

The “Overlooked” *oikonomia* in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* and Kubrick’s *The Shining*

Agamemnon’s performance marks the first surviving use of the σκηνή. This wall, pierced by a door, represents the palace of the Atreidae, and is the locus of persistent evil. In this stage property, “Western tragedy acquired an inner chamber, a place of potent concealment, and a vital passageway to that interior, the channel which makes and unmakes the relationship between seen and unseen” (Padel 1990: 354).

Agamemnon’s uncanny ability to depict interior horror recalls Kubrick’s *The Shining*. The watchman notes the eerie nature of the palace at the outset. Engaging in personification, he says the place has fallen on troubled times: “the house itself, if it should speak,/ would do so most clearly” (οἶκος δ’ αὐτός, εἰ φθογγὴν λάβοι,/ σαφέστατ’ ἂν λέξειεν, 37-8). Soon the chorus sing of the House’s sinister sentience. Iphigenia’s sacrifice has produced a “frightful, fresh-
arising, *house-administering*, wily, remembering, child-avenging rage” (φοβερὰ παλίνορτος/
οἰκονόμος δολία, μνάμων Μῆνις τεκνόποινος, 154-5). “An evil thing, long lasting, [has made] its home in [the] house and ever renews its power” (Fraenkel 1950: ii.93). Clytemnestra even mocks her husband as being one of its architectural membra, “a foot-raising *column* of the high roof” (ὕψηλῆς στέγης/ στῦλον ποδήρη, 897-8).

Kubrick’s Overlook Hotel is also a source of evil possessing those within. Like *Agamemnon*’s palace, it bespeaks wealth and power. The psychically gifted, however, see what lurks beneath the surface. The captive Cassandra needs no introduction to the Mycenaean οἶκος. It is “god-hating, . . . knows many sinister secrets, . . . and has bloody hands” (μισόθεον, . . . πολλὰ συνίστορα/ αὐτοφόνα, 1090-1). The σκηνή in fact conceals a human slaughterhouse (ἀνδροσφαγεῖον καὶ πέδορράντηριον, 1092). The Overlook likewise reeks of death. Built atop a

Native American graveyard, it usurps the geometrical decorations of the vanquished.

Photographs of wealthy white guests cover the walls, mingling uneasily with the Native art. And Danny Torrance senses past misdeeds down every corridor. Both play and film invest doorways with extraordinary power. The door in *Agamemnon*'s σκηνή is a portal to death; the king's hesitant progress toward it resembles Danny's fearful approach to Room 237. In each instance the ensuing violence is the more terrible for being imagined, not seen. Aeschylus' crimson tapestries are matched by Kubrick's nightmarish scene of blood gushing from the elevator doors.

In *The Shining*, Jack Torrance increasingly identifies with the Hotel, to the exclusion of all else. In this he resembles Agamemnon at Aulis. According to the chorus, the king agonized about his daughter's fate, but opted for duty: "How can I desert ship/ and abandon the alliance?" (πῶς λιπόναις γένωμαι/ ξυμμαχίας ἀμαρτῶν;, 212-3) Jack performs similar mental arithmetic, prizing his responsibility to the Overlook above his obligation to wife and child.

Aeschylus and Kubrick are above all alike in their understanding of the terror they depict. According to Stephen King (Duvall 1999: 36), the Overlook "is like a huge storage battery charged with an evil powerful enough to corrupt all those who come in contact with it." Cook further contends (1984: 3) that "the true horror of *The Shining* is the horror of living in a society which is predicated upon murder and must constantly deny the fact to itself. . . . Much of this murder is economically motivated and is the by-product of crimes of property. But much more of it is economically motivated in a subtler sense and results from the frustrations of an economic system that demands the exploitation of its weakest members." In this vein, we should recall *Agamemnon*'s relentless emphasis on the corrupting influence of the wealth of the House of Atreus (Rose 1992: 206-14). As Clytemnestra remarks, "the house does not know how to be poor" (πένεσθαι δ' οὐκ ἐπίσταται δόμος, 962). Time and again, the chorus stress the

interconnectedness of riches, hybris, and violence: Justice shines in smoky hovels (Δίκη δὲ λάμπει μὲν ἐν/ δυσκάπνοις δώμασιν, 772-3).

Works Cited:

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