The Representation of Entrapment

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The net is a fascinating motif, integral to the Agamemnon. One can identify throughout the work a complex network of this symbol, where every recurrence snowballs its cumulative meaning. The focus of this essay is to investigate the string of net imagery as it is interwoven throughout the work. Overall, I seek to demonstrate that the net, a technically devised and powerful weapon of the hunt, signifies the entrapment, victimization, and annihilation of a helpless captive and provokes the audience’s critical evaluation of the advantageousness of human intelligence.

In the hymn, the Chorus attributes the capture of Troy to the actions of Zeus and Night, “Oh Lord Zeus and Pleasant Night possessor of great glories when you casted upon the citadels of Troy a constricting snare, so that no one of the old or of the young would surpass the great net of slavery and all-conquering destruction (ὦ Ζεῦ βασιλεῦ καὶ νυξ φιλία / μεγάλων κόσμων πτεέτειφα, / ήτ’ ἐπὶ Τροίας πύργος ἐβάλες / στεγανὸν δίκτυον, ώς μήτε μέγαν / μήτ’ ἀν νεμόθιν τιν’ ὑπερτελέσαι / μέγα δουλείας / γάγγαμον, ἀτης παναλώτου, 355-361).” The enjambment of both words δίκτυον and γάγγαμον at the beginning of their respective verses emphasize that Troy has been trapped. Moreover, the descriptive adjectives which modify both δίκτυον and γάγγαμον stress that Troy is gravely imperiled; for the δίκτυον, a casting-net, whether for hunting or for fishing, is described as στεγανὸν, literally ‘water-tight’, and the γάγγαμον, typically a small round net especially designed for oyster catching, brings enslavement and inescapable ruin to those over whom it has been thrown. The diction of these verses conjures the stifling oppression upon the conquered Trojan kingdom. Furthermore, the image of Troy ensnared recurs in Agamemnon’s speech, in which he describes how Troy had been enclosed by exceedingly cruel traps (ἐπέτερ καὶ πάγας ὑπερκότους / ἐφφαξάμεσθα, 822). Agamemnon, now, is introduced to the audience as the human
agent who has brought the fulfillment of the suffocation of Troy, which had been attributed to Zeus and Night earlier by the Chorus. Agamemnon is a hunter, tenacious in harassing, trapping, and killing a victimized prey, the kingdom of Troy (χρόνῳ μὲν ἀγαθῇ Πριάμου πόλιν ἅδε κέλευθος, πάντα δὲ πύργων/ κτήρια πρόσθε τὰ ὑποληψθέα / Μοίρα λαπαξεῖ πρὸς τὸ βίων, 126-130).

Hunting after a targeted prey and the repressive constriction of the victim in nets, principle thematic concepts, which were encountered in the passages about Troy, are recurrent in the treatment of the murder both of Agamemnon and Cassandra. First, Clytemnestra manages to stab Agamemnon to death by casting around him an expensive robe (πλεοτὼν ἐἵματος κακῶν, 1383), which she likens to ἀμφίβληστρον (1382), an inescapable (ἀπειρον, 1382) casting-net which one would be used to catch fish (ὡς σπείρῃ ἤθεων, 1382), much like the δίκτυον and the γάγγαμον as described by the Chorus previously. Cassandra similarly is described as caught in fatal hunting nets since Clytemnestra has locked in on her as a target to be annihilated (ἐντὸς δ’ ἀλόδα μορφῶν ἀρχεμάτων / πέθαν’ ἄν, εἰ πείθοι’ ἀσεθοίης δ’ ἰως, 1048). Hence, there arises a plausible analogy between Agamemnon as hunting down Troy and Clytemnestra as hunting down Agamemnon and Cassandra.

As a brief aside regarding Clytemnestra’s hunt, one should note the variety of effective applications of the net image. An example of the versatility of this motif is proven by use of the word, δίκτυον. For example, the δίκτυον not only serves as an instrument for facilitating predation but also as an impressive metaphor for a corpse perforated by stab wounds. Clytemnestra, hinting with dark humor and dramatic irony to her future butchery of Agamemnon, says, “And if this man kept receiving so many wounds as the rumor was brought to the house, he would have more holes to speak of than a net, (καὶ τραυμάτων μὲν εὶ τόσων ἄτυγχαν / ἀνήρ δ’ ὡς πρὸς ὁλὸν ὡχετεῦτο / φάτις, τέτρηται δικτύου πλέον λέγειν, 866 – 868).” Agamemnon, who will be stabbed three times by Clytemnestra, is likened to the net, the very device, which will ensnare him and expose him to his doom. At the same time, the δίκτυον also constitutes a personification of Clytemnestra herself, who is called by the prophetess, Cassandra, the net of Hades and the snare which shares the marriage bed and is jointly
guilty of carnage (Ἠ δίκτυων τί γ’ Αἰδοὺ; / ἀλλ’ ἄρχως ἣ ἕμνευος, ἣ ἔναρτία / φόνον, 1114-1118). Clytemnestra is the embodiment of the net itself, thus drawing attention to her convoluted plan of assassination and inescapable deadliness.

The correspondence of Agamemnon’s entrapment with that of Troy is corroborated further by comparable diction of confinement. For example, Aegisthus says, “It is fine for me to die, now that I have seen this man in the nets of justice, (οὗτω καλὸν δὴ καὶ τὸ κατάνευτον ἐμοὶ, / ἱδόνα τοῦτον τῆς δίκης ἐν ἔρκεσιν, 160-1).” The word ἔρκος, which could connote not only a net but also a fenced enclosure, revokes the verb, ἐφραξάμεθα, signifying ‘to fence in’, used by Agamemnon to describe the capture of Troy at line 822. Furthermore, ἔρκος here reminds the audience of Clytemnestra’s epithetical description as the nearest sole-guardian enclosure of the Apian land (τὸδ’ ἄγχιστον Ἀ- /πίς γῆς μονόφρουρον ἔρκος, 256-7). Just as Cassandra depicts Clytemnestra as a lethal net, the reader also could imagine her as a personified enclosure or network of fences, which beguilingly opens its door⁴ to Agamemnon and then shuts him in so that he is inevitably vulnerable to his impending doom.

Just as clothing (πλοῦτον εἱματος κακὸν, 1383) is compared to a casting-net (ἀμφίβληστρον, 1382) hurled over the victim, Clytemnestra’s misleading speech, a means for alluring Agamemnon to let his guard down in her presence, is likened to a device of entrapment. After Clytemnestra has performed the killing, she proclaims, “I have said much before at the opportune moment and I am not ashamed to contradict it now. For how could one devising hate against a hated foe, resembling a friend, fence the snares of ruin at height too high to be overleaped? (πολλῶν πάροιθεν καφώς εἰρημένων/ τὰματι’ ἐπειν οὐκ ἐπισχυθήσαμαι./ πῶς γὰρ τις ἔχοι τὰς ἐχθρικὰς πορείας, φίλοις/ δοχόδων οὖν, πημοῦς ἄρκωστατ’ ἂν /φράξειν, ἄφος κρεῖσσον ἐκπηδήματος; 1372-6).” Speech is the most effective instrument facilitating the murder of Agamemnon. Importantly, Clytemnestra employs imagery related both to “nets (ἄρκωστατ’)” and “fences (φράξειν)” in order signify the utility of her lies. The word, ἄρκωστατ’, meaning ‘places beset with hunting nets’, is a powerfully evocative word since it exerts the cumulative force of the net-imagery used during the play and also reinforces the idea of Clytemnestra as a net-
wielding huntress, since it summons to the mind Cassandra’s earlier metaphorical depiction of Clytemnestra as an ἄρκυς.

Moreover, ἀφαίειν (‘to fence in’) is a repetition of ἀφαιμεσθα, thus conjuring up the imagery of enclosure. The representation of the enclosure as ‘at a height too high to leap over’ (ἄψως κρείσσον ἐκπηδήματος) strengthens the image of an encirclement of insurmountable, over-towering walls. This bold image reminds the audience of similarly structured earlier verses that deal with the capture and ravage of Troy. For instance, the impregnable enclosure of words by which Clytemnestra surrounds the powerless Agamemnon reflects the description of Zeus’ entrapment of Troy with the δίκτυον, which nobody is able to ‘overleap (ὑπερτελέσαι)’. Thus the net repeatedly is portrayed as a baleful, insuperable weapon of the hunt, which traps, confines, and exposes the prey to the thirsty predator. The strength of the net is reinforced by a change in the therianthropic descriptions of Agamemnon. For, at first, Agamemnon proudly is recounting how the Argive beast and the shield-bearing host launched their leap (Ἀργεῖον δάκος, / Ἴππου νεοσσός, ἀσπιδηφόρος λεῶς,/ πήδημ᾽ ὀρούσας ἄρη Πλειάδων δύσιν, 824-6). Agamemnon also likens himself and the Greeks to a flesh-eating lion that springs over the citadel (ὑπερθορὼν δὲ πύργον ὀμηστῆς λέων, 827). However, such large, majestic, land-leaping beasts stand no chance against an effective net. The figurative net which Clytemnestra devises with her words and illusive appearances is so capable and efficient at trapping Agamemnon, once stamped in the audience’s mind in the form of a lion, that he is minified into a fish swept up in a net (ὥσπερ ἤχθων, 1382). The laughable reduction of Agamemnon’s bestial representation from a lion to a fish illustrates the gracefulness and awesome force of the net.

The ultimate entrapment of Agamemnon is foreshadowed early in the play, when the Chorus says, “My anxiety remains to hear something shrouded in darkness. For the gods are not heedless of mass murderers. And in time the black spirits of vengeance bring to obscurity the one who has prospered in unrighteousness and wear down his life by a reversal of his fortune and when he has come among the invisible there is no strength, (μένει δ’ ἀκοδόσα τι μου / μέριμνα νυκτηφέρεις. τῶν πολυκτόνων γὰρ οὐκ / ἄκοπτον θει. κελαὶ/ναὶ δ’ Ἑρωνής χρόνῳ / τυχρόν ὄντ’ ἄνευ δίκαιας / παιλυνυχεῖ τριβαί βίου / τιθεῖ στὸς τελέθοντος ὀντίς

53
ἀλ/κά, 459-468).” The net, represented by the cloaks, plays a significant role in the actualization of the choral foreboding and thematically links the murder of Agamemnon with the fall of Troy and the sacrifice of Iphigenia.

The word, νυκτηρεφές, ‘covered by night’, straightaway recalls when Night is said to have enveloped the citadels of Troy in a net in the choral hymn to Zeus. The cosmic enshrouding of Troy in a net of darkness can be construed as a figurative description of the literal annihilation of Troy, which is described by Agamemnon in the following way, “The altars and shrines of the gods have been wiped into oblivion, and the seed of the whole land has been utterly extirpated, βωμοὶ δ' ἁιστοὶ καὶ θεὸν ἱδρύματα, / καὶ σπέρμα πάσης ἐξαπόλλυται χθόνος, 527-8).” In relation to this, Clytemnestra throws cloaks upon Agamemnon, veiling him in darkness, which event figuratively marks the realization of his falling among the unseen, which had been portended by the anxious Chorus. Just like Troy’s altars and shrines have been extinguished from sight (ἁιστοῖ), in the same way Agamemnon becomes ἁιστός and ἄμαυρός in fulfillment of the Chorus’ foreboding words when Clytemnestra ensnares him in the cloak and murders him. Agamemnon and Troy, the victims of the net, share the common fate of being made to vanish into the darkness.

Furthermore the Chorus mentions that the Erinyes dim the prosperous, yet unrighteous man. Similarly, the Erinyes are said by Aegisthus to have played a part in the murder of Agamemnon, who is seen by Aegisthus lying in the robes spun by the avenging goddesses (Ἰδὼν ἄνδρα τόν ἢδον ὑφαντος ἐν πέπλοις, / Ερινύων τὸν ἄνδρα τόνδε κείμενον, 1580-1). Thus, the obscurification of the unrighteous yet prosperous man, once a source of proleptic solicitude for the Chorus, is realized when Agamemnon, the living man and exalted conqueror, becomes just an inanimate corpse and literally is erased from sight since he is wrapped up in the cloaks.

The cloaks cast over Agamemnon are called πέπλοι, which is important especially since this word appears only three times in the whole work, one of which occurs in the sacrifice of Iphigenia and two of which reappear in the assassination of Agamemnon. The πέπλος, both the symbolic net (ἄμφιβληστρον, 1382) in the murder of Agamemnon and one of the many enumerated objects which confines and represses Iphigenia during her sacrifice, thus becomes a crucial thematic link, which widens the reader’s
understanding about the brutal and oppressive nature of both of these ritualistic slaughters. First, Iphigenia is said by the Chorus to have been wrapped in the πέπλοι when she was being held above the altar, “After a prayer the father ordered the attendants to seize and lift her up with all their courage like a goat over the altar wrapped in cloaks, and to restrain from her beautiful mouth the sound of a curse upon the home by a gag, by the strength of the bit and the stifling might (φράσεν δ’ ἄξιος παθῷ μετ’ εὐχάν / δίκαιαν χρυσίδος ὑπερθε βωμαθ / πέπλαι περιπτῇ παντὶ θυμῷ / προνοιῇ λαβεῖν ἄξιον, / στόματός τε καλλιπρόφου / φυλακῇ κατασχεῖν φθόγγον ἄραν οὐκος / μία χαλικὸν τ’ ἀναδόκῳ μένει, 231-8).” Iphigenia, likened to goat about to be slaughtered, is wrapped in her cloaks, gagged, and overwhelmed by the overbearing force of her sacrificers; thus she, a young and delicate maiden, is a victim very cruelly subjugated and oppressed. In Casandra’s prophesy, Agamemnon similarly is represented as an animal, the bull, which is ensnared by the cloaks and struck dead by the crafty device of a black horn (Ἄ ά, ἱδὼν ἱδών: ἄπεχε τῆς βοῶς / τὸν τάφυν ἐν πέπλοισι / μελαγείρῳ λαβοῦσα μηχανήματι / τίπτει, 1125-8). Both Agamemnon and Iphigenia are depicted as sacrificial animals, which have been bound up in some way and unpityingly butchered. In both instances, the πέπλος, serving as a sort of covering, becomes an overarching symbol which evokes the image of a tied up, entangled, defenseless creature helplessly exposed to a looming gory execution.

However one difference separates these two examples, for Agamemnon, being a big tough bull, must be brought down by a treacherous slaying (δολοφόνου λέβητος τύχαν σοι λέγω) whereas Iphigenia, described as a mere goat, need only be thoroughly crushed and constrained by the might of her sacrificers. Therefore, in the case of Iphigenia, the πέπλος represents just her state of grave repression, but in the case of Agamemnon, symbolizes not only defenseless entrapment but also the cunning, which must be employed by the cow, the theriomorphic Clytemnestra, in order to bring down a bull, a beast of rather large size (δολοφόνου λέβητος τύχαν σοι λέγω, 1129). The πέπλος then, or the net in general, is not only a symbol of oppression but also of shrewd premeditation and advanced technical engineering, which can make subduing the largest beasts of burden seem as effortless as catching fish in a stream (ὡσπερ ἵθηνον, 1382).
The role of the net in the play then makes a statement about human nature in general, that the innate capacity of the mind to conceive and design things far outstrips the physical might and stamina of beasts. The *Agamemnon* may suggest that the mind, however much it may advance human beings, also enables them to descend to wild, amoral, and animalistic behavior. The lesson conveyed in a rather Aesopian way is that human beings, by nature, are not far from actually embodying the beasts to which they are likened through metaphor and simile. Human beings can act just as viciously as wild beasts, if not worse than them. The net, the product of imagination and creativity, the ostensibly good and special endowments of human beings, is shown as a deleterious instrument of capture, victimization, and slaughter, compelling the audience to reflect upon the potential effects of the employment of the intellect and continually examine and reassess their nature in comparison with the characters of this drama.
Notes

1 See "τί γὰρ / γυναικὶ τούτου φέγγος ἦδιον δρακεῖν, / ἀπὸ στρατείας ἀνδρὶ σώσαντος θεοῦ / πύλας ἀνοίξαι, 601-604." Clytemnestra, in the manner of her epithet, the "fence (ἕρκος)," opens the gates in order to lure and enclose the king.

2 "here is Agamemnon, my husband, now a corpse, the work of this right hand, a just workman (οὗτος ἐστιν Αγαμέμνων, ἐμὸς / πῶς, νεκρὸς δὲ, ἠκούε δεξιὰς χερὸς / ἔργον, δικαίας τέκτονος), 1405."