

Agamemnon's corpse as theatrical "dark matter" in Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers*

Applying to Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* Andrew Sofer's (2013) concept of theatrical "dark matter" as a way of investigating the "gravitational effects" of unseen objects on the stage, this paper argues that Agamemnon's corpse functions as a spatial and aesthetic hub connecting significant materials within the play and the *Oresteia* trilogy more broadly. Since Oliver Taplin's (1977) *Stagecraft of Aeschylus*, scholars have paid close attention to the arrangements and connections between actors and objects in Aeschylean production. The current "(re)turn" to materialism in the study of Classical literature (Canevaro, 2019) situates relations between theatrical objects within sweepingly broad academic frameworks, from the aesthetic (Porter, 2011) to the economic (Hall, 2018), to the programmatic and affective (Telò 2016) and beyond (Telò and Mueller, 2018). Sofer's "dark matter," which owes its name and inspiration to astrophysics, offers a complementary approach that is well-suited to the material dynamics of *Libation Bearers in particular*, but which stands to enrich and intersect with more prevalent materialist studies already underway in Classics.

Materials connect several scenes in *Libation Bearers* and figure prominently in their performance. The grave offerings Orestes ceremoniously deposits in the prologue become theorized recognition tokens in the first episode, when the black and tattered robes worn by the Chorus and Electra correspond not only to the ritual mutilation of their faces and hair but also to the costumes of the black-robed Erinyes of the following play. Last but not least, Orestes' forensic display (lines 981ff.) of the blood-bespattered cloth that murderously ensnared his father recalls an analogous scene in *Agamemnon* in which his mother Clytemnestra similarly stood over the fabric alongside the corpses of those she murdered. Connecting these salient but varied

objects is the dark matter of Agamemnon's body which is visually and temporally absent, yet spatially, emotionally, and aesthetically drives the scene. The tomb, which establishes the play's initial mise-en-scene, has "gravitational effects" across several dimensions. It brings first Orestes and Pylades, then Electra and the Chorus, to the same location and into contact with one another. The tomb exerts ritual attraction as well, drawing liquid and hair offerings, grave goods through the medium of which Orestes obtains longed-for paternal communion. He announces: "Upon this mound I call upon my father to hear... being absent, I did not mourn your fate, father, nor extend my hand at the funeral procession of your corpse" (*ep' ochthōi tōide kērusso patri / kluein... ou gar parōn ōimōxa son, pater, moron / oud' exeteina cheir' ep' ekphorai nekrou*, 4–9).

Agamemnon's unseen exerts an attractive force in other, less spatial ways as well. Wearing dark clothes and violently rending one's flesh and fabric that are traditional components of Greek women's ritual lament (see esp. Alexiou, 1974), symbolically representing and physically realizing among the bereaved the sufferings and experience the dead. This blurring of body and cloth, subject and object, not only aestheticizes and reflects mortals' final passage of death, but also materially and affectively connects Electra with her father.

Perhaps most significant of all the connections in the play, Orestes displays the cloth that helped ensnare his father and now bears witness to his death (*marturei de moi / pharos tod'*, 1010–1). Despite or rather *because* of its murderous role, the cloth (which, like Electra, is disintegrated and bloody, *pollas baphas phtheirousa*, 1013) becomes a physical stand-in for Orestes' invisible but felt father. Orestes proclaims, "Now I am present to grieve him, speaking to this father-killing web (*nun apoimōzō parōn / patroktonon th' hyphasma prospōnōn tode*, 1014–15) — a statement that is at once triumphant and psychologically disturbing as Orestes begins to feel the delirious effects of the great "unseen" force in the play, the Furies. Connecting

verbal and visual modalities with thematic and staging concerns, seeing Agamemnon's corpse as "dark matter" reveals how a Greek playwright's stagecraft might extend beyond (or indeed, *below*) the theater space.

Bibliography

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