

We Might Need Prophets Here: An Examination of Divinatory Perspectives
in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*

The capacity of the Athenian theater to reflect upon significant public issues such as theology, politics, and Athenian identity has been commented on extensively by scholars (Parker 2009; Winkler and Zeitlin 1992), and Aeschylus' *Oresteia* has not lacked in such treatment (Rosenmeyer 1988; Goldhill 2004). While scholars have paid considerable attention to the investigation of human attitudes toward the gods, fate, and the future, as well as to the agents and mechanisms of prophecy present in the *Oresteia*, such examinations have not precisely addressed the aggregate effect of the extensive and complex portrayal of divinatory persons and practices throughout the trilogy on the audience. In this paper, I will demonstrate how Aeschylus' *Oresteia* functions as a forum for the public to consider the validity and effectiveness of the various diviners and divinatory methods available to the *polis*. Aeschylus invites his audience to contemplate the complexities and contradictions of divination by portraying a series of shifting attitudes toward divination and diviners on the part of the chorus and the characters themselves throughout the trilogy.

The characters in *Agamemnon* are ever-mindful of their temporality, frequently referring to the sins of the past and looking fearfully to the future. While the discussion of Calchas' successful but ruinous divination about the sacrifice of Iphigenia (*Ag.* 126-57) offers a complicated examination of divination, the frustration inherent in divination is embodied most clearly in Cassandra, who accurately foretells the future but cannot be understood. In line 1062, the chorus states that Cassandra needs an interpreter, and in their call for an interpreter of an interpreter, the chorus underscores the difficulty of understanding those who claim to divine the

future. This same point is revisited when the chorus misinterprets Cassandra's message about Agamemnon's murder, and they liken her prophecy to the cryptic Pythian oracles (1254-55). Beyond offering opportunities to reflect on the difficulty of understanding divination, Cassandra also comments on the presence of charlatan practitioners throughout the city (1194-95), thereby bringing to the stage the contemporary issue of identifying pretender versus prophet.

The chorus, who serves as an internal audience that models the external audience in theater, exhibit frequent swings in emotion towards Cassandra and prophecy. When Cassandra arrives, they are very antagonistic, telling her they know her reputation and have no need for prophecy (1098-99). The chorus cannot understand the true prophecies offered by Cassandra and lament that prophecies have never brought anything good for men (1130-5). But after Cassandra accurately discusses the past of the House of Atreus, the chorus recognizes her talents and begins to trust her (1193-1213), though in the end they fail to understand Cassandra and are unable to intercede on Agamemnon's behalf. The aversion toward prophecy, which gives way to a deep desire to know the future while ultimately being unable to comprehend it, must have encapsulated the experiences of many in the audience.

Through shifts in the character of Clytemnestra over the course of the trilogy, Aeschylus calls into question a particular form of divination, dream interpretation. In *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra is asked on two occasions by the chorus if she learned about the victory of Troy through dream interpretation (274-77). In both instances, she dismisses dreams as meaningless occurrences when the mind is at sleep and characterizes trusting them as childish. This is in stark contrast to the Clytemnestra of *The Libation Bearers* who, after having a dream in which she is bitten by a snake she was breastfeeding, is immediately frightened—rightfully so—for her life (523-53). Finally, in *The Eumenides*, Clytemnestra appears as a dream herself exhorting the

sleeping Furies to avenge her death. She, in direct opposition to the sentiments she expressed in *Agamemnon*, states that the future of mortals can only be seen in sleep (104-5). She, a dream figure, then goes on, attempting to rouse the Furies who pursue Orestes in a misleading dream which prevents them from carrying out their task (131-35). Thus the trilogy tracks Clytemnestra's perspectives on dreams from purely dismissive, to strictly adherent, to ambivalent.

The characters and chorus in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* are constantly interacting with diviners and divination with divergent attitudes and responses. Aeschylus models his characters' experiences on his audience's complicated relationship to divination. Through Aeschylus' complex presentation of diviners, oracular interpretation, and public sentiments toward them, the tragedian establishes an arena for public reflection and, potentially, the eventual consolidation of sentiment towards the diviners and divinatory methods available to Athenians.

Bibliography

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