

Clytemnestra's Savage Logic in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

This paper demonstrates that the confrontation between Clytemnestra and Cassandra in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (1035-71) constitutes a reversal scene for Clytemnestra for it marks the point where Clytemnestra's mastery of language and signs falters. This loss of control over language and signs leads ultimately to her own demise. Although the Cassandra scene has garnered more attention from scholars since Schein's complaint regarding the dearth of scholarly analysis of its place and function in the *Agamemnon*, no one has yet argued for the pivotal importance of this episode as marking the place where Clytemnestra's course begins its downward trajectory through the loss of her verbal dexterity. Building on work by Goldman and, especially, Thalman that focuses on language and communication, this paper provides a close analysis of Clytemnestra's language in this scene to show that, confronted with Cassandra's silence, Clytemnestra's verbal maneuvering, heretofore masterful, not only fails to persuade Cassandra to enter the house, but also implicates Clytemnestra in the linguistic web of the Lion Parable and Iphigenia's sacrifice and thus in the nets of the curse of the House of Atreus.

The essay first provides a brief consideration of Clytemnestra's virtuoso verbal performance in the Carpet Scene to serve as an example of a successful persuasion scene and to demonstrate Clytemnestra's reliance on and mastery of verbal cunning to engineer her designs. The paper then provides an analysis of the Cassandra episode as a version of a failed persuasion scene that marks Clytemnestra's reversal. A close analysis of Clytemnestra's language demonstrates that here for the first time her grasp on the signs falters and her words implicate her in the nets of the curse. Aeschylus highlights her verbal deficiency and inadequate understanding by bookending this scene with the

immediately preceding Carpet scene and the immediately following prophetic utterances of Cassandra. The primary focus of the analysis is a close reading of lines 1035-71 that shows that the logic of Clytemnestra's use of 'savages' (ὄμοι), although intended by her as another display of verbal ingenuity, backfires insofar as her language unwittingly entangles herself within the verbal web of the Lion Parable (717-36) and the sacrifice of Iphigenia. This analysis has the added virtue of showing that line 1058 (ὡς οὐποτ' ἐλπίσασι τήνδ' ἔξειν χάριν) is essential to the scene. What Wilamowitz and Fraenkel see as an intolerable repetition of line 1044 (οἱ δ' οὐποτ' ἐλπίσαντες ἤμησαν καλῶς) is actually a carefully crafted echo of that line on which Clytemnestra's logic depends and by which it misfires, for she thereby unwittingly links her discourse to the language of the Lion Parable.

Through a close linguistic and thematic analysis of *Agamemnon* 1035-71 and consideration of this scene's relation to other connected episodes, the paper thus demonstrates that the Cassandra scene marks the deflation of Clytemnestra's characteristic and essential power—her verbal cunning and capacity for persuasion—and thus constitutes a reversal for Clytemnestra.

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