

Aeschylus' Reception of Homer through the "Huphasma"

When Aeschylus purportedly claimed that his tragedies were 'slices from the great banquet of Homer' (Athenaeus, *E.* 8.39.17), he once again obscured any exactness in meaning through the opacity of his language. We know quite well that he borrowed from Homer, but how Aeschylus viewed his own work in relation to Homer's remains ambiguous. This paper identifies and analyzes Aeschylus' use of ὕφασμα, an intertext with Homer's *Odyssey*, which he systematically incorporates as patterned imagery with thematic significance. This find expands the work of Homeric reception, elucidates a number of passages in the *Oresteia* and is consonant with those that recognize the depth and complexity of Aeschylus' imagery within the trilogy (cf. Fraenkel, 1950; Garvie, 1986; Sommerstein 1989; Thiel, 1993; Lee, 2004; and Garner, 1990).

The ὕφασμα is one of twelve different words that Aeschylus uses in reference to the "net", which was used to entangle and ultimately help kill Agamemnon. The ὕφασμα itself is referenced six times in the *Oresteia*, with the first instance establishing a context that is advanced and elaborately engaged in each of the ensuing employments. The first instance of ὕφασμα appears in *Ag.* 1489-1496, where the Chorus likens the entrapment of Agamemnon to the web (ὕφασματι, 1492) of a spider, a reference to Clytemnestra, who is said to have killed Agamemnon by her own hand (ἐκ χειρὸς 1496).

In these lines (*Ag.* 1490-1496), Aeschylus intertextually engages the report of Agamemnon's death in *Odyssey* 3.247-275, a point heretofore unnoticed by scholars. Nestor there claims that Aegisthus devised the murder, and, after having accomplished the great deed, he sacrificed to the gods and offered woven goods and gold (*Od.* 3.274-275, πολλὰ δ' ἀγάλματ' ἀνήψεν, ὕφασματά τε χρυσόν τε, ἐκτελέσας μέγα ἔργον). Aeschylus' plot fundamentally differs from Homer's in three aspects. First, Aeschylus presents Clytemnestra as

the killer, not Aegisthus. Second, and related to her agency, is the necessary tension of her motive, which is central to the thematic development of the trilogy. Aegisthus' desire to avenge Thyestes is a motive which does not justify Clytemnestra's involvement. Therefore, Aeschylus must emphasize the suffering of Clytemnestra, through the sacrifice of Iphigenia and the presence of Cassandra, in order to vindicate and intensify her agency. Third, the scene of the murder is moved from a banquet, a detail related in a different portion of the *Odyssey*, to the bath. One of the ways that Aeschylus emphasizes these differences, while maintaining a level of continuity with Homer's narrative, is through the imagery and employment of the ὄφασμα, a term uniquely shared, for differing purposes, in both Homer and Aeschylus.

The link between the two identified passages, *Od.* 3.247-275 and *Ag.* 1490-1496, is the ὄφασμα, an image of a textile distinct for its inter-wovenness. Aeschylus uniquely weaves together Homer's version with his own by transferring the ὄφασμα from the offering of Aegisthus into the hands of Clytemnestra to accomplish a murder with conflated motives. Thus, the context for the ὄφασμα has shifted from an offering to the gods (Homer) to the scene of an unholy death (Aeschylus), which Seaford (249) describes as absolute hostility, violating the bond of husband and wife. The ensuing dialogues between Clytemnestra and the Chorus and then Aegisthus and the Chorus adumbrate the effect of the ὄφασμα imagery. Clytemnestra readily admits her agency and concedes the role and motive of Aegisthus as a contributing factor to her deed, but she also points to Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia as her personal motivation for killing him (*Ag.* 1497-1576). Thus, through the ὄφασμα and supporting dialogues, Aeschylus is careful not to displace the role of Aegisthus or his motive, because the narrative recalling the cursed house of Atreus adds to the rancor of internecine strife. Nevertheless, Clytemnestra is a

focal character in Aeschylus' myth whose motive also intensifies the theme of cyclical vengeance.

The rest of the paper identifies the other five instances and analyzes them in much the same way. Overall, the ὕφασμα is another example of Aeschylus' systematic, and magisterial, use of imagery. Aeschylus' consistent reprisal of the ὕφασμα into successive scenes suggests a conscientious layering of imagery that is as planned and intricate as the spider web it first represents.

Bibliography

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