READING GREEK TRAGEDY

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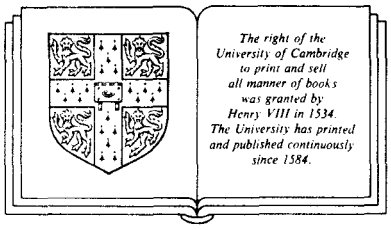

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PREFACE

> I would advise in addition the eschewal of overt and self-conscious discussion of the narrative process. I would advise in addition the eschewal of overt and self-conscious discussion of the narrative process.
>
> JOHN BARTH

This book is designed as an advanced critical introduction to Greek tragedy, primarily for the reader who has little or no Greek. I aim to provide a combination of powerful readings of individual plays with an understanding of the complex difficulties involved in the analysis of the workings of Greek tragic texts, in the light of modern literary critical studies.

For Greek tragedy, the best available critical material – on which I have drawn liberally – is based on a close reading of the Greek text, and even where an attempt is made to help the Greekless reader by transliteration or translation, insufficient assistance is provided for the reader without an extensive knowledge of fifth-century Athenian culture. It is little help to translate *polis* as 'city' or 'city-state', or to leave it in a transliterated form, if the reader has no understanding of the nature of civic ideology in the fifth century and its importance for tragedy in particular.[1]

There have been works attempting such a wider introduction, but they are in general pitched, often with schools in mind, far below the level of critical awareness or sophistication required by the modern reader who approaches these plays from disciplines other than classics.[2] This book is composed specifically for the reader who does not know Greek but who wishes to read Greek tragedy with some critical awareness, and to appreciate and discuss in all their complexities the problems raised by these texts.

The book is divided into four sections, each of two chapters: 1–2, language and the city; 4–5, people and the city; 7–8, knowledge and mind; 10–11, theatre as theatre. Each of these eight chapters has a similar form, and consists of a general introduction to the range of questions and material involved in a particular key topic in the study of Greek tragedy, together with a reading of

[1] This is a common problem particularly with collections of essays by classicists, such as Segal ed. 1968, and especially Segal ed. 1983.

[2] E.g. Arnott 1959; Baldry 1981; and most recently Walton 1984.

certain plays in the light of the more general discussion. So, for example, the chapter 'Sexuality and difference' considers the various critical attitudes that have been taken in the discussion of sexual roles in Athenian culture and in particular in the tragic texts, and then develops a reading of the *Medea* and in far greater detail the *Hippolytus* specifically in terms of the questions of sexuality and difference. This allows the construction of detailed critical readings of the most commonly discussed individual plays with regard to a general and more widely relevant topic. Naturally, one cannot hope to give in a single chapter of such length an exhaustive treatment of a topic as complex as sexuality and difference, but this format not only offers access to the range and force of a modern critical debate and how it relates to particular plays, but also attempts to provide the means through which other plays of the tragic corpus may be approached and read.

The four sections are linked by three more general chapters (3, 6, 9), each of which deals with an essential element of background to the understanding of tragedy – the city and its ideology, Homer and his influence, the upheavals of the fifth-century enlightenment associated with the sophists. In these chapters, the social, literary and intellectual aspects of tragedy are put into a wider context.

I have called the book *Reading Greek Tragedy* not because I believe tragedy should not be performed, nor because most of us first approach these plays through the printed page, but because of certain contemporary critical associations with the term 'reading', which will become clear through the course of the book, and which will serve to distinguish this work from the major traditions of classical scholarship through which tragedy is most often approached. It is a somewhat polemical title for what is self-consciously a challenging book.

I have in general quoted from the Chicago University Press series of translations under the editorship of David Grene and Richmond Lattimore. Overall it has seemed more convenient to keep to a single, justifiably popular translation, than to seek out what I regard as the best translation for each play or set of lines. However, I have also often needed to adapt the translation to make my points more clearly or directly. I have only rarely indicated in the text where I have made such alterations.

I have not included such standard information as the dating of the plays, the lives of the poets, the construction of the theatre, the number of the actors etc., which is readily available elsewhere. It may be worth stating here, however, that all our extant plays were produced in public festivals in Athens and its territory Attica in the second half of the fifth century B.C. Greek

tragedy is Athenian tragedy, specifically Attic drama, from a remarkably brief span of years.

Although the book may be read with any translation, it is assumed that the plays in question have been read: there are no plot summaries or cribs. All Greek is, of course, transliterated, and to avoid confusion for readers unused to a highly inflected language, I have often given simply the base of the word quoted, when it is not in the nominative singular, for nouns and adjectives, or infinitive for verbs. So *philein* and *phil-* are normally used to cover all parts of the verb *philein*. Classicists may easily refer to the Greek text for any necessary clarification. The notes have been used almost exclusively for references, often to further reading on points of interest or further discussion of specific issues. They are not intended to be exhaustive, but helpful to the student or scholar wishing to continue the debates of this book into more detailed areas of scholarship.

It is a pleasure to be able to thank here the many friends and colleagues who have helped me on this book. Dr Robin Osborne and Dr Norman Bryson, read chapters and offered extremely useful comments and encouragement for the project. Dr Robin Osborne, Dr Richard Hunter, Mrs Patricia Easterling kindly showed me work in progress of which I have made liberal use. Professor Froma Zeitlin's influence from shared conversations, ideas and work has been constant: her encouragement and support can be thanked properly only here and not in the many relevant places in my text. Professor Geoffrey Lloyd read many of the chapters and particularly on questions of social and intellectual background offered essential advice and the benefit of his great understanding. Pat Easterling read all the chapters in draft: her astute criticisms and careful scholarship on all matters have been invaluable. John Henderson read the whole book as it progressed with sustaining patience and humour, as well as encouragement and criticism. And a special word of thanks to Jon, Flora, Lizzie and Sho – who convinced me in the first place that it should be possible.

Thanks are also due to the officers of the Press, Pauline Hire and Susan Moore, for their skill and efficiency.

S.D.G.

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1 · THE DRAMA OF LOGOS

The Linguistic Turn
R. RORTY, book title

Like so many modern philosophers, literary critics and novelists – heirs to ancient questions – fifth-century B.C. writers show an 'intense interest in the limits and possibilities of language'.[1] This interest connects numerous writers across numerous genres and disciplines. In the texts of philosophy, the concern with language not only gives rise to the development of linguistic study itself, but also is reflected in the prime place of *logos*, dialectic, rhetoric – the role of language itself – in the development of philosophical systems from Heraclitus to Aristotle. Modern occidental philosophy, for all its historical turns, is still working through Aristotelian linguistic categories and distinctions. It is the fifth century too that offers the first formal studies in rhetoric, the teaching and practice of which dominated education for two thousand years and more, and has recently been the focus of much of the most iconoclastic modern philosophical and literary criticism.[2]

In a society dominated institutionally by the assembly and the lawcourts, the discussion of the best way to use language (persuasion, argumentation, rhetoric) is an issue of considerable social and political importance, an issue brought into sharp focus under the pressure of the sophists' new methods of manipulative argumentation.[3] When the comic poet, Aristophanes, in the *Clouds*, his satire on modern thought and education, wishes to mock the processes of contemporary intellectual debate, he composes a dramatic exchange between personifications of the old, just *logos* ('argument', 'way or system of thinking', 'reason') and the new, unjust *logos* which focuses particularly on the ability of the new *logos* to make the weaker case appear stronger. So too his characters make fun of the philosophers' search for correct usage, linguistic purity and etymologies, with the less than serious test case of the word 'chicken'.

[1] Guthrie 1962–81, Vol. III, 219.
[2] I am thinking especially of Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida. For the development of rhetorical study see Kennedy 1963; Pfeiffer 1968; Russell 1983.
[3] See below, Chapter 9.

For the historian Thucydides, one of the most telling crisis points in the city under the abnormal stress of plague and overcrowding is the shifting and distortion of words away from traditional senses and values: language itself is an object of study among the symptoms of the city in turmoil.[4] The texts of the orators themselves – Demosthenes, Lysias, Isocrates and others – form a corpus fascinating not only for their various insights into Greek social and legal attitudes but also for the development of rhetoric in practice. All these areas of writing demonstrate a recognition of language as something to be studied, utilized, considered in and for itself. Language is not just treated as if it were a transparent medium, offering instant or certain access to meaning or thought or objects; rather, the role of language in the production of meaning, in the development of thought, in the uncertainties of reference, is a regular source of debate not only at the level of philosophical enquiry or literary self-consciousness but also in the more general awareness of the possibilities and dangers of the tricks and powers of words. The fifth century underwent 'a linguistic turn'.

Tragedy offers a particularly valuable insight into this important topic. Language as a specific mark of the civilized quality of being human, comes under the scrutiny of a tragic critique that questions the terms and attitudes of such self-definition of culture. As much as the shifting of language for Thucydides is a sign and symptom of the city at breaking-point, so the tragic texts, which depict and analyse the tensions, uncertainties and collapse of social order, return again and again to the shifting, distorting qualities of language – the ambiguities of the normative terms of society, the tensions in the civic and familial vocabulary and discourse, the twisting manipulations and over-rigid assertions of agonistic debate. When A. E. Housman brilliantly parodies a tragic dialogue, with characteristic insight he has his chorus ask 'What? For I know not yet what you will say.' Housman is poking fun, of course, but in a precise way he recalls the recurring questions in Greek tragedy about the functioning of language; the repeated doubts and misgivings about the sense and usage of words. Such comments and questions about what is being said in the course of tragic exchanges are not meaningless or undirected fillers, as is sometimes suggested by more banal critics – or in jest by Housman – nor are they simply ways of having a character repeat a story or remark for dramatic clarity or because characters and audience would not be typically 'Greek if [they] did not enjoy listening as long as possible to a fine tale beautifully told'.[5] Rather such comments and questions about language or meaning in the process of communication indicate the interest and uncertainty with regard to the sense, control and manipulation of words. Lack of security

[4] Thuc. 3.82. [5] Fraenkel 1950, Vol. II, 182.

and misplaced certainty in and about language form an essential dynamic of the texts of tragedy.[6]

To an audience with solely modern expectations, it may appear that it is the dramatic conventions of tragedy which place a special emphasis on the spoken word. The extreme physical violence and destructiveness of the ancient myths are usually described by such devices as messenger speeches rather than depicted in explicit staging, and the most climactic scenes are often the clashing rhetorical arguments of different views and attitudes – the *agon*. Indeed, although Aristotle described tragic drama as the imitation of an action – *drama* in Greek means 'doing', 'a deed' – to the modern reader these plays have often seemed less than 'action-packed'. 'Static', 'statuesque' are common (if misleading) evaluations. But when I say there is a special focus on language in these plays, I do not mean to compare anachronistically the conventions of ancient tragedy with the conventions of modern drama and I certainly do not wish to imply that the context or particulars of performance or stage-action can be disregarded. It would be foolish to maintain that the *Oresteia*, in particular, with the final procession of torch-bearers, the entrance of the Erinyes, the carpet scene, does not involve visual, dramatic action essential to the trilogy's working. Under the influence of the lengthy tradition of philological study and the modern critical concern with the self-reflexive qualities of literature it is indeed all too easy to forget that these texts have come down to us without the stage-directions, music, dancing and costume that contribute so much to a performance. The religious, social, political context and implications of the institution of the dramatic festivals will also be a recurring interest of this book.

But there is considerably more involved in the assertion that this drama demonstrates a concern with language than the somewhat tautologous statement that a script in performance dramatizes the exchange of words, or, to be more specific, that a messenger-scene dramatizes the process of message-sending. For not only does a masterpiece such as the *Oresteia* utilize such conventional scenic devices as the arrival of a messenger to new and startling effect with particular significance for the understanding of the trilogy – as we shall see, it is simply insufficient to regard the messenger scene of the *Agamemnon* as merely conventional – but also the explicit comments of the play's characters draw further attention to the role of language itself in the process of the communication on stage. It is the way in which what one does with words becomes a thematic consideration of the *Oresteia* that makes this trilogy a 'drama of logos'.

The trilogy opens with a watchman waiting for a beacon-signal, which duly

[6] For studies of this, see Goldhill 1984a; Zeitlin 1982a; Podlecki 1966a, Segal 1982, 1983.

arrives. The first scene is an extended discussion between the queen and the chorus of what this light means and how it comes to have such meaning. The chorus remains not completely convinced by the queen's explanation of the mechanics and code of her signal system. Can this light really work as Clytemnestra described? The scene of message-sending and interpreting is followed by the arrival of a human messenger. The two scenes are explicitly linked (as well as juxtaposed) in the text. Rather than the mechanical model of communication, now there is a man with words. The ironies and uncertainties of this messenger scene mark the different difficulties involved in using words as opposed to sending a beacon-signal. Language cannot be fitted into a mechanistic model of signal-sending and receiving.[7] The queen, indeed, sends the messenger back to the king with a palpably false message which prepares the way for her plot. The messenger's next delivery will show all too clearly the possible dangers in the exchange of language when Clytemnestra is involved. This danger of the misuse of language is vividly depicted in the carpet scene, where the queen's powerful, manipulative persuasion leads Agamemnon to his death. Like Iago or Richard III, the queen's strength and transgressive power stem from her ability to weave a net of words around a victim. It is her verbal deceits that enable her to overthrow order. The Cassandra scene, which follows, offers two more important views on the process of communication. First, the scenario of the persuasive female speaker is reversed. Unlike Clytemnestra, whose lies were all too persuasive and effective, the inspired prophetess's truth persuades no-one and cannot be understood. Secondly, the prophetess's insight into the future and her true language not only express her awareness of the complexity of events but also develop the important theme of finding the right words, or name, which recurs throughout the trilogy. The search to control the future through accurate and powerful language links the many prayers, prophecies and curses of this play. Language, when used rightly, can have a direct and binding effect.

The search to find the correct language of prayer is important for the opening scenes of the *Choephoroi*, which place in parallel the prayers of the son and daughter of Clytemnestra for divine help. Together with the chorus in the lyric *kommos*, the children invoke the gods and their father. Before and after the *kommos*, there are two complex scenes revolving around the process of sign-reading – the recognition scene and Orestes' prophetic interpretation of the sign of Clytemnestra's dream. Like the scene of the beacon-signal discussion, and the many scenes of prophecy, these two scenes of sign-reading

[7] As many linguists have attempted to prove or disprove: cf. e.g. Jakobson and Halle 1956, as discussed e.g. in Culler 1975, for an influential model of language based on message-sending. Eco 1976 offers the most developed view of signal-sending and language. The *Oresteia* is illuminated by these studies as it illuminates them!

further develop the theme of interpretation and (mis)understanding. This development is important to the manner in which Orestes effects the revenge. For, like his mother, he depends on the manipulative power of deceitful persuasion to elude the interpretation of a hearer. He arrives disguised as a messenger with a false tale told in a foreign accent. Aegisthus too, is summoned to the palace by the nurse, who is persuaded to falsify her message. It is right for the chorus to pray to 'deceitful persuasion' when Orestes is in the palace. For the revenge is performed with a parallel reliance on deceit and misrepresentation.

As much as the earlier transgressions of the trilogy are committed through the misuse of language, the ending of the *Eumenides* attempts to right that disorder through the powers of the word. The final act of persuasion comes from the divine lips of Athene, who convinces the Erinyes to give up their anger, and turn from curse to blessing (again the power of language to affect the future course of things is basic to the narrative). The institution of the court, which is also essential to the ending of the trilogy, introduces the mediation of words – speech-making, the jurors' decision – between the violent antagonists of the case. The establishment and rule of law, which formalizes and consecrates social relations of order, marks the necessary involvement of *ideology* in the use of language in a social setting. The control of language, the awareness of the dangers of the misues of language are essential to the security of the social discourse in which social order is formed. From the signal to law . . . the *Oresteia* charts the social functioning of language in the city.

In this extremely brief and, for sure, selective run-through of the narrative of the *Oresteia* (which I will develop in more detail shortly) it is none the less clear how the use of language constitutes one of the important themes of the trilogy. The powers and dangers of language are essential to the narrative of revenge through the repeated acts of deceitful persuasion. The workings of language are traced and discussed through the different scenes of message-sending, sign-reading, interpretation and manipulation. The search for the right word, the desire for accurate prediction and prophecy, the effects of blessing, curse and invocation are all linked to the understanding of the workings of language. The word of the law and Athene's divine persuasion are the means by which reconciliation is sought.

Now the *Oresteia* is one of the most complex works of Greek literature: its highly involved lyric choruses, intense action and extended, interwoven imagery have prompted study after study that testify to this work's inexhaustibility. Its influence has been as immense as its continuing popularity. As with each Greek tragedy (but especially in the case of such complex poetic

utterance) translation becomes a rewriting, a reselection of connections, echoes, meanings. Moreover, to talk about language will involve us in a wide series of other topics and themes which I can sketch only in broadest fashion here, but which bear significantly on our discussion. My treatment of one of the play's complex themes must constantly be qualified by an awareness of the necessary limitations of such a reading of the text.

I want to open my detailed analysis of the trilogy with the investigation of the sending and receiving of messages as a model of the exchange of language. A good place to begin is with the messenger scene of the *Agamemnon*.

The messenger scene comes at an earlier point in this play than in most other tragedies and the structure of the scene is markedly more complex than in many others. For rather than a single extended speech on a single disastrous event, the messenger delivers three long speeches, an address of welcome and two speeches describing what happened at Troy and on the journey home, and in between these latter two speeches Clytemnestra herself delivers a long address in which she gives a message to be taken back to Agamemnon. The herald moves from the confident optimism of his first joyful announcements of return and victory to the sad uncertainties of his second tale of the storm at sea, and between these two speeches Clytemnestra advances her plot of murder by sending a hypocritical welcoming message to her husband. The scene moves from the possibility of the happy return of the conquering hero to dread and foreboding for the lost fleet and the returning king: a considerable factor in this movement away from initial joy and certainty is the progressive undercutting of the secure exchange of language, not just in the juxtaposition of Clytemnestra's hypocrisy and the messenger's shift from rejoicing to foreboding, but also in the way in which the clarity and certainty of the messenger's language seems to be questioned. For a messenger in tragedy is normally treated by critics and characters alike as if he brought a clear and certain record of events – if in somewhat heightened language. But both the content of this messenger's message and his lack of awareness of the possibly dangerous misunderstandings that can arise in the exchange of language undermine any assumed straightforwardness in the process of giving and receiving a message. The first hints of this movement can be seen in the messenger's opening proud boast of the successful destruction of Troy (527–8):

> Gone are their altars, the sacred places are gone.

This destruction of religious sites is exactly what Clytemnestra earlier had prophesied could lead the Greeks to their doom (338–40):

> And if they reverence in the captured land the gods who hold the city
> and all the sacred places of the gods
> they, the despoilers might not be despoiled in turn.

The messenger's use of exactly the same phrase 'the sacred places of the gods' in the same metrical position expresses the fulfilment of the queen's fear; the messenger fails to realize the ominous impact of the message he conveys. In his unawareness of the foreboding his words give rise to, the messenger's statement marks the possibility of a dangerous unawareness of the implications of the use of language. His message already conveys more than he knows.[8]

This lack of awareness is seen markedly at the beginning and end of his second long speech. The chorus have been trying to hint that something disastrous has been happening at home in the absence of the army and king. They pick up the messenger's earlier expression of joy that he'd willingly die now that he's home at last (539), but they turn his expression to a grim willingness to greet death rather than continue in their present woes (550):

> So much, that as you said now, even death were grace.

But the messenger completely fails to appreciate the chorus' new despairing use of his own words, and with an extraordinary *non sequitur* replies as if they had merely reiterated his happiness (551):

> Yes, for things have been well done.

This odd reply, his apparent inability to understand the words spoken to him or to respond to them, seemes to stress the uncertainties in the process of communication, the gaps and misunderstandings between a speaker and listener in the exchange of language – just as he begins to deliver his message.

This message depicts the labours of the Greek soldiers, and he sums up the first part of his speech rhetorically with a question (567):

> But why live such grief again? Toil is over.

The word for 'toil' is *ponos*, which recurs throughout the trilogy from the first line as an expression – almost a leitmotif – for the turmoil in the house of Atreus. If the Argives' toil in one sense is over, in another way it is being further prepared in this scene by Clytemnestra's plotting – in which this messenger will play his part. Once again, the language of the messenger exceeds his apparent immediate intention.

The herald concludes his speech with a standard sounding phrase (582):

> You have the whole story.

The fact that his last speech of the bad news of the storm at sea is yet to be told, as well as his lack of awareness of the relevance of his own and the chorus' words make this messenger's certainty in the giving and receiving the whole

[8] Fraenkel deletes the messenger's comment precisely because he could not believe the messenger would speak so naively. As we will see, this is not the only example of such behaviour from the messenger – or other characters.

story' ironic. As so often in the *Oresteia*, faith in the clear and assured exchange of language is to be set against the misunderstandings and uncertainties of the surrounding verbal communications.

Indeed, Clytemnestra follows this message-giving with a message-sending of her own (604–8):

> Take this message to the king.
> Come and with speed back to the city that longs for him,
> and may he find a wife within the house as true
> as on the day he left her, watchdog of the house,
> gentle to him alone, fierce to his enemies . . .

His present tale seems veined with unrecognized ironies and misunderstandings, but the next message the herald will take will be a specific act of deceit. The queen's powerful manipulation both of language and of the process of sending messages is in direct contrast with the messenger's naive faith in simply transmitting 'the whole story'. Indeed, Clytemnestra echoes precisely those last words of the messenger in dismissing his usefulness (598–9):

> Why should you tell me then the long tale at length
> when from my lord himself I shall hear the whole story.

'Hearing the whole story' is an extremely disingenuous description both of her verbal exchanges with Agamemnon and of the more physical welcome she is preparing. Clytemnestra is using her words and the process of sending a message to weave a web of dissimulation and deceit, manipulating language as an opportunity for furthering her plot. The repetition of the messenger's phrase 'the whole story' in her mouth marks the difference in its possible connotations and implications. The juxtaposition of the optimism of the returning soldier – optimism in the end of toil and in his role as simple message conveyor – and the deceitful, message-sending queen, manipulating words to her own murderous ends, creates a significant tension which marks the danger of the power of language in the mouth of the waiting adulteress.

The specific nature of the queen's verbal deceit is hinted at in her final remarks to the messenger.[9] The hypocritical adulteress's vaunt that 'with no man else have I known delight, nor any shame of evil speech', is, she claims 'loaded with truth'. Particularly after such a notably precise reversal of the truth, this image suggests the marked possibility of its opposite, that words can be emptied, unloaded of truth. If words can be so loaded and unloaded with truth, can language give direct access to a speaker's intention? The model of language suggested by this phrase implies a gap at the heart of communi-

[9] Lattimore gives these lines to the messenger. This does not substantially alter the point I am making about the imagery.

cation between signifiers and what they signify, as if in a message form could be separated from content. In the misrepresentations of Clytemnestra's boast, it is easy indeed to discern the possibility of words being loaded with and emptied of truth.

This suggestion that Clytemnestra's hypocrisy implies a separation between a signifier and what it signifies is particularly important for the scenes preceding the messenger scene, which are also largely concerned with the arrival and understanding of a message, or rather, of a signal, the beacon-light whose anticipation opens the play. Indeed, the beacon-speeches scene, the first scene in which Clytemnestra speaks, is important to the development of the play's view of the processes of communication. For by Aeschylus' invention of the beacon and its discussion, and by the early placing of the messenger scene, the action leading up to the carpet scene and the deception of Agamemnon is dominated by the images, discussion and process of message-sending and receiving, a complex model of language exchange and interpretation. The beacon-speeches scene, which has all too rarely been treated with any analytic rigour or insight by critics, has a major role not just in the system of imagery connected with 'light', 'fire', but also in developing our understanding of Clytemnestra's power in terms of her control over the processes of communication and exchange.

The chorus, who have come to hear what the strange beacon-light may mean, are told by Clytemnestra that it indicates the successful completion of the Trojan war in a victory for the Greek host. The chorus remain somewhat mistrustful of the queen's news and they request proof, and she delivers two long speeches to convince them. After the first, the chorus call her 'lady' and say that they will thank the gods, but would like to hear the proof again. They are amazed. After the second, the chorus call her 'lady' again but add 'you speak like a sensible man with good feeling. I have listened to the proofs of your tale and I believe . . . ' They now accept that they have been given the proof that they requested. Is there, then, a difference between the two speeches? Why does the second speech find the chorus' agreement? Is it just the accumulation of rhetorical force, as critics have generally asserted? Is it convincing because it is a proof twice told?

There is indeed a highly significant and emphatic difference between the two speeches of proof, which even when noted by critics has led to bafflement.[10] In the first proof, Clytemnestra describes in detail the passage of the beacon-light from place to place in its route from Troy to Argos. She describes how the fire is passed along the chain, she explains how the flame travels. She concludes (315–16):

[10] Cf. Verrall's remarks as repeated and discussed by Fraenkel 1950 ad loc.

> By such proof and such symbol I announce to you
> my lord at Troy has sent his messengers to me.

The word 'has sent his messengers to me' is the technical word in Greek for 'to pass the password', 'give the watchword', and the verb in Greek is used somewhat strangely here without a direct object. The sense of 'passing a password' is particularly apposite for the first proof that Clytemnestra has constructed, not only because the light is passed from site to site along a chain, but also because it is precisely like a password in that the beacon-light is a marker without connotation. It is a signifier which has meaning only in terms of a pre-arranged and pre-established system, a 'code'. Like a password, the beacon can only indicate in a binary way: it either signals or it does not; and it can only signify in that manner. It cannot, as a man with words can, communicate madly/stupidly/deceitfully. The meaning of the signal depends on the pre-agreed and unchanging system of markers. It is the mere presence of such a signal and such a system that Clytemnestra seeks to explain by her proof of the passage of light from place to place. In demonstrating the linkages of the system from Troy to Argos, Clytemnestra only shows how the message comes to signal its light. She demonstrates the establishment of the closed system, her 'code'.

In the second speech, however, Clytemnestra, in a quite different fashion, describes what the light might mean, its message and connotations. She delivers an extended description of how Troy was sacked, which as has often worried critics, she could not possibly have known.[11] This forceful description is not, however, just another purple passage for the queen. Rather, the two speeches markedly separate the form and possible content, the signifier (beacon-light) and the signified (a message) in the communication of the beacon-chain. The fact that the message Clytemnestra provides for the light is so markedly a fictitious, imaginative weaving of words emphasizes the arbitrary connection of signifier and signified in the process of message-sending and receiving.

The first two major scenes in which Clytemnestra appears, then, both demonstrate the queen's ability to manipulate the relation between signal and sense. Regarded together in the development of the play, they act as a highly significant prelude to the carpet scene, where it will be the queen's manipulative persuasion which deceives Agamemnon and leads him to step on the tapestries towards his death. The beacon-speeches scene is not merely demonstrative of the queen's powerful force or an exhibition of rhetoric. It offers also a specific indication of the nature of the force of her power in her manipulation of the exchanges of communication.

[11] See note 10.