

The Power of Pity in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*

Aeschylus weaves a strand of pity through the inexorable doom dominating his *Agamemnon*. This paper will emulate Munteanu 2012 in looking for meaning in the compassionate responses of the tragedy's internal audience. The playwright brings the king of Argos home so that his embittered wife can kill him, and that unrelenting tension builds from the watchman's cautious reticence (36) through the death cries of the murdered king (1343, 1345) to the threat of civic strife (1650-1652). Innocent victims of violence amplify this darkness and yet inject a trace of humanity as their suffering evokes compassion.

No human beings, however, participate in the first instance of pity. The chorus recalls in the *parados* that the seer Calchas had attributed to the goddess Artemis compassion (οἴκτω) for a pregnant hare killed by eagles (134). Setting aside debated questions about the true causes for anger of Artemis, it is sufficient to note that this compassion prompted the goddess to act (Gantz 1983:73). The winds prevented the Greek fleet from sailing to Troy.

To win a favorable breeze, Agamemnon killed his own daughter. The chorus remember the horrific scene as Iphigenia is trussed up for the sacrifice (233). Her pleas unacknowledged, her mouth gagged, she did the only thing in her power: ἔβαλλ' ἕκαστον θυτήρων ἀπ' ὀμματος βέλει φιλοῖκτω (240-241). In vain, apart from the old men of Argos who were moved to paint this pitiable picture (O'Sullivan 2008:173). The tragedy opens with memories of the events that set it in motion, events marked by the language of pity.

Pity fades from view but then reemerges more prominently in the exchange between Cassandra and the chorus (1069-1330). Leahy, observing that this scene opens and closes with references to pity, quotes Thomson's conclusion published in 1938 that "The keynote of the

scene is pity” (Leahy 1969:144 with n. 4). After Clytemnestra has failed to lead Cassandra into the palace, the old men of the chorus reject the queen’s hostility and, instead, sympathize with the Trojan captive: ἐγὼ δ’, ἐποικίρω γάρ, οὐ θυμώσομαι (1069). As Cassandra prepares to leave, the chorus, realizing that she has prophesied her own death, reiterate their pity in the last words they speak to her: ὦ τλήμιον, οἰκίρω σε θεσφάτου μόρου (1321).

Cassandra’s own final pronouncement is to pity human misfortune: καὶ ταῦτ’ ἐκείνων μᾶλλον οἰκίρω πολύ (1330). She has witnessed such misfortune in her vision of the murdered children of Thyestes holding their own internal organs, which she calls ‘ἐποίκτιστον γέμος’ (1221), and she had anticipated the choral response to her fate: ἄγαν γ’ ἀληθόμαντιν οἰκίρας ἐρεῖς (1241). Compassion defines this scene that may not advance the plot (Schein 1982:11) but does help reveal its meaning (Schein 1982:15).

The death of Cassandra recalls the sacrifice of Iphigenia, and “the only unquestionably unfair and pitiful murders are Iphigenia’s and Cassandra’s” (Kanellakis 2020:40). These two victims and the pity they evoke create a powerful emotional counterpoint to Clytemnestra’s *coup d’etat*. In fact, the action begins with pity of Artemis and concludes with what the chorus terms the pitiable (ἔποικτον) murder of Agamemnon (1614)—pity is an integral part of the power of the play.

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