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The Ambiguous Home of Life and Death: The Symbolic Uses of the *Skene* and the Female in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*[1]

Abstract

Aeschylus' words have been dissected time and again as the key to our understanding of the notorious figure of Clytemnestra. In this article, I will survey the current literature on key scenes from Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, but explore them from a perspective that studies the surviving words in tandem with the spatial dynamics of the theatre. The traditional role of the woman within the home as wife and mother is challenged both through the powerful words of Clytemnestra and through the dark opening of the *skene* onstage, which symbolizes the life-giving and death-bringing potential of the female in Greek thought. Focusing on the 'tapestry scene', I will examine how the cascading red tapestry at once transforms the house of Atreus into a devouring mouth and into a womb, the parallel orifices that inspired such male anxiety in the ancient world. The connotations of the textile woven by the women of the house, over which a war of words takes place between husband and wife, resembles Clytemnestra's deceptive and alluring tongue, which eventually proves Agamemnon's downfall. And yet, as the womb has connections with life so it does with death. The memory of the brutal slaughter committed by Agamemnon's ancestors, brought vividly to life by Cassandra in front of the palace gates, creates a nightmarish manifestation of the house of Hades before the audience's eyes. This suggestion of vertical depth, which the dark interior captures, transforms Clytemnestra into an otherworldly monster who lurks in the depths of the *skene*-underworld. Through unlocking the secrets of the interior we can truly appreciate Aeschylus' Clytemnestra: a character who defies the limitations of male expectation and gender.

Keywords: tragedy, Aeschylus, space, interior, female, Clytemnestra

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* has been a source of fascination for audiences, ancient and modern, from its first production in 458 BC. The very first play of the trilogy, *Agamemnon*, is probably one of the most studied and performed plays of the entire Greek repertoire. Yet surprisingly it is not the play's namesake – the heroic sacker of Troy and the commander of the Greek army – who has captured

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the imaginations of the generations that followed, but his wife, "arguably the most transgressive woman in extant tragedy" (Hall 2010: 131): Clytemnestra. Aeschylus' alteration of the traditional story, in which Aegisthus was the mastermind executor of the plot while Clytemnestra merely assisted (Hom. *Od.* 3.258-75), seems to be his own innovation (Burnett 1998: 101-2), and it is this presentation of Clytemnestra that trickles down and seeps into later presentations of women as deceitful seductresses and, even more than that, deadly.

However, I would argue that the most drastic innovation in relation to how Aeschylus engages with the female was his use of the stage building, the *skene*, which was definitive regardless of whether it was in use before the first performance of the *Oresteia* or not.[2] Aeschylus fully exploited the wide range of semantic possibilities that the dark interior offered, and it is through its association with the female that this potentially benign space becomes laced with symbolic connotations of life and death.

Across periods and cultures of antiquity, notions of fertility and death, through mourning and funerary practices, have an established association with the category of 'female'; tragedians explored this paradox of women as life-givers and death-bringers on the Athenian stage, beginning in our surviving corpus with Aeschylus. This duality is rendered not merely through the words and gestures of the onstage Clytemnestra, who commands the audience's attention for the majority of the performance, but also through the symbolically charged offstage space.

Recently, much work has been done on exploring the symbolic connotations of the *skene* and the hidden stage it housed. On the surface, the *skene*

[2] Taplin (1977: 87, 277, 310, 452-9) states that the use of the *skene* in the *Oresteia* is so spectacularly sophisticated that it must be an innovation; Sommerstein (2010: 17-22) highlights the lack of archaeological evidence or reliable sources for reconstructing the fifth-century performance space and argues that there is no textual indication in Aeschylus' earlier plays that a stage building was in use (with the exception of *Pers.* 140-1); Raeburn and Thomas (2011: xlii, xlv) postulate that the *skene* was a "recent invention in 458 BC, designed to extend the mechanics of theatrical presentation", although they concede that Aeschylus' earlier plays "do not require a stage building". However, Bakola (2014) evaluates recent scholarship on the uses of the stage building and argues persuasively that it was in use before the *Oresteia*, providing a space from which Darius' apparition could appear from the underworld in Aeschylus' *Persians*. Her argument posits a *skene* that uses the interior to represent vertical depth, symbolic of the depths of the underworld (see § 3 below, 'Down the *Skene*'), which is utilized in later extant tragedies. For the same reason (among others), I think that the dramaturgical significance of the interior must have been established before the first production of the *Oresteia*. Nevertheless, from the textual evidence of the *Oresteia*, Sommerstein (2010: 17-18) highlights that, during its first performance, a stage building with doors was in use as there is "a clear distinction between an 'outside' area and an 'inside' area" and explicit references to doors are made by the characters.

is the infamous house of Atreus in *Agamemnon*, and certainly the *skene* often represents a palace, cave, or tent. As readers, we are trained to see the superficial exterior of the house as nothing more than this, and so scholars have focused their research on the surviving words of the plays. However, the gaping blackness of the interior conveys much more than the representational. Indeed, in a few publications, especially the works of those influenced by structuralism, an increasing amount of interest has been dedicated to unravelling the mysteries of the inside and the potential this has for enriching our understanding of these dramas.[3]

Therefore, the *skene,* in which these contradictory concepts of the female coexist, is the focus of this article. In the 'tapestry scene' especially (Aesch. *Ag*. 905-74), the *climax* of their amalgamation, the *skene* becomes the seat of life and death in the very *tableau* offered to the audience's gaze. Into the ornate tapestry, red with porphyra dye, are woven traditional ideas of female trickery, concepts of productive and reproductive labour, and blood. As Padel asserts, the offstage unseen space is an "image of the unseen interior of a human being" (1990: 358) and, in *Agamemnon*, this space seems undeniably evocative of a woman's interior. Käppel concludes that the 'tapestry scene' is only relevant for the construction of the plot insofar as it compels Agamemnon to enter the house (1998: 158), overlooking the symbolic significance of this moment.[4] For, in a mastery of Aeschylean dramaturgy, the parallelism between the mouth and the vagina, predominant in Greek imagination,[5] is staged simultaneously through the dark interior of the *skene* pouring forth its crimson, bringing to life Clytemnestra's intrinsic femaleness.

Yet that innate femininity is inexplicably linked with female affinity for death. In many parts of the play, but especially in the fourth episode (1035-330), this ominous and frightening unseen place transforms into the house of Hades through the words of Cassandra, the hitherto silent female. Her visions of the brutal history of the Atreidae – the betrayal, murder, and cannibalism – conjure up a cast of phantoms, who are forev-

[3] See authors such as Zeitlin 1985; Segal 1988 for his chapter on *Antigone* and the symbolic connotations of the underground cavern; Padel 1990; Wiles 1997; Bakola (2014 and 2016) argues against the representational interpretation of the *skene* and explores the symbolic and dramaturgical uses of the spatial depth of the *skene* in Aeschylus' *Persians* and the *Oresteia*; most recently Kampourelli (2016) demonstrates the importance of space for understanding Greek tragedy, arguing that the meaning of the interior is shaped by the dramatic action.

[4] Käppel (1998: 157) argues that the tapestry symbolizes "the network of causality of Agamemnon's guilt and fate" ("das Kausalgeflecht der Schuld und des Schicksals Agamemnons"), but does not observe the close connection between the fabric/interior and Clytemnestra.

[5] I will explore this connection found in gynaecological texts in the following section.

er bound to their home and the site of their butchering. The host of shades animated by Cassandra's words, when coupled with the recent scholarship on the versatility of horizontal and vertical depth in Greek tragedy, truly creates a house of death (Wiles 1997: 175-86; Bakola 2014: 9-10), as she herself observes (1291), the implications of which are substantial. For this presentation of the *skene* creates a female character who is the master of her sex's trickery and the monstrous abomination men feared existed in all womankind.

1. The Allure of the Female Tongue

The 'tapestry scene' (*Ag.* 905-74),[6] or 'carpet scene', is one of the most famous from the extant corpus of Greek tragedy, and the moment that we, the audience, have anticipated for some 900 lines; finally, a triumphant Agamemnon returns from Troy and is greeted by his wife, Clytemnestra, at the palace gates. It is then that Clytemnestra activates her plan and elegantly manipulates her husband into committing an act of *hybris*, which will lead to his demise: the treading of the expensive fabrics produced by his own house. Within this elaborate tapestry, traditional ideas of female duplicity bind the fabric more closely to the feminine, for the garment teases and tempts Agamemnon with its luxurious beauty, in much the same way as Clytemnestra with her manipulative tongue, seducing him to master and surmount what he knows is forbidden (921-4). I will explore this parallel between the fatally seductive tongue of Clytemnestra and the fabric, in terms of both the language and the dramaturgy of Aeschylus, and attempt to unravel the many overlapping layers of symbolism captured by this prop and the interior space. For if the fabrics are imagined as the female's seductive tongue, the *tableau* of the crimson cascading from the *skene* (908-74) suddenly becomes a mouth extending its tongue before our eyes; the house becomes a living breathing organism (cf. *Ag.* 37-8, 1310) and an extension of the duplicitous female *psyche*.

In ancient Greek imagination,[7] the orifices of women were frequently considered dangerous, and the two that men especially feared were the parallel openings of the vagina and the mouth, the "upper and lower mouths, [which] show similar or parallel responses" (Hanson 1990: 328). Both shared carnivorous appetites (the former for sex and the latter for

[6] Sommerstein (2008: 104) explains that 'tapestry scene' is a more appropriate name, given the nature of the materials, than the more widespread 'carpet scene'.

[7] Hanson (1990: 309-38) explores in detail the language used in medical texts to describe female anatomy, including the crossover between the terminologies of mouth-jar-uterus.

food) and existed beyond the realms of male control, whether it be that women talked too much or were sexually unchaste (Fulkerson 2002: 343). Thus, in male eyes, the ideal woman was silent and remained indoors, far from the temptations of the outside world (Hall 1997: 103-10), which she could not resist herself due to her insatiability. It is this notion, which was shared by many cultures, including the Greeks, that I wish to explore and apply to *Agamemnon*.

The text which seems to first bring this correlation between the mouth and the vagina to prominence is Hesiod's didactic epic, *Works and Days* (60-104), in which he relates the myth of Pandora, the first woman. The description of the jar and Pandora's notorious defining act (namely the unleashing of misery upon mankind) borrows terminology from human anatomy, in particular those used for the mouth and female genitalia in medical texts.[8] In Sissa and Zeitlin, the jar is viewed, rightly in my opinion, as a metaphor for the female body and, more specifically, for the womb, with Elpis left inside closely resembling the child which a woman has the potential to bear. In gynaecological works, the womb was often compared to an upside-down jar and the myth of Pandora must surely have been influential to this line of thinking. The nouns χεῖλος ("lip") and πῶμα ("seal") in this passage highlight the reciprocal nature of language for the literal and metaphorical jar; the use of these terms to describe the uterus-jar, vocabulary also fitting for the mouth, emphasizes the link between these orifices.[9] In the case of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, the passageway of the *skene* doubly evokes the hazardous female mouth and vagina, and male anxiety finds ground in the androgynous female character of Clytemnestra, whose licentious tongue has a distinctly feminine ability to persuade and conquer her male counterpart, Agamemnon.[10]

Firstly, the tongue is characterized as a woman's "most dangerous part, her one powerful member" (McClure 1999: 70-1) for it is the weapon most readily available to her gender.[11] Deceit and manipulation are markedly feminine in nature and it is no accident that Clytemnestra dominates Agamemnon with words during the 'tapestry scene'. Pelling convincingly discusses how Clytemnestra successfully manages to deceive both the Chorus and Agamemnon without ever actually lying (2005: 95-9). Instead she manag-

[8] See the Hippocratic corpus for these ideas: the womb 'is' a jar in *Ep.* 6.5.11; cf. also *Gen.* 9.3 for analogy to jar.

[9] See Sissa (1990: 53-70) and Zeitlin (1996: 64-5) for a more detailed argument of the jar as a metaphor and its connection to the terminology of female anatomy in Classical thought.

[10] Raeburn and Thomas (2011: lviii) describe Clytemnestra as embodying Persuasion (cf. *Ag.* 385-6) in the third episode, impelling Agamemnon towards his death.

[11] Knox (1988: 277) demonstrates that Medea can only prevail by using deceit as she is a woman.

es to cloak her true intent behind a smokescreen of flattery and misdirection, in much the same way that the Muses are able to tell many lies that look like genuine things (Hes. *Th.* 27). In her speech at Agamemnon's return, Clytemnestra heaps up metaphorical expressions, calling him "the watchdog of his homestead" (896: τῶν σταθμῶν κύνα), which is truly her title as she has protected the house in Agamemnon's long absence, "forestay" (897: πρότονον), "firmly-footed pillar" (898: στῦλον ποδήρη), and "only son" (898: μονογενὲς τέκνον). These appellations cast her in the role of a subservient loving wife as she appeals to Agamemnon's masculine authority, the one on whom their house and the entire city depend.[12] Yet, while the audience, familiar with Agamemnon's fate, sees through her guile, Agamemnon is naïvely seduced by her adulation. This intense flattery and the earlier characterization of Clytemnestra as the "watchdog of the house" (607: δωμάτων κύνα) render Cassandra's metaphor all the more appropriate to the audience (*Ag.* 1228-9):

> οὐκ οἶδεν οἷα γλῶσσα μισητῆς κυνὸς
> λείξασα κἀκτείνασα φαιδρὸν οὖς, δάκνει.
>
> [He does not know what kind of bite comes after the fawning tongue / Of that hateful bitch and the cheerful inclination of her ear.][13]

However, this powerfully persuasive tongue of hers is not merely evident in the words Aeschylus places in her mouth, but in the visual dramaturgy: the crimson fabric seduces and tempts Agamemnon just as thoroughly as her words in order to cross the boundary of mortal propriety against his better judgement (922-4). This connection between fabric and female deception was a *topos* of ancient Greek literature centuries before Aeschylus created his tragedy;[14] you do not have to look much further than the mythological precedents of Clytemnestra, Helen, and Penelope to see this. The connection to the feminine is implicit in the tapestry itself and in its handling by "female servants" (908: δμῳαί), yet the link between Clytemnestra's alluring tongue and the tapestry itself has not yet been highlighted enough in my research.[15]

While her verbal discourse in the 'tapestry scene' aurally bewitches Agamemnon, the tapestry itself presents a visual manifestation of Clytemnestra's feminine charm. The focus on the opulence of the fabric is contin-

[12] Fraenkel (1978a: 405-6) stresses that there is a heavy emphasis on protection and preservation in these lines, as Clytemnestra wants to assure Agamemnon that "his absence would bring everything to rack and ruin".

[13] All translations are from Sommerstein 2008.

[14] McClure (1996-97) examines the depiction of the female activity of producing cloth as coercive and magical, as well as the connection between weaving and feminine wiles.

[15] Zeitlin (1985: 52-111) has asserted that a connection between the door and the mouth is present in Euripides' *Hippolytus*.

ually highlighted by the adjectives ποικίλος ("beautiful"), repeated three times within fifteen lines (923, 926, 936), ἀργυρώνητος (949: "bought with silver"), emphatically positioned after πλοῦτος ("wealth"), and ἰσάργυρος (959: "worth its weight in silver") in Clytemnestra's speech. The nouns πέτασμα (909: "wall-hanging") and εἶμα (921: "clothing") illustrate that this was not a carpet, not a ποδόψηστρον (926: "doormat") to be walked upon, but something infinitely more delicate and precious.[16] Morrell correctly asserts that it is the combination of her arguments and garments that seduces Agamemnon by appealing "to his self-perception as the dominant male in his community as measured by his success in the war against Priam, the wealth of his *oikos,* and his willingness to be an object of envy" (1996-97: 149). So this garment and Clytemnestra's words equally represent Agamemnon's achievements, as he sees it. Together they beguile Agamemnon to embrace the Eastern luxury he has just destroyed and captured as booty at Troy – and it only takes a stichomythic exchange of thirteen lines to do so. In his essay, Dover searches for the reason for the emergence of the red fabric motif in this play and, in doing so, draws a comparison between the heroic Agamemnon and his contemporary equivalent Pausanias (1987). Pausanias, like Agamemnon, fell prey to the luxurious lifestyle of the East and also met a tragic end, having been betrayed by those he trusted (cf. Fraenkel 1978a: 413 for the connection between the tapestry, the barbaric, and the Persian). Whilst Dover's essay omits the many layers of symbolic meaning attached to the crimson fabric, Fraenkel's analogy further strengthens the link between the obsequious tongue and the enchanting textile.

Moreover, this image is recalled in the Cassandra scene when she conjures up the frightening image of the "house breathing blood-dripping slaughter" (1310: φόνον δόμοι πνέουσιν αἱματοσταγῆ); the ancestral palace of Atreus becomes a living, breathing organism and, to perform such a biological process, the mouth is often required. This image undeniably recalls the earlier *tableau* of the red fabric, which seems to only heighten this interpretation of the fabric as symbolic of Clytemnestra's tongue. Indeed, Wiles highlights this repeated personification of the *skene*, claiming that the "*skene*/house is in a sense the protagonist of *Agamemnon*" (1999: 168). The *ekkyklema* (theatrical trolley associated with interior spac-

[16] Denniston and Page (1957: 148) state that "the term 'carpets' should not be used"; see also Taplin 1977: 314-15. Morrell (1996-97) believes that the fabrics are in fact clothes, rather than carpets or tapestries (cf. 921, 960 and 963 for references to εἵματα), as they are so valuable and such a symbol of Clytemnestra's authority as a woman; Judet de la Combe (2001: 327) illustrates the difficulty in trying to determine the precise nature of the object.

es),[17] which wheels out the bloodied corpses of Agamemnon and Cassandra through the door and onto the stage, silently speaks of the terrible secrets to which it bore witness. Zeitlin stresses the "homology . . . between the door and the mouth as apertures to the interior which can either be opened or closed" (1985: 74). Earlier the door remained closed, trapping Agamemnon, and then Cassandra, inside, keeping the true nature of the events within unspoken. However, Clytemnestra's supreme pleasure at defeating her husband, in a speech heavily suggestive of sexual gratification (1384-92) (Foley 2001: 204), blurs the boundaries of time and space. In triumphant glee, the doors burst open and the *ekkyklema* announces the truth to the waiting Chorus and the audience before Clytemnestra even opens her mouth.[18]

The evidence seems compelling to view this significant boundary, this liminal threshold, as a mouth, with the red tapestry, which spills out of the door-mouth, as a tongue. The importance of speech, especially in the 'tapestry scene', when coupled with Cassandra's personification, would certainly enrich our understanding of the visual of the performance. Metaphors such as "the *ekkyklema* exposes . . . the *skene* . . . as a space which swallows up life and 'disgorges' death" (Bakola 2014: 10) and "like an octopus disgorging its stomach to capture its prey, the fabric extending from inside takes its victim with it as it retracts" (Rehm 2002: 78) seem all the more visceral if the *skene* is viewed in this context. Therefore, this deadly image of the mouth reflects the innate danger of the female as perceived by the male, and is visibly brought to life through the dark opening that looms over the stage, a constant hungry presence, which lures life in and spits death out.

2. The Female Within[19]

As I have demonstrated above, the visual *tableau* of the 'tapestry scene' elicits a carnivorous mouth laying a deceptive trap for its prey in the form of its sumptuous tongue. I also observed that there is a close parallel between the cavity of the mouth and that of the womb in ancient thought.

[17] Sommerstein (2010: 23) describes the purpose of the *ekkyklema* in Greek drama.

[18] Raeburn and Thomas (2011: xlvi) suggest that "the *ekkyklema* was itself a very recent or even brand new invention", which would make the grand revelation of the bodies an even more powerful and significant action.

[19] The argument of this section draws on the recent work of Bakola (esp. 2016), and her analysis of the symbolism of textiles within *Agamemnon* and the *Oresteia* trilogy. However, my analysis focuses on the *skene* as the embodiment of Clytemnestra's interior, through which the tapestry becomes symbolic of (re)productive labour, and the repercussions this has for Agamemnon's character.

If the *skene* can be imagined as one, it can naturally be envisaged as the other.[20] And so, given the close connection between the *skene* and the female protagonist Clytemnestra – for certainly her transgressive nature dominates the audience's attention whether she is at the threshold or concealed within (Taplin 1977: 299-300, 317) – I will now focus on the interior as representative of her quintessential femaleness: her roles as a woman, that of a wife and mother, and the reproductive potential and capability that she inherently possesses. This female interior is transposed into the dramaturgy of this (in)famous scene, in which the *skene* evokes the female womb and the red tapestry suggests menstrual blood, which emerges from the inner recesses and flows to Agamemnon's feet (914).

The tapestry is redolent of blood and Aeschylus takes pains to focus the audience's attention on the colour of the dye (910, 946, 957, and 959). It is no accident that the fabric shares an epithet appropriate for blood (Goheen 1955: 115-26; Taplin 1977: 315; 1995: 81-2), for the very heart of the play underscores the blood that has been spilled and the blood still to be shed. As Goheen illustrates, the innate ambiguity of the colour of πορφύρα, which can be translated variously as crimson, purple, or something in between, is undeniably reminiscent of the darkness of blood when it has been shed and has come into contact with the dust of the earth, as is the case in the 'tapestry scene'. The noun πορφύρα, which is repeated twice in close succession (957, 959), and the neologistic adjectival compound πορφυρόστρωτος (910: "spread with crimson"), which reflects Aeschylus' innovative vision in his use of stagecraft, stress that the significance of the colour cannot be underestimated. Thus, the tapestries laid on the earth in this crucial scene are evidently evocative of blood.

Yet, it is not just that the fabric denotes spilled blood, lifeless and motionless, but rather that it is portrayed as an animate, flowing stream of blood connected to the *skene*,[21] its producer, that makes this scene so powerful. The fluidity of the fabric is conjured by κηκίς and βαφή (960), both of which create the illusion of movement and "powerfully suggest the flow of blood" (McClure 1999: 88). McClure explains the significance of κηκίς, used of a substance that oozes or spurts, and βαφή ("dye"), which is often metaphorical of blood, in presenting the fabric as liquescent. Moreover,

[20] Goheen (1955: 121) examines the sexual implications of the tapestry; Padel (1990: 99-102) highlights the connection between the interior and the generative potential of the earth, and by extension the female; Bakola (2016) asserts that the tableau of the 'tapestry scene' evokes that of the womb and menstrual blood.

[21] Raeburn and Thomas (2011: xlviii) observe that the tapestry resembles "a stream of blood", but, in failing to analyse the tapestry's connection to the interior, they do not examine the greater significance of 'blood' in this scene and its wider implications within the drama.

this liquidity creates an affinity with the feminine, which has often been noted by scholars, for it was the female body which was often considered porous and vulnerable to dissolution (Carson 1990: 143; Cawthorn 2008: 16, 54-5).

As Bakola has shown, this stream of blood, reminiscent of menstrual blood as it flows out of the interior opening, and reinforced by the (re)productive symbolism of the textiles, is suggestive of the reproductive capabilities of the female. Indeed, the destruction of the fabric closely recollects the sacrifice of Clytemnestra's daughter, Iphigenia, a near-constant presence in the background of the play, whom Agamemnon slaughtered for the progress of the Trojan expedition. The very term βαφή is used both of the tapestry (960) and Iphigenia's robes (239), which pour to the ground as she is lifted to be sacrificed.[22] Although Denniston and Page argue that her cascading robe does not signify blood (1957: 91), the repetition of this noun, and the participle χέουσα ("pouring"), seems to elicit the blood which inevitably flowed to the earth when her throat was slit, which the chorus cannot bring themselves to speak of explicitly in the *parodos* (40-257). Indeed, the colour of her flowing saffron robes (239) brings to mind the blood-red colour of diluted saffron (Bakola 2016: 125) and anticipates the violent scene that the chorus did not see and do not speak of (248). Undoubtedly, the liquidity of Iphigenia's robe is recalled in the 'tapestry scene', strengthening the connection between mother and daughter and, by extension, the symbolic representation of female reproduction in the fabric.

Furthermore, the connection between these two events is well expounded by Morrell, who notes that the sea (958) conceived in Clytemnestra's triumphant speech over Agamemnon recalls this dreaded moment, the last meeting of king and queen at Aulis (Morrell 1996-97: 157-61). For then it was the impassable waves that caused this unnatural sacrifice of a daughter by her father and, in Aeschylus' performance, a sea of bloodshed recalls this perversion and links these two degenerate crimes. In this way, Iphigenia is evoked at this crucial moment, this turning point for the father who destroyed her (Taplin 1977: 313), and her strong connection to the fabric is a reminder of Clytemnestra's justification for his murder (cf. Pind. *Pyth.* 11.22-3). Thus, Clytemnestra's reproductive power, evoked in the tapestry and in the memory of Iphigenia,[23] is the victim of Agamemnon's destruc-

[22] Lebeck (1964) examines the significance of Iphigenia's robe and the metaphor of βαφή as blood.

[23] Judet de la Combe (2001: 49) emphasizes that the purple, which originated in the sea, is symbolic of the violence carried out at Aulis. By the same author see also 2004: 131.

tive action.[24] His final word πατῶν (957: "treading") demonstrates his reckless ruin of life, past and potential future, for he is treading not just on valuable "clothing" (960: εἱμάτων) but on Clytemnestra's fundamental femaleness, her ability to be a mother (cf. the use of clothing during the 'tapestry scene' in the National Theatre's 1999 production of *The Oresteia*).[25]

However, the "sea" (958: θάλασσα) also represents the generative capability of nature in this scene, which, like the human life of Iphigenia, Agamemnon disregards and crushes underfoot for the sake of his vanity. Firstly, it is not just the bloodlike colour that bears so much symbolic significance at this moment, but also the vocabulary that the characters use; the tapestry is stained with expensive dye from murex shellfish (πορφύρα), and on three occasions Aeschylus draws attention to this aspect of the colour (910, 957, 959). That the first adjective to describe the fabric is πορφυρόστρωτος highlights that, from the very moment it is brought into view, heavy emphasis is placed upon the murex shellfish, which made this prop possible with their death. For the dye, a mucous secretion from the hypobranchial gland was collected from the shellfish once they were crushed and, as only a small amount was produced by each snail, vast quantities would have had to have been destroyed to colour such a large garment.[26] Additionally, this repetition of the origins of the dye creates a vivid bond between the fabric and the sea in *Agamemnon*. As Clytemnestra so eloquently, and portentously, comments in ll. 958-62, the sea produces a "ever-renewed" (960: παγκαίνιστος) amount of dye,[27] and the house of Atreus will never run out of wealth with which to purchase it. Yet the natural death implicit in the tapestry, made explicit by the vocabulary of the characters, further heightens the fabric's af-

[24] In the Globe Theatre's 2015 production of *The Oresteia*, directed by Adele Thomas, the 'tapestry' was a simple piece of white fabric, which stretched from the interior to Agamemnon's chariot. The moment that Agamemnon stepped onto the fabric, he deployed a container of red blood, destroying the whiteness beneath his feet. Although a powerfully suggestive action, which reminds the audience of the blood Agamemnon has shed elsewhere, it misses the symbolism that was implicit in Aeschylus' red tapestry (that of Iphigenia's sacrifice and Clytemnestra's role as a mother), which provided a visual manifestation of Clytemnestra's justification for murder.

[25] During the 'tapestry scene' of the National Theatre's 1999 production, directed by Katie Mitchell, a 'carpet' of bloodied children's dresses are laid out across the stage, symbolising Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia.

[26] See Bakola (2016) who examines the vast natural and labour resources the production of the tapestry of this scene would require. She argues that this scene reflects humanity's abuse of the earth's natural resources and, by extension, the female's generative resources, including the production of human life (as previously discussed).

[27] Judet de la Combe (2004: 364) describes the opening (of the stage building) as representative of the sea and the continuous work of nature to renew what is lost.

finity with blood; woven into the very fabric is an excess of life-potential that has been destroyed for human avarice. As Padel illustrates, "the earth, womb of world violence, is fertile with fearful as well as beneficial resources" (1992: 10). Thus, the *tableau* of the female womb and menstrual blood overlaps with the image of the *skene*-interior as the θάλασσα. The sea as a creator of natural life, carelessly destroyed for a superficial display of power and affluence, and comparable with the *skene* in the 'tapestry scene', presents the interior as a cosmic womb, which has been argued by Bakola (2016). Agamemnon's πατῶν becomes yet more symbolic and more significant an action; his calamitous destruction of human and natural life portrays the inevitability of his gruesome fate as he disappears into the female-earth womb.

Moreover, this amalgamation of the cosmic and individual womb onstage conveys the horror of the events within more dramatically than mere words ever could, no matter how powerful. The door, naturally equal to the vagina in this context, forces to the forefront of the audience's imagination the ultimate perversion of natural order and the female, for the female should create and nourish life within her womb and, at the right time, give birth to young life. However, Clytemnestra has appropriated her femininity to produce not life but death; her femininity creates an intrinsic bond with the earth in which she lives, yet, like the earth, which can be benevolent or merciless, Clytemnestra embraces the darker aspects of her gender.[28] She invites life into her in the form of Agamemnon, but rather than nourish that life, she gives birth to death when the *ekkyklema* is wheeled out onto the stage. As Taplin states, "the threshold of the ancestral palace is the line which divides life and death" and, here, Clytemnestra, the female, undeniably controls that liminal space (1995: 35). In addition, the image of Agamemnon's lacerated corpse slumped in a bathtub and wrapped in a bloodied garment (1382-3) is a terribly vulnerable one and contributes to the notion that this is the perversion of a natural birth (Hall 2002: 21). Like an unborn child, he was completely and utterly helpless at the mercy of the female.

Yet the rich reproductive symbolism of the female is further layered with figurative meaning; namely, the representation of productive labour.[29] The tapestry expresses not only the value of life but also the economic value of the house from which it protrudes. The wealth (949) of the

[28] Lebeck (1988: 80) describes the perversion of "forces which should be beautiful, benevolent and life-giving" in the imagery of the *Oresteia.*

[29] Bakola (2016) examines the connection between reproductive and productive labour in detail in the *Oresteia* trilogy, in particular in the 'tapestry scene' of *Agamemnon.*

house is very much embodied in the tapestry and both Agamemnon and Clytemnestra emphasize its monetary value: the *argyros* ('silver'; 'money') of ἀργυρωνήτους (949: "bought with silver") is picked up again ten lines later in ἰσάργυρον (959: "worth its weight in silver"). The house, like the sea, shares an endless and ever-renewing wealth of resources (960). That the wealth of the house is synonymous with the tapestry is conveyed through the rich compound δωματοφθορέω (948: "despoil the house"); destroying the fabric is equal to destroying the house. However, it is not just wealth in general that is displayed before the eyes of the audience, but also the wealth generated by the female sphere of activity. Textile making was a gender-specific pursuit, one which demonstrated the integral role the female played in the survival and preservation of the *oikos*. The presentation of the fabric is therefore a demonstration of female creative prowess and feminine authority. The destruction of these fabrics by the male in this scene thus gains even more importance. The aggressiveness of πατῶν ("trampling") demonstrates Agamemnon's hubristic and detrimental attitude towards the resources of his own house (Taplin 1977: 313) and female domestic power in the eyes of the audience and indeed the gods. As Morrell asserts, this trampling of the fabrics "signals simultaneously an appropriation and devaluation of that power" (1996-97: 149-50).

3. Down the *Skene*

That the interior of the *skene* corresponds to the female interior is evident time and again in this tragedy, layering the interior with symbolic connotations of fertility, as the dramaturgy of the 'tapestry scene' so vividly portrays. However, as Segal repeatedly demonstrates in his exploration of *Antigone,* Sophocles portrays "the womb as the underground cavern, the mysterious seat of life-and-death" by emphasizing the spatial depth which the cave captures. The connection between life and death is highlighted as existing in this "subterranean reservoir" of the *skene*, which lay under the control of the woman (1988: 171, 173). Similarly, in *Agamemnon,* the *skene* is representative of the house of Hades as it is not only life which lurks inside, but death, under Clytemnestra's control.

As Padel so elegantly explores in her chapter "Inner World, Underworld, and Gendered Images of 'Mind'", "inward flux and darkness are characteristic of innards, of Hades, and women's inwardness" (1992: 99). In this case, where the woman in question is the axe-wielding wife and mother Clytemnestra, the darkness of the *skene* is undeniably evocative of death (as much as it is of life, as we saw earlier). That the sacrifice is taking place in the very middle of the hearth (1056: ἑστίας μεσομφάλου) highlights the innate

ambiguity of the female as represented in the space. Vernant succinctly demonstrates that "Hestia's 'maternal' aspect strengthens the analogy between the circular hearth and the *omphalos*", which evokes the female abdomen and is suggestive of the umbilical cord (1983: 178-9). The hearth's position at the centre of the house, deep within the heart of the female domain, and its shape, which evokes that of the navel, reiterates my earlier discussion of the interior as evocative of the female womb. However, the hearth becomes the scene of Agamemnon's brutal slaughter[30] and reveals itself as the interior of the house of Hades in the episode that follows.

Vernant emphasizes that Hestia is the site of contact between the mortal sphere and the immortal, connecting the *oikos* to the gods above and, more frighteningly, to the gods below (1983: 194). Thus the blackness, which swallows Agamemnon as he crosses the threshold at the end of the 'tapestry scene',[31] "becomes the darkness of the underworld" (Wiles 1999: 165). It is significant then that it is the hearth, which ties the house to the realms below, that Clytemnestra announces as the *locus* of the murder and that the Chorus confirm as the site of the sacrifice (1310).

The connection between the hearth and the underworld is also seen in Euripides' *Medea*, which features another transgressive female from the tragic stage, when Medea dramatically swears by the goddess Hecate, whose home is deep in the underworld, but who "lives in the inner chamber of my house" (Eur. *Med.* 397*:* μυχοῖς ναίουσαν ἑστίας ἐμῆς) in this tragedy. Medea's claim that this goddess of the underworld is living in her hearth truly depicts the interior of the house, from which Medea's terrifying offstage screams poured forth just a short time before and in which the children will meet their death, as a house of death.[32] This connection to the world below highlights the ambiguity of the interior in Greek tragedy. The darkness of the *skene* represents not just horizontal depth but also vertical depth, the intersection of which is the hearth in the Greek home.

The concept of a vertical axis in the Greek theatre is noted by Wiles, who, in his chapter "The Vertical Axis", explores the potential of the verti-

[30] Seaford (1995: 370) observes that "the ambiguity of the metaphor and reality inheres in the sacrificial metaphor", as an actual sacrifice appears to be taking place at the same time as Agamemnon's metaphorical one.

[31] Lunn-Rockliffe examined the presentation of Hades as carnivorous in Roman and later Christian literature, as a personified entity which devoured life, in her lecture "Early Christian Personifications of Hell*"* at the *Hellish Persons* Public Talk (24 October 2014).

[32] In the National Theatre's 2014 production of *Medea,* directed by Carrie Cracknell, the stage, which depicted the interior, highlighted this connection to the underworld when a portion of the floor was lifted and, from the depths, the fatal robe, which would destroy the house of Creon and Jason, was drawn up.

cal to define the tripartite universe of immortals, mortals, and dead. However, his exploration focuses on what he calls the "most important vertical relationship . . . that of actor and audience" and dissuades us, as modern readers and audiences, from analysing the play in terms of spatial depth (1999: 168, 176-7). On the other hand, Bakola persuasively argues that there is a third axis, the transverse axis,[33] which captures spatial depth in Greek drama and allows the horizontal depth represented by the dark interior to signal that of the vertical, those spaces which exist below the earth (2014: 9-10). This interpretation of dramatic space allows us to view the inner recesses of the house of Atreus as those of Hades, especially as this association between the interior and depth is evoked during scenes of murder and death,[34] the favourite activities of members of the Atreid family.

This image of the *skene* is not merely implicit in the spatial dynamics of the unseen interior, but is also made explicit in the words of Cassandra in the scene where she discusses her fate, which is so horrifically entangled with that of the house of Atreus' fellow victims (1219-24). The house as the scene of murder, in particular that of kin-murder, is drawn attention to multiple times throughout Cassandra's exchange with the Chorus and, among them, the three following lines (*Ag.* 1090-2):

> μισόθεον μὲν οὖν, πολλὰ συνίστορα
> αὐτοφόνα κακὰ κἀρτάναι,
> ἀνδροσφαγεῖον καὶ πεδορραντήριον.
>
> [No, no, a house that hates the gods, one that has knowledge / Of many crimes in which kin have been slain and heads severed / A place where men are slaughtered and blood sprinkles the floor.]

As Fraenkel points out, no specific crime is mentioned (yet) (1978b: 494), and, instead, Aeschylus conjures an atmosphere of horror, which anticipates the reveal of the gruesome details. The many words for murder and death in these few lines alone highlight the tremendous slaughter that has occurred within the walls of the palace; for this is no ordinary family home as the compounds ἀνδροσφαγεῖον and πεδορραντήριον, used uniquely in this instance, demonstrate so viscerally. Padel explores this notion of kindred blood shed on the ground as "the ultimate evil", for blood is the unseen, yet vital, link between family members, and the shedding of that

[33] Bakola's use of the transverse axis takes the work of Kampourelli (2016), who analyses space in terms of axes as viewed by the spectator, as its foundation. She demonstrates that the vertical axis is provided by the stage building (2014: 30).

[34] Bakola (2014: 7-13) explores more thoroughly this association between the interior of the *skene* and spatial depth, examining its presence in various dramas of the fifth-century.

blood is a violation, making visible what ought to remain concealed (1992: 174). Throughout Cassandra's exchange with the Chorus, the image of liquescent blood recurs (1172, 1293-4, 1309), presenting a terrifying image of a hellish world within the borders of the *skene*.

Moreover, this action of blood spilling on to the floor is like that of a libation, nourishing the earth and the dead below. In Homer's *Odyssey,* Homer details the necessary rites to attract shades in the underworld, including the libation of blood, a crucial element which allowed the dead to converse with the living (*Od.* 10.503-40). This libation of blood, albeit animal blood in this instance, highlights its significance in relation to the dead. Cassandra's prophecy and her visions of the dead (1096-7, 1217-22) become all the more tangible in light of the continual stream of blood which the house of Atreus offers the earth. The ghosts of the dead children, whom Atreus butchered and fed to Thyestes, are likened to the shapes of dreams (1218: ὀνείρων προσφερεῖς μορφώμασιν) and most likely would have reminded a fifth-century audience of the descriptions of the dead in the Homeric tradition; their insubstantiality, their restlessness, their appearance, frozen in the moment of their death, are all elements of the dead in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.* Achilles' vision of Patroclus in the *Iliad* highlights that the dead are mere "images" (*Il.* 23.72: εἴδωλα), who live in the house of Hades but have no real substance. A similar depiction is given in the *Odyssey* when Odysseus sees his mother's ghost in the underworld. Homer presents Anticlea as "resembling a shadow or a fleeting dream" (*Od.* 11.207-8: σκιῇ εἴκελον ἠὲ καὶ ὀνείρῳ ἔπτατ'[ο]). So Cassandra's visions of Thyestes' dead children create a potent manifestation of the house of Hades onstage, the *climax* of which is her dramatic address to the gates which will lead to her death (*Ag.* 1291):

Ἅιδου πύλας δὲ τάσδ' ἐγὼ προσεννέπω.

[I address these gates as the gates of Hades.]

As she stands with her back to the audience, as the actor must surely have done (Raeburn and Thomas 2011: 206), the audience is invited to see the house as she does: a home of death.[35] This explicit reference to the *skene* as the domain of Hades is the culmination of Aeschylus' symbolic use of the ambiguous unseen interior and the atmosphere of death conjured in the graphic divinations of Cassandra throughout this episode (1090-2, 1096-

[35] Judet de la Combe (2004: 141-2) argues that the palace is portrayed as a place of deaths past and future, observing that, in this scene, the only deaths which Cassandra sees are those that occurred within the boundaries of the palace. Most notably, Iphigenia is never alluded to, a prominent figure in the build-up to the slaughter.

7, 1126-8, 1172, 1186-90, 1217-22, 1277-8), which directly precedes the scene of Agamemnon's brutal offstage murder (1343-7).

Furthermore, Cassandra's address to the "gates" (πύλαι) throws the entrance of the *skene* into sharp relief as it is not the 'house' that she addresses but the gates themselves. The threshold, which has been crucial throughout the performance, becomes the dividing line between life and death more plainly than had elsewhere in the drama. The woman who dominates this threshold, Clytemnestra,[36] then takes on a more significant role when the *skene* is viewed in the context of Hades: she becomes Cerberus, the guard dog of the underworld, who "fawns to deceive" just as she does (1228-9) (Sommerstein 2008: 148). Her characterization as "watchdog of the house" (607: δωμάτων κύνα), an idea picked up by Cassandra (1228), has ambiguous connotations, as Goldhill notes (1984: 56). The comparison to a dog links her to her adulterous sister Helen (for Helen as a dog see Hom. *Il.* 3.180, 6.344 and 6.356, *Od.* 8.319), denotes her shamelessness and, more significantly, her loyalty to the house, for she determines who can enter and who can escape. Lebeck further examines this kinship between Clytemnestra and a dog in her exploration of the hunting motif in the *Oresteia* trilogy. Lebeck observes that the robe, which bound Agamemnon in his grim fate, as Clytemnestra so triumphantly describes as she boasts over his entangled corpse (1374-83), "for Agamemnon is a net . . . Clytemnestra the dog who drives her game into the net" (1988: 78). Truly her elated declaration that "I staked out around him an endless net" (1381-2: ἄπειρον ἀμφίβληστρον . . . περιστιχίζω), with the use of the ἀμφί- prefix and the περί-prefix, emphasizes the trap that had been set, and so Lebeck's metaphor of Clytemnestra as a hunting dog seems undeniably appropriate.[37] This depiction of Clytemnestra as a watchdog, which drives men to their death and prevents their escape, especially evokes Cerberus. And yet it is interesting that Cassandra could not similarly be herded to her death by Clytemnestra. The only other female present in *Agamemnon*, Cassandra is immune to Clytemnestra's manipulation and cannot be tricked like Agamemnon. Nonetheless, eventually she too enters Clytemnestra's hellish nightmare within. In the end, Clytemnestra allows neither man nor woman to escape from the inevitable death concealed deep within the palace.

[36] Taplin (1977: 299-300) notes Clytemnestra's control of the doorway and that she is the watchdog who allows people to cross the threshold; Rehm (2002: 86) observes that "Clytemnestra dominates the central doorway".

[37] In the Globe Theatre's 2015 production of *The Oresteia*, Clytemnestra, played by Katy Stephens, very deliberately tilts her head as she stands in the doorway of the house as she listens to the Chorus and Agamemnon, a striking action reminiscent of a guard dog.

4. Conclusion

Padel's statement that "the language of space is part of the tragedian's armoury" (1990: 342) is demonstrated time and again in *Agamemnon*. Aeschylus' symbolic use of the *skene*'s interior, the intrinsically female domestic sphere, which is so closely identified with the paradoxical aspects of life and death that the female embodies, is a language that transcends the limitations of speech. As Wiles emphasizes, "theatre is pre-eminently a spatial medium, for it can dispense with language on occasion but never with space" (1997: 3). In Aeschylus' masterpiece, that offstage place silently tells of the fatal inevitability which lives inside the house of Atreus, as well as the innate life-giving elements of Clytemnestra, which she weaponizes (907-74) and for which she suffers (1417-8, 1525-6).

Clytemnestra is a character whose femininity is often overlooked and diminished by the male attributes that she possesses (her heroic language, her authority over men, her murder weapon).[38] However, the interiority of the *skene* symbolizes her own interiority, both of her mouth and her womb, and emphasizes her undeniable femaleness in her roles as a wife and mother. Simultaneously, that darkness which dominates the stage represents the flipside of the female in the eyes of the male: the unknown, the frightening, the uncontrollable.[39] The interior, which is so emblematic of the life-giving potential of the female, simultaneously depicts death and the perpetual cycle of vengeance which lives on in the cursed household of Atreus.

Thus, Clytemnestra's propensity to possess the abilities of both sexes for violence and manipulation only serves to stress the innate contradiction of the female as she masters these two opposing poles to triumph over her male enemy, and indeed revel in his bloody demise (1371-94, 1401-6, 1438-47). As Bardel summarizes, "Clytemnestra remains unequivocally female . . . exploiting 'typical' female resourcefulness to the limit, [she] usurps and appropriates male power and prerogatives" (2002: 52). Her "anomalous personality" is her true weapon (Winnington-Ingram 1988: 87); she is neither defined, nor limited by her gender, but, like the dark deep, she is ever-changing and evolving, she is something more.

[38] Davies (1987) examines whether Clytemnestra uses the axe or the sword to kill Agamemnon, both of which are undeniably masculine.

[39] Carson (1990: 159) highlights the female alliance with the wild and raw nature, with formlessness and instability; Zeitlin (1996: 344) states that the "boundaries of women's bodies are perceived as more fluid . . . less easily controlled" and so they are unstable and a "source of disturbing power over men".

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