The True Colors of κηκίς (Aesch. Ag. 960)

In Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* blood, sacrifice, and kin slayings are intensified scene by scene and become especially prominent during the tapestry scene. Little has been said about the term κηκίς (Ag. 960) and its sacrificial and ritual nuances have not yet been explored extensively (Blomfield 1826, Fraenkel 1962, Lebeck 1971, Schütz 1779). In this paper, I expand the argument that Lebeck initiated in 1971, where she argues that the color of πορφύρα (πορφυρόστρωτος πόρος, Ag. 910) refers to the bloodshed produced by kin killings in the *Agamemnon*. Also, I extend the exploration of blood imagery and focus on the thematic connotations of the phrase κηκίδα παγκαίνιστον (‘an ever renewed dying stain,’ Ag. 960) which ties in with other references of shedding blood in tragedy. My analysis demonstrates that the phrase κηκίδα παγκαίνιστον (Ag. 960) participates in the vocabulary of blood and killings as well as encompasses the sacrificial vocabulary used to describe such killings in the trilogy. I begin by discussing the different definitions for the word κηκίς commencing with the Hippocratic corpus. In *De morbis popularibus* 2.6.27.1, it indicates something dark and black (κηκίς μέλαινα). Then, I discuss its different occurrences in poetry (e.g., Sophocles *Philoctetes* 696, Apoll. Rhod. 4.600). I also compare the importance of the phrase, κηκίδα παγκαίνιστον (‘an ever renewed dying stain,’ Ag. 960) within the tapestry imagery (Lebeck 1971) by connecting it to other color words in the carpet scene (πορφυρόστρωτος πόρος, πορφύρας, Ag. 910, 957). As Lebeck argues (1971), the moment Agamemnon steps on the ἄβατον carpet, he reenacts his responsibility for Iphigenia’s sacrifice (παρακοπὰ πρωτοπήμων “primal source of woe” Ag. 223) as well as the origins of the crimes of his lineage (πρώταρχον ἄτην “the primal sin” Ag. 1192-3).
The κηκίς refers to the color of the purple dye, while the adjective παγκαίνιστον points out the element of renewability. Next, I analyze how the connotations of the color purple contextualize the tapestry scene in relation to Agamemnon’s murder. I then situate the ritual implications of κηκίδα παγκαίνιστον (Ag. 960), in relation to Clytemnestra’s description of Agamemnon’s ritual slaughter (ἔσφαξ’ Ag. 1432). By examining the sacrificial connotations of κηκίδα παγκαίνιστον (Ag. 960) I will demonstrate how this phrase within the context of the carpet scene underlines the connection between Iphigenia’s sacrifice (σφάξαι, σφαγήσεται Eur. Iphigenia in Aulis 1351, 1361), and Agamemnon’s slaughter by Clytemnestra, reenacting the impious continuation of the generational violence of the royal house of the Atreids (Zeitlin 1971). Κηκίς πανκαίνιστος therefore, intensifies blood imagery, since it is entwined not only with the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra, as a retribution for his violent conduct and deeds, but also as a reflection of the past, and a predicting of the future. This circle of bloodshed (ending eventually with Orestes’ murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus), where each act of murder is repaid by another, reveals the meaning of πανκαίνιστος and anticipates Orestes’ revelation of his mother’s and her lover’s corpses after the murder in the Choephoroi.

Bibliography


