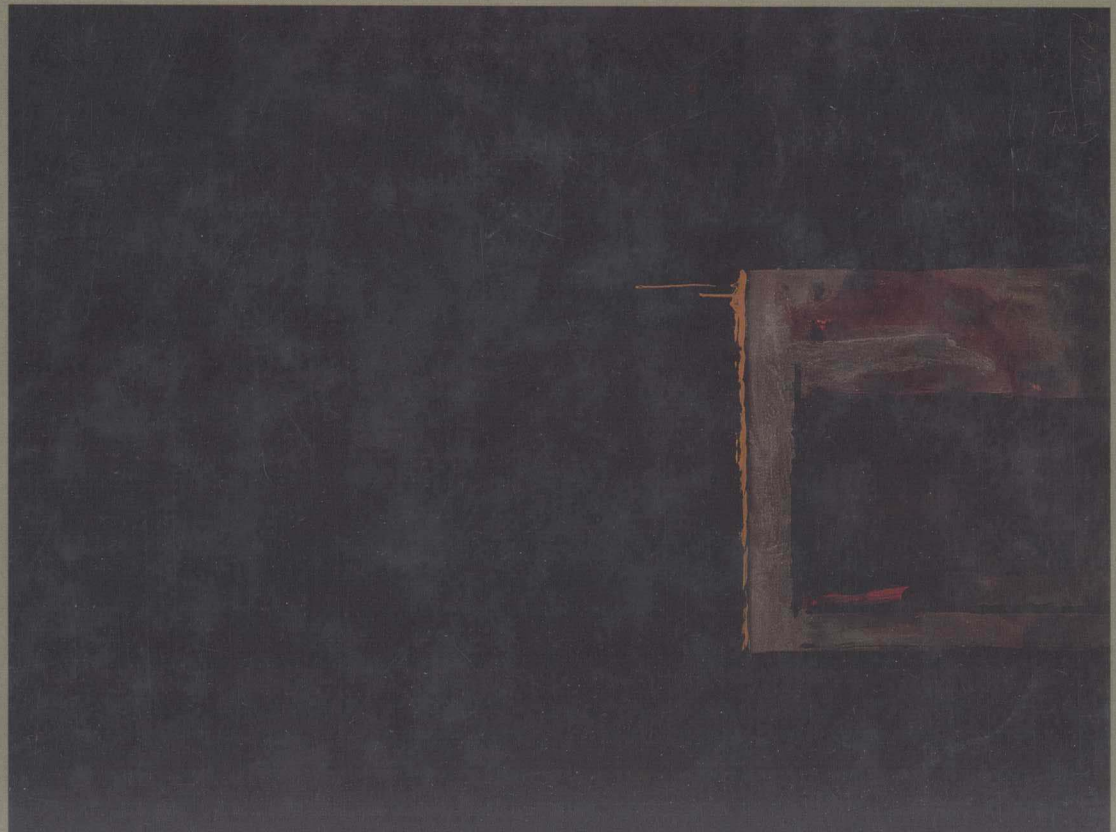
INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM



Aeschylus's
The Oresteia

Modern Critical Interpretations

Aeschylus's
The Oresteia

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom
Sterling Professor of the Humanities
Yale University

Chelsea House Publishers ◇ 1988
NEW YORK ◇ NEW HAVEN ◇ PHILADELPHIA

Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48–1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Aeschylus's Oresteia / edited and with an introduction by Harold Bloom.
p. cm.—(Modern critical interpretations.)
Bibliography: p.
Includes index.
ISBN 0–87754–903–6 (alk. paper) : $24.50
1. Aeschylus. Oresteia. 2. Orestes (Greek mythology) in literature. I. Bloom, Harold. II. Aeschylus. Oresteia. III. Series.
PA3825.A6A37 1988
882'.01—dc19 87–18343
CIP

Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best modern critical interpretations of the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Douglas Smith for his assistance in editing this volume.

My introduction centers upon Clytemnestra as a figure of negative sublimity, imaginatively stronger than either Agamemnon or Orestes. John Jones begins the chronological sequence of criticism with his meditation upon the thematic cluster he calls the drama's "corporate fight for health and life, and the single great death threatening all."

In Anne Lebeck's study of the *Libation-Bearers,* we are led to the conclusion that "Orestes truly is his mother's own." Froma I. Zeitlin, analyzing what she terms "the dynamics of misogyny" in the *Oresteia,* views Athena as the "truly positive female figure" in the trilogy.

Hunting and sacrifice are expounded by Pierre Vidal-Naquet as interlocked and crucial themes in the *Oresteia.* The tragic emotions are contextualized by W. B. Stanford, in a close study of the emotive methods used by a master poet, as leading up to the happiest and most optimistic ending in all of Greek tragedy.

In this volume's concluding essay, John Herington imaginatively brings together the many elements that constitute the poetry of Aeschylus and that allow it so triumphantly to represent its "no-man's-land of dark and light," one of the most superb instances of a visionary cosmos in Western literature.

Contents

Introduction

Agamemnon, Orestes, and Electra are all of them strong characters, but readers or playgoers confronting *Agamemnon* and the *Libation-Bearers* are likeliest to remember Clytemnestra. She has a savage inwardness that is different in kind, not just in degree, from the consciousness of the other survivors in her immediate family. Aeschylus is not much interested in psychology, according to many of his scholars, and Agamemnon has little in him that resembles the probing intensity of the Oedipus of Sophocles or even the Orestes of Euripides. Like his contemporary, Pindar, Aeschylus sometimes can seem closer to the archaic view of man than to the Sophoclean. His Agamemnon is a smaller figure necessarily than the war-leader of the *Iliad,* but the deep similarities are undeniable. The largest difference is the background or context, which is so menacing in Aeschylus as to diminish his protagonists, except again for Clytemnestra. When I read the *Oresteia,* I receive the uncanny impression that Aeschylus somehow precedes Homer in time, if only because the cosmos and the gods seem more archaic, less rational even than they do in the *Iliad.*

In the cosmos with Aeschylus, there is always choice or will, but essentially it is a choice between catastrophes. Homer's world is dangerous, but you can choose a right way, within the limits of the gods' designs upon you. The *Oresteia* shows you great figures caught between wrong and wrong, or between the daemonic and the divine, where the two are ambiguously mixed. Some scholars attribute this to the curse upon the house of Atreus, but the ambiguity is present in Aeschylus elsewhere. E. R. Dodds, in his *The Greeks and the Irrational,* sees the movement from Homer to Aeschylus as being from shame-culture to guilt-culture. Yet guilt is so endemic in the *Oresteia* that it seems more than cultural, seems reality itself. Aeschylus is so difficult a poet for us because either we must assimilate his sense of guilt to paradigms we can comprehend—

Christian or Freudian—or else acknowledge that the *Oresteia* is somehow more remote from us than even the *Iliad* now is.

One way in which the flamboyant Clytemnestra refreshes us is that we do not have to debate just how guilty she is. There are ambiguities in the guilt of Agamemnon and the guilt of Orestes, but Clytemnestra is gloriously culpable, overtly exultant at having butchered Agamemnon and poor Cassandra:

> CLYTEMNESTRA: Now hear you this, the right behind my sacrament:
> By my child's Justice driven to fulfilment, by
> her Wrath and Fury, to whom I sacrificed this man,
> the hope that walks my chambers is not traced with fear
> while yet Aegisthus makes the fire shine on my hearth,
> my good friend, now as always, who shall be for us
> the shield of our defiance, no weak thing; while he,
> this other, is fallen, stained with this woman you behold,
> plaything of all the golden girls at Ilium;
> and here lies she, the captive of his spear, who saw
> wonders, who shared his bed, the wise in revelations
> and loving mistress, who yet knew the feel as well
> of the men's rowing benches. Their reward is not
> unworthy. He lies there; and she who swanlike cried
> aloud her lyric mortal lamentation out
> is laid against his fond heart, and to me has given
> a delicate excitement to my bed's delight.

The "sacrament" is murder, the "sacrifice" a vengeance for the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, but the gratuitous horror is the enormous relish with which Clytemnestra rejoices in her murder of Cassandra, a rejoicing that achieves an apotheosis in erotic sadism: "and to me has given / a delicate excitement to my bed's delight." Is there a comparable figure to Clytemnestra in Homer? Her sister Helen is the only possibility, and fades rapidly juxtaposed to Agamemnon's fatal wife, who is a personage of sinister authority. Her hatred of her husband has a sexual element in it, a resentment of a ruler weaker and less cunning than herself, who takes precedence over her only because he is a male.

Clytemnestra is most herself as a personage precisely where Aeschylus is most himself as a poet, in the crimson path of tapestries Agamemnon walks upon to his slaughter. For Clytemnestra, it is the emblem of the triumph of her will over his; for Aeschylus it is one with his motive for metaphor, with the will to representation that drives him to write

his plays. Few acts of the ancient imagination are as superbly memorable as Clytemnestra's association of the trodden tapestries with the rich robes by which she has netted the king:

CLYTEMNESTRA: Much have I said before to serve necessity,
but I will take no shame now to unsay it all.
How else could I, arming hate against hateful men
disguised in seeming tenderness, fence high the nets
of ruin beyond overleaping? Thus to me
the conflict born of ancient bitterness is not
a thing new thought upon, but pondered deep in time.
I stand now where I struck him down. The thing is done.
Thus have I wrought, and I will not deny it now.
That he might not escape nor beat aside his death,
as fishermen cast their huge circling nets, I spread
deadly abundance of rich robes, and caught him fast.
I struck him twice. In two great cries of agony
he buckled at the knees and fell. When he was down
I struck him the third blow, in thanks and reverence
to Zeus the lord of dead men underneath the ground.
Thus he went down, and the life struggled out of him;
and as he died he spattered me with the dark red
and violent driven rain of bitter savored blood
to make me glad, as gardens stand among the showers
of God in glory at the birthtime of the buds.

These being the facts, elders of Argos assembled here,
be glad, if it be your pleasure; but for me, I glory.
Were it religion to pour wine above the slain,
this man deserved, more than deserved, such sacrament.
He filled our cup with evil things unspeakable
and now himself come home has drunk it to the dregs.

This astonishing declaration is so powerful that its full implications require almost endless meditation. Clytemnestra's pride in her deed is absolute, and ensues from a hatred so transcendent that it embraces Zeus as another representative of male sexuality, which is her true victim. The blood of Agamemnon substitutes for his semen, and her glad glory is nourished by that life's blood. So long-meditated a revenge has about it a peculiar guilt, yet Clytemnestra has joined a beyond, a negative sublime that cannot be touched by guilt. Her last words, spoken to Orestes before

he takes her within the house to her death, are defiant and angry, and again directed against maleness: "You are the snake I gave birth to, and gave the breast."

It is difficult to believe that Aeschylus could have intended the rhetorical, indeed poetic triumph that Clytemnestra wins over both Agamemnon and Orestes. But father and son, though very different, are flawed, guilt-driven, doom-eager yet lacking in color, nerve, even in eloquence. Clytemnestra keeps her hold upon the imagination, and is prophetic of much that has come to us, and more that may come. She excites no sympathy, yet her originality and force are undiminished. Her strength is that guilt and shame alike are alien to her. Aeschylus possessed a greater insight into the darkness of the war between men and women than any other dramatist before Shakespeare. Clytemnestra's ghost inhabits that darkness, and goes on calling to the sleeping Furies: "Up, let not work's weariness / beat you, nor slacken with sleep so you forget my pain."

The House of Atreus

John Jones

A watchman lies stretched out on the roof of Agamemnon's palace, propped on his elbows, scanning the horizon for the prearranged beacon-fire which will announce the capture of Troy. The physical and visible situation delivers the *Oresteia*'s opening complete, full-formed; it were an absurd inadequacy to speak of this disposition as having dramatic point. The watchman lying on top of the building (represented by the permanent *skēnē* before which the action takes place) is the eye and tongue and consciousness of the household asleep beneath him, and the poet's means of communicating its mood. "I weep," he says, recounting his weary watch,

> and I groan over the troubles of this house of ours, no longer ordered for the best as it once was. And tonight I pray for a happy release from my task: may the beacon-fire carry its glad news through the darkness.
>
> (*Agamemnon,* ll. 18–21)

And at that moment, in a congruence of wish and fact found throughout Greek tragedy, the fire burns up in the distance. He rouses the palace:

> Hullo! Hullo then! This loud cry of mine gives Agamemnon's wife the signal to rise from her couch with all speed and send a shout of thankful joy ringing through the house, in welcome to this fire.
>
> (ll. 25–29)

And his speech ends with a sudden shift from joy at Troy's capture to anxious concern for the house and its affairs:

> Ah well, may he come home, the master of our house; and may I hold his dear hand in mine. But for the rest—I'm dumb: a great ox is standing on my tongue. And yet the house itself, could it but speak, would have a plain tale to tell.
>
> (ll. 34–38)

This short opening scene gets across to the audience (in a world without theatre programmes) necessary background information as to the time and place and people of the action, and it also asserts an intense, unremitting focus on the "house," the fortunes of which will be followed through the play and through the trilogy, into the next generation. The note of tragic disquiet in the watchman's speech issues from the house (observe the delicate and arrested movement towards personification in "the house itself, could it but speak") and concerns itself; the human individuals are apprehended only in relation to the household which contains them—not merely the watchman-servant perched up there on the roof for everyone to see, but those chief people of the story to whom he refers: the absent king is not "Agamemnon" but "the master of the house," his queen is not "Clytemnestra" but "Agamemnon's wife"—both of them designated by their household status and function. "House" (the Greek *oikos* and its synonyms) is at once house and household, building and family, land and chattels, slaves and domestic animals, hearth and ancestral grave: a psycho-physical community of the living and the dead and the unborn. The master of the house is priest in charge of the family cult (in which slaves attached to the *oikos* participate) as well as its secular head, and his wife is bound to him through the *oikos* which she joins at marriage. Marriage is not primarily a business of personal relations—still less of romantic love—but of securing the continuity of the *oikos*.

Aeschylus's first audience will have been more receptive than we can hope to be of the image of this *oikos*—the house of Atreus—which the watchman establishes. For us it is a conscious but necessary effort to accept this image for what it is, and to retain it while the watchman descends and disappears from sight, and the Chorus file into the *orchēstra* and sing their opening song. They narrate the mustering of the expedition to punish Paris and his city, the anger of Artemis and Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia; and as they are finishing their song Clytemnestra enters to give them the news of Troy's capture. There follows a long

dialogue between queen and Chorus, at the end of which, in the second choral song, credit for the Greek victory is given to Zeus and just retribution is held to have visited Paris "who entered the house of the sons of Atreus and dishonoured his hosts' table by stealing the wife away" (ll. 399–402).

The plural "sons of Atreus" is remarkable. Aeschylus has altered the traditional form of the story (and violated the laws of human prōbability as the Greeks understood them) by making Agamemnon and Menelaus share a house. By this deviation he gives Agamemnon a claim against Paris alongside that of his brother, Helen's husband, and—more important than the legal issue—he avoids the dissipation of interest that would result if the web of action and reaction, crime and retribution, were extended beyond the one *oikos* which he wishes to keep in the dramatic foreground throughout. Still greater concentration is achieved by disposing of the Trojan war before Agamemnon returns. The herald, arriving ahead of his king, delivers an extended quasi-epic narrative of the fighting and its hardships; and now the time is ripe for Agamemnon's entry. The war is a dying theme, and an extreme simplicity of situation prevails. We are witnessing a homecoming.

Agamemnon greets his country and his country's gods, proclaims that he will appoint assemblies to consider matters of state and public worship, and concludes:

> And now I will enter my palace and approach my household hearth, first of all saluting the gods who sped me forth and have brought me home. Victory has attended me; may she stay with me always.
>
> (ll. 851–54)

No word of Clytemnestra. The focus is the *focus*—the socio-religious hearth of Indo-European societies and a living force to Aeschylus and his audience—now to be approached after long absence by the household's master who is also its priest. To feel the moment in this way is the first step toward a just reading of the carpet scene. The carpet lies between Agamemnon and his hearth: this is the situation which commentators have obscured in two closely related ways, by psychologising the meeting of husband and wife into a process of temptation, and by spiritualising a quarrel about treading upon a carpet into something supposedly more exalted. Their joint effect is to reduce the carpet to a physical pawn in a mental conflict.

When Clytemnestra's women have strewn the purple tapestries in

front of him, Agamemnon declares that he will not be pampered like a woman or grovelled to like a barbarian king:

> And do not draw down Envy upon my path by strewing it with tapestries. Such honours are for gods; I think with dread of a mortal man treading on fine embroidered work. Pay me the respect due a man, not a god.
>
> (ll. 921–25)

Mortal hubris and divine jealousy or envy (*phthonos*) are here, as so often, interlocked. And when Agamemnon says that to tread on the tapestries would be an act of insolent pride and folly likely to incur retribution from above, it is important to recognise that he is shrinking from something wider than almost any modern formulation of impiety. Hubris embraces the familiar impieties as an offshoot of its wide-branching central meaning of doing deeds and thinking thoughts "greater" than those which a human being ought to do and think. Everywhere in Greek tragedy we find hubris, and the fear of hubris, arising in contexts which are not obviously religious; and in the carpet scene our sense of impiety should be muted to the point of integration within this broad ancient concept: in fact it is a mistake to think of the tapestries as dedicated to religious uses, because we shall thus be led into the false precision that conceives of Clytemnestra urging Agamemnon to commit an act of clear-cut sacrilege. Faced with the tapestries, Agamemnon says it would ill become a human being to tread on them. Why? He suggests the answer himself: "I think with dread of a mortal man treading on fine embroidered work." The tapestries are precious; a lot of work has gone into them. No further reason is offered in the course of the ensuing dialogue (it is said that people in general will disapprove, which merely leads us to ask why they should) until, at last, Agamemnon suddenly yields:

> Well, if you will have it so—let someone undo my shoes, and quickly. . . . And may no god glance malignly on me from afar as I tread upon these purple dyes. It awakes the deepest shame, this wasting of our house's substance with my feet and spoiling of costly woven fabrics.
>
> (ll. 944–49)

The suggestion contained in "fine embroidered work" is now fully explicit; Agamemnon's initial rebuke to Clytemnestra was rooted in his unwillingness to waste the substance of the *oikos*. His "pay me the respect due a man, not a god" was directed to the truth that it would be fitting

for a god to be offered some element of the household's wealth (this is of course the point of sacrificial destruction of objects), but to address that kind of service to a man could only result in a wanton wounding of the body of the house. One must be ready, and glad, to admit a certain largeness of poetic treatment. Aeschylus is not pressing upon us the thought of tapestries being sacrificed to gods. He is concentrating on the destruction of *oikos*-substance, and distinguishing the kinds of respect proper towards gods and towards men. (A near-absurdity arises when we stress, as I believe all commentators have done, the narrow transgression of walking on the tapestries rather than the broad hubris of wasting the house's wealth: we find ourselves regarding the tapestries as somehow reserved for the feet of gods. Indeed Agamemnon himself admits, according to the better interpretation of the controversial lines 931–34, that for a man to walk upon tapestries like the ones now in his path is not necessarily an impious action.)

And again, while a servant is taking off his shoes—a gesture of modesty and of respect for the precious stuff, and also an attempt to minimise damage—Agamemnon declares his fear of divine *phthonos* ("may no god glance malignly on me"), now in direct association with the religious "shame" (*aidōs*) of the wealth-wasting. And he sets foot on the tapestries. And thus his homecoming is a harming of his house, the lucid externality of this equivalence presenting a complete and painful dramatic sense: the thing is done, it shows itself.

If any doubt remains as to where interpretative emphasis should rest, it is dispelled by Clytemnestra's words at the moment when Agamemnon gives way to her:

> The sea—who shall drain the sea?—is at hand with its store of purple stain for dyeing fine things, abundant, precious as silver, eternally renewed. And of fine things, my king, there is no lack in our house—by the god's grace: our house does not know how to be poor. I would have devoted many such to be trodden underfoot, if some oracle had required this tribute of the house when I was casting about for means to secure your safe return.
>
> (ll. 958–65)

She directs her attention (as, from behind her, Aeschylus directs ours) towards the household's wealth; she counters her husband's scruples with the argument that the *oikos* can afford the waste that is taking place at this moment, as Agamemnon walks along the tapestries into the palace.

The religious fear which prompted his rebuke of Clytemnestra and his initial refusal to tread on the tapestries now moves into the dramatic foreground, for Clytemnestra's sentiment that the *oikos* is so rich that it need not bother about this kind of extravagance, while trivial-seeming to us, will have struck a fifth-century audience as recklessly hubristic; and they will have observed a vital distinction between the senseless wantonness taking place in front of them and the hypothetical circumstances envisaged by Clytemnestra of the same destruction following an oracle's command. Great wealth linked with high station had been from early times the subject of moral reflection on the virtues of moderation and restraint. Eminence did not arouse in the Greeks a narrow hostility or envy, but it did seem to them singularly vulnerable; they never tired of saying, in their tragic literature and elsewhere, that to be prominent and prosperous and at the same time to avoid hubris is exquisitely difficult. The old men of the *Agamemnon*'s Chorus show a timidity and eagerness for a life obscure enough to escape heaven's jealous eye which one might parallel in almost any extant Greek tragedy. Nevertheless, the choral songs of this play are exceptional in the degree to which they isolate and dwell upon material prosperity. I am saying that the great tragic subject of Excess is being given economic point.

An important function of choral meditation is to create and sustain atmosphere, to foster thematic affinities. Early in the play, after Clytemnestra has told them of Troy's capture, they reflect:

> Disaster, the child of reckless folly, is with us for all to see, when the house of the proud-hearted is crammed with wealth in excess, beyond what is best. Our prayer is for sufficiency without sorrow, for that share which the wise man calls enough. There is no escape for him who, wanton in his wealth, thrusts the exalted seat of Justice out of sight, out of mind.
>
> (ll. 374–84)

Their burden is Paris's guilt and just punishment, but the link between his abduction of Helen and their large moralising upon riches is extremely tenuous—although we ought not to forget that Paris has enriched his household and his city by this theft. Aeschylus is availing himself of the opportunity given in the Chorus's lyrical elaborations—the intrusive author's voice of Victorian fiction achieves a similar end more blatantly—to provide reader and spectator with an ultimate objectivity of reference, like a key signature. This reaches us as a religio-moral drift in which the

action is suspended. When he gives the following passage to the Chorus at the long-awaited moment of Agamemnon's entry:

> Justice sets store by a righteous life, and her light shines in the smoky dwellings of the poor. But she departs with averted eyes from gold-encrusted halls where men's hands are defiled, taking her way to innocent homes. She does not bow to the power of wealth stamped false with idle praise; she guides all things to their fulfilment.
>
> Hail, my King, stormer of Troy, Atreus's son.
>
> (ll. 773–81)

It is no accident that Agamemnon appears when he does: but this is not to say that the words are directed at him in the form of personal indictment. Indeed they are not directed *at* him at all; we must allow the theme of unholy wealth and the visible figure of the king simply to coexist in our reception of the scene. The Chorus's remarks are suitably general in tone since their application is collective. They anticipate the self-wounding of the *oikos* which is soon to be presented in the spoiling of the tapestries.

Aeschylus has thus made careful preparation for the carpet scene, to insure that its sense shall not be misapprehended. Nor can one doubt the hubris entailed in Clytemnestra's defending of waste by an appeal to wealth; the Chorus's religio-moral brooding has produced a state of attentiveness in which doubt is impossible. Furthermore, the choral song which follows her speech contains an indirect refutation of its argument:

> The ship of human fortune, holding a straight course onward, strikes a hidden reef. Then, if a well-judged heave tips part of the cargo overboard, the wisely fearful captain saves his ship from foundering: and a house too, no longer over-freighted, escapes total wreck.
>
> (ll. 1005–13)

The *oikos*—any *oikos*—is being likened in a forcefully collective quasi-simile (the likeness sliding characteristically toward identification) to a ship at sea, and the Chorus is envisaging circumstances in which it would be a blameless and prudent decision to sacrifice part of the corporate wealth in order to save the rest. A comparison between purposeful surrender and purposeless waste emerges into consciousness almost unprompted. Clytemnestra is not directly challenged, but the economic bias of her hubris cannot be overlooked. We have noted a similar oblique

commentary investing Agamemnon; the Chorus's words immediately before his entry are not directed at him, but they are felt to have been thrown round him; and when, in the song which comes to an end with his dying cry, they affirm: "Mankind never has its fill of prosperity" (ll. 1331–32)—an unattached piece of moralising, even by the standards of Greek tragedy—one experiences an *oikos*-focussed rightness of context which occupies the place both of causation (Agamemnon isn't killed because he walked on the tapestries) and of personal justice (he doesn't deserve to die for walking on the tapestries). Likewise when Clytemnestra turns to Cassandra, the captive Trojan seer whom Agamemnon has brought home with him, and orders her to go inside the house and take her stand "with many another slave at the altar of the god who guards its wealth," adding that she has "reason to be deeply thankful for having masters old in wealth" (ll. 1037–38, 1043), the bitterness of Cassandra's situation (she is being sent inside to be murdered, which she knows through her seer's gift but cannot prevent) stands in the kind of relation we are considering—thematically pointed but causally remote—to the hubris of her new mistress.

I am not trying to subordinate Agamemnon's murder to the carpet scene, but to understand both in the light of Aeschylus's intention to dramatise the troubles of the house of Atreus. The point of immediate relevance is the dwarfing of all other consideration by the corporate consequences of these two outrages committed within the *oikos,* against itself. The Chorus's response to Agamemnon's death-cry is public and institutional; they talk of "a plot to set up a tyranny in the city" on the part of the two "defilers of the house" ("murderers" would be too narrow a designation of those who have killed the king and master of the *oikos*), and when Clytemnestra appears before them to justify her action they reply to her with waverings and contrapuntal blendings of opinion, blaming her, admitting Agamemnon's guilt, confessing themselves unable to judge between the adversaries; but the dominant strain is their dismay, which is the corporate dismay of the stricken *oikos:*

> I am at a loss what to think and where to turn, now the house is tottering; I fear the pelting storm of blood that shakes the house,
>
> (ll. 1530–34)

and their horror of the evil spirit (*daimōn*) which has been seen through successive generations of the house of Atreus, and which is now at work again. The potency of the family *daimōn* and its central place in the trilogy