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Awry Crowns: Queenship and Its Discontents

Edited by Rosy Colombo

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The Queen on Stage. Female Figures of Regality in Aeschylus

Abstract

The figure of the Queen is the protagonist of two Aeschylean tragedies: *Persians* and *Oresteia*. The staging of *Persians*, which took place in 472 BCE in Athens, probably caused shock among the Greek spectators of the tragedy at the Theatre of Dionysus, on the slopes of the Acropolis, and in particular among Athenians. In particular, the main character that stands out at the centre of the dramatic composition is the Queen: a mother that is anguished for the fate of her son Xerxes, justifying his errors and presenting him as a disturbed and neurotic being, striving to emulate his father, and moreover misled by bad companies that – the Mother says – have instigated him to perform the insane military campaign against Greece. The dramatic emphasis is on the royal figure of the Queen mother, on her care for the image of power, for the dignity of the king's body, up to her concern for the integrity of the garment of her son Xerxes, torn after the defeat of Salamis. On the set of the early theatre, the second, superb, figure of royalty is Clytaemnestra. Before Aeschylus, the saga of Orestes, as we can reconstruct from literary and iconographic sources, was a traditional story, an epic saga in which the main characters were all male: Agamemnon, the king; Aegisthus, the tyrant; Orestes, the young hero who avenges the murder of the legitimate king – the king-father – and regains the throne. The tradition of this story is interrupted by Aeschylus' dramaturgical invention. His new *Oresteia* does not focus on Orestes' glorious enterprises. Its protagonist is now Clytaemnestra. She is the main character of the plot and is at the centre of the representation: alongside her, there is the usurper, her lover, Aegisthus. Echoing Ernst Kantorowicz's seminal study *The King's Two Bodies*, under the guise of the King, Clytaemnestra unveils her body: yet, hers is not the king's double body – the natural king's corpse doubled in a symbolic regal body – but a female one, the body of a mother, the body of the Queen. The male gendered epic – the saga – ends precisely at this turning point and *incipit tragoedia*.

KEYWORDS: Aeschylus' *Persians*; Aeschylus' *Oresteia*; Clytaemnestra; actors' character

1. *Mythos and Ethos*

Among the six composite elements of the tragedy that Aristotle identifies – μῦθος, ἦθος, λέξις, διάνοια, ὄψις, μελοποιία, that is: plot, character, style,

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thought, spectacle, and music (Arist. *Po.* 1450a10) – the most important is the *mythos*, the plot consisting of the invention and composition of the facts (1450a23).

On defining how the playwright must preventively select and compose his plot, Aristotle recalls the importance of choosing the beginning and end of the story, its duration, and the proportion among its parts: the example that the philosopher proposes is the harmony of living bodies in which one member must not be too small or too large compared to the others, and not lose the harmonious vision of the entirety of the body which must always be “embraceable with the gaze”. Thus, even the articulation of the myth and the duration of the performance chosen by the playwright must allow the spectator to always have an overview, even if the time of the performance responds to its logic and internal proportion.

On the quality and potential of the *mythos* that provides the skeleton to the drama, there is a general consideration: the fact that, unlike the historian who represents the facts “that happened once”, the poet presents reality in all its possible forms; the poet makes reality happen, he gives it access to expression. Taking Aristotle’s reflection to the extreme, we could say that for this reason, poetry – in particular tragic poetry – is not only “more serious and more philosophical than history” (*Po.* 1452b15), but it goes deeper in the multifarious sense of reality, in the multiple and variable manifestations of its becoming. Tragic poetry is more ‘true’ than history in the sense that theatre is an augmented reality; one that delves deeply into the folds of infinite possible, engaging a version of ‘reality’ and bringing it to expression.

In the hierarchy of the compositional ingredients of tragedy, the second place is held by the characters:

The most important of these elements is the plot. Tragedy is, in fact, not a representation of men but of an action. Figures do not therefore act to represent characters, but their character is gained through the action. It follows that the actions and the plot are both the end to which tragedy aims. In fact, you cannot have a tragedy without action, but you can have one without characters.¹

Immediately after the predominance of *mythos*/plot comes the construction of characters, which must however be consequent, dependent on the – primary, and most important – construction of the *mythos*. Furthermore, *ēthos* must never be predominant over the development of the plot; indeed,

¹ 1450a15-25: μέγιστον δὲ τούτων ἐστὶν ἡ τῶν πραγμάτων σύστασις. ἡ γὰρ τραγωδία μίμησις ἐστὶν οὐκ ἀνθρώπων ἀλλὰ πράξεων καὶ βίου . . . οὐκ οὐκ ὅπως τὰ ἦθη μιμήσονται πράττουσιν, ἀλλὰ τὰ ἦθη συμπεριλαμβάνουσιν διὰ τὰς πράξεις ὥστε τὰ πράγματα καὶ ὁ μῦθος τέλος τῆς τραγωδίας . . . ἔτι ἄνευ μὲν πράξεως οὐκ ἂν γένοιτο τραγωδία, ἄνευ δὲ ἠθῶν γένοιτ’ ἄν.

a character “will have to acquire his profile through action” (1450a20).

Therefore, character is not already predefined by the prejudice of its ‘univocal’ mythical profile, or by a typed characterization, as will be true for the characters of the New Comedy. It is the playwright who chooses which traits to confer to the character and which role – usually unexpected compared to the pre-existing knowledge of the audience about the myth – the character will play in the tragedy.

In this contribution, I will try to probe how Aeschylus chooses the *mythos* for the plot of *Persians* and *Oresteia*, and how he grafts, on the fabric of the plot, the character of the Queen, whom he puts at the centre of his dramaturgical montage.

2. *Persians*: The Queen, the Son’s Body, the King’s Body

Beside the choice of a shred of *mythos* for his drama, the playwright is called to construct a plot, arbitrarily putting himself (and the plot) at a point of a story – which is not yet ‘History’ – that the spectators presume to know very well. In the case of *Persians*, Aeschylus chooses an unexpected perspective both in a chronological and in a spatial sense. Indeed, from a chronological point of view, in the succession of events leading to the Greek victory against the Persians, the focus on the Battle of Salamis – chosen as the main theme of the drama – is neither at the beginning nor at the end of the ‘Persian Wars’; it is not the last or final sequence of Greek victories (Marathon / Salamis / Platea).

Actually, from a dramaturgic point of view, Aeschylus chose to focus the core of his drama on the central battle of the war. That is to say, on the best one, from various perspectives. First of all, from the perspective of Athenian propaganda, the battle of Salamis is the most appropriate point to stage the all-Athenian glory of the naval victory. It is the midpoint of the splendid victory of the fleet of 307 triremes (armed by Athens in the stretch of sea in front of the city) against the 1207 heavy Persian ships. Secondly, from a dramaturgical point of view, it reveals itself as a most strategic choice because it allows connecting the present tense of the drama to the double prophecy brought on stage by the Shadow, the Ghost of Darius: prophecy of the past (opaque re-enactment of Marathon), and prophecy of the future (prefiguration of the final battle of Platea). From both points of view – relating to the montage and to the need to recapitulate the series of Greek victories before the audience of the Great Dionysia, putting the Athenian victory at the centre – the choice of the plot cut proves perfect.

As Aristotle said, they are not predefined characters, but profiles that emerge from the very plot of the drama directly in the scene. So it is for the

Queen, the first ‘character’ to appear in the first preserved tragedy.

After the *parodos* – a choral triumphal march – full of pride for the vision of the admirable army that had departed towards the West, and already interwoven with the Chorus’ anxieties, the Queen appears on stage:

But look, here is a light like
the eyes of the god, the mother of our king,
my Queen. I bow low before her.
It is fitting also that we all address her
with words of salutation.
(150-4)²

As in an aura, light and majesty envelop the Queen. She comes out of the palace door. It is the palace of Susa, the scenic backdrop of the tragedy. She solemnly proceeds on a royal chariot wearing regal robes – as can be evinced from what she says at the time of her second appearance on stage (607-9). The Chorus members break the dance formation of the opening choral number of the drama and, with a concentric movement, prostrate themselves as a sign of homage.

We see the profile of the Persian sovereign: Queen of the entire world, addressed by the Chorus of Persian Elders with homage and ritual prostration. She is the lady of the Elsewhere, abstracted from everything, to everything superior, who, from the centre of her empire, from the sumptuous palace of Susa, does not even know where Athens is. Indeed, she asks the Chorus: “Where did my son go? Athens? And where would this Athens be?” (230).

But the Queen does not only bring her majestic nature to the scene. Anxieties and omens of ruin prevail as she tells her prophetic dream: two women, Greece and Persia, ‘blood sisters;’ the son Xerxes on a chariot drawn by the two allegorical figures; Greece, the rebel sister, and her son thrown from the wagon which breaks in half:

Two women appeared to me: they were beautiful and in beautiful clothes. One in Persian garb, the other in Dorian attire: they appeared before my eyes, both far more striking in stature than the women of our time and flawless in beauty. They were sisters of the same family. As for the lands in which they dwelt, to one had been assigned the land of Hellas, to the other that of the Barbarians. The two, as I imagined it, seemed to provoke

² Ἄλλ’ ἦδε θεῶν ἴσον ὀφθαλμοῖς φάος ὀρμάται / μήτηρ βασιλέως, βασίλεια δ’ ἐμή, προσπίνω / καὶ προσφθόγγοις δὲ χρεῶν αὐτήν / πάντας μύθοισι προσαιδᾶν. The reference for the greek text is το West 1998, along with the preparatory studies by the same author (West 1990). For the translation and commentary of the excerpts, see Centanni 2003: 707-62, 961-1133; for the analysis of the dramaturgic structure of each tragedy, see Taplin 1977.

each other to a mutual feud: my son, when he had become aware of this, attempted to restrain and placate them: now . . . He yoked them both to his car; now . . . he placed the collar-straps upon their necks. One bore herself proudly in these trappings and kept her mouth obedient to the rein; the other struggled. Now . . . with her hands she tore apart the harness of the car; now, she dragged it violently along with her and snapped the yoke in two. My son was hurled to the ground, and his father Darius stood by his side filled with pity. But Xerxes, catching sight of him, tore the garments covering his body. (181-99)

“My son was hurled to the ground, and his father Darius stood by his side filled with pity. But Xerxes, catching sight of him, tore the garments covering his body”.³ These are the images of Xerxes’ loss of composure, thrown to the ground by the rebellious movement of the ‘Greek’ woman. Even in the Queen’s vision/dream, the humiliation of the young King was aggravated by the fact that his father witnessed the scene.

Following the recount of the dream – and a new, anguishing song by the Chorus – the Messenger arrives on stage reporting the news of the actual Persian defeat in the battle of Salamis.

With the *ēthos* of the first, grandiose, female character of the tragic scene, Aeschylus does not only create the profile of the great and detached Queen of the most powerful empire in the world, but he also qualifies the character with the care and affection of a mother.

Already in the first exchange with the Messenger, the Queen abandons herself to an outburst that is both maternal and royal at the same time. After the first – synthetic and terrible – news of the defeat, the mother’s heart jolts:

QUEEN Who is there that is not dead? Whom of our leaders must we bewail? Who, appointed to wield command, by death left his post empty, without its chief?

MESSENGER Xerxes, himself, lives! And beholds the light of the sun.

QUEEN The words you utter bring a great light of joy into my house; a bright day after the darkest night!

(296-301)

“The Persian Empire no longer exists”, says the Messenger. “All Persians are dead”. But among the many myriads of dead, Xerxes, the King, the Queen’s son, is alive. We see the mother reacting with an uncontrollable jolt to the news that her son is alive.

Later in the drama, we hear her psychological justifications for her child’s insane act: Xerxes led the Persian army into the disastrous expe-

³ 197-9: πίπτει δ’ ἐμὸς παῖς, καὶ πατήρ παρίσταται / Δαρεῖος οἰκτεῖρων σφε. τὸν δ’ ὄπωξ ὄρα / Ξέρξης, πέπλους ρήγνυσιν ἀμφὶ σώματι.

dition across the sea, committing the impious act of *hybris*, of tightening a yoke around Poseidon's neck. All this because he was instigated by 'bad companies', because he did not want to feel inferior – in wealth and in power – to his father.

GHOST OF DARIUS How was this possible? Madness must have hit my son!
And I now fear that anybody, the first to arrive, will prey on the immense treasures that I have conquered

...

QUEEN But this lesson, you must know, the impetuous Xerxes has learned through conversation with evil men: they kept telling him that you won plentiful treasures for your children by your spear; whereas he – on his part, through lack of manly spirit – played the warrior at home and did not increase his father's wealth. Evil counsellors taunted him, many a time, and he listened to them: finally, one day, he planned this armed expedition against Hellas.

(750-8)

Now, the main character that stands out at the centre of the dramatic composition presents itself as a mother that is anguished for the fate of her son Xerxes, justifying his errors and presenting him as a disturbed and neurotic being, striving to emulate his father, and moreover misled by bad companies that – the Mother says – have instigated him to perform the military campaign against Greece. "This lesson impetuous Xerxes [my son] learned through conversation with evil men, for they kept telling him that you won plentiful treasures for your children by your spear; whereas he – on his part, through lack of manly spirit – played the warrior at home and did not increase his father's wealth".

Rarely does Aeschylus indulge in psychology in the construction of his characters. But in this case, the envy of the son for the glorious father, and the mother's intention to find a mitigating factor for his deeds, is not only an extraordinary dramaturgical invention that gives the character roundness and depth, but it is a trait that is both incredibly human and at the same time profoundly poetic.

"A bright day after the darkest night!":⁴ the Queen's voice expresses the egoistic, exclusive, care for the fate of the body of her son. But it does not concern only her son's body – because that body is also the King's body. "As long as he is alive . . .", as long as the king is alive – the rest does not matter. Therefore, the Queen's accents are maternal accents: the irrepressible (and somewhat incongruous) joy of the mother who only cares that her child be alive.

In the meantime, through a powerful ritual staged during the Chorus'

⁴ 300-1: . . . φάος μέγα / καὶ λευκὸν ἡμᾶρ νυκτὸς ἐκ μελαγχίμου.

stasimon, the Queen successfully provokes the appearance of the Phantom of Darius. We are in the central episode of the drama, focused on the brilliant Aeschylean invention of the first appearance on the theatrical stage of a ghost: the father of Xerxes, who is presented as the figure of a just and wise king, who immediately recognizes the *hybris* of his son as the first reason for the disaster that struck the Persians – a disaster that is presented as immense, memorable, and irreversible.

GHOST OF DARIUS And as for you, beloved and venerable mother of Xerxes, withdraw to the palace, pick up the most beautiful attire, and prepare to meet your son: for the pain of all his misfortunes, he tore his splendid clothes that now hang in shreds on his body!

QUEEN O God, how much grief assails me! But, most of all, this sorrow storms my heart: to hear of the shameful clothes which are now worn by my son! But I will depart now, and when I have brought appropriate garments from the palace, I will make attempt to meet my son; for I love him most, and I will not forsake him in his affliction.

(832-51)

“He tore his splendid clothes that now hang in shreds on his body! . . . Most of all, this sorrow storms my heart: to hear of the shameful clothes which are now worn by my son!”.⁵

This image – Xerxes in his torn dress – punctuates the *opsis*, the actual and metaphorical imagery of the drama. Even the last image of the Queen’s prophetic dream portrayed Xerxes tearing his clothes, humiliated by the fall from the chariot. Now, the Phantom of Darius suggests that the Queen welcome her son by covering him with a new dress, and his recommendation finds a ready listener: now, the care of Xerxes’ royal robe seems to be the Queen’s greatest concern (845-51). And this care – the care of the survival of the King’s body, the same body protected by the Persian body-guard of ten Thousand Immortals – is one of the notes that makes up the symphony of the tragedy; the formal, symbolic, ideological landscape reproduced by Aeschylus, distinguishing the values of the Persian Empire from ‘our’ values.

The joyful voice of the Queen learning of the survival of her son from the Messenger is not only the relieved voice of a mother. It is the voice of a royalty in which only one – the King – is worth something; everyone else is worth nothing, even if they are – in the first vision of the Chorus – the magnificent leaders of an army gathered from all of Asia to march against Greece.

⁵ 834-48: . . . πάντα γὰρ / κακῶν ὑπ’ ἄλγους λακίδες ἀμφὶ σώματι / στημορραγοῦσι ποικίλων ἐσθημάτων. . . . / μάλιστα δ’ ἦδε συμφορὰ δάκνει, / ἀτιμίαν γε παιδὸς ἀμφὶ σώματι / ἐσθημάτων κλύουσαν, ἢ νιν ἀμπέχει.

The (very formal and symbolic) concern is oriented toward the intangibility of Xerxes' body. This is one of the *Leitmotive* of the tragedy: Xerxes' robe in rags, the royal garment to be restored and re-integrated. But at this point, in a very strategic representation staged by Aeschylus, there is no margin for any re-integration. Indeed, in *Persians*, the Queen does not appear again on stage with the 'new guise' for the Son-King; the intangibility of the royal body is compromised forever.

That is why the formal degradation of the King, of his image, of his bearing, will reappear in the final *kommos*, led by Xerxes in the role of *ex-archos chorou*. And this is the final image of the tragedy: the King presented as a naked character, torn, without the royal casing.

XERXES Do you see this remnant of my royal robe?

CHORUS Yes, I do indeed!

...

XERXES And I tore my robe at the sight of such a disastrous event.

...

I am naked now: I lack my followers!

(1017-36)⁶

Now the King – as Kantorowicz would have it – is on stage without his “two bodies”. Aeschylus invents the way of theatrically representing the body of the King as a symbolic figure of the Asian form of power, against which Greece claims its own style of freedom. That body is exhibited on the stage as a humiliated and undressed body. In the exodus of the tragedy, it is Xerxes himself, who leads his own funeral procession. Xerxes is alone, and the King's body is only the degraded one we see on stage. Through error, through *Atē*, through the fault of the *daimōn*, due to his own *hybris*, the King has lost his own majestic royalty.

As Shakespeare's Richard II, Xerxes also tears the royal clothes of which his own form consisted, outlining his figure. In the scenic expression of the *skhisis* (division), the King's mortal body is vulnerable – naked, scratched, degraded; the Great King is nothing but flesh stripped of its form. However, now naked, he awaits a new garment (as the Queen had promised) that should reinstate his royal status. In *Persians*, Aeschylus does not only stage the defeat of the powerful enemy who had invaded Greece, driven back East by the value of the citizens of the Greek *poleis*; he stages the actual collapse of the Kingship, in the mortification of the body and of the King's robe. The shreds and rags dangling from the King, as residual traces

⁶ Ὅρᾳς τὸ λοιπὸν τόδε τᾶς ἐμᾶς στολᾶς;/ ὀρῶ ὀρῶ./ . . . / πέπλον δ' ἐπέρρηξ' ἐπὶ συμφορᾷ κακοῦ./ . . . / γυμνός εἰμι προπομπῶν.

of the mystical casing of royalty, are symbolically and concretely adherent to Xerxes' degraded body.

The Queen-mother is not able to coat the body of the King, of her son. Nor can she do it.

3. *Oresteia*: The Queen's Two Bodies

According to the scheme proposed by Aristotle, even in the case of the *Oresteia* we must ask ourselves what dramaturgical cut was chosen by Aeschylus, as well as what character profiles and, in particular, what the design for the main character, Clytaemnestra, was.

My first question is: what was the myth of the *Oresteia* before the tragic version that Aeschylus performed at the theatre of Dionysus in Athens in 458 BC? Before this date, what was the story that the audience knew? And how did Aeschylus change the mythical story in performing his trilogy? This is the main question, the core of my reading.

The myth they knew before the Aeschylean version was a traditional story: an epic saga in which a king (Agamemnon) went to war, and his cousin (Aegisthus) occupied his throne, marrying the queen. The king returned from war, sat back on his throne, and was killed by the usurper (Aegisthus).⁷ This is a conventional scene of regicide and, in this way, it is represented by a fixed *schēma* in vase painting: an adult bearded male (Aegisthus) killing an adult bearded king.⁸ Then, in the myth, the king's son Orestes, who was far away, returned to avenge his father, killing the usurper.

This is a typical, traditional, male story and from the literary and iconographic sources, it is possible to deduce that, in this mythical version, the matricide by Orestes happens accidentally. In vase paintings, Orestes is assisted in the murder of Aegisthus by his friend, Pylades. Sometimes we also see a young woman entering the stage: she is Electra in the cases in which she is offering help to Orestes; however, when she is offering help to Aegisthus, she is Erigone, daughter of Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra in other versions of the myth.

Sometimes, Clytaemnestra is also shown entering the stage with her arm stretched, trying to stop Orestes from killing her lover. She holds an

⁷ On the scope of the Aeschylean innovation, compared to the role of Clytaemnestra in previous sources, especially Stesichorus, see Zeitlin 1978; Käppel 1998; McClure 1999: 70-111; Komar 2003; Goldhill 2004; McNeil 2005; Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2010; Medda 2017; Montanari 2018.

⁸ On the relationship between iconography and drama, see Bordignon 2015 and in particular for Clytaemnestra, Viret Bernal 1997; Carpino 2011.

axe or a stool – always makeshift weapons – and intervenes at the edge of the main action. This tyrannicidal scene is almost exactly like the first regicidal scene acted by Aegisthus against Agamemnon. The only difference is that the murderer is now a younger unbearded man.

On an important krater of the fifth century BCE – the Boston *Oresteia* Krater⁹ – we see both scenes on its two sides: regicide and tyrannicide. Aegisthus plays a *barbitos*, an instrument which was frequently painted in images representing the all-male symposium. It is a completely and perfectly male story. An all-male story. The lost *Oresteia* by Stesichorus (sixth century) was also an epic poem in which we hear the *kleos* of Orestes – the glorious song of the young hero avenging the king-father. There is a unique paradigm that contains the first scene of regicide and the second avenging scene. In this *schēma*, all the female characters – Clytaemnestra, Electra, Erigone or Chrysothemis – hold secondary roles: they are all marginal to the main myth acted by Agamemnon, Aegisthus or by Orestes. These female characters hold a similar role to that of Electra in *Libation Bearers*: while assisting her brother in the preparation of the murder, she is not an active player in the drama; she is little more than a *feminine coryphaeus*.

The traditional plot is interrupted by the mythical change that is Aeschylus' dramaturgical invention; in the new *Oresteia*, the audience does not see a performance of Orestes' *kleos*, but the focus and the centre of representation – the main character of the plot – is now Clytaemnestra.

In the prologue, Clytaemnestra is represented as the Sovereign, the actual 'King' of Argos. She has a wilful character that is expressed by the oxymoronic phrase "man-will heart of the Lady".¹⁰ The personality of the protagonist is presented from the start in all its complexity and ambiguity: male and female genders living together, in the heart, body, intentions, and hopes of the Lady who exercises power. In fact, she performs conventional gender roles. Aeschylus does not describe the virile character of Clytaemnestra: he invents it and presents it right here, at the start of the trilogy, and for this reason he often underlines the male profile of the character. Clytaemnestra is the 'King' of the city, the director of the drama that she herself is constructing. She prepares the plot herself, and we know that before the beginning of the tragedy (at the time of Agamemnon's departure to Troy – we can surmise) she had already instructed the chain of sentinels to light the fires from mountain top to mountain top, from Asia to Greece, to announce the victory of Achaean army in Troy.

From the start of the tragedy, the Chorus – citizens of Argos – seems to

⁹ Attic red-figures calyx-krater by the Dokimasia Painter, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 63.1246.

¹⁰ Ag. 11: γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον . . . κέαρ.

be accustomed to recognizing the power of the Lady. “The power is yours, Clytaemnestra” (258: ἦκω σεβίζων σόν, Κλυταιμήστρα, κράτος – by a *tmesis*, the name of the Queen is in the centre). And the Chorus also recalls that, in Argos, Clytaemnestra is the only bulwark for the whole city. It underlines that the mind and words of Clytaemnestra are those of a male gender: “My lady, you speak, you reason, like a man”.¹¹

After the first episode, the Messenger confirms that the lights from the fires had been truthful, answering the doubts of the Chorus. However, Clytaemnestra herself had had no doubts to begin with. She proves deeper knowledge and better lucidity than anyone else. She has greater factual consciousness than the Messenger himself, who witnessed the fall of Troy. Clytaemnestra, the real director of the drama, controls the past, the present, and – above all – the future. Her words are full of authority and – whilst seen to be false – are in fact a conscious and true wordplay.

In the scene of the dialogue with Agamemnon, the words of the Lady are very persuasive, presenting herself as a wife, alone for so many years and as faithful as a female dog. She organizes the scene of the return of the king in detail, with a long red carpet on which she orders Agamemnon to put his feet. Agamemnon denounces the attitude of his wife and highlights the virile quality of Clytaemnestra’s desire: she loves to fight and in the expression at 940, οὔτοι γυναικός ἐστιν ἰμείρειν μάχης, there is a semantic cross between her erotic desire and her aggressive instinct. Instead, Clytaemnestra treats him like a female and for this reason – as he does not want to appear like a woman – he does not want to walk on the red carpet she has prepared for his regal entry into the Palace.

Clytaemnestra wins the rhetorical fight and finally the King gets out of the chariot, puts his foot on the long red strip, and walks until he reaches the Palace door and the death she has perfectly prepared inside. The only character that resists Clytaemnestra’s power is Cassandra, the prophetess of Apollo, who cannot be captured in the web of the Lady. Thanks to Apollo, the ill-fated girl wins the game, the *agōn* of knowledge, because she is the only one who knows – better but more obscurely than the Queen – the past, the present, and the near future. The wisdom of Priamus’ miserable daughter is the paradigm of prophetic wisdom, the deepest but most ineffective and useless kind of wisdom.

After the murder, Clytaemnestra exits the Palace and claims the power of her metaphorical imagery, which has just proved its actual capacity: the figure of the web¹² – the inescapable trap she equipped for the King – has

¹¹ 351: γύναι, κατ’ ἄνδρα σώφρον’ εὐφρόνως λέγεις.

¹² 1382-3: ἄπειρον ἀμίβληστρον, ὥσπερ ἰχθύων, / περιστοιχίζω, πλοῦτον εἴματος κακόν.

materialized itself in the actual net in which the king's body is enclosed. A strange, close-woven, spider web¹³ that Aegisthus identifies as a "peplus of Erinyes".¹⁴

Reconstructing the crime scene, Clytaemnestra declares that the King fell at the third sword-stroke by her own hand as tribute to Hades (1387 – maybe a reference, symbolically reversed, to the third toast to Zeus given by Iphigenia for the fortune of her father, quoted at 246-7).¹⁵ The last physical contact between the King and his wife is a spurt of blood from Agamemnon's body that hits her (1390). The Queen unashamedly claims the deep, strong, intense pleasure she felt when the bloody dew sprang out (1391-2); the similarity of the bloody pleasure of the Lady and male ejaculation is patently displayed, and the sexual image is confirmed by the metaphor of the sowed earth furrows that receive pleasure from the rain of Zeus (*ibidem*).

Just as she shamelessly disclosed her great joy at the homecoming of her husband (856: οὐκ αἰσχυνοῦμαι), now Clytaemnestra shamelessly reveals the deepest reasons for her act (1373: οὐκ ἐπαισχυνθήσομαι). She strips herself of the clothes of a poor woman left alone by her husband for many years. She no longer pretends to be a defenceless female; on the contrary, she scolds the Chorus for treating her like a stupid woman (1401). She claims she is not a witch – as instead the Chorus accuses her – but rather that Agamemnon was a bad sorcerer, since he sacrificed their daughter to bewitch the Thracian winds (1417-18: ἐπωδὸν Θρηκίων ἀημάτων). In reference to their murdered daughter – Iphigenia – Clytaemnestra claims the direction of the posthumous funeral rites in the underworld; she invites the dead daughter to run, meet, and embrace her father when he arrives at the Waste Land of Death (1555-9).

Returning to the crime scene, Aeschylus represents the Queen alone in performing the king's murder. Clytaemnestra does not mention the presence of Aegisthus; on the contrary, she proudly admits the whole responsibility of the action: "I stand where I dealt the blow; I stand in front of my action. Thus have I done the deed; deny it I will not".¹⁶ The Chorus blames Aegisthus for not taking part in the murder, and Aegisthus himself admits to leaving the execution of the murder to the woman (1636-7). This is the great invention of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Many details let us hypothesize that, in Aeschylus' version, Aegisthus was not inside the Palace at the time

¹³ 1492: ἀράχνης ἐν ὑφάσματι τῶδ[ε].

¹⁴ 1580: ὑφαντοῖς ἐν πέπλοις Ἐρινύων.

¹⁵ On Agamemnon killing modes, sword or ax, cf. Fraenkel 1950: app. B, 806-9; Davies 1987; Prag 1985: 82-3; Prag 1991.

¹⁶ 1379-80, ἔστηκα δ' ἔνθ' ἔπαισ' ἐπ' ἐξειργασμένοις. / οὕτω δ' ἔπραξα, καὶ τάδ' οὐκ ἀρνήσομαι; see also 1551-3.

of the regicide. Aeschylus wants the audience to believe that the presence of the cousin in the Palace could arise suspicion on the part of Agamemnon, and for this reason Aegisthus does not enter the stage from the door of the Palace, but most likely from an external space, from one of the *parodoi*: as Taplin highlights, line 1608 says “Faraway though I was, I laid my hand upon my enemy”.¹⁷

In this context, the character of Aegisthus is reduced to a subordinate role. Upon his entrance on stage, the Chorus expresses its contempt for him, calling him a female; and although Aegisthus proudly calls himself the tyrant of Argos, as a “woman” (1625: γύναι) he was unable to kill the king with his own hands (1635-43). He produces a tactical justification for his absence, but it is not enough to defend himself from the accusation of female cowardice. This is another confirmation of the symbolic reversal between feminine and masculine that is one of the core themes of the drama. Against the accusations of the Chorus, Clytaemnestra assumes a role of Executioner of Justice and claims the presence of Dike and Themis – the two Greek names of justice – at her side as assistants in the regicide (1396ff.). Clytaemnestra proposes a macabre toast to death, declaring the absolute justice of her act at l. 1396. The male heart of the Queen recites the formula of the crime, presenting her right hand as guilty. Aegisthus too invokes justice on his side. For him, this day is “the day of justice”.¹⁸ Dike appears leading Agamemnon by the hand into the house, as if he were a bride (911). Justice reappears again in another allegorical picture: now Dike brings Aegisthus as if he too were a bride (1607). The last words of the Chorus against Aegisthus are injurious expressions: he is like a cockerel beside the Lady. We know very well – and the Greek audience knew even better – that Aegisthus’ own reasons for his revenge against Agamemnon have mythical roots: his brothers were killed, cut up, cooked, and served up at a banquet by Atreus, Agamemnon’s father, to Thiestes, Aegisthus’ father. But these reasons are obscured in the Aeschylean version, marginalised by Clytaemnestra’s deeper and more important reasons.

At the end of the first act of the trilogy, Clytaemnestra is at the height of her power: she is the manager of the situation and stops Aegisthus’ arrogance against the Chorus. She is in command of the situation and she imposes her authority, against the Chorus and against Aegisthus, as she prohibits his violence on the citizens of Argos. She stops the killing. She stops the bloodshed:

No, my dearest, let’s not do more damage
We have already reaped enough unhappy harvest;

¹⁷ Καὶ τοῦδε τᾶνδρὸς ἡψάμην θυραῖος ὤν.

¹⁸ 1577: ὦ φέγγος εὖφρον ἡμέρας δικηφόρου.

let's not have yet further bloodshed.

...

That is my woman's words
for those who condescend to hear them.

(1656-62)¹⁹

These are the Ladies' words, the "words of a woman for those who condescend to hear them". These are the last words of the character in the drama, and these words are now the words of a king.

The importance and centrality of Clytaemnestra in Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is confirmed by her role in the second act of the trilogy, *Libation Bearers*. In the mythical saga, as we have seen, Orestes is the young hero who becomes the Avenger of the Father, dethroned and killed by the cousin Aegisthus. In the Aeschylean version, Orestes performs a new role: the greater figure of the Matricide.²⁰ The first, strongest image of the tragedy is that of the allegorical nightmare of the mother, dreaming of a snake that is sucking a blood clot from her breast. The horrible, prophetic dream triggers the drama, because Clytaemnestra – due to her nightmare – sends her daughter Electra to the tomb to appease the soul of Agamemnon by sacrifice. At the tomb, Electra meets her brother and together they plan revenge.

Indeed, in the Aeschylean version, revenge is not the rightful *nemesis* acted by the young prince against the usurper of the father's throne. Orestes returns home and his first aim is no longer to kill Aegisthus but Clytaemnestra. Revenge is now the rightful justice that the children – both the children, but Orestes by his own hands – dispense toward their mother, the murderer. Actually, in *Libation Bearers*, Aegisthus' murder (the main, canonical, scene of the tyrannicide in the versions of the myth before Aeschylus), is only a corollary of the execution of the true culprit for the death of the king-father: Clytaemnestra. Indeed, the accusation of matricide, not the lawful revenge of Orestes, is the main point at the centre of the whole action of the third act of the trilogy, *Eumenides*. In the third act of the trilogy, Orestes is not the Young Hero, the Avenger of the Father: he is the Matricide (and many years later, in Euripides' *Andromache*, he will introduce himself with the words "I am the Matricide".)

The principal scene of the drama coincides with the matricide, the scene in which Clytaemnestra's nightmare proves true. In this scene – in Italy, the principal scene in a drama is defined as 'the mother-scene'! – Clytaemnestra bares her breast to Orestes to dissuade him from the crime. In this

¹⁹ Μηδαμῶς, ὧ φίλτατ' ἀνδρῶν, ἄλλα δράσωμεν κακά. / ἄλλα καὶ τὰδ' ἐξαμῆσαι πολλά, δύστηνον θέρος. / πημονῆς δ' ἄλις γ' ὑπάρχει: μηδὲν αἰματώμεθα. / . . . ὧδ' ἔχει λόγος γυναικός, εἴ τις ἄξιοι μαθεῖν.

²⁰ On the character of Orestes, see Tsitsibakou-Vasalos 2007: 127, 185, 216-21, 223.

‘mother-scene,’ the Queen, to whom Aeschylus assigns the role of ‘King’ by putting her at the centre of his trilogy, strips off her regal robes – the symbolical king’s body, as Kantorowicz suggests – and in her last performance, unmasks her physical, carnal body, in a final, desperate, attempt to move her son: she unveils a female body, the feminine and maternal body of the Other, under the body of the ‘King’ that she herself had usurped. But the gender game is now at its end and the final performance of Clytaemnestra is doomed to fail.

Orestes hits Clytaemnestra in the breast and kills her. But in doing so, he also kills the character that had held – in the extremely innovative construction of this plot – the king’s throne. In Aeschylus’ version, the death of the Queen is not only the death of the mother: it is the death of the whole body of archaic royalty, of the ‘demon’ who had soaked the Atreides’ palace with blood. For Aeschylus – as is clear in the third act of the trilogy and in the happy ending with contemporary democratic Athens – it is the end of the monarchic principle of power that precedes, and allows, the opening of the horizon of the *polis*.

4. Bodies and Phantoms of Regality: A Play of Ghosts

The role of the Queen’s character is crucial in the composition of Aeschylus’ tragedies in which Phantom/Ghost figures appear,²¹ and so much so that it is the key feature in three out of his seven tragedies on the matter.²² Darius’ ghost appears on stage in *Persians*; the Phantom of Agamemnon does not appear but is evoked in *Libation Bearers*; and the unexpected Phantom of Clytaemnestra appears in *Eumenides*. In all three tragedies, the figure of the Phantom has an important role, and it is precisely the dramaturgical use of the figure of the Phantom that confirms the centrality that Aeschylus gives to the character of the Queen.

In the central scene of *Persians*, the Queen approaches Darius’ tomb as a *choēphoros*, a “libation bearer” (609-10: χοῶς φέρουσα[α]). Before the Messenger’s announcement, the coryphaeus advises her to officiate a propitiatory sacrifice to the dead, addressed to Earth and to all its Dead. The liquid

²¹ An extended version of the content of this chapter is in Centanni 2016.

²² On ghost apparitions in the surviving Aeschylean tragedies you may find enlightening notes in the various comments to the tragedies of Aeschylus, starting from the fundamental Wilamowitz 1914, and following with Sommerstein 2010. In particular, on the Aeschylean invention of ghosts as a *persona dramatis*, and the intertextual relations between the spectres in Aeschylus, you may find important ideas in the following essays: Bickel 1942; Rose 1950; Jouan 1981; Rosenmeyer 1982, in particular 257ff.; Padel 1992; Käppel 1998; Barone – Faggi 2001; Frontisi-Ducroux 2007: 165-76.

offerings of the Queen must reach Darius, so as to ingratiate him and flatter and attract the Shadow to the surface.

Therefore, the Queen urges the Chorus to accompany the acts of the ritual she is preparing. She asks the Persian Elders to accompany her propitiatory ritual gestures with their song (619-22). The Chorus positively responds to the Queen's order, confirming the different roles that must be assumed – both by the Queen and by the Chorus itself – for a successful ritual.

The lyrics are designed as a prayer to propitiate the appearance of the Shadow (627-72). As announced by herself and confirmed by the Chorus, the Queen remains on stage during the song, and while the Elders sing and dance the psychagogic anthem, she performs the material part of the rite (658-66).

The Shadow gradually emerges from the mound on which the Queen is officiating and around which the Chorus is dancing, and Darius appears at the centre of the stage. The concert summoning ritual of Queen and Chorus is successful. The progressive appearance of Darius is indicated in the text with the mention of the reverse order of appearance of his regal clothes, from bottom to top, shoes to crown. More importantly, besides the spectacular character invention of the Queen, Aeschylus also invents a character for the Ghost: the Phantom of the King appears on the scene declaring that he had to make a tremendous effort to escape Hades, even if only for a short time. Having just emerged from Darkness, Darius asks the Elders to account for their groans and cries, for their distressed accents, and for the alarming presence of the Queen on his grave. The Shadow tells of all the trouble and discomfort he had to endure on the way, and then urges the Chorus to make haste (692).

The Phantom on stage is the Phantom of the Father with whom the Son must deal. This is the first Ghost in theatre history, that tells a truth designed to stand in the symbolic imaginary and has his shadow reverberate in the history of Western thought: the Father's Ghost says that the Son is inept, inadequate in his role. However, Aeschylus plays meta-theatrically with his own dramas and, in his surviving tragedies, there is also another Phantom of the Father: an impotent ghost, who is unable to rise from Hades and appear in the light.

Aeschylus opens the second act of his *Oresteia* with a scene connoting a strong ritualistic atmosphere. At the centre of the stage, Agamemnon's tomb stands out "as an altar" (*Cho.* 106). Entering the scene, Orestes turns to the gods of the Underworld and speaks (1-19).

Orestes came to Argos from his exile in Phocis, accompanied by his friend Pylades. The son of Agamemnon invokes his father for a sort of 'second' rite, not having been able to honour him properly during the im-

promptu and humiliating funeral performed by his murderous mother: he cuts his hair for the second time, after having already cut it a first time in the rite of passage from *ephēbeia* to youth. The act of Orestes is, therefore, both a ritual of homage to his dead father (which echoes Achilles' homage to Patroclus in the *Iliad*), and a repetition of the rite of passage that entrenches the full maturity of the protagonist.

Orestes and his friend Pylades take refuge behind the funerary stele, sheltered from the view of a procession of women coming from the Palace towards the tomb (*Cho.* 16ff.) Electra presents herself as a member of the Chorus, albeit the most prominent one, composed of Trojan slaves. Orestes then sees his sister: he does not report a difference in her role, but only in her demeanour. Having arrived at the tomb, Electra begins her ritual, pouring libations onto Earth (165-6, 124-51).

The ritual involving the pouring of liquid offerings onto the land – performed by the Chorus and Electra in the role of coryphaea – begins. It is a “paean of the dead”, with which the Chorus accompanies the sacrifice (157-8).

The scene is quite similar to that performed by the Chorus and the Queen in *Persians* (609ff.). Even in this case, the actor – the Queen in *Persians*, Electra here – officiates the rite at the king's tomb – Darius in *Persians* (621-2, 624); *Agamemnon* here (164) – pouring liquid offerings onto the land; even in *Persians*, the Chorus is expressly invited to sing a “hymn” to the genius of the Dead (*Pe.* 619-21).

Furthermore, in *Libation Bearers*, as in *Persians*, an impressive allegorical dream of the Queen had opened the way to the dramatic action, the apotropaic rite in particular. The thematic, lexical, and dramatic proximity between the scene at the tomb of Agamemnon and the scene of the invocation of Darius is an Aeschylean self-quotation, but it also contributes, in this context, to making a major impact on the spectators. Aeschylus plays, meta-theatrically, with the ghosts. In fact, the summoning ritual in *Persians* is successful and, at the end of the song, Darius' Shadow appears from the tomb. Because of the analogy of the dramatic situation, dramatic suspense is triggered even in *Libation Bearers*: the audience expects the Shadow of Agamemnon to appear.

However, the second invocation of Agamemnon's Shadow by Electra (the first having been by Orestes) is interrupted by Electra herself, surprised at seeing the marks left by her brother on and around the tomb (164-211). At this point, instead of her Father's Ghost, it is Orestes who appears: he comes out of hiding and urges Electra to be confident in the signals that attest to his identity, introducing the recognition scene (*anagnōrisis*) between the siblings who have long been separated by Orestes' exile in Phocis. The third invocation of the Shadow, the most intense, can now begin: in a long lyric *amoibaioi*, the voices of the children and the Chorus alternate and

blend in a piece of poetic virtuosity (306-477): the song is the longest *kommos* in all of the surviving tragedies and is very elaborate in terms of metrics and composition.

The Chorus stages the entire repertoire of the funeral ritual gestures: head pounding, hair pulling, face scratching (425-7), and oriental funeral melodies that the Trojans carry as dowry of their native heritage (423-4; on oriental rhythms typical of funeral lamentation, also see *Pe.* 121). It is a *thrēnos*, a funerary song (as defined both by Electra and the Chorus): the rhythmic writing and performance confirms the mournful tone of the song that also has the function of staging a posthumous funeral for Agamemnon, celebrated late in respect to the first dishonourable burial carried out by his assassin bride. But the primary intention of the song is the invocation of their father's Shadow (315-496).

The siblings try to capture Agamemnon's Shadow with the effective use of impressive words: their bond of affection may cause the king to come to the rescue "of his beloved ones" (355). But the rhetorical strategy used to draw the Shadow from Hades also uses the obsessive re-call to *atimia*, the dishonour that struck the king: the lack of honour and the funeral rites that were denied him by his murderers; death by treachery, unworthy of a Sovereign (479); the dishonourable end that procures a status of lowered prestige, even among the Dead, for Agamemnon. The Chorus itself contribute to provoking the Shadow, recalling the massacre inflicted on the king's body (especially the degrading rite of *maschalismos*, amputation of the limbs) as the ultimate form of dishonour (444).

The rhythmic *crescendo* of the three-voice song prepares for the apparition of Agamemnon's Shadow. The scene has the effect of triggering an expectation that combines the hope of the children with the spectators' own investment in the spectacular scenic event they are awaiting themselves. But even this rite fails, though the song is very long and rhetorically orchestrated: not satisfying the expectations of a public that cannot forget the impressive appearance of Darius' ghost in *Persians* (see the specific references to the ritual invocation, in particular that of the headpiece that rose from Darius' tomb), no ghost raises its head from this tomb. The children are now alone.

At this point, the purpose of the song shifts. The father denies his children the epiphany of his *eidolon* and Orestes, consequently, conceives another plan:

ORESTES My father, brought low in a manner so unfitting for a king, grant my request to be the master of your heritage . . . Send Justice as an ally to your friend; or give us strength to get a grip as strong as theirs, if after your defeat, you want to wrest back victory.
(479-99)

The instance of a physical appearance of his father by his side is unrealized, and therefore Orestes diverts this invocation in another direction to attract Agamemnon's power and enlist his father in the revenge party. Agamemnon is called to emerge from Hades, not as a ghost-like presence, but as inspiration and support in his son's undertaking.

Now Agamemnon's son is no longer "the helpless little Eagle-chick", curled up on his father's grave as if to seek shelter in the nest. The non-appearance of the ghost convinces Orestes that he is now the hero and protagonist of the drama: he has to be ready for action. And it is only at this point that Orestes urges the Chorus to report the contents of Clytaemnestra's dream. The Queen's night-terror is finally revealed in detail: the allegorical nightmare woke the terrified Queen, but she did not quite realize its prophetic potential.

The dream is promptly interpreted by Orestes as a vision of his plan for revenge. It is Clytaemnestra, with her nightmare, who tells her child that it will be him – and no other – that kills her. Orestes recognizes himself as the monstrous serpent that appeared in the dream, sucking a blood clot from his mother's breast. And, recognizing himself as the beast of the allegorical dream, Orestes transforms into that serpent. The metamorphosis takes place in a symbolic scene, in which Orestes utters the fatal formula of auto-identification with the snake: "Behold! I am that dragon". The women of the Chorus hound Orestes not to waste time and to follow his words with action. Finally, Orestes does formalize his decision: as preached by the Chorus, Orestes does not surrender to the pain, as he "has learned from his anger" and is ready for action.

The father's ghost does not make an appearance. But, thanks to his non-appearance, Agamemnon's son has now actually come home. He is a son who has grown up and who claims his father's throne for himself. Orestes is alone and is now the director of his undertaking, the undisputed protagonist of the dramatic action of an 'Oresteia': a tragic saga that no longer has the father at its core, but the son of the king.

The weakness of the King – in the guise of a Phantom and in parallel to the power of the Queen – is confirmed by the unexpected appearance of the Phantom of Clytaemnestra in the *Eumenides*.

It should be noted that in *Eumenides*, from a dramaturgical point of view, the act of the Phantom of Clytaemnestra is not instrumentally necessary. Again, it is a big *coup de théâtre* from the point of view of the *opsis*; whereas, from the point of view of the strict need for the development of the plot, the inclusion of this scene could be defined as almost accessory. In the drama, the role of the Phantom of the Mother is the appearance of a powerful demon, as a phantasmatic incarnation of the spirit of the Erinyes. However, the scene is justified by an urgent and precise emotional motive: Clytaem-

nestra must awaken the demons from their lazy sleep, to rile them against their prey – Orestes, the son who fled Delphi in the direction of Athens.

At the beginning of the third part of *Oresteia*, the Pythia, after introducing herself, runs away in horror at the sight of the sleeping Furies who surround the *omphalos*, onto which Orestes, the matricide, is clinging to.

Clytaemnestra's *eidolon* suddenly appears, rising perhaps from the trap-room under the scene. Indeed, the hypothesis of an appearance of the Shadow *e machina* from the Earth seems impossible by the reference to a sudden apparition, which differentiates this scenic entrance from the slow and progressive appearance of Darius' Shadow in *Persians* (661ff.); see, on the other hand, the non-appearance of the ghost of Agamemnon in *Libation Bearers*, which should have been progressive (*Cho.* 479ff.: "Do you not lift your head?"). All of the hideous Furies – "decrepit old girls" (as Apollo describes them in *Eum.* 69-72) who live in the shadows of Tartarus and whom no one, neither man nor beast nor god, ever approached – are the demonic mask of the Mother. The character profile of Clytaemnestra is also defined by Aeschylus in a brilliant way. The Shadow claims to come from the world of the Dead in which she is wandering, vilified and disgraced. In Hades, between the weak *eidōla* of the Dead, the value of honour and dishonour still maintain their power: Electra and Orestes complain of the *atimia* Agamemnon suffers among the Dead (*Cho.* 96, 409, 434ff.), and the ghost of Clytaemnestra rebukes the demons for the pain she suffers, dishonoured and adrift in Hades (*Eum.* 95ff.), echoing the reprimand of Patroclus' Phantom that reminds Achilles of his wandering, because he too is yet without a funeral rite (*Iliad* 23.65ff.).

Clytaemnestra blames the Furies for their ingratitude, reminding them of the sacrifices that she used to officiate at night; the evocation of the image of the Queen engaged in nocturnal rites with demons adds blood to the scene, and lends a murky and witch-like colouring to the character of Clytaemnestra's Shadow (*Eum.* 106-9).

The Shadow urgently needs to perform her task, and rouses the demons: her wounds, on display, are a jolt that shakes the demons to their core. Clytaemnestra reaffirms the link that once bound her to her son, but now she only sees Orestes as her murderer, the matricide against whom she demands revenge. The power of the Furies sleeps, in a deep slumber, and from that sleep – which neutralizes their evil virtues – the Ghost of Clytaemnestra tries to wake them. Finally, we hear the moans of the demons that begin to wake up, urged to resume the hunt by the Phantom. Once they are awake, the Phantom of the mother can return to the Shadow. The Furies, in her place and on her behalf, are ready to return to hunting the matricide.

In the seven preserved tragedies by Aeschylus, we have three ghosts – one of which is absent, for Agamemnon fails the occasion of his epiphany.

Darius' spectre was able to weave past and future in the form of a prophecy. In *Persians*, the Phantom's voice is deep and wise but totally ineffective in the course of events: in actual fact, it resonates as a symbol of the failure of his son, Xerxes. The absence of Agamemnon's ghost suggests that it is time for his son to take his place because the 'truth' is now all in the drama: the role that Orestes can now occupy in his father's absence. Only if the Father's Ghost remains in the Shadow can the son finally – tragically – embark upon his own undertaking. Alone, without his paternal spectre to incite him and project his old resentments on his young will, Orestes can act out his drama without losing himself – at least for now – in any Hamletic hesitations: straight to the heart of the drama, to matricide.

In *Libation Bearers* the appearance of Agamemnon's ghost – promised by a summoning ritual made by his children on the tomb – did not occur, and the public was directed by Aeschylus toward investing not in the resentment of the spirit of the hero-father, but rather in the new heroism of his son Orestes.

In the calibrated, thoughtful design of the plot of *Oresteia*, Aeschylus shows that the paternal spirit is unable to access scenic reality, but instead it is the mother's spirit that generates ghosts. Indeed, in *Eumenides*, Aeschylus stages an unexpected twist referred to as a meta-theatrical double play with *Libation Bearers*, and with the significant precedent of a great figure, invented by himself: the first Phantom figure in *Persians*. Now, it is the Shadow of the murdered mother that appears; the absence of the Father-King's ghost is offset by the dramatic weight of the fantastic scene of the Queen-Mother's apparition.

By composing the plot for his tragedies – *mythos* – unedited with respect to the repertoire of 'stories' shared with his audience, and by profiling new characters – *ēthē* – that take on colour and thickness through the unfolding of the same plot, Aeschylus decides to put the grandiose figure of the Queen with her doubled body at the centre of his dramaturgical design: a double icon of motherhood and regality in *Persians*, and a double icon of monarchic authority and female power in the *Oresteia*. The male gendered epic – the saga – ends precisely at this turning point and *Incipit tragoedia*.

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