SKENÈ

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliazzi, and Alessandro Serpieri.

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About Information Sources in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and *Choephori*

Abstract

This paper investigates the topics of information and information sources in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and *Choephori*. The emphasis placed by the author on these issues is clearly noticeable from the beginning of the *Agamemnon* in the famous scene of the relay of beacons. A comparison with the *Odyssey* (4.514-37) suggests that communication through beacons is an Aeschylean invention, one specifically adopted in this version of the myth of Agamemnon's return. The beacon scene constitutes an initial opportunity for Aeschylus to engage in a large-scale reflection about information sources and their degree of reliability. Throughout the play, the beacon system is put in relation to news, verbal reports, ominous dreams, and rumours. The characters' assessment of the reliability of different information sources plays an important role in their characterization, notably in the cases of Clytemnestra and Cassandra. Nevertheless, many differences can be found between the *Agamemnon* and the *Choephori* concerning the treatment of this topic. A comparative reading of the two plays allows Aeschylus' reflection on the human condition emerge more vividly.

Keywords: Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, *Choephori*, communication, information, news, rumour.

Introduction

This article will take issue with information sources in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* and *Choephori*, with a view to bringing out their relevance in those plays.[1] I propose to explore Aeschylus' treatment of these sources, as well as the way in which the characters deal with them. I will first consider the *Agamemnon*, with particular regard to the debate between Clytemnestra and the chorus over the reliability of information sources in relation to the news

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about the fall of Troy. Then, after briefly commenting upon Cassandra's foreknowledge of her destiny, I will turn to the *Choephori* and focus on the (false) news of Orestes' death. Finally, I will examine Clytemnestra's changing attitude towards information sources in the two plays and I will produce a tentative explanation of why Aeschylus chose to focus on this topic.

Before engaging in this task, though, I believe that the use of the term 'information sources' in the context of Greek Archaic and Classical culture needs to be clarified. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, 'information' is "the imparting of knowledge in general" (*n.*, I). In Aeschylus' time, the transmission of news and messages was generally oral, while written transmission was not so widespread (Longo 1981: 59-73). Nevertheless, human *media* were not the only way of exchanging knowledge or intelligence. If we look at the poetic representation of distance communication in the Homeric poems, we may see that this phenomenon is closely linked to the divine.[2] The *spectrum* of information sources is much broader in Ancient Greece, in that it is not limited to the human scale (Detienne 1989: 137-41). The communication between gods and mortals – which is pervasive in the Homeric poems, if less so in tragedy – is a way through which mortals obtain knowledge or get an insight into the past, the present, and the future. That is why experiences such as dream and possession – two divine strategies of communication with mortals – have an informative potential. Hence, I deem it necessary to include dreams and prophecies among the information sources that I will consider here, together with signals, messengers' oral communications, and rumours.

1. The News of the Fall of Troy in the *Agamemnon*

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* starts with an impressive image. After he has been waiting for a year, Clytemnestra's watchman finally sees the signal announcing the fall of Troy (22ff.). This is made possible by a complex communication system of beacons, that is, eight beacons stretching between Troy and Argos, on mountains or elevated sites.[3] Fire leaps from one site to the next, and the news travels with it, eventually reaching Agamemnon's palace (281-316). A messenger (or maybe Agamemnon himself)[4] has triggered the chain announcing the fall of Troy, and Clytemnestra's watchman, crouched on the roof of Agamemnon's

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[2] See Larran's chapter on the divine origin of *Ossa* 'Fame' (2011: 23-30).

[3] On the functioning of the relay of fires, see Longo 1976. The text, as we have it, mentions eight sites, although Quincey (1963: 123) proposed to interpolate a ninth one, between Athos and Macistus, in the lacuna after l. 287.

[4] Aesch. *Ag.* 315-16: τέκμαρ τοιοῦτον σύμβολόν τέ σοι λέγω / ἀνδρὸς παραγγείλαντος ἐκ Τροίας ἐμοί ("This is the kind of proof and token I give you, the message of my husband from Troy to me"). Unless otherwise stated, English translations of Greek texts are taken from the editions included in the bibliography. All translations of the *Iliad* are mine.

palace, ends it.[5] This scene is a famous one and has been widely commented on.[6] I will therefore reconsider it, together with the whole of the *Agamemnon*, from the standpoint of what I believe is its import on distance communication.

1.1 Beacons and the Greater Reliability of Verbal Communication

The beacon system is a form of non-verbal communication and is presented in the play as an unusual one. As I will discuss further in detail, the chorus is very sceptical about the reliability of this system, as it is the first time its members hear about it. It is indeed most likely that such communicative arrangement was regarded as exceptional in Aeschylus' time too, and the Athenian public may have been as surprised as the chorus when presented with it. The beacon system is a combination of fire signs and communication by relay (Longo 1976: 133), and if the former was probably used in wartime to transmit simple messages, the latter was not as common.[7] As Oddone Longo points out, this type of communication would have required a large and politically homogeneous area, a specific organization, and a centralized power (1976: 134; 1981: 100), and these conditions did not apply to Greece in 458 BC. Nevertheless, the Athenians might have known of the existence of structured relay systems in the Persian Empire (see, for example, Herodotus' description of Xerxes' messengers

[5] The long-standing debate about the journey of the signal and the location of the beacon-sites is presented, together with the author's point of view, in Quincey 1963. See also Longo 1976: 124-5.

[6] Some scholars have highlighted the symbolism hiding behind the image of the relay of fires. According to Timothy Gantz (1977), the spreading of fire symbolizes the spreading of retribution from generation to generation. Andrea Blasina (2003: 77-92) stressed the link with other scenes dealing with light in the *Agamemnon* and in the whole *Oresteia*, with special regard to the end of the *Eumenides*. Other scholars have focused on the Homeric elements disseminated in this prologue (see Pace 2013); John Vaughn (1976) has studied the characterization of the watchman. Others have drawn attention to terminology and semantic fields (Fornieles Sánchez 2015: 157-62) or tried to reconstruct the scenic apparatus (Blasina 1998 and 2003: 92-9). Stephen Tracy (1986) suggested a link with the so-called *angareion*, a Persian messenger system described by Herodotus in 8.98. Oddone Longo conducted a fine semiotic analysis of the system of beacons (1976) and interestingly commented on its reliability compared to the transmission via a messenger (1981: 94).

[7] The possibility of encoding a message in fire signs is limited, the only possibilities being a binary encoding 0/1 (sign = alarm) or a triple encoding 0/1/2, if the sign moves (Longo 1976: 130-1 and 1981: 89). One significant example of fire signs can be found in *Il.* 18.207-14, where Achilles is compared to a besieged city: the fires of the siege and the rising smoke function as a signal for the neighbours. Another one is found in Theognis' *corpus* (1.549-50). The poet tells Cyrnus about a silent messenger (ἄγγελος ἄφθογγος) who, appearing (φαινόμενος) from a far-shining watch-place (ἀπὸ τηλαυγέος σκοπιῆς), stirs the battle up (πόλεμον πολύδακρυν ἐγείρει). In this passage, the silent messenger is clearly a beacon shining from a watch-site. See also Hdt. 7.182-3 and Thuc. 3.80.2, 8.102.1.

system called ἀγγαρήιον in 8.98).[8]

The beacon relay is not a mere communication-related innovation, but if one considers the most famous accounts of the myth of Agamemnon's return, it appears to be in fact a new invention in its own right. In the *Odyssey* (4.514-37), Agamemnon is shipwrecked on the shore of Argos when Aegisthus' watchman sees him.[9] This version differs from Aeschylus' one. First of all, it is Aegisthus and not Clytemnestra who has set up the watch; secondly, the watchman is expecting to see Agamemnon coming back from Troy instead of a signal announcing the fall of the city. Thirdly, the watchman of the *Odyssey* directly witnesses the comeback, while in Aeschylus' play he spots a signal from far away (τὸ σύμβολον, 8). Remarkably enough, there is no beacon relay in the *Odyssey* and, more generally, there are very few examples of non-verbal communication in the Homeric epics.[10] In the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*, distance communication is mostly verbal and often involves mediators, like messengers (ἄγγελοι) and heralds (κήρυκες);[11] multiple mediation is generally avoided.[12]

[8] See also Mardonios' system in Hdt. 9.3. Xenophon in the *Cyropaedia* describes a similar system (8.6.17-18).

[9] *Od.* 4.524-7: τὸν δ' ἄρ' ἀπὸ σκοπιῆς εἶδε σκοπός, ὅν ῥα καθεῖσεν / Αἴγισθος δολόμητις ἄγων, ὑπὸ δ' ἔσχετο μισθὸν / χρυσοῦ δοιὰ τάλαντα: φύλασσε δ' ὅ γ' εἰς ἐνιαυτόν, / μή ἑ λάθοι παριών ("Now from his place of watch a watchman saw him, whom guileful Aegisthus took and set there, promising him as a reward two talents of gold; and he had been keeping guard for a year, lest Agamemnon should pass by him unseen").

[10] The only example to be found in the *Iliad* is 18.207-14.

[11] In the Homeric poems, both *angeloi* and *kerykes* perform a mediating function, even though they do not belong to different categories of mediators. Rather, as Fornielez Sánchez has shown (2015: 52-62), *angelos* is a temporary function that many characters can perform, while the *keryx* is a professional figure (see also Durán López 1999: 30). Since the heralds' tasks often involve a communicative function, these figures are particularly suited to being charged with delivering messages or news (e.g. *Il.* 3.247-58, 4.192-7, 7.354-97, 12.342-63, *Od.* 16.327-32, 468-9). In this case, they act as *angeloi*. The *keryx* is placed side by side with other professional figures, named *demioergoi*, such as seers, doctors and carpenters in *Od.* 16.383-5. Both in the *Iliad* and in the *Odyssey*, the *keryx*'s undertakings are heterogeneous; for this reason, Durán López (1999: 30) has labelled the *keryx* "the *factotum* of the Homeric world". Also, the *keryx* performs a ritual function in a religious context (Barrett 2002: 57). According to Pisano (2014: 59), he is an expert in communication tasks in a broad sense, since he takes care of the exchanges between mortals and gods by helping with the sacrifices and preparing the meals. On the *kerykes*' tasks in the Homeric poems, see Mondi 1978: 9-13; Durán López 1999: 29; Mader 1991; Pallí Bonet 1956: 346; Pisano 2014: 56-66; Oehler 1921; Thalmann 2011. In the Homeric poems, the term *keryx* only applies to mortals, but in Hesiod, Hermes is the herald of gods (θεῶν κῆρυξ in *Op.* 80 and *fr.* 170* Merkelbach-West; κῆρυξ ἀθανατῶν in *Th.* 939). On the contrary, *angelos* applies both to mortals and gods. In the *Iliad*, the heralds are called "messengers of Zeus and men" (Διὸς ἄγγελοι ἠδὲ καὶ ἀνδρῶν) on two occasions (*Il.* 1.334, 2.374). On the analogies between the Homeric *keryx* and the Vedic *kārú*, see Mondi 1978: 74-89 and Barrett 2002: 57. On the difference between *angeloi* and *kerykes* in Greek tragedy, see Avezzù 2015: 14-17; Campos Daroca 2014: 87-9; Fornieles Sánchez 2015: 153-80.

[12] On multiple mediation in the messenger-scenes of the *Iliad*, see Cesca 2017.

The peculiar nature of a system of communication based on signals also emerges in Aeschylus' peculiar definition of it through the voice of his characters. In the passages of the *Agamemnon* in which the beacon system is described, the lexicon related to verbal communication plays an important role. Even if fire is not a verbal *medium*, its spreading and function are illustrated through terms referring to the semantic field of the *angelos*. The fire is called εὐάγγελος ("bringer of good news", 21 and 475), ἄγγαρος ("courier", 282), ἄγγελος ("messenger", 588), and its function is designated as ἀγγέλου μέρος ("the part as messenger", 291). At l. 280, the chorus startles and asks: "what messenger could reach here with such speed?" (τίς τόδ᾽ ἐξίκοιτ᾽ ἂν ἀγγέλων τάχος;) to which Clytemnestra answers: "Hephaistos", thus drawing another analogy between the messenger and the fire.[13] The verbs used to refer to the information provided by beacons and sites are ἀγγέλλω ("to announce", 30) and παραγγέλλω ("to transmit a message", 289, 294, 316). Φάτις ("report", 9), βάξις ("tidings", 10 and 477), and παράγγελμα ("transmitted message", 480) designate the news of the fall of Troy and are in turn related to verbs describing speech: φημί ("to say"), βάζω ("to say", "to speak") and παραγγέλλω. The lexicon of verbal communication, which is the standard *medium* for distance communication, is employed by Aeschylus to describe a non-verbal transmission of information. On the one hand, as Raquel Fornieles Sánchez has pointed out, this state of things shows that, in Aeschylus, ἄγγελος ("messenger") and its derivatives (ἀγγέλλω, παραγγέλλω, παράγγελμα, etc.) are employed as technical terms to allude to the transmission of news. On the other hand, the vocabulary of transmission of the news closely pertains to the action of a messenger (Fornieles Sánchez 2015: 162).

Having examined the issue from a vocabulary-related point of view, let us now analyse Clytemnestra's so-called 'beacon-speech' (281-316) from the perspective of the narrative mode chosen by Aeschylus. In describing the spreading of the light from site to site, Clytemnestra heavily relies on litotes:[14]

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[13] Longo 1976: 143-4. Clytemnestra's reply reminds of Herodotus's claim that Xerxes' messengers system is similar to the Greek torch-bearers' race in honour of Hephaistos (Hdt. 8.98.2).

[14] The text is corrupted, but another litotes could perhaps be found at l. 304 (see Fraenkel 1950: 162). Aesch. *Ag.* 302-4: λίμνην δ᾽ ὑπὲρ Γοργῶπιν ἔσκηψεν φάος, ὄρος / τ᾽ ἐπ᾽ Αἰγίπλαγκτον ἐξικνούμενον / ὤτρυνε θεσμὸν †μὴ χαρίζεσθαι† πυρός ("Across Gorgopus' water shot the light, reached the mount of Aegiplanctus, and urged the ordinance of fire to make no delay"). Since μὴ χαρίζεσθαι does not make sense, editors have suggested other solutions: μὴ χατίζεσθαι (accepted by G. Murray, see Aeschylus 1937) and μὴ χρονίζεσθαι (which I accept, following E. Page and W. H. D. Rouse, see Aeschylus 1926, and P. Mazon, see Aeschylus 1983).

ὁ δ᾽ **οὔτι** μέλλων **οὐδ**᾽ ἀφρασμόνως ὕπνῳ
νικώμενος παρῆκεν ἀγγέλου μέρος.
(*Ag.* 290-1, my emphasis)

[He, delaying not nor carelessly overcome by sleep, did not neglect his part
as messenger.]

σθένουσα λαμπὰς δ᾽ **οὐδέπω** μαυρουμένη,
ὑπερθοροῦσα πεδίον Ἀσωποῦ, δίκην
φαιδρᾶς σελήνης, πρὸς Κιθαιρῶνος λέπας
ἤγειρεν ἄλλην ἐκδοχὴν πομποῦ πυρός.
φάος δὲ τηλέπομπον **οὐκ** ἠναίνετο
φρουρὰ πλέον καίουσα τῶν εἰρημένων.
(*Ag.* 296-301, my emphasis)

[The flame, now gathering strength and in no way dimmed, like a radiant
moon overleaped the plain of Asopus to Cithaeron's ridges, and roused an-
other relay of missive fire. Nor did the warders there disdain the far-flung
light, but made a blaze higher than their commands.]

In the Homeric poems, litotes are often used in narrative contexts where
the characters are portrayed in the act of obeying orders. This happens in
particular in the *Iliad*'s messenger-scenes.[15] These scenes revolve around
a recurrent narrative pattern which has 'Character A' give the messen-
ger a set of directions normally followed by a litotic negation signalling
the carrying out of the received instructions. In the lines following the in-
struction-speech, a negative sentence expresses the transition from A's in-
structions to the messenger's action as in "He spoke and the goddess sil-
ver-foot Thetis did not disobey him" (ὣς ἔφατ᾽, οὐδ᾽ ἀπίθησε θεὰ Θέτις
ἀργυρόπεζα, *Il.* 24.120).[16] The same narrative scheme becomes apparent in
Clytemnestra's speech, where fire acts as a messenger. It is worth noting
that, in this speech, the transmission of news is shaped by verbal commu-
nication, even when the *medium* is not a verbal one. The above-mentioned
question asked by the chorus ("what messenger could reach here with such
speed?") suggests that an alternative to verbal communication is not even
conceivable.

[15] To identify these scenes I refer to Irene de Jong's Appendix V (2004: 241-2), where
she collects twenty-two messenger-speeches. Only some of them are included in mes-
senger scenes, according to my use of the term; I do not consider H 38-40 = H 49-51, K
208-10 = K [406-8+] 409-11, K 308-12 = K 395-9, Π 454-7 = Π 671-5 as authentic messen-
ger scenes but rather as simple cases of repeated speeches. Moreover, I am not dealing
with the embassy to Achilles in Book 9, which would require a specific study (and see
on this Cesca forthcoming).
[16] See also *Il.* 2.166, 4.68, 4.198, 6.102, 12.351, 24.120.

After Clytemnestra has explained how the beacon system works, the chorus, being only partially persuaded, asks her to repeat her speech. However, the queen prefers to tell of the sack of Troy, evoking the voices and feelings of the Trojans and the Greeks. Of course, she cannot but give a fictional description of it. The chorus is well-aware of that, and yet is happy with her words, taking them as "certain proofs" (πιστὰ τεκμήρια, 352). As Longo wrote:

> The chorus proves itself more inclined to trust a message presented through the traditional framework of the oral ἀγγελία (here Clytemnestra behaves as a proper ἄγγελος), even though her report is clearly unreal, as she herself acknowledges (321: οἴομαι), rather than the news conveyed by the beacons' technical innovation. (1976: 155, my translation)[17]

Albeit being fictional, Clytemnestra's account is more convincing than her previous and very meticulous report about fires.[18] As Longo has remarked, this is another piece of evidence that the chorus is more responsive to the traditional form of oral *angelia* rather than to other ways of communication. This is further confirmed by the subsequent dialogues between the chorus and Clytemnestra, in which the beacon system is often discredited. In fact, the credibility gained by Clytemnestra at ll. 320-54 will not last long. At ll. 479-82, the chorus says that only a very naïve or upset person would trust news coming through fire:

τίς ὧδε παιδνὸς ἢ φρενῶν κεκομμένος,
φλογὸς παραγγέλμασιν
νέοις πυρωθέντα καρδίαν ἔπειτ᾽
ἀλλαγᾷ λόγου καμεῖν;
(*Ag.* 479-82)

[Who is so childish or so bereft of sense, once he has let his heart be fired by sudden news of a beacon fire, to despair if the story changes?]

At ll. 590-3, after a herald has confirmed the fall of Troy, Clytemnestra recalls the accusations she has been charged with:

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[17] "Il coro mostra così di prestare maggior fede ad un messaggio che gli viene recato secondo i modi tradizionali dell'ἀγγελία orale (Clitennestra ricopre qui il ruolo di vero e proprio ἄγγελος), benché si tratti di un racconto palesemente immaginario e come tale connotato dalla sua autrice (v. 321 οἴομαι), che non alla testimonianza del messaggio trasmesso per il tramite della innovatrice tecnica di segnalazione luminosa".

[18] In Betensky's opinion (1978: 14), the mention of geographical names in Clytemnestra's description aims precisely at convincing the old men of her perfect knowledge of the beacon system.

καί τίς μ᾽ ἐνίπτων εἶπε, ῾φρυκτωρῶν δία
πεισθεῖσα Τροίαν νῦν πεπορθῆσθαι δοκεῖς;
ἦ κάρτα πρὸς γυναικὸς αἴρεσθαι κέαρ.᾽
λόγοις τοιούτοις πλαγκτὸς οὖσ᾽ ἐφαινόμην.
(*Ag.* 590-3)

[Then there were some who chided me and said: "Are you so convinced by beacon-fires as to think that Troy has now been sacked? Truly, it is just like a woman to be elated in heart." By such taunts I was made to seem as if my wits were wandering.]

1.2 *The Herald and the Importance of* Autopsia

Despite being faster than any *angelos* could ever be, the beacon system does not have the same credibility, and indeed the chorus praises the herald's words as he appears on stage[19] assuring that, unlike the travelling flames, he will not be speechless (οὔτ᾽ ἄναυδος, 496) and will speak the truth through words (λέγων, 498) and not through smoke (καπνῷ πυρός, 497):

μαρτυρεῖ δέ μοι κάσις
πηλοῦ ξύνουρος διψία κόνις τάδε,
ὡς οὔτ᾽ ἄναυδος οὔτε σοι δαίων φλόγα
ὕλης ὀρείας σημανεῖ καπνῷ πυρός,
ἀλλ᾽ ἢ τὸ χαίρειν μᾶλλον ἐκβάξει λέγων
τὸν ἀντίον δὲ τοῖσδ᾽ ἀποστέργω λόγον.
(*Ag.* 494-9)

[The thirsty dust, consorting sister of the mud, assures me that neither by pantomime nor by kindling a flame of mountain wood will he signal with smoke of fire. Either in plain words he will bid us to rejoice the more, or – but I have little love for the report opposite to this!]

In other passages, Aeschylus employs the adjective ἄναυδος in connection with *angelos*. In the *Suppliant Women* (180) and *Seven against Thebes* (81-2), the epithet "voiceless messenger" (ἄναυδος ἄγγελος) is applied to the clouds dust raised by marching soldiers. Viewed as a harbinger of the approaching army, dust becomes a "voiceless, clear and reliable messenger" (ἄναυδος σαφῆς ἔτυμος ἄγγελος, *Sept.* 82, my translation). In the *Sacred Delegation* (fr. 78a.20 Radt), a τύπος ("image") is described as "messenger,

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[19] The herald appears on stage at. l. 503. Brioso Sánchez points out the pre-eminence of the information transmitted through a messenger in Aeschylus' plays (2011: 171). On the question of the lapse of time between the night when the beacon-flame appears for the first time and the arrival of the herald, see Fraenkel 1950: 254-6.

voiceless herald" (ἄγγελον, κήρυκ' ἄναυδον). An analogous statement can be found in the *Choephori*, when Electra, finding a lock of hair on Agamemnon's tomb, is uncertain about its meaning, and wishes that it could take on a "kind voice" (φωνὴν ἔμφρονα), "like a messenger" (ἀγγέλλου δίκην, 195), and tell her whether Orestes has returned.

In Electra's words, as well as in the chorus' view, visual and acoustic data stand in opposition to each other, although this does not mean that the former is actually inferior to the latter. We later learn that the herald has personally witnessed the events,[20] which is precisely what makes him reliable in the chorus' eyes.[21] Indeed, not only is Clytemnestra's chosen *medium* of communication peculiar in itself, but her knowledge is the product of mediation by relay. Each step of this relay increases the distance from facts, thus generating the chorus' mistrust. Contrariwise, the herald, being an eyewitness, can be regarded as the primary source of information of the event.[22] In the *Persians*, the messenger makes this very point before starting to illustrate the facts. He declares that, since he was present during the battle, he can testify its disastrous outcome (παρών, 266) and, accordingly, he also stresses that his knowledge is not based on reports of others:

> καὶ μὴν παρών γε κοὐ λόγους ἄλλων κλύων,
> Πέρσαι, φράσαιμ' ἂν οἷ' ἐπορσύνθη κακά.
> (*Pers.* 266-7)

[20] On the chorus' demand, the herald reports that a storm dispersed the fleet on the way back from Troy (651-73). However, he refuses to report the events that he has not witnessed, such as Menelaus' alleged death. On the ambiguous status of the tragic messenger (*dramatis persona* and poetic tool), see Barrett 1995: 546-50 and 2002: 32-40.

[21] At ll. 988-9, the chorus tries to disperse a bad feeling by reporting the return of Agamemnon's army as a sure fact: "Of their coming home I learn with my own eyes and need no other witness" (πεύθομαι δ' ἀπ' ὀμμάτων / νόστον αὐτόμαρτυς ὤν).

[22] On the importance of direct witness in the Greek *polis*, see Lewis 1996: 10 and 89-91; on the testimonial evidence used in trials, see Butti de Lima 1996: 42-76. The opposition between direct witness and second-hand accounts emerges also in the *Iliad*. In 2.485-6, the poet asks for the help of the Muses; unlike the mortals who can only go by hearsay (ἡμεῖς δὲ κλέος οἶον ἀκούομεν, "we hear but a rumour"), knowing nothing (οὐδέ τι ἴδμεν "and we know nothing"), the Muses know everything (ἴστέ τε πάντα, "you [*scil.* Muses] know all things"). The forms ἴστε and ἴδμεν, just like the verb πάρεστε, "being present" (485), stress the importance of a kind of knowledge based on eyewitness (Kirk 1985: 167). For a comparison of this passage with the narrative practice of the tragic messenger, see Barrett 1995: 552-4 and 2002: 40-5. The claim of the messenger in Aeschylus' *Persians* (429-30): "The multitude of evils, not even if I went on for ten days, I could never recount for you in full" (trans. by J. Barrett; κακῶν δὲ πλῆθος, οὐδ' ἂν εἰ δέκ' ἤματα / στοιχηγοροίην, οὐκ ἂν ἐκπλήσαιμί σοι) closely resembles the claim of the epic poet in *Il.* 2.485-6, but "unlike the epic narrator, the messenger claims to have seen the events himself" (Barrett 2002: 44).

[Since I myself was present and did not merely hear what happened from the report of others, I can tell you exactly what kind of disaster was wrought.]

This need for *autopsia* in order to verify events, or information, which are only inferred from sub-optimal evidence, appears elsewhere in the *Oresteia*.[23] At the end of the *Agamemnon*, when the chorus hears the king's cries coming from within the palace, some of its members refuse to draw any conclusion about what may have happened before they have been given clear proof that their lord is actually dead. Although their scepticism is unjustified, their reaction illustrates their concern over autoptic examination:

> ἦ γὰρ τεκμηρίοισιν ἐξ οἰμωγμάτων
> μαντευσόμεσθα τἀνδρὸς ὡς ὀλωλότος; —
> — σάφ᾽ εἰδότας χρὴ τῶνδε θυμοῦσθαι πέρι·
> τὸ γὰρ τοπάζειν τοῦ σάφ᾽ εἰδέναι δίχα. —
> (*Ag.* 1366-9)

[— And shall we, upon the evidence of mere groans, divine that our lord is dead? // — We should be sure of the facts before we indulge our wrath. For surmise differs from assurance.]

Going back to the fall of Troy, we should bear in mind that the report of a herald, of a messenger or of anyone who witnessed the actual events, is considered to be the most reliable source of information. However, many other sources can contribute to – or, more often, interfere with – human knowledge of the events. At l. 272 the chorus, displeased with Clytemnestra's claims, asks for further verification: "What then is the proof? Have you evidence of this?" (τὶ γὰρ τὸ πιστόν; ἐστι τῶνδέ σοι τέκμαρ;).[24] They inquire about other possible, if untrustworthy, sources of information a naïve Clytemnestra could have relied upon, such as dreams and rumours:

> Χορος   πότερα δ᾽ ὀνείρων φάσματ᾽ εὐπιθῆ σέβεις;
> Κλυταιμηστρα   οὐ δόξαν ἂν λάβοιμι βριζούσης φρενός.
> Χορος   ἀλλ᾽ ἦ σ᾽ ἐπίανέν τις ἄπτερος φάτις;
> Κλυταιμηστρα   παιδὸς νέας ὡς κάρτ᾽ ἐμωμήσω φρένας.
> (*Ag.* 274-7)

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[23] See also Electra's cautious attitude in the *Choephori* when she finds Orestes' lock and footprints, and even when her brother finally stands in front of her (164-234). Her scepticism is unjustified, but reveals her anxiety about not having the means to verify Orestes' identity.

[24] I choose here Prien's punctuation (the philological debate on this line is resumed in Fraenkel 1950: 150).

[Chorus Do you believe the persuasive visions of dreams? // Klytaemnestra I would not heed the fancies of a slumbering brain. // Chorus But can it be some pleasing rumor that has fed your hopes? // Klytaemnestra Truly you scorn my understanding as if it were a child's.]

1.3 Dreams

Aeschylus has been defined as a poet of dreams (Rousseau 1963: 103), and indeed in his plays – and in particular in the *Oresteia* – dreams and visions repeatedly appear.[25] The cases of Atossa's dream at the beginning of the *Persians* (181-200) and of Clytemnestra's one in the *Choephori* (523-39 and 928-9) show the ominous nature of this phenomenon. Dreams foresee tragic events, which eventually prove to be veridical.[26] Nevertheless, they are not always easily understandable; they are sometimes obscure (δύσκριτοι, 981) and in some cases they can even deceive the mortals. In fact, at ll. 489-92, the chorus compares the beacon's light to a dream (ὀνειράτων δίκην, "dream-like", 491), which may have come to fool their minds,[27] and asks: "Do you believe the persuasive visions of dreams?", insinuating that nocturnal visions are not to be trusted. Once more, this conception of the oneiric dimension as deceitful is close to the epic model (Catenaccio 2011: 205). In the Homeric poems, dreams are a communication tool between gods and mortals.[28] They may anticipate future events, transmit divine exhortations, or mirror reality, even though they are never free from ambiguity (Brillante 1991: 144-73). In some cases they truly need to be interpreted, while in others they are totally transparent. Nevertheless, even clear visions risk being deceptive, as we can observe in *Il.* 2.1-15, when Zeus sends a dream to fool Agamemnon into arming his troops, deluding him about

[25] On dreams in the *Oresteia*, see Rousseau 1963 and Catenaccio 2011. For a survey on dreams in Greek tragedy, see Messer 1918: 59-102 and Devereux 1976. On dreams in antiquity, see Guidorizzi 1988; Brillante 1991; Harris 2009.

[26] Not all dreams in Aeschylus are prophetical. See for example the dream of the Erinyes in *Eum.* 94-139: Clytemnestra's ghost appears in their sleep and urges them to wake up and persecute matricidal Orestes.

[27] Aesch. *Ag.* 489-92: "We shall soon know about this passing on of flaming lights and beacon signals and fires, whether they perhaps are true or whether, dream-like, this light's glad coming has beguiled our senses" (τάχ᾽ εἰσόμεσθα λαμπάδων φαεσφόρων / φρυκτωριῶν τε καὶ πυρὸς παραλλαγάς, / εἴτ᾽ οὖν ἀληθεῖς εἴτ᾽ ὀνειράτων δίκην / τερπνὸν τόδ᾽ ἐλθὸν φῶς ἐφήλωσεν φρένας).

[28] In the Homeric poems, dreams are divine. Cf. *Il.* 1.72 ("in fact, the dream is from Zeus", καὶ γάρ τ᾽ὄναρ ἐκ Διός ἐστιν,), 2.1-15 and 26 (Zeus), 10.497 (Athena), 24.677-88 (Hermes), *Od.* 4.795-803, 828-9, 6.13-24 (Athena), 20.87 (δαίμων). In *Il.* 2.5-72, Dream (Ὄνειρος) acts as a messenger of Zeus ("I am a messenger to you from Zeus", Διὸς δέ τοι ἄγγελός εἰμι, 26 and 63).

conquering Troy if he attacks immediately at full strength.[29] This treacherous dream (Ὄνειρος) is both divine and evil,[30] in that it fools not only Agamemnon, but the entire Council, which underpins the king's authority by agreeing with his decision to follow the instructions he has been given during his sleep.[31]

As we have seen, the information one can get from dreams can be either exceptionally helpful or completely deceptive. The choice between trusting or calling into doubt that information is given to men, whose skills are nevertheless inadequate to pursue the right decision (Brillante 1991: 157). In the *Odyssey*, Penelope uses the image of the two gates to describe this state of things:[32]

> ξεῖν', ἦ τοι μὲν ὄνειροι ἀμήχανοι ἀκριτόμυθοι
> γίγνοντ', οὐδέ τι πάντα τελείεται ἀνθρώποισι.
> δοιαὶ γάρ τε πύλαι ἀμενηνῶν εἰσὶν ὀνείρων:
> αἱ μὲν γὰρ κεράεσσι τετεύχαται, αἱ δ' ἐλέφαντι:
> τῶν οἳ μέν κ' ἔλθωσι διὰ πριστοῦ ἐλέφαντος,
> οἵ ῥ' ἐλεφαίρονται, ἔπε' ἀκράαντα φέροντες:
> οἱ δὲ διὰ ξεστῶν κεράων ἔλθωσι θύραζε,
> οἵ ῥ' ἔτυμα κραίνουσι, βροτῶν ὅτε κέν τις ἴδηται.
> (*Od.* 19.560-7)

> [Stranger, dreams verily are baffling and unclear of meaning, and in no wise do they find fulfillment in all things for men. For two are the gates of shadowy dreams, and one is fashioned of horn and one of ivory. Those dreams that pass through the gate of sawn ivory deceive men, bringing words that find no fulfillment. But those that come forth through the gate of polished horn bring true issues to pass, when any mortal sees them.]

Considering this, we can better understand the chorus' question about "persuasive visions of dreams" (ὀνείρων φάσματ' εὐπιθῆ, 274), which, in the *Agamemnon*, might have deceived Clytemnestra about the fall of Troy. Her offended reaction ("I would not heed the fancies of a slumbering brain", Οὐ δόξαν ἂν λάβοιμι βριζούσης φρενός, 275) testifies to her awareness of the weak reliability of that source of information, and the use of the term δόξα ("opinion", "conjecture") at l. 275 strengthens the idea that dreams, which come through sleep, are both illusory and undependable.

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[29] Zeus sends this dream to Agamemnon because he wants to please Thetis by harming the Greeks, who have dishonoured her son Achilles.

[30] Agamemnon's dream (ὄνειρος) is divine (θεῖος) in *Il.* 2.22 and 56, and evil (οὖλος) in 2.6 and 8.

[31] Nestor gives credit to Agamemnon's report only because he is the king, claiming that he would not have believed any other Achaean (*Il.* 2.80-2).

[32] On the symbolism in this metaphor, see Lévy 1982: 40-1.

1.4 Rumours

The other source of information that rouses the chorus' apprehension is rumour (φάτις, 276).[33] The term φάτις occurs seventeen times in the surviving *corpus* of Aeschylus' plays, and more than half of these occurrences can be found in the *Oresteia* (eight of them in the *Agamemnon*).[34] Although its primary meaning is 'voice', 'utterance', it more often designates a 'rumour'.[35] If in terms of reliability *phatis* does not bear a negative connotation *per se*,[36] it still defines verbal information that may not be traced back to a sure and clearly recognizable source.[37] For example, it is never used to define the herald's speech,[38] and at ll. 671-3, the herald himself shows scepticism about the rumours on Menelaus' fate. When the chorus asks him about "the general voice of other voyagers" (φάτις πρὸς ἄλλων ναυτίλων, 631), he explains that a storm has scattered the fleet and the sailors are dispersed. This may easily give rise to false news:

> καὶ νῦν ἐκείνων εἴ τίς ἐστιν ἐμπνέων,
> λέγουσιν ἡμᾶς ὡς ὀλωλότας, τί μή;
> ἡμεῖς τ' ἐκείνους ταῦτ' ἔχειν δοξάζομεν.
> (*Ag.* 671-3)

[So now, if any of them still draw the breath of life, they speak of us as lost – and why should they not? We think the same of them.]

Δοξάζομεν (673) reminds us of Clytemnestra's mention of δόξα at l. 275. Despite being a verbal *medium* of communication*, phatis* draws on the domain of *doxa*, like dreams and signals, as it cannot offer satisfactory evidence and is therefore not the proof (τέκμαρ, 272) the chorus is seeking. Clytemnestra shows she is aware of that.

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[33] On the vocabulary of rumour in Greek tragedy, see Brioso Sánchez 2011: 93.

[34] Cf. Aesch. *Ag.* 9, 276, 456, 611, 631, 868, 1132, 1254, *Ch.* 736, 839, *Eum.* 380, *Pers.* 521, 227, *Suppl.* 293, *Sept.* 841, *Aetn.* fr. 6.3 Radt.

[35] For 'voice', 'utterance' see *Ag.* 456, 1254 and *Eum.* 380. This meaning can also be found in *Odyssey* 6.29, 21.323, and 23.362. No occurrences of φάτις are found in the *Iliad*. For 'rumour', see *Ag.* 9, 276, 611, 631, 868, 1132, *Ch.* 736, 839.

[36] In the *Agamemnon*, φάτις is used indifferently by the watchman (9), by Clytemnestra (868), and by the chorus (631). At l. 276, the inquiring chorus attributes a negative connotation to it by adding the indefinite pronoun τις and by employing, if metaphorically, the verb πιαίνω, 'to fatten'. On ἐπίανεν (276), see Fraenkel 1950: 152. On the interpretation of the adjective ἄπτερος in the same line, (see 152-3).

[37] The spreading of unofficial news, which could have been false or redundant, was a real problem in the Greek *polis*. Many criteria could help to test the reliability of an unofficial messenger (see on this Lewis 1996: 75-96).

[38] On the opposition between rumour and message in Greek tragedy, see Brioso Sánchez 2011: 137-40.

With regard to this, a comparison with the *Odyssey* may prove particularly apt because of the common topic of *nostos*, ("return home"). Both Odysseus and Agamemnon are on their way back from Troy, and in both cases their own people are eager for news about them. The term φάτις occurs three times in the *Odyssey* with the meaning of 'voice', while the recurrent concept of 'rumour' is expressed by ἀγγελίη ("message") and ἀκουή ("thing heard"), both rare words in Aeschylus' plays.[39] The absence of sure information about Odysseus is indeed a central theme in the poem. Penelope and Telemachus are impatiently committed to gathering news, but this does not mean that they would welcome the ἀγγελίαι uncritically.[40] Although Penelope keeps questioning foreigners,[41] she eventually refuses to believe her husband has returned even when he is sitting in front of her. As is well-known, only his mention of the secret of the marriage bed carved into an olive tree can eventually convince her and gain her trust.[42] In his turn, Telemachus (1.414) maintains that he will no longer confide in any ἀγγελίη: "No longer do I put trust in tidings, whencesoever they may come" (οὔτ' οὖν ἀγγελίῃ ἔτι πείθομαι, εἴ ποθεν ἔλθοι), and for this reason he early sets sail to Pylos and Sparta to visit his father's companions. Even the swineherd Eumaeus is very cautious about the news of Odysseus' return, as he had been tricked already by an Aetolian, who provided false information in order to gain hospitality (*Od.* 14.378-85).

Clytemnestra herself, another waiting wife, though with decidedly different feelings,[43] complains about the amount of untrustworthy news she

[39] In the *Odyssey*, ἀγγελίη is the commonest way to indicate 'rumour', 'news' (1.414, 1.408, 2.30, 2.42, 2.255, 10.245, 14.374, 15.41, 15.447, 15.314, 15.329, 16.334, 16.467, 24.48) and, more rarely, 'message' (2.92, 5.150, 7.263, 13.381, 16.355, 24.354). Ἀκουή ('thing heard', 'tidings') occurs five times to describe the attempt of Telemachus to learn about his father's whereabouts. It is always paired with the genitive πατρός ("concerning the father", 2.308, 4.701, 5.19, 14.179, 17.43). Ὄσσα ('fame') belongs to the same semantic field, and in *Od.* 1.282, 2.216 comes from Zeus (ἐκ Διός); in 24.413 fame is a "swift messenger" (ἄγγελος ὦκα), while in *Il.* 2.93 it acts as Zeus' messenger (Διὸς ἄγγελος). See also κλέος ("fame", "glory") in *Od.* 2.217, 23.137, and κληηδών ("information contained in a chance utterance") in *Od.* 4.317 (cf. Fornieles Sánchez 2015: 101-3). In Aeschylus, ἀγγελίη occurs only twice: in *Ag.* 86 as "news", and *Prom.* 1040 as "message", "order". In general, the term is uncommon in Greek tragedy (cf. Fornielez Sánchez 2015: 219-27 and 263). Ἀκουή appears only once with the meaning of 'listening', while ὄσσα is completely absent. Βάξις appears twice in the *Agamemnon* as "rumour" (10 and 477), as well as in *Prom.* 663 and *Suppl.* 976. On the semantic field of rumour in Greek Literature, see also Larran 2010 and 2011.

[40] On the characters' suspicious attitude towards news in the *Odyssey*, see Fornieles Sánchez 2015: 105-7.

[41] See *Od.* 1.415-16, 14.373-4.

[42] *Od.* 24.166-217.

[43] On the opposition between Clytemnestra and Penelope, see Moreau 1992: 165.

has received during Agamemnon's absence. She says that if all the reports (φάτις, 868) about her husband's being injured or dead were true, Agamemnon would have more holes in his body than a net, and he would have died three times at least:

καὶ τραυμάτων μὲν εἰ τόσων ἐτύγχανεν
ἀνὴρ ὅδ᾽, ὡς πρὸς οἶκον ὠχετεύετο
φάτις, τέτρηται δικτύου πλέον λέγειν.
εἰ δ᾽ ἦν τεθνηκώς, ὡς ἐπλήθυον λόγοι,
τρισώματός τἂν Γηρυὼν ὁ δεύτερος
πολλὴν ἄνωθεν, τὴν κάτω γὰρ οὐ λέγω,
χθονὸς τρίμοιρον χλαῖναν ἐξηύχει λαβεῖν,
ἅπαξ ἑκάστῳ κατθανὼν μορφώματι.
(*Ag.* 866-73)

[And as for wounds, had my husband received so many as rumour kept pouring into the house, no net would have been pierced so full of holes as he. Or if he had died as often as reports claimed, then truly he might have had three bodies, a second Geryon, and have boasted of having taken on him a triple cloak of earth ample that above, of that below I speak not, one death for each different shape.]

The sole reliable herald is the one who refuses to speak about Menelaus' death because he did not see it, since only the words of a direct witness are worthy of being trusted. As is well-known, in Greek tragedy it is precisely a herald, or a messenger, who reports about action performed off-stage.[44] The messenger acts as a mediator between scenic and extra-scenic – or retro-scenic – space (Avezzù 2015: 18; Longo 1978: 77; Bremer 1976). Like the literary messenger of the Homeric poems, "he is swift, reliable, and always tells all" (Barrett 2002: 23).[45] Just like the herald of the *Agamemnon*, he does not give an account of *phatis* but of facts, and reports exclusively what he has beheld.[46]

Before carrying on our scrutiny of information and information sources in Aeschylus plays, it is worth summarizing the main issues we have discussed so far. By opening his play with the beacon scene, an Aeschylean in-

[44] In Greek tragedy, messengers are often entrusted with the task of reporting brutal events which are too violent to be performed on stage, such as military defeats (Aesch. *Pers.* 249-514) and murders (see Avezzù 2015; Zeppezauer 2011). A listing of messenger-scenes in Greek tragedy can be found in Barrett 2002: 224; Campos Daroca 2014: 97-102; Fornieles Sánchez 2015: 197-216.

[45] Cf. also Barrett 1995: 542-5.

[46] On the tragic messenger as eyewitness, see Barrett 1995: 546-50 and 2002: 31-40, 108-31; Campos Daroca 2014: 76-7; Lewis 1996: 90; de Jong 1991: 9 (mostly on Euripides' plays); Pellegrino 2015: 34-8.

novation, the author knowingly decides to put particular emphasis on the topic of information. The standard messenger scene is delayed, and the beacon scene functions as a preparatory messenger scene. The fire stands for the *angelos* but is not considered as reliable; in the chorus' view, light cannot replace voice just as relay cannot replace eyewitness. This is the issue at the core of the debate between Clytemnestra and the chorus, which opens up a large-scale reflection about information sources (Longo 1976: 153), and I will later clarify the role of this initial argument in the play. For now, we must bear in mind that, despite the doubts of the chorus, the beacon system turns out to be a reliable *medium*. Clytemnestra rightly trusts it, even if, in principle, she cannot possess any objective guarantee of its credibility. And yet, the queen, a woman with a heart "of manly counsel" (ἀνδρόβουλος, 11), emerges victorious from the Aeschylean riddle of information sources, at least in the *Agamemnon*.

2. Cassandra in the *Agamemnon*

When we deal with the topic of information in the *Agamemnon*, we cannot ignore Cassandra, who received from Apollo the gift of prophecy but was condemned by the same god never to be believed. In fact, prophecy is a *medium* of communication between gods and mortals, which provides men with information about their future (Pisano 2012).[47] The semantic field of prescience and revelation is generously employed in the long and pathetic dialogue between Cassandra and the chorus,[48] and the word φάτις is used at l. 1132 in order to underline the link between oracles and information. After drawing a brief summary of the scene dedicated to Cassandra, which has been the object of much scholarly investigation,[49] I will focus on the aspects that are relevant to my survey, only to return to this scene in the last section of this paper.

Cassandra makes her appearance towards the end of the *Agamemnon*. As a slave to the king, she silently enters the stage on his chariot, and never speaks until Clytemnestra leaves her alone on the stage (1072).

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[47] Of course, if compared to the piece of information Clytemnestra and the chorus have lengthily discussed in the first part of the play, the one Cassandra possesses is of a different type: the fall of Troy is an event that has recently taken place, while Cassandra's knowledge, which she derives from prophetic skills, concerns the future.

[48] See μαντικός ("prophetic", 1098), προφήτης ("prophet", 1099), μάντευμα ("oracle", 1105), θέσφατος ("divinely decreed", 1113, 1130, and 1132), θεσπέσια ὁδός ("the way of divination", 1154), ψευδόμαντις ("false prophet", 1195), and ἀληθόμαντις ("prophet of truth", 1241).

[49] See, among others, Doyle 2008; Harris 2012; Schein 1982, and the related sections of the commentaries cited in the final bibliography.

She then starts prophesizing about the bloody future of the house of Agamemnon, the legacy of Atreus' horrendous crimes. At first, her prophetical language is obscure and enigmatic (1072-177), but very soon Cassandra makes it clear that Clytemnestra will slay both her husband and herself (1214ff.).[50] The prophetess knows what the queen is planning, as she draws this information from Apollo himself. However, since nobody will believe her words, she cannot but wait for her divination to be fulfilled. Although at the beginning the chorus appears to trust her oracles (1213), her words are only partially taken into account. If, on the one hand, the chorus accepts the idea that she is foretelling her own death, on the other hand, it seems to pay little attention to the prediction of Agamemnon's murder. In fact, the chorus' final questions and comments exclusively regard Cassandra's death: "But if, in truth, you have knowledge of your own death" (εἰ δ'ἐτητύμως / μόρον τὸν αὐτῆς οἶσθα, 1296-7), and "Poor woman, I pity you for your death foretold" (Ὤ τλῆμον, οἰκτίρω σε θεσφάτου, 1321). Once again, as she understands, the only way to be believed is to be a direct witness of the reported events (παρών, 1240), someone who has seen them (ἐπόψεσθαι, 1246), a requirement with which of course she cannot comply:

τὸ μέλλον ἥξει. καὶ σύ μ᾿ ἐν τάχει παρὼν
ἄγαν γ᾿ ἀληθόμαντιν οἰκτίρας ἐρεῖς.
(*Ag.* 1240-1)

[What is to come, will come. And soon you, yourself present here, shall with great pity pronounce me all too true a prophetess.]

And again, "I say you shall look upon Agamemnon dead" (Ἀγαμέμνονός σέ φημ᾿ἐπόψεσθαι μόρον, *Ag.* 1246). Also, after having heard Agamemnon's cries, some members of the chorus still maintain that mere groans are not sufficient to prove the king's murder (1366-9).

As has been noted, Clytemnestra and Cassandra, two women who are doomed to confront one another as murderer and victim, have something in common as both of them know the truth, but neither can really convince their interlocutor (Moreau 1992: 162), even though the chorus' mistrust clearly bears different consequences in the two cases. As we have discussed above, Clytemnestra's assertions are discredited because of the peculiarity of the beacon system, and also because – as we will see – she is a woman dealing with male affairs. On the contrary, the fact that the chorus does not pay attention to Cas-

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[50] By declaring that "a woman is murderer of a man" (θῆλυς ἄρσενος φονεύς / ἔστιν, 1231-2; my translation), Cassandra reveals Clytemnestra's true intentions. Nevertheless, later on the chorus seems to disregard the detail of the murderer's gender, since they use the masculine participle τοῦ τελοῦντος at l. 1253: τοῦ γὰρ τελοῦντος οὐ ξυνῆκα μηχανήν ("I do not understand the scheme of him who is to do the deed").

sandra's words about Agamemnon's imminent death derives from Apollo's punishment.[51]

At this point of the *Agamemnon*, the burden Cassandra has to carry is double. Not only has she been mocked and insulted because of her gory oracles, but now realizes, thanks to those same prophetical skills, that Apollo himself has condemned her to a violent death in a foreign land:

> ἰδοὺ δ᾽ Ἀπόλλων αὐτὸς ἐκδύων ἐμὲ
> χρηστηρίαν ἐσθῆτ᾽, ἐποπτεύσας δέ με
> κἀν τοῖσδε κόσμοις καταγελωμένην μέγα
> φίλων ὑπ᾽ ἐχθρῶν οὐ διχορρόπως, μάτην –
> καλουμένη δὲ φοιτὰς ὡς ἀγύρτρια
> πτωχὸς τάλαινα λιμοθνὴς ἠνεσχόμην –
> καὶ νῦν ὁ μάντις μάντιν ἐκπράξας ἐμὲ
> ἀπήγαγ᾽ ἐς τοιάσδε θανασίμους τύχας.
> (*Ag.* 1269-76)

> [Look, Apollo himself is stripping me of my prophetic garb – he that saw me mocked to bitter scorn, even in this bravery, by friends turned foes, with one accord, in vain – but, like some vagrant mountebank, called 'beggar', 'wretch', 'starveling', I bore it all. And now the prophet, having undone me, his prophetess, has brought me to this lethal pass.][52]

Cassandra realizes that she will die and that the god who condemned her is the same who discloses this fatal information. The prophetess is also fully aware that she cannot escape her doom. In fact, her knowledge of the future does not allow her to save her own life, but only increases her suffering and anger against Apollo.[53] To the chorus who asks her why she is determined to face her death, she answers by stating the unavoidability of her destiny: "There is no escape; no, my friends, there is none any more" (*Ag.* 1299: οὐκ ἔστ᾽ ἄλυξις, οὔ, ξένοι, χρόνον πλέω) and "The day has come; flight would profit me but little" (*Ag.* 1301: ἥκει τόδ᾽ ἦμαρ: σμικρὰ κερδανῶ φυγῇ). After Clytemnestra has defeated the mistrust of the chorus with the help of her great mastery of information sources, the death of Cassandra marks a tragic impasse, since possessing (or not) the information does not seem to be a discriminant for success or safety anymore. A more powerful force directs the outcome of mortal actions. Now that Cassandra's last words have instilled this doubt into the

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[51] Cassandra tells the chorus about this at ll. 1209-12. The god punished her for refusing to comply with his desires by making her vaticinations veridical but ineffective. On the debate about the sexual relationship between Cassandra and Apollo, see Debnar 2010: 131-3.

[52] On the interpretation of ll. 1269-76, see Mazzoldi (2001), who proposes an interesting option: "And now the prophet, having undone me, his prophetess" (καὶ νῦν ὁ μάντις μάντιν ἐκπράξας ἐμὲ).

[53] At ll. 1264-8, Cassandra blames Apollo's insignia and gets rid of them.

audience's minds, the play can move towards its ending. However, the topic of information sources is not exhausted, and Aeschylus will further pursue it, though by means of a less systematic argumentation, in the *Choephori*.

3. The News of Orestes' Death in the *Choephori*

In the *Choephori*, Troy has been taken, Agamemnon has come back and has been killed by his wife, and the focus, in terms of information, has now shifted on the (false) news of Orestes' death. Compared to the ending of the *Agamemnon*, the position of Clytemnestra towards informative *media* is completely overthrown. In the *Agamemnon*, in front of the chorus' malicious allusions to her naivety, she had declared that she did not trust dreams, nor rumours. In the *Choephori*, she deals precisely with these two sources of information, although she fails to use them to her advantage. She is deeply impressed by a dream she had the night before Orestes' return, but its exact meaning remains unclear to her; she then trusts the false report of his death that is clearly presented as unreliable as a rumour. Paradoxically, she does not give her dream the careful consideration it deserves – as she should have done –, but relies on news that turn out to be lies.

When a stranger comes to Argos, bringing the news of Orestes' death, Clytemnestra trusts him without questioning his reliability. Should he have been a herald, or someone known to her, or at least an eyewitness, Clytemnestra's behaviour would not have been that surprising. But this is not the case. The stranger – who is Orestes himself – admits he has not seen the hero dead but – he explains – on his way to Argos, he has run into a man who asked him to report the news at court:

> ἀγνὼς πρὸς ἀγνῶτ' εἶπε συμβαλὼν ἀνήρ,
> ἐξιστορήσας καὶ σαφηνίσας ὁδόν,
> Στροφίος ὁ Φωκεύς· πεύθομαι γὰρ ἐν λόγῳ
> ἐπείπερ ἄλλως, ὦ ξέν', εἰς Ἄργος κίεις,
> πρὸς τοὺς τεκόντας πανδίκως μεμνημένος
> τεθνεῶτ' Ὀρέστην εἰπέ, μηδαμῶς λάθῃ.
> (*Ch*. 677-82)

> [A man, a stranger to me as I to him, fell in with me, and inquired about my destination and told me his. He was Strophius, a Phocian (for as we talked I learned his name, and he said to me, "Stranger, since in any case you are bound for Argos, keep my message in mind most faithfully and tell his parents Orestes is dead, and by no means let it escape you".]

Many elements should make Clytemnestra suspicious of his words. Firstly, the news bearer is a stranger to her. Secondly, he has not witnessed the

event, but reports someone else's words. Thirdly, this someone else is himself a stranger. Orestes explicitly designates him as "a stranger to me as I to him" (677), whose name he knows only because the man himself told him.[54] Not only is his report a second-hand account, the product of transmission by relay, but the information it contains is conveyed by two strangers.[55]

If we compare this scene with the same episode in Sophocles' *Electra*, we find significant differences. In Sophocles, the news is conveyed by an old man (Orestes' Pedagogue), who claims to come on the behalf of an ally of Clytemnestra (670). Though the man is a stranger to the queen, as in the *Agamemnon*, the fact of being an acquaintance of her ally Phanotheus identifies him as a trustable and friendly messenger:[56]

τὸ ποῖον, ὦ ξέν'; εἰπέ: παρὰ φίλου γὰρ ὢν
ἀνδρός, σάφ' οἶδα, προσφιλεῖς λέξεις λόγους.
(Soph. *El.* 671-2)

[And what is it, sir? Tell me. Coming from a friend you will bring, I know, a kindly message.]

A second difference between the two strangers is that the one in the *Electra* declares he has witnessed the fact (762), and relates the circumstances of Orestes' death providing a surprising amount of details. The report of the horse race in which Orestes would have died and his subsequent cremation occupies eighty lines (681-760), and affords a full description of the beholders, the sounds, and the emotions of the dire event.[57] Besides, the presence of the messenger at the moment of Orestes' death reinforces his reliability:

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[54] As Bowen (1986: 120) points out, the expression πεύθομαι γὰρ ἐν λόγῳ (679) "underlines the impression of a throwaway detail".

[55] The identity of the messenger was one of the main criteria to judge the reliability of unofficial news in the Greek *polis* (Lewis 1996: 80-5).

[56] An analogous trick, based on the principle of the source's supposed reliability, is the one that causes Aegisthus' death in Aeschylus' *Choephori*. Following the advice of the Corypheus (770-2), the Nurse adds an important detail to the message Clytemnestra has entrusted her with: she says that Aegisthus must go alone to meet the strangers (734-7). This will allow Orestes to slay him. The Nurse's message does not raise any suspicion partly because Aegisthus trusts the 'source' of the message (i.e. Clytemnestra), just as she did with Phanotheus in Sophocles' *Electra*.

[57] An amazing amount of detail, as Marshall comments: "The Pedagogue presents details in his narrative that strictly speaking go beyond the perception of a spectator in the horserace, such as mention of the horses' breath on the drivers' backs in 718-19: do such details add verisimilitude to the narrative, or are they another potential clue for the on-stage characters that the narrative is invented?" (2006: 210). On the construction of this false *angelia* on Homeric inheritance and its metatheatrical implications, see Barrett 2002: 132-67. On the reasons that might explain the choice of a chariot race as a setting for Orestes' death, see Finglass 2007: 300-4. On the relation of this passage to other literary material, see Barrett 2002: 132-67; Campos Daroca 2014: 85-6; Finglass 2007: 300-4; Marshall 2006.

τοιαῦτά σοι ταῦτ᾽ ἐστίν, ὡς μὲν ἐν λόγῳ
ἀλγεινά, τοῖς δ᾽ ἰδοῦσιν, οἵπερ εἴδομεν,
μέγιστα πάντων ὧν ὄπωπ᾽ ἐγὼ κακῶν.
(Soph. *El.* 761-3)

[Such is my story – it is grievous even to hear, but for us witnesses who looked on, it was the greatest of sorrows that these eyes have seen.]

In the *Electra*, Orestes' trickery is much better conceived than in the *Choephori*, where there are sufficient elements for unmasking the false news, although Clytemnestra simply ignores them. Comparing it with Sophocles' *Electra*, we can understand how Aeschylus openly decided to insist on the obviousness of the deception by contrasting it with Clytemnestra's inability to expose it. Her blindness is made even more striking by the contrast with the accurateness she has shown in the previous play with respect to information sources. Her mind is now "open to quick encroachment", as the chorus was insinuating in the *Agamemnon* (485-6).[58] She no longer speaks "as wisely as a prudent man" (*Ag.* 351: κατ᾽ ἄνδρα σώφρον᾽ εὐφρόνως), but she becomes credulous as a woman.

Aegisthus, on the contrary, appears to be more cautious. First of all, he defines the news he has just learnt from the newcomers as φάτις.[59] Secondly, in order to test the reliability of that φάτις, he wants to see (ἰδεῖν, *Ch.* 851) the messenger, and verify directly whether he was present at Orestes' death or is just reporting a second-hand account:

ἰδεῖν ἐλέγξαι τ᾽ αὖ θέλω τὸν ἄγγελον,
εἴτ᾽ αὐτὸς ἦν θνῄσκοντος ἐγγύθεν παρών,
εἴτ᾽ ἐξ ἀμαυρᾶς κληδόνος λέγει μαθών.
(*Ch.* 851-3)

[I wish to see the messenger and put him to the test again – whether he himself was present at the death or merely repeats from vague reports what he has heard.]

Aegisthus is sure that his "mind with eyes open" (φρένα ὠμματωμένην, 854) will not be deceived. Unfortunately he does not have the time to verify the news, since the messenger kills him right after he enters the house. As Barrett points out, "[h]is skepticism . . . serves to underscore the absence of any such skepticism on Clytemnestra's part" (2002: 153).

Another element that should have arisen suspicion about the imminence of Orestes' revenge is the dream Clytemnestra had the night before

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[58] Ὁ θῆλυς ὅρος ἐπινέμεται / ταχύπορος, ("a woman's mind has boundaries open to quick encroachment").

[59] Aesch. *Ch.* 839-40: νέαν φάτιν δὲ πεύθομαι λέγειν τινὰς / ξένους μολόντας ("I heard startling news told by some strangers who have arrived").

receiving the news of her son's death. In the *Choephori* (527-39), the chorus relates that she dreamt of giving birth to a snake that later sucked a blood clot out of her breast. If Aeschylus' public is well aware of the true meaning of the queen's nightmare – the snake is of course Orestes, ready to revenge Agamemnon's death on his mother –, Clytemnestra is unable to read the signs. Although she is very upset and orders libations, she fails to understand the ominous dream's authentic message. As related by the chorus (527-31), many details suggest a link with motherhood: the queen gives birth (τεκεῖν) to a snake, she lays it (ὁρμίσαι) in swaddling clothes (ἐν σπαργάνοισι) as a baby (παιδὸς δίκην), and she herself offers her breast to it (αὐτὴ προσέσχε μαστόν), but when she hears about Orestes' death, she feels relieved, and almost forgets about it. She will gain awareness of its true meaning only a moment before being slain by her son (928-9). On the contrary, Orestes is able to interpret his mother's oneiric vision, as if he were a seer (548-51).

In the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra had haughtily rejected the chorus' idea that dreams (ὀνείρων φάσματα, 274) may be trustworthy sources of information. Here, at the beginning of the *Choephori*, upset by her dream, she shows a completely different attitude. What is paradoxical is that, despite her worries, she puts no effort into the interpretation of its real meaning. As Penelope had it in the *Odyssey* (cf. above), some dreams are deceiving, others are not. This one is trustworthy and provides useful information about future events, but Clytemnestra fails to understand it.

Aeschylus presents us a different Clytemnestra in the *Choephori*. However clear-headed she might have been in the *Agamemnon*, once she has accomplished her revenge she grows careless and almost unconcerned, and this transformation could not go unnoticed in the eyes of Aeschylus' audience.

4. The Attitude of Clytemnestra Towards Information Sources: *Agamemnon* vs *Choephori*

In the *Agamemnon*, as we have pointed out above, Aeschylus greatly emphasizes the topic and the role of information sources. In particular, the debate over their reliability serves the characterization of Clytemnestra as an ingenious, self-confident, and powerful woman, thus relating her representation on stage to the question of her royal power. Let us explore then how the play develops this dynamic relation.

As shows the debate over the reliability of the beacon system between the queen and the chorus, the reception of information may not be carried out passively, but requires intelligence and lucidity, since it involves an

examination of the sources. The capacity to distinguish between true and false information is presented as an essential attribute of power and authority. In fact, in calling Clytemnestra's discernment into question, the chorus explicitly attacks the legitimacy of her power. Right before the herald's arrival, the chorus speaks its own contempt for the queen's womanly tendency to believe too quickly:

> ἐν γυναικὸς αἰχμᾷ πρέπει
> πρὸ τοῦ φανέντος χάριν ξυναινέσαι.
> πιθανὸς ἄγαν ὁ θῆλυς ὅρος ἐπινέμεται
> ταχύπορος· ἀλλὰ ταχύμορον
> γυναικογήρυτον ὄλλυται κλέος.
> (*Ag.* 483-7)

> [It is just like a woman's eager nature to yield assent to pleasing news before yet the truth is clear. Too credulous, a woman's mind has boundaries open to quick encroachment; but quick to perish is rumor spread by a woman.] [60]

In Greek society, power and control of communication were tightly intertwined (Longo 1976: 150 and 1978: 85). The latter was a prerogative of the former and a privilege of men. Yet, in the *Agamemnon*, both are in the hands of a woman. Clytemnestra is the one who is familiar with the functioning of the beacon system; it is she who has set up the watch (10-11), and not – as happens in the *Odyssey* – Aegisthus, who makes his first appearance on stage only at l. 1577 and takes no active part in preparing Agamemnon's murder: he explains to the chorus that "to ensnare him (*scil.* Agamemnon) was clearly the woman's part" (τὸ γὰρ δολῶσαι πρὸς γυναικὸς ἦν σαφῶς, 1636).[61] As Froma Zeitlin correctly pointed out, Clytemnestra is "portrayed as monstrous androgyne" who "demands and usurps male power and prerogatives" (1978: 150).[62] Undoubtedly, Clytemnestra's control of communication enhances the image of a queen behaving as a king, even though, according to the chorus, only a very naïve (παιδνός) or upset (φρενῶν κεκομμένος) person could have trusted a message coming from a fire (479).

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[60] On the interpretation of this sentence, see Fraenkel 1950: 241-3.

[61] Aegisthus is clearly more interested in taking possession of Agamemnon's goods and power, rather than to kill him out of revenge. See Aesch. *Ag.* 1638-9: "However, with his gold I shall endeavour to control the people" (ἐκ τῶν δὲ τοῦδε χρημάτων πειράσομαι / ἄρχειν πολιτῶν).

[62] In *Ag.* 11, Clytemnestra's heart (κέαρ) is designed as "of manly counsel" (ἀνδρόβουλος). The term was probably coined by Aeschylus in order to define specifically this character (Fraenkel 1950: 10). In *Ag.* 351, the chorus congratulates Clytemnestra for speaking as wisely as a man. Scholarship has widely commented this characterization; see Longo 1976: 151 and note 91.

"Truly, it is just like a woman to be elated in heart" (ἦ κάρτα πρὸς γυναικὸς αἴρεσθαι κέαρ, 594), the chorus said. In the *Choephori*, Aegisthus makes a similar statement, as he wishes to verify whether the news of Orestes' death is true or is "merely a panic-stricken report spread by women which leaps up to die away in nothingness" (845-6),[63] since women hearts are supposed to be exposed to easy and uncontrolled enthusiasm. Dreams, rumours, and a capricious temperament are for women, while solid evidence is for men.[64] However, Clytemnestra is far from being fickle and naïve. Despite the chorus' disapproval, she kept trusting the news and making sacrifices; she also imposed on the citizens to raise "a shout of happy praise" (ὀλολυγμόν, 595), following the feminine custom (γυναικείῳ νόμῳ, 594; cf. Moreau 1992: 162).[65] She is also extremely perceptive, and knows very well how to read signs and distinguish true from false news. The chorus' calling into doubt the beacon system, which in fact works perfectly and allows the queen to set up a plan to kill her husband, adds to Clytemnestra's determination and self-confidence.[66] Likewise, the chorus' allusions to the human inability to tell the difference between reliable and unreliable sources, trustworthiness and deceit, true and false, sets off by contrast her cunning and malicious cleverness.

What happens to Clytemnestra in the *Choephori*? Once she has accomplished her revenge, her mastery of information sources no longer supports her. As I have already noted, many elements could have raised her suspicion and revealed the truth, but she failed to recognize them. This Clytemnestra has nothing in common with the heedful and clear-headed queen of the *Agamemnon*; in the *Choephori*, she is a woman unable to solve the puzzle of evidence. In the *Agamemnon*, she had been sensible and alert in defending the reliability of the beacon system against dreams and rumours, while in the *Choephori*, she is totally unable to interpret the informative potential of an ominous dream and to expose false news. Unlike her, Aeschylus' public fully understood the signs, and could easily predict what would come next; besides, in the eyes of the audience, Clytemnestra's previous cleverness strikingly enhanced the contrast between her present interpretative blindness and the plain evidence of the signs she is presented with.

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[63] ἦ πρὸς γυναικῶν δειματούμενοι λόγοι / πεδάρσιοι θρῴσκουσι, θνῄσκοντες μάτην.

[64] Aesch. *Ag.* 351-3: "Lady, you speak as wisely as a prudent man. And, for my part, now that I have listened to your certain proofs, I prepare to address due prayers of thanksgiving to the gods" (γύναι, κατ᾽ ἄνδρα σώφρον᾽ εὐφρόνως λέγεις. / ἐγὼ δ᾽ ἀκούσας πιστά σου τεκμήρια / θεοὺς προσειπεῖν εὖ παρασκευάζομαι).

[65] The ὀλολυγμός was a loud cry of joy in honour of the gods, mostly performed by women.

[66] See also Betensky's remarks about the beacon-speech as a mean of characterization of Clytemnestra (1978: 13-14).

Clytemnestra's earlier command of information sources was one of the elements that led her to success in the *Agamemnon* and characterized her as an ingenious, powerful woman. In the *Choephori*, her faded control of them serves another purpose, as it foreshadows her ruin, which will come not only because of Orestes' revenge but also, as Orestes himself reminds us, because of fate:

Κλυταιμηστρα   ἡ Μοῖρα τούτων, ὦ τέκνον, παραιτία.
Ορεστης   καὶ τόνδε τοίνυν Μοῖρ᾽ ἐπόρσυνεν μόρον.
(*Ch.* 910-11)

[Klytaemnestra Fate, my child, must share the blame for this. // Orestes And fate now brings this destiny to pass.]

By having Cassandra appear at the end of the *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus had already casted a shadow on the optimistic idea that the ability of gathering or seizing the right information can suffice to avoid ruin. That is why the triumph of Clytemnestra's intelligence does not last long, and the *Choephori* realizes that suggestion. It is only by comparing the two plays with regard to the use and interpretation of information sources, then, that we may recognize how the ability to gather and seize information does not guarantee the control of the events, nor of fate.

Conclusion

Starting from the initial beacon scene and throughout the whole play, Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* presents a large-scale scrutiny of information sources and their degree of reliability. The *Choephori* carries on this perusal by deepening the analysis of men's attitude towards information sources, getting to the conclusion that it is impossible for human beings, even for those who master information, to change or direct the course of their destiny.

Aeschylus' staging of the potential and limits of possessing information shows that mortals are powerless towards the unfathomable plans of destiny. Cassandra's last words in the *Agamemnon* precisely bear on the fragility of human fate: "if misfortune strikes, the dash of a wet sponge blots out the drawing" (1328-9).[67] Mortals can be shrewd or obtuse, accurate or inaccurate, they can achieve ephemeral success thanks to their skills, but they will eventually succumb to the superior and arbitrary will of the gods.[68]

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[67] εἰ δὲ δυστυχῇ, / βολαῖς ὑγρώσσων σπόγγος ὤλεσεν γραφήν.

[68] On the arbitrary nature of divine punishment, which indeed is a central theme in Greek tragedy, see Fornaro 2009.

They share a tiny part in determining the consequences of their own actions, and may exercise little control on future events. In his attempt to portray the tragic nature of human condition, Aeschylus made use of many narrative devices. The staging of the debate about information sources in the *Agamemnon* and the *Choephori* can be considered one of them, and a very effective one.

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