

The Limping God and the Manly Woman: Hephaistos and Clytemnestra in Aeschylus'

Agamemnon

Clytemnestra's famous beacon speech in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (281-316) begins with a name: Hephaistos. In this paper, I argue that Clytemnestra's reference to Hephaistos points to a deep personal connection to the god; this connection highlights their shared ability to manipulate technology and ultimately underscores Clytemnestra's problematic nature as the "manly woman" in the play. As a woman holding a man's position, and a god who limps, Clytemnestra and Hephaistos both fundamentally challenge the traditional roles they inhabit. By bringing in Hephaistos at the start of her speech, Clytemnestra allies herself with a god who simultaneously reflects her own strengths while showing how those strengths conflict with her expected role in society.

Clytemnestra's beacon speech stands out as an example of her control over both language and technology (*technai*). She relies on *technai*—the novel beacon system—to get news about the fall of Troy. When asked by the chorus what messenger has brought her news of Troy, she responds that Hephaistos himself brings her the news from Mt. Ida to Argos. Recent commentaries (Raeburn and Thomas 2013, Denniston and Page 1957) have focused on the geographical difficulties of the beacon speech, with only a glancing consideration for the first word of the speech. I suggest that this geographical focus overlooks a notable instance in which Clytemnestra presents herself as connected to an Olympian god. The reference to Hephaistos stands out as the first (of very few) instances in which Clytemnestra refers to a god by name. As Froma Zeitlin remarks of the *Agamemnon*, "the major characters lack a close personal relationship with the gods" (Zeitlin 1965). Why does Clytemnestra refer to a god at all, and why

Hephaistos specifically? I argue that a more nuanced examination of Hephaistos in this context evokes two striking parallels between the characters. Both god and mortal use similar *technai*, and both uneasily inhabit their conventional roles as, respectively, a god and a woman.

First, I examine Clytemnestra and Hephaistos' related use of *technai*. Clytemnestra and Hephaistos share two significant usages of *technai* in the context of the *Agamemnon*: both utilize fire to their own advantage, Clytemnestra with her beacon system, and Hephaistos, as the blacksmith-god, with most of his projects. Both are also well known for their use of nets as weapons: Clytemnestra uses a net to kill her husband (*Ag.* 1382-87), while Hephaistos traps his adulterous wife Aphrodite and her lover Ares in bed together with an invisible net (*Od.* 8.266-366). Both thus rely on their ability to wield technology to their advantage. Second, I will explore how both Clytemnestra and Hephaistos struggle with the conflict between their roles and their bodies. Hephaistos is one of the very few gods who ever betrays a sense of bodily struggle: for instance, he is described in Homer as bustling about (*Il.* 1.600) and sweating (*Il.* 18.372). His own publication of Aphrodite's affair further adds to his image as a struggling divinity, one who cannot even maintain the affections of his wife. Clytemnestra, on the other hand, reigns sovereign over Argos in the absence of her husband and possesses a "man-plotting heart" (*Ag.* 11). As the limping, emasculated god and the manly woman, Hephaistos and Clytemnestra break out of their respective conventional roles of divinity and obedient wife. They share a sense of not quite fitting in, which is ultimately based on a reversal of their traditional gender roles.

To summarize, I argue that Clytemnestra's reference to Hephaistos in the beacon speech is much more than a simple metaphor for fire. In her brief address to Hephaistos, Clytemnestra points back to herself, to both her skillful use of technology throughout the *Agamemnon* and the problematic nature of her status as a woman in the play.

Bibliography

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