

ΑΙΣΧΥΛΟΥ ΧΟΗΦΟΡΟΙ

Text and translations are from the Verrall edition of 1893.

Some translations by Herbert Weir Smyth (1926), available at <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0007%3Acard%3D1> (accessed 1 Nov 2014)

Il. 6-7

πλόκαμον Ιναχῶ θρεπτήριον
τὸν δεύτερον δὲ τόνδε πενθητήριον

‘a lock to Inachus for nurture and this second lock for mourning’

Orestes places two locks of hair on Agamemnon’s grave. We shall examine, in the recognition scene, Electra’s references to these locks in terms suggestive of the horns of the radiant new moon. At this early stage the allegoric identification of both Orestes and Electra with the new moon, as symbol of Apollo and the Athenian miracle, must remain provisional, until the many elements of the symbolic framework come to cohere ever more strongly in a triumph of coherence, radiance and integrity.

The ground in this scene conveniently represents the horizon. Regulus (Agamemnon) has set. The above-ground action take splace in the sky. Orestes’ invocation in this scene of Hermes, conductor of souls and go-between of the infernal and celestial gods, is consistent with this.

Il. 10-11

τί χρῆμα λεύσσω; τίς ποθ’ ἦδ’ ὀμίγγυρις
στείχει γυναικῶν φάρεσιν μελαγκίμοις

‘What do I see? What company may this be, these women that come in noticeable garb of black?’

We have seen, in Agamemnon, the identification of the chorus with the stars of the night sky. This is also their allegoric value here. They wear ‘sable,’ as it is still twilight and they are not fully visible.

Il 20-21

Πυλάδη, σταθῶμεν εκποδόν, ὡς ἂν σαφῶς
μάθω γυναικῶν ἦτις ἦδε προστροπή.

‘Pylades, let us stand away, that I may make sure, who are these women that come with supplication here.’

Verrall is perplexed about the role of Pylades:

Nothing in the Choephoroi is more curious, or more significant for the purpose with which the legend was framed, than the part assigned to Pylades. Until the double vengeance is completed by the slaying of Clytaemnestra, Pylades is inseparable from Orestes ... But during all this time not only is he himself without speech or function, but scarcely any notice is taken of him. (Introduction, p. xvii)

This opacity is removed by a consideration of Pylades’ role in the allegory. When night has fully come down, the curved new moon is clearly seen to clasp, as it were, the dark moon in its jaws (Fig. 1). Observation on a clear night will confirm this. However, in twilight only the radiant sliver of new moon can be seen, with the dark moon being invisible in the still illuminated sky. Hence Pylades, although he accompanies Orestes (radiant moon) throughout the drama as the dark moon, is silent here and throughout all the action until lines 899-901, when he utters his first speech of the play. Aeschylus is making a point here: by line 899 night will have almost fully descended, with little lingering radiance of the sun (murder of Aegisthus-Clytemnestra). By Pylades’ second and final speech (930-33), night will be at its most profound.



Figure 1 Pylades (dark moon)-Orestes (radiant moon)

Aeschylus tells us in *Agamemnon* that Orestes as a child was sent away by Clytemnestra to live with Strophius, king of Phocis, who was married to Agamemnon’s sister. There, Orestes and Pylades, Strophius’ son, became like brothers. I take the root of the name ‘Strophius’ to be ‘strophe,’ a ‘turning,’ as in the strophe and antistrophe of Greek lyric odes, where the song is taken up in turn by singers in one direction and then the return direction of the choric line. ‘Strophius’ would then be apt for the allegory, as expressive of the periodic waxing and waning of the moon, in which its dark and radiant aspects participate. It would be natural, then, for Orestes and Pylades to be ‘brothers.’

Verrall puzzles over Orestes' phrase διχῶς ἐπράτθην, 'it was a two-fold sale of me' (914), when he is countering his mother's plea for mercy:

it is hard to suppose that the phrase διχῶς ἐπράτθην, following as it does immediately upon a reference to the character of Strophius, can have any meaning, except that the transference of Orestes from Clytaemnestra to him was a bargain *corrupt on both sides*, in which both parties sought their apparent interest ... [Verrall's italics] (Introduction, p. xv)

In terms of the allegory, however, διχῶς ἐπράτθην is likely to be another reference to the double nature of the moon – to what will become, in fact, the 'brotherhood' of Orestes and Pylades.

Il. 59-63

ῥοπή δ' ἐπισκοπεῖ δίκας
(ταχεῖα τοῖς μὲν ἐν φάει
τὰ δ' ἐν μεταίχμιῳ σκότου
μένει, χρονίζοντα βρύει,
τοὺς δ' ἄκραντος ἔχει νύξ)

'Yet Justice watches poised (on some descending swift in the light of day, though sometimes punishment bides in the darkness, growing while it waits, and sometimes darkness takes the offender ere aught is done)'

'ῥοπή' as the sense of a sinking of the pan of a scales, a turning point or critical moment signifying death. This is highly appropriate from an allegorical point of view, if we think of the pan as being thin and perhaps slightly concave, like the sliver of new moon. When viewed laterally, the extremities of the pan would correspond here to the locks of hair, the horns of the new moon, which, as the 'scales-pan of Justice' (ῥοπή δίκας), supplants the sun in the sky.

Verrall's rendering of ἐν μεταίχμιῳ σκότου as 'darkness' ignores μεταίχμιῳ, 'midway,' 'border-land,' 'space between.' Weir Smyth on the other hand has 'the frontier of twilight,' or the interval between day and night. This would be completely appropriate for the allegory, as the moon (Orestes = Justice) 'grows full with time' (χρονίζοντα βρύει) as the darkness gradually descends. Another possibility is that night may supplant the sun before moondawn (τοὺς δ' ἄκραντος ἔχει νύξ): the night here being 'fruitless' (ἄκραντος), in the sense that its fruit is the moon.

Il. 107-22

Here is another instance of the technique, which we have noted in *Agamemnon*, of stichomythia – single line exchanges between two speakers, here Electra and the chorus – as indicative of the gradual, continuous lightening or darkening of bodies or a body of the heavens. Here, it is the radiant moon (Electra) and the starry sky (chorus) which are gradually intensifying in visibility. This stichomythia ends in longer speeches by both participants, indicating that the moon and stars have established themselves as visible in the heavens.

I. 173

HL. καὶ μὴν ὄδ' ἐστὶ κάρτ' ἰδεῖν ὁμόπτερος

‘Look! The lock is ... to the eye ... just like in feather’

The siblings are indeed birds ‘of the same feather’ (ὁμόπτερος). Aeschylus’ mention of the feather is appropriate, as feathers have a slight curvature and are often (though not always) white, in both qualities like the radiant new moon.

The locks, found here by Electra, are the first of the three proofs of her kinship with Orestes which this scene offers. Verrall has, in his introduction, discussed the intense debate over this scene in the nineteenth century, centering primarily around the quality of the three items as proofs. These problems disappear, however, if we view the items as symbolic of aspects of the moon (Orestes = Electra).

I. 177

HL. μάλιστ' ἐκείνου βοστρύχοις προσεΐδεται

‘It is very like in looks to the locks of him [Orestes]’

βόστρυχος has the meaning ‘a curl or lock of hair,’ ‘anything twisted or wreathed.’ There is thus a distinct curvature to the locks which Electra considers, as one would expect in light of their allegorical value as the horns of the (curved) new moon.

Camille Paglia argues for the light symbolism of Apollo’s hair:

The Dorians, who invaded Greece from the north in the twelfth century B.C., may have been blonde ... I think Apollonian light turned again into blondeness, one of Europe’s racist motifs, glamourized in Botticelli and the Apollonian *Faerie Queene*. Blondeness is Apollo’s wolfish coldness and conceptualism. (*Sexual Personae* [Penguin, 1990], p. 73-4)

II. 204-210

καὶ μὲν στίβοι γε, δεύτερον τεκμήριον,
ποδῶν δ' ὅμοιοι τοῖς τ' ἐμοῖσιν ἐμφορεῖς·
καὶ γὰρ δύο ἐστὸν τῷδε περιγραφὰ ποδοῖν,
αὐτοῦ τ' ἐκείνου καὶ συνεμπόρου τινός·
πτέρναι τερόντων θ' ὑπογραφαὶ μετρούμεναι
εἰς ταῦτ' συμβαίνουσι τοῖς ἐμοῖς στίβοις.
πάρεστι δ' ὠδὶς καὶ φρενῶν καταφθορά.

Electra: ‘See! Yes, there are marks on the ground, to tell us more ... and marks of feet, similar marks, and like unto my own ... Yes, yes! For here are *two* outlines of feet, those of him, and those of some companion ... In the measurements of heel and fore-part the slight-

drawn lines agree exactly with the marks made by me ... It is an agony ... destroying thought!’

The footprints are a reference to the serene progress of the moon, which moves against the background of the fixed stars by an amount roughly equal to its angular diameter (0.5°) per hour. Again, this serves to confirm the identification of both Orestes and Electra with the radiant moon.

Il. 211-223

The stichomythic exchange indicates that the moon (Orestes/Electra) is gradually becoming more distinct in the early night sky. Orestes’ long speech (Il. 268-304) will indicate the established presence it has attained.

Il. 230-1

ἰδοῦ δ’ ὕφασμα τοῦτο, σῆς ἔργον χερός
σπάθης τε πλεγάς, εἰς δὲ θήρειον γραφήν

Orestes : ‘And see this weaving, the work of thine own hand ... the batten strokes of it ; look at the beasts in the pattern!’

The craters of the moon are seen by the human eye gazing from earth to form patterns:



Figure 2 The patterns 'woven' into the moon

Il. 301-304

τὸ μὴ πολίτας εὐκλεεστάτους βροτῶν,
Τροίας ἀναστατήρας εὐδόξῳ φρενί,
δυοῖν γυναικοῖν ᾧδ' ὑπηκόους πέλειν,
θήλεια γὰρ φρήν·

‘the desire that my countrymen, the most renowned on earth, whose glorious spirit achieved the destruction of Troy, should not be subject, as now, to tyrants, women both—for woman he is at heart...’

This opprobrium of the womanly natures of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus recalls the similar sentiment expressed in *Agamemnon* 8-11, ὠδε γὰρ κρατεῖ/ γυναικος ἀνδροβουλον ἐλπίζον κεαρ. The ‘heart of a woman’ (θήλεια ... φρήν ; γυναικος ... κεαρ) is contemned by Aeschylus, for the reason that the *Oresteia* celebrates the triumph of the new Athenian miracle over the Goddess-worshipping cultures (of Persia, Egypt, etc.) which had prevailed in the ancient world hitherto.

Il. 443-6

λέγεις πατρῶον μόνον· ἐγὼ δ' ἀπεστάτουν
ἄτιμος, οὐδὲν ἄξία,
μυχοῦ δ' ἄφερκτος, πολυσίνου κυνὸς δίκαν,
έτοιμότερα γέλωτος ἀνέφερον λίβη,
χαίρουσι πολύδακρυν γόνον κεκρυμμένα.

Electra: ‘Our dead father was used as thou sayest. I myself was not by, being slighted, of no account. Shut out of the chamber, like a mischievous dog, I answered, not with laughter but readier tears, to their rejoicing that covered my piteous lament.’

Electra’s sequestration from the murder scene is consistent with the allegory, the moon being nowhere visible at the time of the engulfment of Regulus by the rising sun at the time of the star’s heliacal rising.

Il. 538-82

Il. 583-648

The long speeches of Orestes (538 ff.) and the Chorus (583 ff.) indicate that the moon and stars are now starkly visible in the night sky. The remaining afterglow of the sun is fast disappearing (cf. Il. 656-7 ὡς καὶ νυκτὸς ἄρμ' ἐπείγεται σκοτεινόν): an appropriate time, in terms of the allegory, for the murder of Clytemnestra-Aegisthus.

I. 560

Πυλάδη, ξένος τε καὶ δορύξενος δόμων.

‘Pylades ... to be entertained within as a friend (as indeed I shall be) *of the spear*.’ (Verrall: the italics are his)

‘and with me Pylades, whom you see here, as a guest and ally of the house.’ (Weir Smyth)

Verrall makes heavy weather of this line, noting that ‘no equivalents, like or unlike, exist [in English] for ξένος or for δορύξενος’ (p. 224). However, the latter term could well serve the allegory if ‘spear’ were interpreted as a reference to a spear of moonlight (also figured in the arrows of Artemis).

II. 730 ff.

The Nurse (of Orestes) most plausibly represents, like Pylades, the dark moon, which has given rise to and nurtured the first sliver of new moon (Orestes). This interpretation is supported by the stichomythic exchange between the Nurse and Chorus (II. 762 ff.): both the stars and the dark moon clasped in the jaws of the new becoming more visible as night attains its final depth. Given that the Chorus here is a single slave of the household, she might plausibly represent Venus, the evening star, which is often strikingly collocated with the moon:



Figure 3 The moon and Venus

II. 899-901

ποῦ δαὶ τὰ λοιπὰ Λοξίου μαντεύματα
τὰ πυθόχρηστα, πιστὰ δ' εὐορκώματα ;
ἅπαντας ἐχθροὺς τῶν θεῶν ἡγοῦ πλέον.

Pylades: 'And what then of Loxias' command as yet unfulfilled, his Pythian oracle? And the faith of oaths, what of it? Think that the enmity of all the world is better than that of heaven.'

It is of course perfectly consistent with the allegory that Pylades' first words of the play should come at the moment of Orestes' slaying of Clytemnestra: the dark moon being fully visible in the complete absence of the afterglow of the sun. Pylades' second speech of two (ll. 930-3) will come immediately after the murder of Clytemnestra, so that his only two speeches frame it: a structural point clearly of allegorical significance, for the reason given above.

ll. 907 ff.

The stichomythic exchange between Orestes and Clytemnestra (907 ff.) suggests the gradual strengthening of the moon alongside the weakening of the sun.

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The play ends with Orestes fearing pursuit by the Eumenides, in consequence of his crime in slaying his mother. The 'Kindly Ones' represent here the gradually growing dark moon which will inevitably supplant the radiant moon in the monthly cycle. We shall see how Aeschylus handles this theme in *Eumenides*, and how Sophocles also incorporated this theme into his Theban trilogy.