Blood and Watchdogs: Two Images in *Agamemnon* 607-612

Anne Salloom ‘14

One of the most important and distinctive features of the *Agamemnon* is the large number of complex and interlocking images that Aeschylus uses throughout the work.¹ These metaphors are particularly notable for their bold nature, as Aeschylus coins many new metaphors, which would have been striking to his audience. ² Additionally, the interrelatedness of reoccurring images throughout the work means that these duplications have a significant impact on the work as a whole, connecting together ideas and events from throughout the play. Such interconnectedness means that these repeated images take on different layers of meaning and can relate to the work as a whole in multiple ways; they do not simply add ornamentation to the play, but rather are essential to its understanding. In looking at the importance of images in the *Agamemnon*, this paper will focus on two images from the end of Clytemnestra’s response to the herald, who brings the news of the capture of Troy. Clytemnestra is the most powerful speaker in the play; she exemplifies the art of persuasion, and she has no qualms about lying or using crafty language to make her point.³ These two images occur in the context of Clytemnestra’s highly persuasive and ironic speech, and this background lends additional meaning to the images. In this paper, I will use the two dominant images at the end of Clytemnestra’s speech to the messenger, the image of the dipping of bronze (612) and of the watchdog (607), to show how repetitions of these images are related to each other and add multiple layers of meaning to the speech. I will also use these examples to demonstrate the interconnectedness of images and specific words throughout the *Agamemnon*.

At the end of her response to the herald, Clytemnestra uses the image of the dipping of bronze to reinforce the idea of her supposed innocence. This image and the specific words used in her metaphor occur elsewhere in the play, where they relate back to the image in Clytemnestra’s speech and serve to further illuminate her
meaning and connect the ideas of the play as a whole. Speaking ironically, she says, “I do not know more of pleasure from another man, or of censorious rumor, than I do of the dipping of bronze” (οὐδ᾽ ὀῆδα τέρφεν ὀὖδ᾽ ἐπίφορον φάτων/ ἄλλον πρὸς ἀνόρφος μᾶλλον ἡ χαλκοσφάρα, 611- 612). Her language is characteristically ironic here; she of course knows “of pleasure from another man,” and her murder of Agamemnon will be a dipping of bronze in blood, just a dipping different from the phrase’s literal meaning of forging metal. The only other appearance of the word for “bronze” (χαλκός) in the Agamemnon reinforces the falsity of Clytemnestra’s speech. The Chorus, at the beginning of the first stasimon (355-487), compares Paris with bad bronze, although Paris’s name is actually withheld until after the comparison (399), leaving its subject unknown until the end. The Chorus says that this person, “in the manner of bad bronze, with wearing and knockings, turns out to be black, when he is condemned” (κακὸν δὲ χαλκὸν τρόπον/ ἐν καὶ προσβολαῖς/ μελαμπαγής πέλει/ δικαιοθείς, 390- 393). This metaphor could easily refer to Clytemnestra, because, like the low-quality bronze, she gives a false impression to the beholder through her lies and clever speech, but the truth of Clytemnestra’s behavior becomes apparent over time, just as the true quality of the bronze becomes apparent after it has been worn down. The fact that the subject of the comparison is left ambiguous until its end further suggests that Aeschylus intended for the metaphor to have multiple identifications. Further, the word for “black” (μελαμπαγής) in this simile actually has the more specific meaning of “black-clotted,” conjuring the image of clotted, dried blood, and its other use in the Aeschylean corpus is in reference to blood. This use of a word associated with gore further increases the suggestion of this comparison with Clytemnestra, the murderer, and links this simile back to the image of murder in 612. Thus, this earlier image of bronze, with its reference to a deceptive person and language suggesting murder, reinforces and strengthens the meaning of Clytemnestra’s speech, while it also demonstrates the interconnectedness of images in the play through the relatedness of the ideas expressed by the two images.

In addition to the significance of the image of bronze, the other uses of the word for “dipping” (βαφή) in the play likewise connect this image at the end of Clytemnestra’s speech with two
other places in the play, enhancing the meaning of both the speech and the image. While the word in 612 means to produce a weapon through the tempering of metal, it can also indicate dye, and while the actual image shifts with the meaning of the word, the repetition of the word links the three vivid images together. The first use of the word occurs as the Chorus tells of Iphigenia’s sacrifice, describing her “saffron-dyed robes” (κρόκου βαφάς, 239), which fall around her as the men in Agamemnon’s company prepare to murder her (228-247). The use of the same word, βαφή, in Clytemnestra’s speech and in the description of Iphigenia’s sacrifice links linguistically two events in the play that are already linked thematically. Clytemnestra plots against Agamemnon because of her daughter’s murder; this sacrifice causes her to seek the retribution that she alludes to, so the repetition in the use of the word βαφή links the cause with its effect. Additionally, the imagery Aeschylus uses while describing the murder creates a vivid scene for the audience, and the Chorus even describes the scene as being “like a painting” (ὡς ἐν γραφαῖς, 242), referencing the strength of the image. Because of the striking imagery and the centrality of the events described to the play, it is likely that the audience would have linked this scene with later allusions to Agamemnon’s murder. Thus, the repetition of the word βαφή enhances the meaning of Clytemnestra’s speech by linking cause and effect.

Likewise, the third use of the word in the play thematically links to the downfall of Agamemnon and thus further adds meaning to the speech. After she has convinced Agamemnon to walk on the purple garments upon his return home, Clytemnestra speaks of the “dye of the clothing” (εἱμάτων βαφάς, 960), which Agamemnon walks on. These garments would normally have been consecrated to the gods, and by walking on them Agamemnon’s hubris is exemplified, a characteristic that traditionally would lead to a man’s downfall, as the Chorus expresses earlier (367-378). The imagery of the richly dyed garments here is linked to the image of Iphigenia’s sacrifice through the use of the word βαφή; the similar imagery of colorfully dyed cloth links two causes of Agamemnon’s downfall. Additionally, Clytemnestra refers to this dye as a “gushing of purple” (πορφύρας…κηκίδα, 959-960), and this image may hint at or conjure the appearance of blood, further relating the imagery of Agamemnon trampling on the garments with the implied bloody sword of 612, in addition to the repetition of the
word in both places. Thus, the three uses of βαφή in the play all link thematically to each other, as the causes for Agamemnon’s death are linked with Clytemnestra’s oblique reference to his murder.

A second dominant image at the end of Clytemnestra’s response to the herald is the image of a dog. She refers to herself as a “watchdog of the house” (δωμάτιων κόινα, 607), and although the surface meaning of this image suggests her “faithfulness” (ἐσθλήν, 608) to her husband, to an understanding audience she speaks with clear irony. The Greek associations with dogs would have added to this double meaning as well, because female dogs were associated with shamelessness, an obvious characteristic of Clytemnestra’s behavior. While the image of the dog is used extensively throughout the Agamemnon, creating several complex layers of meaning, this paper will just focus on a few of the appearances of the word “dog” (κύων) that are most pertinent to Clytemnestra’s speech and demonstrate the relationship between repeated images. Most directly, Cassandra says while prophesizing that Clytemnestra has “the tongue of a hateful bitch” (γλῶσσα μοιητῆς κυνῆς, 1228).

Cassandra uses this phrase in reference to Clytemnestra as a murderer, which provokes the female dog’s association with bad behavior. Additionally, the numerous references to the Thyestean feast throughout Cassandra’s prophesy (1069–1330) call Aegisthus to mind, and these hints at her adultery further relate to the association of shamelessness with female dogs. Cassandra’s prophecy therefore ties into the ironic description that Clytemnestra gives of herself, and this earlier reference adds meaning to and confirms Cassandra’s prediction.

Clytemnestra repeats this same watchdog imagery when she refers to Agamemnon ironically as “a watchdog of a herder’s homestead” (τῶν σταθμῶν κόινα, 896), while she praises him upon his return home. Just as when she uses the image in reference to herself, its identification with Agamemnon is clearly ironic as well. The joy that she expresses in this speech for his return (855–913) is either entirely false, or present only because she is excited to carry out her plot; the mention of a dog in the middle of Clytemnestra’s lying once again brings up its associations with shamelessness. Additionally, this entire scene emphasizes Clytemnestra’s shocking, unwomanly behavior: she should be indoors, not outdoors making a speech that outdoes her husband’s in scope. In this way, the mood of the entire scene ties back into the imagery and negative
associations of Clytemnestra as a watchdog, and Cassandra’s characterization of her as having “the tongue of a hateful bitch” seems particularly appropriate as she makes this insincere speech. Finally, the use of this image to describe Agamemnon emphasizes his negative qualities as well. Her speech comes after Agamemnon’s boast about the havoc he worked upon Troy (810-854), and although Cassandra has not been referenced yet, she is present on the stage, his concubine brought back as the spoils of war, clearly displayed to his wife. These reminders of his negative actions make her praise of him seem particularly ironic and serve to emphasize his behavior that the Greek audience might have seen as shameful or unacceptable. Additionally, although Clytemnestra uses the masculine form of the word to describe him, it occurs in the accusative case, and because of its inflection it looks just like the feminine form of the word (κύνα), further inviting this comparison with a bitch. Thus, this reference to Agamemnon as a faithful watchdog builds off the imagery and associations already established in Clytemnestra’s speech to further characterize the two protagonists and connects to Cassandra’s later characterization of Clytemnestra.

In conclusion, these images of the dipping of bronze and of the watchdog serve as only two examples of how Aeschylus uses repeated imagery to add multiple layers of meaning to the play and to illustrate the complexity and irony of Clytemnestra’s persuasive speaking. Repeated usage of the same word brings together different ideas and themes, which complement and add to each other in meaning. Furthermore, the irony and double meaning in Clytemnestra’s speech further enhance the effect that these reoccurring images produce. These images thus do not simply add ornamentation to the play, but rather add significantly to its interpretation by bringing together themes from throughout the work. Given the importance of images in Aeschylus that can be gleaned from the examination of these two images, it is clear that the observations made in this paper do not apply only to these few lines, but can be extrapolated to the play as a whole. The interconnectedness of images and specific words throughout the Agamemnon add significantly to the play and enhance the importance of themes throughout. By looking carefully for such reoccurring images, readers can better understand the play and the relatedness of its themes and ideas.
Bibliography


Notes

1 Earp (1948) 97.
2 Earp (1948) 93-98.
3 Goward (2005) 63-68.
4 Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon, 8th ed., s.v. “μελαμπαγής.”
5 Liddell and Scott's Greek-English Lexicon, 8th ed., s.v. “βαρή.”
7 Raeburn and Thomas (2011) lxvi.