

Agamemnon as Eagle and Vulture: Animal Single-Parent Images in the *Oresteia*

Much attention has been paid to animal imagery in the *Oresteia*; Knox (1952) exhaustively parsed the lion imagery whereas Heath (1999) investigated the merging between the animal and human worlds. However, most analysis of the animal imagery does not explore the importance of such imagery to conceptions of gender and of the family unit. The animal imagery serves as commentary on the struggle between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon for control of their family, the struggle between the female and the male, and the struggle between mother and father. The animal single-parent images present a dominant Agamemnon as the sole head of the family and the only parent to Electra and Orestes and a Clytemnestra removed from the family or even the species. These images serve as precursors to the final trial, depicting a remade family in which matricide is no longer a crime because there no longer is a mother.

The first animal single-parent image occurs at *Agamemnon* 48-54 when the war cry of the Atreidai is likened to the cry of parent vultures which have lost their young. In this image, both Agamemnon and Menelaus are depicted as single parents. However, their wives are not co-parents. Instead, Clytemnestra as vulture mother is completely absent and Helen is more appropriately seen as the lost vulture chick. In this image, the men become both war leaders and nurturing parents. With Agamemnon and Menelaus in this dual role, mothers are not necessary. A complete family is one with only one male parent and the connection between the father and the children is the only emotional bond. In such a family, the role of mother does not exist, nor does the crime of matricide. Such a reading is complicated by the possibility of connecting vulture Agamemnon's lost chick to Iphigenia. Thus, at *Agamemnon* 48-54, Agamemnon is depicted as a successful single parent because he cares deeply for his children, but he is also depicted as a failed father.

Agamemnon is again an animal single parent at *Choephoroi* 246-51. The eagle family is only Agamemnon, Orestes, and Electra. Clytemnestra is an entirely different species. Garvie sees the snake as an especially pertinent image for Clytemnestra's relationship to her husband and children; the viper was thought to attack its mate and be attacked by its children (1986). However, what is depicted here is not intra-species animal violence; Clytemnestra the snake attacks a family of another species. This exclusion from the animal family does not lessen Clytemnestra's guilt, but instead defines her behavior as that of a hostile outsider. The image suggests that Clytemnestra acts as an enemy, not as a family member, and should not be protected by the bonds of family. Clytemnestra has forfeited her role as wife eagle through her violence against Agamemnon. Clytemnestra's place in the family and the need for a mother is completely removed through this animal image.

The purpose of these images is to assert that the father is the only parent, removing the mother from the family. The family is reconfigured from a mother, a father, and the children to one male parent and children. The role of the mother is completely removed and the father, in place of the mother, takes on a nurturing role and cares deeply about the welfare of the children. This reconfiguration creates a new model of the family which reduces the genetic and familial connection between Clytemnestra and her children and legitimizes their antagonism towards her. Orestes' revenge for his father against his mother is justified by the model of the family presented through single-parent images: the familial bond was strong between Orestes and Agamemnon, but nonexistent between Orestes and Clytemnestra.

Works Cited

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