

(Bare) Feet and Power in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*

This paper shows that references in the *Oresteia* to human feet underlie and emphasize the trilogy's preoccupation with authority and dominance. Sommerstein has pointed out examples of kicking and trampling in the trilogy that show "contemptuous spurning of what ought to be sacred" (Sommerstein 1989, 104), and a recent publication on feet in ancient Greece suggests that some vase images of shod and barefoot figures "could relate to issues of power and dominance" (Levine 2005, 68). Agamemnon and Orestes' barefoot entrances into the palace associate them with one another in contexts of deception, vulnerability and murder (Wiles 1988, 84). The Furies' avenging feet eventually find rest as Athena curbs their destructive pursuits and allows the trilogy to end in a solemn harmonious procession.

Agamemnon's feet are powerful: they underline his dominance over Troy. Clytemnestra calls his foot "Troy's ravager" (*Ag.* 907). When he walks barefoot on precious cloths into the palace, Agamemnon shows that he is aware that feet have power to ruin the house's riches and provoke divine envy (*Ag.* 921). When he agrees to walk on the tapestries he says, "Let someone quickly remove my shoes, which serve as my foot's slavish conveyance (*Ag.* 945)." The general's feet dominate all, including his shoes.

The removal of Agamemnon's shoes here changes our perception of his status and foreshadows his death, as tragic costume adjustments tend to do (Arnott 1989, 171). No longer is he the dominant, destroying foot. Barefoot Agamemnon will proceed to the bath and, completely naked, will fall victim to the net and the sword. His barefoot status shows his vulnerability to Clytemnestra's attack, and parallels Orestes' shoeless condition in the *Libation Bearers*.

The barefoot fugitive Orestes in *Libation Bearers* suits Aeschylus' dramatic needs for recognition by his sister Electra (Hammond and Moon 1978, 381), but also associates Orestes with the poverty and lack of resource which barefootedness frequently implies. When the disguised Orestes approaches Clytemnestra at Argos, his expression for arrival is "I unyoked my feet" (ἀπεζύγην πόδας; *Cho.* 676). His bare feet are part of his disguise: they imply that he is as vulnerable as his barefoot father had been. His unshod approach to the palace recalls Agamemnon's, but instead of Clytemnestra's shoeless victim, he is a barefoot avenger.

Both Agamemnon and Orestes have come home after a long absence; each approaches the same door and speaks to Clytemnestra about removing sandals. While Agamemnon's barefoot homecoming presages his own death, Orestes' barefoot entrance into the same hall is the prelude to his murder of Clytemnestra. He fools the queen, who wrongly thinks that that her son had kept his foot out of the family's curse (*Cho.* 692), thus recalling Agamemnon's barefoot status when he met with the full force of it.

In *Eumenides*, the power and weakness of feet emphasize and reinforce the characters' circumstances. The Pythia is so distressed at seeing the Furies that she cannot stand and walk (*Eum.* 36-37). Clytemnestra's ghost tells the sleeping Erinyes that Orestes has escaped, and has trodden on her gifts with his feet (*Eum.* 110). Likewise, the Furies emphasize the power of their own feet in carrying out their duties of pursuing the guilty, referring to the vindictive dances of their feet (ὄρχησμοῖς τ' ἐπιφθόνους ποδός *Eum.* 370) and their crippling feet (βαρυπετῆ καταφέρω ποδός ἀκμάν *Eum.* 374) that pursue and overcome even the long-distance runners (τανύδρομοις *Eum.* 374). They present their job as a competition of feet, in which their own are superior.

Athena offers the Furies a place to rest: instead of pursuing criminals, they will settle down and have “seats” (ἔδρας *Eum.* 805) and an underground home, presiding on shining thrones (λιπαροθρόνοισιν ἡμένας ἐπ’ ἐσχάραις *Eum.* 806; cf. 854-857). When the goddesses finally accept their new position, their escorts urge them to walk to their new homes in stately procession (*Eum.*1033-1034). Thus the Furies have changed from being malignant-footed hunters of men to becoming those who feel delight along their path: τερπόμεναι καθ’ ὁδόν (*Eum.*1042).

In the *Oresteia* images of bare and shod feet emphasize themes of power and violence, weakness and disguise. The trilogy concludes with the end of the foot’s violent reign, as the Kindly Ones walk gracefully out of the orchestra, taking their new status “in stride.”

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