's work.²⁵ The maidens, like most women in ancient times, probably spent most of their days weaving, and the implication may be that they were horrified at the possibility of damaging women's fine handiwork.

The color of the garment also suggests that it was purchased elsewhere. Purple dyeing originated in the Near East, and at the time Agamemnon lived, probably the twelfth century BCE, it is thought that sea purple was only available in Persia. Of course, the connection between where Agamemnon purchased the cloth and his accepted period of existence presupposes that the playwright and audience of the fifth century BCE maintained standards of historical authenticity.²⁶ If not, then they may have assumed that the cloth was of Greek origin. By the sixth century BCE, the manufacture of purple textiles along the Argive coast had established a reputation worthy enough to garner business from the Persian royalty.²⁷ It is possible, then, that the Greek audience viewed the tapestry as having a Greek or Persian origin. In any case, the cloth, historically, would have been woven by women. Whether woven by foreign women or the women serving in the palace of Agamemnon, the tapestry invokes women's work, and Agamemnon's translation of this work, the art that women poured their hearts into, as "something purchased with silver" renders him a man who cares more about the expense than the craft.

When Agamemnon thus agrees to trample on the carpets, he is not only offending the gods in his pride, but also trampling on the workmanship of many women. Stepping on the cloth would mean dishonoring the work of Athenian women. So Agamemnon tramples not only the work of the women who made the cloth, but also the workmanship of all the women in the Athenian audience. He tramples on woman, violating her through her work.

While Agamemnon and Clytemnestra enter the house, Cassandra remains outside. The quiet tension felt in this moment ruptures when Clytemnestra leaves and Cassandra steps from the chariot raving of her destiny. Again the net imagery comes into play. Cassandra refers to the net in 1115 using *diktuon* when asking the Chorus, "Is this some net of death?" It is questionable here whether Cassandra uses the net as a metaphor for a trap, or if she refers specifically to the robe, mentioned later, that holds Agamemnon while Clytemnestra strikes him with her axe. The most probable explanation is that this *diktuon* alludes to the metaphorical trap of death while it anticipates Clytemnestra's physical net.

A connection between Clytemnestra and the net adds to gender ambiguity. In the next line, Cassandra does not refer to Clytemnestra as simply wielding a net, but actually embodying it. She asks in 1116, "Or is the net the wife, the

murderess?" This statement is made just prior to Cassandra's detailed description of Agamemnon's impending attack:

Ah! Ah! Look! Look! Keep the bull from
The cow. Having captured him
In the robe, the blackhorned trap,
She strikes him. And he falls in the watery vessel.²⁸

The "robe" in this cry is actually *peplos* in Greek, a woven cloth, sheet, carpet, or curtain. Again, the object of women's work returns, but here Aeschylus makes the connection literal. As before, the language used presents strong semiotic tensions in the cloth's relationship to the women who made it, and more extensively, all women who make such cloths. While Clytemnestra wields a robe/net to catch Agamemnon, she *is* a net, as a murderer pulling him towards death. Offstage, Clytemnestra embodies the robe, as the robe embodies the women offstage.

At the same time, there is a shift in the play's positioning of Clytemnestra. As the spectators pity the doomed concubine/slave, Cassandra tells of Clytemnestra's cunning, her pleasing Agamemnon while plotting to kill him. Because of these actions, Cassandra deems Clytemnestra a *stugnê kuôn* or "hateful bitch"²⁹ and asks what kind of *dusphiles dakos* or "hateful beast" would be most fitting to describe her. Cassandra's speech has the spectators caught in a state of perplexity. They feel for Clytemnestra's position and understand the necessity for revenge, but they are put off from the idea of murder by Cassandra's statements. There is something terribly malicious in the method; in the act, it would seem that Clytemnestra might have transformed into a shameless state similar to that of Agamemnon when he sacrificed Iphigenia.

Clytemnestra's shamelessness is confirmed when Cassandra foretells her own death. Leaving the subject of Cassandra's own death until last, Aeschylus has her pull the spectators into confirmation that the act of murder about to happen will exceed the realm of justifiable revenge. Violence begets more violence, and woman, originally the mastermind of usurpation of power, soon becomes the victim. The victim in this case is Cassandra, the most innocent character in the trilogy; it is she whose city was destroyed, who was raped by the conqueror, and who was forced to travel to his new home to live as a slave.

With this shift from mastermind to victim, so too comes a shift in the status of the robe. As Cassandra acquiesces in her death, she *disrobes*, leaving behind her staff, flowers, and prophetic robes of Apollo.³⁰ It is possible that Cassandra's disrobing signifies a willingness to submit to death. In Athenian marriage, scholars have noted that the removal of the veil signified the bride's willingness to marry the groom.³¹ Indeed, it seems to be the only moment allotted for the young woman's consent. Cassandra's actions also mirror Iphigenia's, as described by the Chorus at

the beginning of the play, when Iphigenia poured her robe to the ground. Although Iphigenia protested her father's mandate in words, she finally resigned herself to her sacrifice by performing the action of a bride, knowing that she was to be transferred from one male guardian (Agamemnon—the father) to another (Hades). As stated previously, it is during this speech that the spectators first form their empathetic connection with Clytemnestra—who remains silent onstage, hearing the Chorus speak of her daughter's sacrifice. It is only fitting, then, that the audience's sympathies turn when Cassandra performs the same action to demonstrate her willingness to walk into Clytemnestra's planned trap.

Before she ascends the palace steps, Cassandra calls out in line 1318 that another woman will die because of her impending and unjust murder. Through this mandate, she is not only the prophet but also the architect of future events. Cassandra is one woman about to die; Iphigenia was the first; and Clytemnestra, because of her actions, is the last. I agree with Rehm's supposition that Cassandra's death, and her willingness to go to it, alters the spectators' opinion of Clytemnestra. Cassandra's death, "more than the slaying of Agamemnon[,] turns the audience against her and makes her [Clytemnestra's] death acceptable."³² This conflict will play itself out through the rest of the trilogy: Orestes' inculpability will rely upon the idea that he did not overstep his boundaries in the violence he committed.

When Clytemnestra returns, she exults over the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra. It is evident from her speech that her concerns lie with the death of Agamemnon. The body of Cassandra is present onstage, silent like Clytemnestra in the beginning, but speaking volumes to the audience. Against this morbid picture, Clytemnestra defends her actions:

All that I have spoken before under the circumstances,
I will now not be ashamed to speak against.
How else could one administer hate for a hateful man,
A man who appeared to be loving, and fashion the hostile nets
High enough to prevent overleaping?
In this contest that has plagued my thoughts
For years, victory has come to me at last.
I stand in the place where I struck him dead.
This I have plotted, and I do not deny this.
So that his destiny could neither flee death nor keep it away.
Spreading them boundlessly, just as with fish,
I cast the evil, rich robes around him.³³

Asking how she managed to succeed in the murder, here the Queen first uses the word *arkus*, or as previously mentioned, "hunting net." Appropriately enough, in describing the murder moments later, Clytemnestra refers to a net as something

thrown around, *amphiblêstron*. The word here can mean cloak, but Clytemnestra turns it into a fishing net when she remarks that her method of entrapment was “just as with fish.” Agamemnon is a fish in the bathwater, caught in her net. Finally using the word *heima*, a word used previously to describe the tapestry and translated here as robes, Clytemnestra explains how she entangled and murdered her husband.³⁴

Acting as a fisherman, Clytemnestra performs a man’s duty by trapping her husband in a net. Yet, because she uses robes, her tools are that of a woman; they provide a connection between husband and wife. In “The Last Bath of Agamemnon,” Richard Seaford details the significance of the robe to marriage: “A wife sleeps on a *eune* [bed] with her living husband under a robe, and when he dies she puts a robe over his body on a *eune*.”³⁵ Clytemnestra, in transforming the robe into an instrument of death, has also altered her gender role from a wife to man. Her duty is to sleep with him under the robe and cover him with it when he dies as a sign of honoring his death or their marriage in his death, but instead, she acts like a fisherman or a hunter, traps him and his concubine in it, and murders them both. The emphasis on Clytemnestra’s gender transformation is heightened by the amalgamation of hunting and fishing.³⁶ The imagery positions Clytemnestra as one overstepping the bounds of her gender. In “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Judith Butler surmises that

Discrete genders are part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished. Because there is neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.³⁷

Gender was conscripted in ancient Greece into strict binaries. Men did not weave; women did. Men owned property; women conveyed dowries. Men were the guardians of women; women needed to be guarded. Murder for the purpose of usurping power was not a task that women undertook. Women in tragedy tend to murder their children, not their husbands. In *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra’s crossover to a male role is first exemplified when Cassandra tries to convince the Chorus of Agamemnon’s impending murder. She predicts in 1250, “they plan to strike, and kill.” And even though she has previously specified that it is a woman who initiates the murder, the Chorus asks her in 1251, “what *man* is this who prepares this polluted act?” The miscommunication is blamed on Cassandra’s divination, but her assertion in 1254 that she knows Greek “too well” indicates that the Chorus’s mishearing of her words has more to do with their assumptions as to what gender

of person would carry out such a deed. In the eyes of the Chorus—and at this point in the play, the audience—the deed that Clytemnestra performs is a man's deed.

Reinforcing this point is Aeschylus' imagery of men's work—hunting and fishing—as juxtaposed with the earlier visual reference to the ruination of women's work, when Agamemnon tramples the tapestry. The murder weapon itself takes part in the transformation, as a robe, another textile to be associated with women not only in its creation but also in its previously stated purpose: the wife covers the body of her husband with it. But, just as Clytemnestra's act turns her from a woman to a man, the act also turns the prop from a robe, a cloth created by women, to a net created and used by men to perform their work.

Clytemnestra's gender crossover is complicated by her own words. As she speaks in line 1401 to the Chorus's objections to the murder of her husband, Clytemnestra chastises them by saying "you try me as a senseless woman." The Chorus doubts Clytemnestra's aptitude because they think of her as a mere woman.

Oppositions also assist in moving Clytemnestra's gender to the male side. Casting her net, the Queen catches fish; both Agamemnon and Cassandra embody her prey. The characterization of Agamemnon as a fish feminizes the late king. James Davidson writes of the uncanny link between fish and women. He points to numerous sources that have made comparisons between the fetish for prostitutes and young men (prized for their femininity) and the delicacy of fish and concludes that this particularly sexual association was prevalent in Greek society.³⁸ Though the comparison is not sexual in the *Oresteia*, Agamemnon's status as a caught fish is certainly a feminization. Clytemnestra has turned the patriarchal world upside down on her husband by murdering him in order to usurp his rule, or rather to continue her own.

Even when Aegisthus steps into the picture, Clytemnestra embodies the role of the man. The Chorus belittles Aegisthus for staying in the house with Clytemnestra awaiting the king's arrival. His actions prompt the Chorus to employ their own gender reversal when they address Aegisthus in 1625-1626: "woman, you waited in the house for them to come here." Aegisthus is called a woman because he hid inside the palace walls—the domain of women—instead of fighting at Troy with the other men or openly attempting to take over the kingdom from Agamemnon. As the one who murdered the king, Clytemnestra rules over the kingdom. Aegisthus' inaction in *Agamemnon* makes possible Clytemnestra's gender crossover because she is able to perform the male usurper.

Clytemnestra's gender reversal continues in *Choephoroe* 658-667 when Orestes asks to be announced at the palace doors to the rulers of the house and specifies that a man should come to the door to hear his news. It is, of course, Clytemnestra and not Aegisthus who appears. Later, at 889, after Aegisthus' murder, Clytemnestra calls out desperately for someone to give her the *androkmêta pelekun* or man-axe.

By desiring to wield the weapon of a man, she seeks a man's status—only to have her desire cut down by her son.

Returning to *Agamemnon*, the final net reference is spoken by Aegisthus in 1580, who delights in seeing Clytemnestra's handiwork: Agamemnon wrapped in his own blood. It indicates the fulfillment of the masculine takeover of the net as a hunting device from its original feminine significance as woven cloth. The word chosen is *pagai* or trap/anything that fixes or fastens. Aegisthus' declaration that the trap is *huphanta*, or woven, implies that Clytemnestra found a feminine means to complete a male task.

Near the current murder scene lie Cassandra's cast off garments, including flowers, robes, and a staff that marked her. The "robe of death" around the fallen Agamemnon is juxtaposed to Cassandra's "robe of acquiescence" and a death that will prompt its own revenge. As the spectator views the robe lying before the dead Cassandra, there is a sense of incompleteness. The robe of woman is again trampled and waiting for its retribution.

With Clytemnestra taking over the man's position, or "playing the other" in a reversal of Zeitlin's original meaning,³⁹ the remaining task of the trilogy is to turn the topsy-turvy rule of the House of Atreus back on its feet. Orestes and Electra become the agents of this task in *Choephoroe* when Orestes returns to Mycenae for an all too foreseeable reunion with his sister. Orestes' return at the start of the play again prompts another vista of women's actions and space. Orestes first visits his father's untended grave to place a lock of his own hair in mourning. At the sound of Electra and the Libation Bearers entering, Orestes and Pylades hide, peering like the Greek spectators, at the women's actions from afar. Because the women's offering takes place outside the palace walls, even the customary duties that they perform—pouring libations to the dead—are haunted by a sense of sinful error.

With Electra outside the palace walls, and Orestes hidden, it seems that the topsy-turvy gender world persists even for these two. Gender opposition soon mellows into gender ambiguity as Electra picks up on Orestes' presence. She notes the likeness of the lock of hair to her own—a common shared attribute between siblings. Then she sees his footprints and implausibly finds them to match her own. At this stage, Aeschylus has dis-gendered both Orestes and Electra for the purposes of recognition.⁴⁰ They possess the same gender, one straddling Greek notions of male/female. Somehow in this liminal state, Electra is still dubious of Orestes' return, and this doubt continues even when Orestes presents himself in person to her. He makes note of her doubt and proceeds to convince her that he is her brother:

Seeing me now, you do not know me.
But when you looked at this beloved lock from my head
And when you examined my tracks

You grew excited thinking you saw me.
 Putting the cutting of your brother's hair
 To my hair, see that it matches your head.
 And look at this robe, the work of your hand
 Your weaving strokes and the beasts you embroidered.
 Cease your excitement, do not give in to the joy in your heart.
 For I sense those nearest to us are hateful.⁴¹

Electra does not react to Orestes' explanation of the footprints, nor does she believe him when he puts the lock up against his own hair. It is only when her weaving is presented, something indeed that differentiates the two of them, that Orestes has to suppress her excitement. Electra recognizes more than her handiwork: it is Orestes' appreciation of her weaving that confirms he is her brother. Contrast Orestes' reference to his *huphasma* or robe with Agamemnon's references to the tapestry at the beginning of the trilogy. Agamemnon has no care for the work that went into the textile; his only interest is its cost. Orestes' reference to Electra's blade strokes characterizes him as one who has paid attention to his sister's detailed work; he, unlike his father, values women's work as artistry rather than capital.⁴²

At the very moment of recognition, Orestes takes his first step into male gender definition by calming Electra's overbearing emotions. Together, the two of them pray to their father to give Orestes the power to avenge Agamemnon's death. Electra urges her father's spirit in 492 to recall the *amphiblêstron* or "anything thrown around" and Orestes follows directly, goading Agamemnon to remember "you were hunted with fetters not made of bronze."

Aeschylus has left the character Cassandra unmentioned throughout the second play. Even if her death swayed the spectators against Clytemnestra in the first play, Agamemnon's death now must prompt them to support Orestes. The loss of dowry for Electra and the mistreatment of the attendant ladies (the Chorus) have heightened the spectators' desire to see the death of Agamemnon avenged. The mistreatment of women is again a key. The Chorus has been led away from their fathers' houses to serve as slaves to Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. And despite the fact that Clytemnestra lives on, her daughter's dowry is denied; Electra remains a woman denied the privilege expected by the Athenian audience for aristocratic women.

Women, and the textiles they create, again become the force that turns spectators toward the hero. When the Chorus is first introduced at the beginning of the play, they discuss their mandate in lines 22-31 to leave the palace to pour libations. They speak of tearing at their linens in lamentation for Agamemnon—ruining their garments in traditional lamentation as their lives too are being ruined by their current lord. Robes resurface in the play after Orestes murders Aegisthus and his mother. Like the tapestry in *Agamemnon*, the robe is spread out, though this time it is held

up by the female Chorus, who stand in a semicircle around Orestes according to his instructions. Orestes speaks of how the robe became not only a net, but also a binding force (*desmon*, in line 981) for his father's hands and feet. He urges all to behold his mother's unholy handiwork—a verbal play upon the connection to the crafting of both the robe and Agamemnon's murder. Calling his mother a sea serpent and a viper (*muraina*, in line 1002), Orestes transforms his mother, the predator, into the hunted animal. Caught in her own net, Clytemnestra is no longer ruler; the gender subversion is undone.

In perhaps the best known speech in *Choephoroe*, Orestes deems the robe to be his witness to his mother's injustice:

Did she do it or did she not do it? My witness is
This robe, in which she thrust Aegisthus' sword.
And the ooze of bloody murder works together with time,
Ruining the embroidery with multiple stabs.⁴³

His personification of the robe calls to the minds of the spectators the true witness and unmentioned victim, Cassandra, whose tearing off of her own robes before entering death may infuse the disembodied object with the signification of her presence. When Orestes personifies the robe as his "witness," he refers not to Agamemnon but Cassandra. The robe Orestes now holds up is the one that killed her and not the one she tore off before entering the palace to die at the end of the first play. This "robe of death" is the visible sign evoking an absent one, Cassandra's "robe of acquiescence," and infusing the disembodied object with her presence. Cassandra's final prayers—that another woman would die for her—surely ring out in the spectators' minds when Clytemnestra's death is followed by the resuscitation of the robe by the female Chorus. Some spectators may see Cassandra's death as finally vindicated. Orestes' speech turns Clytemnestra into the one who ruins women's work. Bloodstains have ruined the embroidery—the very intricacy of women's work. The bloodstains surely recall the color of the tapestry; that odd crimson purple is again a sign of destruction, though this time it is both a representation of death (since the stains were presumably from Agamemnon and the unmentioned Cassandra) and a substance ruining the textile.

Because the embroidery and the images in weaving can be considered women's mode of writing, it is shameful that Clytemnestra would choose to desecrate the fine work by murdering Agamemnon in the embroidered robe. Beyond subverting a wife's tool from care to murder, Clytemnestra subverts the purpose of the object—covering women's writing with bloodstains. Because the prop cannot be a poor substitute, but must be a textile that has truly undergone the careful workmanship referred to by Orestes, its powerful ruination in the play impels the audience to value the work of women and thereby side with Orestes, who shares

their sentiments. Although the bloodstains may not be made from real blood, the dye used to represent the blood stains has the same consequence; it ruins a textile woven carefully by women.

Suddenly, with the murder completed at Orestes' hands, it seems that the topsy-turvy world of gender disruption instituted in *Agamemnon* is finally turned right side up. Yet the arrival of the Furies at the end of the play indicates that some part of the balance is still upset. Women, specifically Cassandra, the Libation Bearers, and Electra, have been righted by an act that upsets the bond between mother and son. Matricide, arguably in defense of women in Orestes' case, cannot go unpunished. The Furies arrive at the end of *Choephoroe* to retaliate.

At the beginning of *Eumenides*, Aeschylus' play is transported to a different locale: the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Even this male space provides spectators a glimpse into a forbidden world. The Pythia, or priestess of Apollo, who was not easily accessible to Athenians even if they made the pilgrimage to Delphi, addresses the spectators directly in 55-56, telling of her horror at the arrival of the Furies and noting that the Furies' *kosmos* or fashion was suitable neither to honor a god nor to appear in a man's house. Previously in *Choephoroe* 1049, when Orestes first sees the Furies, he notes that they wear black robes.

Between the second and third plays, the Furies have surrounded Orestes at Delphi; they have trapped him but are put to sleep by Apollo to permit his escape. They awake only after the ghost of Clytemnestra appears and notifies them that Orestes has escaped from their "net." The word used for net here is *arkus* in 146—the first word used by Clytemnestra following Agamemnon's murder to describe the murder device, or robe, as a net. In the *Eumenides*, the *net/robe* is actually an embodied feminine force; the Furies are the robe, binding Orestes to the prohibition against matricide. When they awaken, the Furies reaffirm this imagery by stating that the prey has escaped from their *arkus*.

Though alive, Orestes has become the hunted animal this time, and the Furies both the agents and the methods of entrapment. Anne Lebeck notes the importance of this binding imagery to the play:

Then in *Eumenides*, immediately before the first stasimon, Orestes prays that Athena may come as deliverer to loose him. . . . All earlier images of destiny and destruction as something that entangles man, an object hindering movement, curbing freedom, culminate in this spell with which the Furies bind Orestes.⁴⁴

The boundaries of gender, then, are on trial. Do these female goddesses have a right to bind Orestes to his deed? Can they, through ancient law, rule over Athens as a female body deciding justice? Or does that right fall to the male citizens that Athena appoints?

Interestingly, in the end the vote is split—a perfect continuation of the gender binaries in the play. Athena, the male-born daughter of Zeus, ironically casts the final vote for Orestes. In retribution, the Furies threaten to spread disease across the land, but Athena entreats them to accept new duties as goddesses who receive offerings at ceremonies of childbirth and marriage. Much like the Athenian wives who are restricted to the darkest areas of the home,⁴⁵ the Furies are invited by Athena to descend underground to Erechtheus' home to serve in honor and receive these offerings, thus agreeing to have their responsibilities mitigated by the younger gods.⁴⁶ Although the Furies initially object, they are eventually persuaded by Athena, who instructs her attendants in 1028-1029 to “dress them in purple-dyed garments to pay honor to them,” thus awarding the Furies a final privilege of journeying to their new home in purple robes. Finally, Aeschylus has restored the robe—trampled by Agamemnon, cast off by Cassandra, and torn by Clytemnestra and Orestes—to the female goddesses.

While the third play is undeniably patriarchal and upsets the accomplishments of the previous plays (Clytemnestra's death is never properly avenged and the Furies relinquish their independence), the significance of the robe, and the scenes in which it appears, cannot be ignored. Nor were they probably forgotten by spectators during the third play, *if* they stayed to watch all three works. Here the robe is restored to women and its position of honor, while the man who first defiled the textile remains dead and the man who valued the hard work of his sister in making his own robe is permitted to go free. The women are permitted to return to their quarters—presented in this trilogy as a safe haven from the horrors of slavery and loss of dowry associated with Cassandra, Electra, and the Libation Bearers. So, while Zeitlin's interpretation (among many others) of the trilogy is valid, teleological readings of the work overlook some of the true representations and plights of women. Moreover, Zeitlin's logocentric reading ignores the power of performance; specifically, it works to override the primacy of visual representation onstage, an element that, when taken with language, can flesh out the most compelling moments in the play.

Notes

1. In her interpretation of the trilogy, Zeitlin finds (as I do) that the play is fascinated with the feminine. She, however, sees the image of the female's authority, and thus the representation of women, as degenerating throughout the trilogy from Clytemnestra, a “rebel against the masculine regime,” to the Furies, “archaic, primitive, and regressive.” Zeitlin's argument asserts that the goddess Athena is an androgynous character who ultimately yields all power to the patriarchy of Athenian democracy. Political power is granted to the male while ritual power, that of the Furies, is granted to the female. From I. Zeitlin, “The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*,” *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996) 89. This essay was first published in *Arethusa* in 1978.

2. Zeitlin's citations are too numerous to name here, but major works that perpetuate her reading include: Sue Blundell, *Women in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1995); Sue Ellen Case,

Feminism and Theater (New York: Routledge, 1998); Kathleen Komar, *Reclaiming Klytemnestra: Revenge or Reconciliation* (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 2003). Case does not cite Zeitlin directly (perhaps because at that point Zeitlin's reading is already entrenched in feminist criticism), but Sallie Goetsch, who also calls for Greek drama to be read with theatre theory in mind, notes the similarities between Zeitlin's reading of the play and Case's reading of the male-identified Athena. See "Playing Against the Text: *Les Atrides* and the History of Reading Aeschylus," *TDR* 38.3 (1994): 88-9.

3. Andrew Sofer, *The Stage Life of Props* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2003) 12.

4. Evidence of the presence of women in the audience is far more concrete than evidence supporting their absence. In Plato's *Gorgias*, Socrates remarks that theatrical rhetoric is directed at a crowd made up of men and women. In Plato's *Laws*, an Athenian surmises that educated women would choose tragedy as the best kind of performance. Plutarch mentions one of Phocion's wives out in public in attendance at a play. The scholion to Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae* mentions a politician named (s)Phyromachos who assigned separate seats in the theatre for women and men, free women and prostitutes. In a fragment from Alexis' *Gynaeocracy* (performed 350-275 BCE), a character directs women to watch sitting in the furthest possible seats with the foreign women. And perhaps the most notorious piece of (undoubtedly questionable) evidence comes from Aeschylus' anonymous biographer, who wrote: "when, at the performance of the *Eumenides*, Aeschylus introduced the *khoros* in wild disorder into the orchestra, he so terrified the crowd that children died and women suffered miscarriage." For a thorough investigation into the presence of women in the audience, see Jeffrey Henderson, "Women and the Athenian Dramatic Festivals" in *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 121 (1991): 133-47, and Eric Csapo & William J. Slater, *The Context of Ancient Drama* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1995) 286-7.

5. Sara B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975) 62.

6. Blundell, *Women* 179.

7. Oliver Taplin, *Greek Tragedy in Action* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1978) 452-9.

8. This passage is taken from the Lattimore translation. See Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, tr. Richmond Lattimore. (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1953). All other translations are my own and are based on the Greek text of George Thomson, ed., *The Oresteia of Aeschylus* (Amsterdam: Adolf M. Hakkert, 1966). Line numbers refer to that text.

9. An account of the discussion surrounding the placement of Clytemnestra's first entrance occurs in Oliver Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1977) 280-5. Taplin comes to the conclusion that Clytemnestra was not onstage during the Chorus's song because there is little precedent for that kind of silent entrance in Greek tragedy. I move that it is too powerful an option to let precedent of extant texts rule the answer.

10. Ag. 221, 222, and 223 respectively.

11. W.B. Stanford, *Greek Tragedy and the Emotions* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983) 128.

12. This is not the first appearance of *diktuon* in the play. The Chorus uses *diktuon* when speaking of the fall of Troy: "Oh Zeus our king and night beloved / who has given us the great heavens, / you threw over the walls of Troy / the all-consuming fishing net, so that no one neither great / nor young might overleap / the net of great enslavement and / utter ruin." Ag. 355-61.

13. The following language is found Ag. 909, 910, 921, and 923 respectively.

14. R.F. Goheen, "Aspects of Dramatic Symbolism: Three Studies in the *Oresteia*," *American Journal of Philology*, 76 (1955): 113-37.

15. Meyer Reinhold, "History of Purple as a Status Symbol in Antiquity," *Collection Latomus* 116 (Brussels: Latomus, 1970): 8. The color purple's association with opulence may have stemmed from a manufacturing process wherein purple dye was extracted from sea creatures. Robert R. Stieglitz outlines this process:

The basic raw material for the dye production was a liquid, obtained directly from the hypobranchial glands of Mediterranean mollusks. Each shellfish produced only a few drops of the precious secretion, which was then boiled in salt water to create the dye. In order to produce Tyrian purple in commercial quantities, many thousands of shellfish were required.

See "The Minoan Origin of Tyrian Purple," *Biblical Archaeology* 57.1 (1994): 46. Though time-consuming, costly, and wasteful, the processing of Tyrian purple, otherwise known as sea purple in Homer, provided the only colorfast dye in the Ancient world. (See Reinhold 11.) Imitation dyes of the color purple probably followed as a means of providing those who could not afford color-fast purple with a lower-priced, though still extravagant, alternative; it is possible that this cheaper imitation dye

could have been used for the cloth in the play, but this does not alter the central fact that the cloth was woven by women. Agamemnon's remark that the tapestry was purchased with silver indicates that the tapestry was dyed using the former, expensive process. (Taplin, *Greek Tragedy* 315.)

16. Taplin 314.

17. Blundell, *Women* 141.

18. Eric Broudy, *The Book of Looms: A History of the Handloom from Ancient Times to the Present* (Dartmouth, NH: U P of New England, 1993) 25.

19. A detailed account of women's relationship to textiles and the origin and practice of spinning and weaving can be found in Elizabeth Wayland Barber, *Women's Work: The First 20,000 Years* (New York: Norton, 1994). Barber covers ancient weaving extensively and perhaps more thoroughly than other scholars because she is a weaver herself.

20. Kathryn Sullivan Kruger, *Weaving the Word: The Metaphorics of Weaving and Female Textual Production* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna U P, 2001) 54.

21. Herodotus, *The Histories*, eds. Walter Blanco and Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, tr. Walter Blanco (New York: Norton, 1992) 85.

22. Maria C. Pantelia, "Spinning and Weaving: Ideas of Domestic Order in Homer," *American Journal of Philology* 114.4 (1993): 494; Kruger, *Weaving the Word* 55.

23. Pantelia 49.

24. Myth too confirms the importance of weaving to women's communication. Recall the story of Procne and Philomela: Procne married Tereus and bore him a son. But Procne missed her sister and begged her husband to return to Athens and bring back her sister for a visit. When Tereus returned to Procne's father's house, he grew captivated by her sister Philomela. Tereus then gained the father's permission to usher Philomela back to his palace. Upon arrival, Tereus took Philomela to the forest, raped her, and cut out her tongue so she could not tell her sister. Without a means to relate her horrors to her sister verbally, Philomela chose to weave the tale into a garment and send it to her sister. Procne understood what happened to Philomela and murdered and served up her son to her husband to eat. At the end of the tale, the gods save Philomela and Procne from Tereus' wrath by changing all three of them into birds—Procne a nightingale because she sings the name of her son "Itys Itys Itys" in mourning, Philomela a swallow because her speech is unintelligible, and Tereus a hoopoe because he constantly utters the word "where" or "*pou*" looking for the women. See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*. ed. and tr. Brookes Moore (Boston: Cornhill, 1922). Procne's call is mentioned by the Chorus in *Agamemnon* when they compare Cassandra's dirge to Procne's (1140-1145).

25. "I propose that since most of her time was spent weaving or in the related tasks of spinning or carding wool, a woman regarded textiles as a substitute for 'written texts; in textiles women alone could record and read the major events of their lives. . . . Hence in ancient Greece weaving comprised a tool for female signification, but a further distinction can also be made between the *weaving process* and the *woven textile*. One is process-oriented whereas the other is product-oriented; weaving becomes a metaphor for speech, something occurring in time, whereas the woven material becomes a metaphor for something written, and thus permanent, unchanging." Kruger, *Weaving the Word* 54-5.

26. Pat Easterling has pointed out that, although Greek dramatists were indifferent to anachronism in some cases, they did maintain a greater sense of historical accuracy when compared with Shakespeare and his contemporaries. So this flexible notion of time leaves open the question of the historical accuracy of props. See "Anachronism in Greek Tragedy," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 105 (1985): 1-10.

27. Reinhold, "History of Purple" 22.

28. Ag. 1125-1128.

29. The following language is found Ag. 1228 and 1232 respectively.

30. Rush Rehm suggests that Cassandra's disrobing recalls the disrobing of Iphigenia before her sacrifice, described at the start of the play. He notes, "their respective disrobings also signal the transition from an innocent maid to a bride of death" in *The Play of Space* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 2002) 81.

31. Rush Rehm, *Marriage to Death* (Princeton: Princeton U P, 1994) 17.

32. Rehm, *Play* 81.

33. Ag. 1372-1383.

34. Ominous too in Agamemnon's death is that his link to fish also indicates Clytemnestra's error; as James Davidson notes, "[w]ith one or two exceptions, fish was not considered a suitable animal for sacrifice." *Courtesans and Fishcakes* (London: Fontana P, 1998) 12.

35. Richard Seaford, "The Last Bath of Agamemnon," *Classical Quarterly* 34 (1984): 251.

36. Anne Lebeck has pointed out that Aeschylus' imagery is "a blend of fishing and hunting which corresponds to no hunt in this world." *The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure* (Washington, DC: Center for Hellenic Studies, 1971) 65.

37. Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology

and Feminist Theory,” *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. ed. Sue-Ellen Case, (Baltimore: John Hopkins U P, 1990) 273.

38. Many of these comparisons occurred in Greek comedy. Davidson notes that in the play *She Goes Fishing*, “flute-girls and hetaeras [are] given nicknames like ‘Sand-smelt’ ‘Red Mullet’ and Cuttlefish” and “it is hard to know at any one time whether he [Antiphanes] is satirizing his victims for their love of fish or for their excessive devotion to hetaeras and boys.” Davidson, *Courtesans and Fishcakes* 10.

39. See Froma I. Zeitlin, “Playing the Other: Theater, Theatricality, and the Feminine in Greek Drama,” *Playing the Other* 341-74.

40. This recognition scene has generated a good deal of scholarship on the convention of recognition in Greek drama. See David Wiles, “The Staging of the Recognition Scene in the *Choephoroi*,” *Classical Quarterly* 38.1 (1998): 82-5.

41. *Cho.* 225-234.

42. Orestes has a similar recognition scene with his other sister, Iphigenia, in *Iphigenia in Tauris*. He convinces her that he is Orestes by referencing a weaving she made about the golden ram (813-817).

43. *Cho.* 1010-1013.

44. Lebeck, *Oresteia* 67.

45. Pomeroy, *Goddesses* 79.

46. *Eum.* 848-869.