

An Aeschylean Tale of Fear and Sacrifice in Ismail Kadare's *The Successor*

This paper explores the influence of Aeschylus on Ismail Kadare's *The Successor*. The novel is set in Albania in 1981 and has as its plot the mystery surrounding the death of the second in command of the Albanian Communist party, Mehmet Shehu, known throughout the novel as the Successor. Although based on historical events, it is primarily a fictionalized meditation on the arbitrariness of life under a dictatorship and serves as continuation of his earlier short novella *Agamemnon's Daughter*, which tells the story of Suzana, daughter of the Successor, who is forced to give up her lover for the sake of her father's political career. In that story, the lover she is forced to leave imagines he sees the ghost of Agamemnon while watching a state propaganda parade and connects the fall of Agamemnon (punishment for sacrificing Iphigenia) with the coming doom of the communist party in Albania, foreshadowing also the impending death of the Successor.¹ In *The Successor*, the story begins with the mysterious suicide of the Successor, which many believe was really murder ordered by the Guide, the character representing Enver Hoxha, the Albanian communist dictator from 1944-1985. In keeping with the plot of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the Successor's wife, called "Comrade Clytemnestra" by the Guide, is hinted to have been the murderer by novel's end.

The influence of Aeschylus can be seen throughout the novel (and well as in the accompanying novella) through repeated explicit references to the story of Agamemnon as followed by Aeschylus. Kadare even leads his reader to view the tale he is telling

¹ In *Agamemnon's Daughter*, Kadare has the main character quote Aeschylus directly after also relating a story of eagles to forge the connection between Aeschylus and his own story (p. 62).

through the lens of Greek tragedy by having his characters ruminate on the connections. It is not the story and references alone, however, that shows Aeschylus lingering in the background of the novel. Rather, it is the atmosphere Kadare creates, one of tension and fear, that reminds the reader most of Aeschylus' own *Agamemnon*. Kadare creates this atmosphere especially by deploying throughout the novel the imagery and storytelling techniques found in the opening *parados* sung by the Chorus of Argive men in the play, focusing especially on the imagery and meaning of the sacrifice of Iphigenia. While I will make note in the paper of explicit allusions to Aeschylus throughout, I will focus the talk on the more subtle and powerful impact of Aeschylus found especially in the near stream-of-conscious narrative of the daughter, the Iphigenia character, in Chapter 4 ('The Fall'). Here, all consideration of the Successor's death and the events that lead to it is filtered through the daughter's eyes interwoven with prophetic bird signs, flashbacks to the relationship reminiscent of the Chorus' flashback to her false 'marriage' to Achilles and her silencing on the altar.

The use of imagery is mirrored by the abrupt and yet densely layered style Kadare uses, also reminiscent of Aeschylus' choral style. The overall effect, then, is to build up both the sense of foreboding and inevitability that accompanied Agamemnon's return and fall in *Agamemnon*. Further, the resulting atmosphere of fear and doom in *The Successor* invokes a similar negative response to tyranny in the reader as in the audience of *Agamemnon* inevitably feels as Clytemnestra and Aegisthus enter the palace at the end of Aeschylus' play. And this likely explains the reason Kadare found the Aeschylean version of the story so compelling—it is not the tale of revenge and blood feud he hoped to summon up, but the threatening atmosphere of fear that defines life under tyranny.