

Gendered Truths in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

This paper argues that truth in the *Agamemnon* is “gendered” in the following respects: 1) male and female characters both access and react to the truth differently; 2) their respective genders affect how they are perceived and treated by their interlocutors; 3) the female characters demonstrate a greater tendency to conceive of truth in terms of the overarching plot of reciprocal retribution. Truth-telling plays a significant role in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, in which announcements of significant events are often what move the plot forward, yet this topic has not received a great deal of scholarly attention. The craftiness of Clytemnestra and particularly her cunning use of language have generated abundant discussion (Winnington-Ingram 1983; Betensky 1978; Goldhill 1984; McClure 1999; Foley 2001), but neither her role as a truth-teller nor the relationship of gender to truth in Aeschylus has been fully explored.

I will examine three notable moments of truth-reporting in the *Agamemnon*: Clytemnestra's informing the Chorus of Troy's fall, the Herald's subsequent reiteration of this report, and Cassandra's narration of the various events that have befallen or will befall the House of Atreus. The nature of their sources varies, thus eliciting contrasting reactions from the Chorus, some of which are explicitly gender-based. When Clytemnestra names the non-verbal signal of the beacon-fires as her source, the Chorus express doubt about the fires' authority and veracity and belittle Clytemnestra's trust in them as typical for an overly credulous woman (268-280; 475-487). The Herald, by contrast, relays information based on firsthand, eyewitness experience, which the Chorus value more, expressing unhesitating belief in his report (583-584). The Chorus' choice of truth-words further reflects the relative degrees of trust they invest in Clytemnestra and the Herald, respectively; *alēthēs*, which they use to describe the Herald's report (491), has a greater tendency to characterize verbal communications than *etētumos*, which describes Clytemnestra's non-verbal beacon-fire (477), and the Chorus believe the former more readily. The treatment of Cassandra is more complicated, as the Chorus alternately believe and fail to understand her (cf. Lebeck 1971, 52-58). The alternation hinges on whether she speaks of the past or the future; her brand of truth is unique in that it knows no time dimension and is thus susceptible to a fluctuating response from the Chorus, who understand her when she speaks of past events but are confounded by her predictions of immediately future events. Cassandra is a figure who transcends gender and its accompanying implications about credibility; as a virtually

genderless character, her prophecy, despite the impediments of Apollo's curse, eventually gains the Chorus' comprehension and belief (1295-1321).

I will then point out that it is above all the female truth-tellers in the *Agamemnon* who demonstrate an understanding of the inevitability of truth and its consequences. Clytemnestra and Cassandra at various points express a keen awareness of the underlying theme of the *Oresteia*, that events stem from what has happened before and affect what is to come: reality is governed by reciprocity. Cassandra's brand of truth allows her to contextualize her death as one event in a series of retributive murders (1316-1319), while Clytemnestra similarly acknowledges as truth (*aletheia*) the probability that her gruesome actions will be met with corresponding and equal reactions (1560-1568). Not only do male and female characters access truth differently, they possess different conceptions of truth: the Herald merely reports what has happened, whereas Clytemnestra and Cassandra understand that truth encompasses the notion that past, present, and future events are connected as reactions and precursors to one another.

Bibliography – Gendered Truths in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

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