The Discourse of the Waiting Wife at *Agamemnon* 855-913

At *Ag*. 855-913 Clytemnestra adopts the "Penelope-tone" of the faithful waiting wife (Conacher 1987, 33), intending to deceive her husband with her passionate rhetoric (McClure 1999, 78-79; Pelling 2005, 97). As a result, her speech contains many of the topics pertaining to the discourse of waiting wives in later tragedies: she mentions false reports, despair and suicide attempts, fear for the safety of her children, constant weeping, insomnia, and harrowing dreams. As part of a larger study of the traumatic experiences of wives awaiting soldier-husbands to return, I argue that Clytemnestra's speech connects Penelope's experiences in the *Odyssey* with a discourse of waiting wives in Greek tragedy.

Clytemnestra begins by describing her insufferable life (δύσφορον...βίον, 859) while her husband was at Troy. The first important *topos* (τὸ μὲν...πρῶτον, 861) in the discourse of the waiting wife is the danger of dire reports (κληδόνας παλιγκότους, 863), which pour into the house, one more horrible than the last. Familiar also to wives of soldiers who fight in modern wars, as described by Marian Faye Novak, wife of a Vietnam veteran (Novak 1991), this experience appears in the *Odyssey* and in every extant tragedy that features a waiting wife. Deianeira in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* confronts a messenger who brings her a false report of Heracles' return (225-469). In Euripides' *Heracles*, Megara claims that Eurystheus' heralds had falsely reported Heracles' death (553). The first scene of Euripides' *Helen* also depicts an encounter with a messenger, Teucer, who falsely reports Menelaus' death at sea (123-132).

The second *topos*, the despair resulting from false reports that leads to suicidal thoughts, recalls Penelope's prayers for a quick death from Artemis (18.202-205, 20.61-63). Clytemnestra claims that reports of Agamemnon's death drove her to tie a noose around her neck several times (874-876). Megara, having lost hope that Heracles would return, decides to submit to execution

(Eur. *Her.* 295-301). Euripides' Helen also decides that death is a better alternative than remarriage to another man (Eur. *Hel.* 293-305).

Another concern for waiting wives is the safety of their children, as exemplified by Penelope's concern for Telemachus in the *Odyssey*. Clytemnestra uses her supposed fears for Orestes' safety as an excuse for having sent him to another household (877-885). Deianeira also complains about how her husband comes and goes, sowing children, but failing to help care for them as they grow (Soph. *Trach.* 31-33). Finally, in the *Heracles*, a political plot like the one Clytemnestra claims to fear (883-885) actually does threaten the children's lives (Eur. *Her.* 69-87).

Other *topoi*, such as constant weeping, insomnia, and dreams that repeat the horrors of false reports, are vividly described by Clytemnestra (887-894; see Caruth 1996 on trauma and dreams). Though Penelope and Clytemnestra recall their trauma in dreams more frequently than other wives (cf. *Od.* 19.535-553, 20.88-90; Aesch. *Cho.* 523-539, Soph. *El.* 417-423), Deianeira also mentions anxious nights (Soph. *Trach.* 29-30), the Chorus testifies to Deianeira's constant weeping and insomnia (103-111), and Helen delivers a lament that displays her own tears upon tears (δάκρυα δάκρυσι, Eur. *Hel.* 195). The only *topos* common to the discourse of waiting wives that Clytemnestra fails to mention is fear of the husband's infidelity, an omission that speaks loudly in this case.

The ending of Clytemnestra's speech, in which she heaps praise upon Agamemnon as the savior of her household (895-901), also anticipates a belief frequently held by waiting wives: that the return of the soldier-husband will bring an end to the family's troubles. Tragedy, as opposed to epic, demonstrates that this belief is often false, that the soldier's return brings a new set of problems that the family must also confront. Clytemnestra's welcome speech, because it offers a

deceptive imitation of the discourse of waiting wives, highlights all the important topics of a discourse that starts with Homer's Penelope, but finds its most varied, rich expression in tragedy.

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