

BRIDAL CLOTHS, COVER-UPS, AND *KHARIS*: THE 'CARPET SCENE' IN AESCHYLUS' *AGAMEMNON*

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Past readings of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (458 BC) have spawned numerous theories about the nature and significance of the cloth stage prop central to the 'Carpet Scene' (783–974).¹ Kenneth Morrell has pointed out that 'recent critics at best emphasize the ambiguous nature of the "fabric"', which the critics refer to variously as something carpet-like, as rugs or blankets, as garment-like tapestries or loosely-fitting garments, as draperies, and more generally as the household's treasure.² But what fabric, if any, would have been versatile enough to function as a tapestry, a robe, *and* a blanket, and would have inspired outrage when used as a rug?

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² K. Morrell, 'The Fabric of Persuasion: Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, and the Sea of Garments', *CJ* 92 (1997), 155 ff., refers to D. Denniston and D. Page's survey (*Aeschylus, Agamemnon* [London, 1957], 148 ff.) of *heima* in other contexts as an 'outer garment' not a 'rug' or 'carpet'. Conversely, according to S. C. Woodhouse, *English-Greek Dictionary: A Vocabulary of the Attic Language* (London, 1936), 68–9, 138–9, 180, 719, *heima* refers to bedclothes and a bed coverlet. See Morrell's review of interpretations of the cloth, op. cit. 155–6, (nn. 20 and 21), especially arguments that it is clothing, not a carpet. On the former, see K. J. Dover, 'I tessuti rossi dell'*Agamemnone*', *Dioniso* 48 (1977), 58, as 'tessuti' and 'non sono tappeti', who agrees with E. Vermeule, 'The Boston Oresteia Krater', *AJA* 70 (1966), 21, asserting that, 'It is not, of course, a red carpet. It is clothing.' W. Whallon, *Problem and Spectacle: Studies in the 'Oresteia'* (Heidelberg, 1980), 64 ff., also argues that the cloths resemble *pharea* or *peploi*, 'loosely fitting garments that may serve other purposes as well'. Furthermore, he suggests that instead of spreading many garments on Agamemnon's path, the servants lay one large *pharos* or *peplos* out. Some scholars also refer to the cloth's association with household wealth (948–9): G. Crane, 'Politics of Consumption and Generosity in the Carpet Scene of the *Agamemnon*', *CP* 88 (1993), 117 ff.; or with gender power-play between husband and wife, *polis* and *oikos*: S. Goldhill, *Aeschylus: The Oresteia* (Cambridge, 1992); O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford, 1977), 299–300 on 'Clytemnestra's control of the threshold'.

More symbolically significant than the most luxurious carpet, the fabric strewn on the ground before Agamemnon strongly suggests a bridal cloth, an object replete with symbolism, which would have served as both a nuptial robe and a coverlet for the marriage bed. Scholars who discuss Athenian weddings in the context of the *Oresteia* have overlooked the nuptial nuances of the 'carpet'.³ Clytemnestra's tapestry-like cloth is a woven coverlet (*Ag.* 909: *πετάσμασιν*; 949: *ύφάς*). Like most patterned or figured nuptial cloths/robes for a royal couple, it is brightly coloured or decorated (*Ag.* 923: *έν ποικίλοις... κάλλεσιν*; cf. 936) and a garment or robe (960: *είμάτων βαφάς*; cf. 963).

May we yet unravel from the divergent interpretations of the 'figured cloth' its dramatic purpose and symbolism? This paper argues that the cloth's meaning is intertwined with the aesthetics and ethics of fifth-century Athenian notions of reciprocal gift-giving (*kharis*), in this case as *kharis* relates to textiles and their visual power.⁴ This nuptial cloth is central to Clytemnestra's deceitful *kharis* or thank-offering which, when sincere, was felt to stabilize and sustain both the marriage and the community as a whole.

The foundation for such a reading rests upon parallels in the *Agamemnon* with fifth-century Athenian wedding rites, cloths, and their symbolism. In addition, the play resounds with Homeric precedents, undoubtedly known to Aeschylus' audience, in particular, stories about the role of nuptial cloths in restoring marital and civic harmony. And, since ancient nuptial cloths are reported to have used iconography (*ekphrasis*) through woven images, in some known cases for paradigmatic purposes, two overlooked aspects of the play may yet shed light on the iconographic text possibly depicted on Clytemnestra's mysterious textile: the staging of the 'Carpet Scene' (783–974) and allusions to myths of tragic 'love triangles' (1069–330).

³ Few scholars have discussed wedding rites in the context of the *Oresteia*. R. Rehm, *Marriage to Death* (Princeton, 1994), the most thorough to date, overlooks the nuptial nuances of the 'cloth'; R. Seaford, 'The Last Bath of Agamemnon', *CQ* 34 (1984), 250 ff. refers in passing to similarities between funereal and wedding rites, with regard to Agamemnon's bath cloak (*kosmos*); R. Meridor, 'Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 944–57: Why Does Agamemnon Give In?', *CP* 88 (1987), 38 ff. refers only to love-triangles in the 'carpet scene.' And, while numerous scholars have interpreted the 'carpet' to be garments of some kinds (n. 2 above), none explores the possible connection to wedding robes, even though earlier (232–3) the Chorus in the *Agamemnon* describe Iphigenia sacrificed in her wedding robes.

⁴ B. MacLachlan, *The Age of Grace: Charis in Early Greek Poetry* (Princeton, 1993), 124 ff. on *kharis* in the *Oresteia*; B. Wagner-Hasel, 'The Graces and Colour Weaving', in *Women's Dress in the Ancient Greek World* (London, 2002), 20 ff. on *kharis* and the textile arts; R. Seaford, *Reciprocity and Ritual* (Oxford, 1994).

Athenian Wedding in the *Agamemnon*

While some scholars discuss how the *Agamemnon* draws upon the audience's familiarity with Athenian wedding ceremonies, they overlook the nuptial nuances of the 'carpet'.⁵ As others have in part pointed out, the play includes numerous allusions to wedding rites, beginning with the torchlight procession when the groom brings the bride to his parents' home (*oikade oikothen*), typically in a cart or (typically in literary works) in a chariot. Arriving at the groom's home, the couple are greeted at the door by his mother after which the bride is welcomed into the household with rites of incorporation (*katakhysmata*).

The play opens with the dramatic imagery of torch lights which signal Agamemnon's return home from the Trojan War. Furthermore, Agamemnon and Cassandra's arrival onstage together in the same chariot (*Ag.* 906, 1039, 1054, 1070), as Taplin maintains, must have appeared to the audience as a parody of actual wedding processions or their iconographic representation on sixth- and fifth-century Attic vases.⁶ Despite her status as war-prize and concubine, Cassandra is posed to resemble a bride in veils, perhaps for an ironic effect, sitting demurely beside Agamemnon, the abductor as 'groom'.

Furthermore, before complying with Clytemnestra's insistent urging that he walk on the patterned cloth, Agamemnon makes two reciprocal requests that mirror pre-nuptial and nuptial rites. The first, fastening the bride's special sandals (*nymphides*), is reversed when Agamemnon asks that his sandals be removed so as not to desecrate the cloth. His second request alludes to rites of incorporation (*katakhysmata*) that are offered to slaves, as well as to brides, coming into a new home. By asking his legal wife to welcome his concubine as bride into their home, Agamemnon adds insult to injury.

Following the carpet scene, Agamemnon's bath, which Seaford likens to a funereal bathing rite, can also be interpreted as an ironic inversion of the groom's pre-nuptial ablution, intended for its salutary benefits: 'the

⁵ R. Hague, 'Marriage Athenian Style', *Archaeology* 41 (1988), 32 ff.; R. Rehm (n. 3), 154; J. Scheid and J. Svenbro, *The Craft of Zeus: Myths of Weaving and Funeral Rituals in Greek Tragedy* (New Haven, 1996), 60 ff.; B. Wagner-Hasel (n. 4), 20 ff.

⁶ J. H. Oakley and R. H. Sinos, *The Wedding in Ancient Athens* (Madison, 1993), discuss and provide numerous photos of Attic vases and *epinetra* depicting pre-nuptial rites, wedding processions with the bride and groom in chariot or cart, and the couple entering the wedding chamber. Among these, a popular mythological subject for fifth-century Attic vases was the wedding procession of Peleus and Thetis (or the procession of guests on the following day, the *epaulia*). See also Taplin (n. 2), 304.

water was thought to enhance his fertility since it was "life-giving and productive." However, more reminiscent of a bride than a groom, Agamemnon is described as being covered by a 'net' that may have resembled a bridal veil, especially if, as Vermeule suggests, the Dokimasia vase's depiction of an effeminate, veiled Agamemnon corresponds in some way to Aeschylus' bath-robe costume design.⁷ Furthermore, by associating the ideas of bride, seduction, deception, and murder, Aeschylus reminds the audience of what, in large part, motivates Clytemnestra: retribution for Agamemnon's deceit in luring their daughter, Iphigenia, to her death at Aulis with the promise of her marriage to Achilles.

Given the allusions to wedding rites which precede and follow the 'carpet scene', a reminder of Iphigenia's aborted wedding at Aulis, the resplendent, patterned cloth that Clytemnestra has laid on the ground for Agamemnon to walk on is no mere carpet. Like most patterned, nuptial cloths for royal couples, Clytemnestra's cloth is described alternatively as 'tapestry-like' (923) and as garments or vestures (960). I will argue that substantial evidence throughout the play points to the possibility that the purple tapestry is a nuptial cloth, which typically served both as a robe and as a coverlet for their marriage bed.⁸

Bridal Cloths in Antiquity

The visual and symbolic centrepiece of this central scene of the *Agamemnon* was most likely neither crimson, nor a carpet. Produced by a 'mock tapestry' technique known since the Bronze Age,⁹ the

⁷ R. Seaford (n. 3), 247 ff.; Hague (n. 5), 33; and Oakley and Sinos (n. 6), 15 ff. on pre-nuptial ablutions. The Dokimasia vase (460 BC) depicts Agamemnon, covered with a fine net (veil-like), being slain; see E. Vermeule (n. 2), 1–22. Vermeule and Prag, *The Oresteia: Iconographic and Narrative Tradition* (London, 1985), suggest that both the krater and Aeschylus' references to Agamemnon caught in a net or web may draw upon Stesichorus' *Oresteia* (c. 560–40 BC).

⁸ Scheid and Svenbro (n. 5), 66 ff. While the authors discuss the Roman wedding practice whereby the bride and groom are covered with their nuptial cloth, it is unclear if this was common for ancient Athenian weddings as well. The Attic red-figure vase fragment (Figure 3) suggests that this too may be an ancient Greek wedding practice. Regarding the purple colour of the cloth, see Morrell (n. 2), 162, (n. 31), on Aeschylus' audience's association of this colour with wedding rites, not only with bloodshed.

⁹ E. Barber, 'The Peplos of Athena', in J. Neils (ed.), *Goddess and Polis: The Panathenaic Festival in Ancient Athens* (Princeton, 1992), 111–12. Fragments of ancient Greek woven picture cloths, used as robes (*heima*, *peplos*, *pharos*) in ritual contexts have been found throughout the ancient world. See Barber, *op. cit.*, 111–14 and her *Women's Work, The First 20,000 Years* (New York, 1994), 229–31; M. Vickers, *Images on Textiles: The Weave of Fifth-Century Athenian Art and*



Fig. 1: This illustration shows how a length of fabric can be worn as a robe, or a *peplos* in this case. Drawing by Susan Bird; from S. Woodford, *Introduction to Greek Art* (Ithaca, NY, 1986), 56, by kind permission of the artist.

nuptial cloth would have been woven on a vertical warp-weighted loom, using a supplemental warp-weave technique to incorporate a patterned design or pictures that tell a story in several colours. Consequently, in the strict sense, *ta poikila* would not have referred to an 'embroidery'.¹⁰ Conversely, as a tapestry for a royal couple, as Lattimore's translation states, it would have described a woven length of cloth (*Ag.* 949: ὑφάς) and a robe (*peplos*, *pharos*, *heima*, or *diplax*) (Figure 1).

According to Barber, for a royal couple, such a cloth would probably have been woven by the queen herself or by a female relative close to her, using a mock tapestry technique to create a story cloth. Furthermore, noble Mycenaean ladies, like other neolithic and bronze-age women throughout Europe, 'recorded the deeds and/or myths of their clans in their weaving'.¹¹ While slaves probably would have woven the household

Society (Konstanz, 1999); B. Wagner-Hasel (n. 4), 22 ff.; *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Winter 1995/96: *Textiles in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*: 90.5.873; 10.130.1076; 1977.232. In Hellenistic times, they were also used as wall-hangings (*pastoi*) in bedrooms or temples. See Oakley and Sinos (n. 6) 138, (n. 98); J. Sebesta, 'Mantles of the Gods and Catullus 64', *Syllecta Classica* 5 (1994), 39.

¹⁰ Fraenkel (n. 1), 147, 149, translates *ta poikila* (926, 936) as 'embroideries', which denotes hand stitching on linen or another fine fabric, rather than decorated woven cloths or tapestries, and he translates *huphos* (949) as 'textures' rather than textiles. Compare this with R. Lattimore, *Aeschylus I: Oresteia* (Chicago, 1953), 62–3: 'tapestries' (909, 936).

¹¹ According to Barber (n. 9: 1994), 231, if, in fact, these royal story cloths depicted the mytho-history of the clan, such weaving would be 'a task so important that it could be entrusted only to the queens and princesses, with their gold and silver spindles and royal purple wool'.

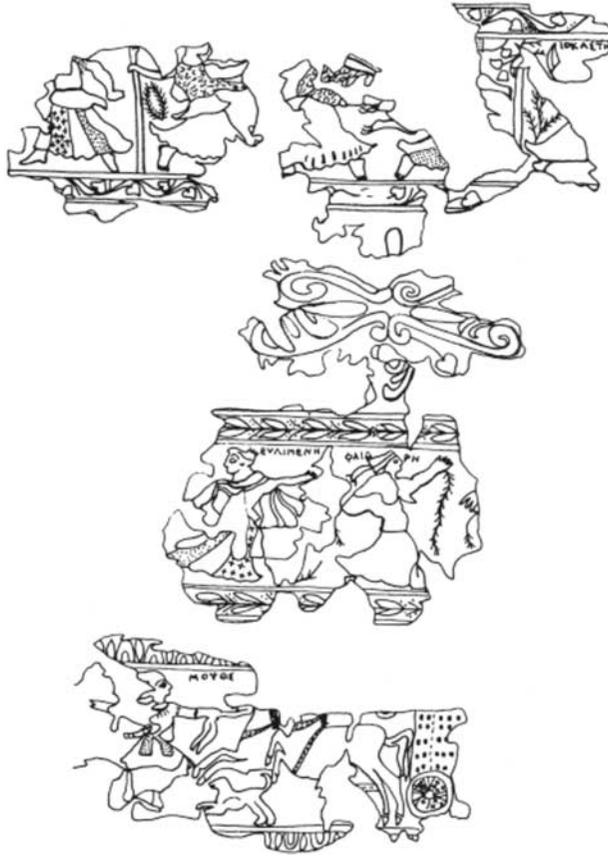


Fig. 2: This is a drawing of a fragmentary Greek story cloth, fourth-century BC, from a tomb at the Greek colony of Kertch on the Black Sea. From Barber (n. 9: 1994), 230 fig. 9.6, by kind permission of W. W. Norton and Company Inc.; story cloth in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg.

staples, such as sheets and towels, plain cloaks and blankets, in contrast noble ladies would have made more time-intensively ornate or ritually important clothing for themselves, their families, and friends. In fact, in the archaeological record of the ancient world, we find ample evidence of patterned or story cloths that depict mythohistorical subjects (Figure 2). Apparently, these picture cloths were used for sacred ceremonies, such as the Panathenaic festival involving the investiture of the statue of Athena, for aristocratic weddings and funerals, and later in Hellenistic times for wall hangings in bedrooms or in temples.

Weaving Symbolism and *Kharis*

Patterned clothing had a special significance to ancient Greeks, having been produced in the ritual sphere by women weavers (*arrhēphoroi*) chosen from each city state to produce fabrics for sacred rituals and for the *Charites*.¹² Despite this fact, the symbolic significance of woven textiles in antiquity, in particular those that incorporated pattern-weaving or iconography, has only recently received scholarly attention.¹³ Furthermore regarding the symbolic value of textiles in antiquity, according to Wagner-Hasel, 'More than any other objects, (for ancient Athenians) textiles symbolized the relationship between persons or groups who owe one another *kharis*.'¹⁴ As exemplified by the Panathenaic investiture of Athena, a woven robe served as a symbol of community, its meaning derived from its roots in collective textile work.

More to the point in the *Agamemnon*, the relationship between married couples signified a community in itself that was sustained, in part, through reciprocal giving. Consequently, a woven cloth had special significance for the Athenian wedding, when the groom presented his bride with a pictured nuptial cloth. According to Scheid and Svenbro, 'it is up to the spouse already living in the future home of the couple to furnish the blanket beneath which the newlyweds' union will be consummated' (Figure 3).¹⁵ These multivalent cloths represented the balance of cosmic, social, and sexual opposites, served as a thank-offering between husband and wife, and, in the case of royalty, affirmed the family's social rank by iconographically preserving their mythohistory.

¹² On the *Charites* in early Greek poetry, see MacLachlan (n. 4), 41 ff.

¹³ As both Vickers (n. 9), and Wagner-Hasel (n. 4), maintain, the pleasure and power of a woven cloth derived from its beauty, which could be heightened in special cases by the incorporation of Tyrian purple dye and even golden threads.

¹⁴ On *kharis* communities, see Wagner-Hasel (n. 4), 27–8. See MacLachlan (n. 4), 26, 136, 140, on Clytemnestra's un-*kharis* speech, *peithō* used for seduction and deceit, rather than for pleasure and truthful persuasion (*Ag.* 606–7: *γυναικα πιστήν δ' ἐν δόμοις εὔροι μολών| οἶανπερ οἶν ἔλειπε*), referring to hypocrites who greet the hero home from the war (793–4: *καὶ ξυγχαίρουσαν ὁμοιοπρεπεῖς| ἀγέλαστα πρόσωπα βιαζόμενοι*); alluding to the *kharis* of truthful speech: Cassandra to the Chorus (1183: *φρενώσω δ' οὐκέτ' ἐξ ἀνιγμάτων*) and the Chorus to Cassandra (1243–4: *καὶ φόβος μ' ἔχει κλύοντ' ἀληθῶς οὐδὲν ἐξηκασμένα*).

¹⁵ According to Scheid and Svenbro (n. 5), 66, typically, since the bride would be a stranger entering her husband's house, this meant that the groom would provide the nuptial blanket and the house. However, the reverse may have been true when a foreign man is integrated into a woman's home, as was the case for Agamemnon, Jason, Menelaus, Odysseus, and Theseus. In such cases, the bride provided the nuptial cloth, as well as the house, and her spouse 'ends up beneath the *khlaina* of his bride'.



Fig. 3: Red-figure vase, Athens, c. 525-500 BC. It depicts what appears to be a married couple under their nuptial cloth or cloak: courtesy of the Louvre, G99. Photo by J. A. McNeil.

Scheid and Svenbro argue that in ancient Greece and Rome the craft of weaving functioned as a metaphor for cosmic, civic, and marital harmony, a concept that harked back to Homer. Most notably, a nuptial cloak (*khlaina*, *pharos*, or *heima*) was a metonymic figure for sexual union, the physical interlacing of the spouses, as well as for the nuptial bed (*koitē*). In Greece and Italy, it symbolized the couple's union: the fabric was the bed which was marriage.¹⁶ Consequently, when Cassandra refers to Clytemnestra's and Aegisthus' adultery, she uses the verb 'trample on' (*patounti*) to describe their 'loathing for a

¹⁶ Scheid and Svenbro (n. 5), 85 ff.

brother's bed' (1193), notably the same verb that Agamemnon used when at first refusing to walking on the cloth. Hence, metaphorically speaking, the audience would have recognized — if ironically Agamemnon did not — that the cloth symbolizes their marriage bed; to defile one is to defile the other.

The weaving metaphor extended still further to equate the nuptial blanket with the roof over one's head, house, and home. In discussing Plato's *Statesman*, Scheid and Svenbro maintain that throughout ancient Greek literature and thought, there is a symbolic connection between the house or roof (*stegasma*) and fabric (*skepasma*), between house and cloth. Reinforcing the symbolic connection between a nuptial *khlaina* and the *oikos*, before entering the palace with her husband, Clytemnestra refers to the cloth as a *khlaina* (robe-coverlet) and to house, home, or hearth seven times (958–74): 'For as, when the root remains, the foliage returns to the *house*, . . . so by thy coming home' and 'to the hearth of thy house, thou dost signify that warmth has come (home) in winter' (968–9).¹⁷

Homeric *Topos* – Beneath Bedcovers

Not only archaeological, but also literary evidence of both cloth and picture cloth weaving and, in particular, nuptial story-cloths, abound in antiquity. Homer depicts high-born women weaving picture cloths most likely for important rites of passage (births, marriages, funerals) that depict family history or mythological events.¹⁸ Moreover, the act of slipping under their nuptial bedcovers served as a *topos* for Homeric (and later) couples for restoring marital harmony: after

¹⁷ The metaphorical connection between house, bed, and sexual consummation is also implied in Clytemnestra's prayer to Zeus Teleios (966–74) just before entering the house where she mentions 'consummation' (*telos*) four times: (972–4). Notably, the trilogy ends with Apollo's tribute to the goddess Hera as 'the lady of consummation and married love' (*Eum.* 214–15).

¹⁸ The Homeric word for pattern-weaving, *passein* or *empassein*, alludes to the technique of 'scattering' coloured supplementary wefts in the foundation weft to produce these woven images. Homer refers to women weaving colourful picture cloths: Helen's purple *diplox*: *Il.* 3.125–8, *Od.* 4.121–37; Andromache's purple *diplox*: *Il.* 22.440–41; Nausicaa: *Od.* 6.25–40, 57–65; Arete: *Od.* 6.305–7; Circe: *Od.* 10.221–3; Calypso: *Od.* 5.61. Some scholars suggest that Penelope too (*Od.* 1.228–50) may be weaving either a picture cloth (Barber [n. 9: 1994]) or a nuptial robe (Scheid and Svenbro (n. 5), 68 (n. 79)). Furthermore, in the *Iliad* (5.338), Aphrodite makes a veil woven with many pictures, or *daidala* (14.178–9: ἀμβρόσιον ἑανὸν . . . τίθει δ' ἐνὶ δαίδαλα πολλά), and a girdle for Hera to seduce her husband, Zeus (14.219–20: τῇ νῦν, τοῦτον ἱμάντα τεῶ ἑγκάπθεο κόλπῳ | ποικίλου). Moreover, Homer refers to Aphrodite's *peplos ambrosios* with brightly coloured flowers woven into it (Scheid and Svenbro [n. 5], 65). Ovid (*Met.* 6) refers to Athena's picture weaving skills in her competition with Arachne; Athena's cloth depicts the *Gigantomachy*.

separation in the case of Penelope and Odysseus (*Od.* 23.295 ff.), after discord in the case of Zeus and Hera (*Il.* 1.609 ff.), and after both in the case of Helen when she and 'Menelaos went to rest, and Helen, queenly in her long gown, lay beside him' (*Od.* 4.304 ff.), a scene later depicted in even more detail in Theocritus' 'Epithalamium of Helen' (*Idylls* 18: 16–19).

The reunion of Odysseus and Penelope provides a paradigm of restored marital harmony against which Aeschylus' audience could compare that of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra witnessed before them.¹⁹ In the *Odyssey* (23.295–301), Homer describes how Odysseus and Penelope's marriage is restored after a twenty year separation through metaphorical allusions to 'weaving' in several senses: textile, sexual, and narrative. In the literal textile sense, Eurynome and the nurse 'laid soft coverlet(s) on the master's bed' (23.289–90: εὐνήν ἐσθήτος μαλακῆς; 23.295–6, οἱ μὲν ἔπειτα ἀσπάσιοι λέκτροιο παλαιοῦ θεσμὸν ἴκοντο). In the sexual sense, there is the couple's love-making or sexual interlacing: 'The royal pair mingled in love again' (23.300: τῶ δ' ἐπεὶ οὖν φιλότητος ἐταρπήτην ἐρατεινῆς). And in the narrative text(ile) sense, they take turns telling their stories (23.301: τερπέσθην μύθοισι, πρὸς ἀλλήλους ἐνέποντε).

Marital and Discursive Discord

For Aeschylus' audience, Odysseus and Penelope's reunion underneath their marriage bed's coverlets (*Od.* 23. 289–90) would have served as an *exemplum* for the role of *kharis* in restoring the marriage bond after a long separation.²⁰ In dramatic contrast, Clytemnestra's nuptial cloth,

¹⁹ A. T. Murray, *Homer: The Odyssey* (New Haven, 1995), 403 ff. The English translation of *The Odyssey* used here is that by R. Fitzgerald (Garden City, 1963). Scholars focus on Clytemnestra as Penelope's foil for the faithful wife: see S. Goldhill (n. 2), 46 ff. However, critics overlook the fact that in these two stories, we find wives who pass the time purposefully weaving during their husbands' absences. While Penelope is the prototypical wife against whom Clytemnestra is judged, both appear to have been weaving a nuptial and/or funeral *pharos* or *heima*. In *Cho.* 989, 1010–11, Orestes speaks of the fatal robe as his 'mother's sacrilegious handiwork'.

²⁰ Several post-Homeric writers refer to married couples being reconciled under their nuptial cloths or bed coverlets, some of which depict pictures or stories. See Scheid and Svenbro (n. 5), 65, on *Zas* and *Chthonie's pharos* in Pherekydes of Syros (sixth-century BC), Helen's *khlaina* woven for Menelaus in Theocritus' 'Epithalamium of Helen' (*Idylls* 18, 16–19), and Peleus and Thetis' *purpura khlaina*, which depicts Ariadne abandoned by Theseus after their wedding night under her *peplos*, in Catullus 64. Regarding the latter, an Attic red-figure *lekythos* depicts Ariadne and Theseus on their nuptial bed, perhaps sharing her *peplos* (Pan Painter, 470 BC, Taranto, Museo Nazionale IG 4545: J. D. Beazley ARV² (Oxford, 1963), 560.5 and 1659; *Para* 388 (Oxford, 1971); *Addenda* 259 (Oxford, 1982)).

as both a wedding robe and coverlet for the marriage bed, simultaneously validates and parodies the cloth's symbolic values relating to marital and civic balance and harmony, concerns central to the *Oresteia* as a whole.²¹ Clytemnestra's gesture of giving such a cloth, apart from her having it laid on the ground, would have been regarded by the audience as a symbolic act of reciprocal thank-offering intended to restore the marriage-bond with her husband.

Unfortunately, instead of restoring the marital bond with her *kharis*-gift, Clytemnestra perversely uses the cloth to cloak deceit and betrayal with feigned *kharis*. During the royal couple's brief reunion, Clytemnestra abuses *kharis* in speech, using it for seduction and deceit, rather than for persuasion and bonding. In doing so, she further reinforces the rift created at Aulis by Agamemnon's egregious *akharis kharis* when he publicly dishonoured both mother and daughter with a false promise of Iphigenia's marriage.²² On this point, the Chorus reminds the audience before Agamemnon's arrival that he sacrificed his daughter in her nuptial robes (*Ag.* 233: *πέπλοισι*). Reciprocally, Clytemnestra presents her husband with a nuptial cloth/robe, which is as much a fabric as a fabrication or semblance of *kharis* (793, *ὁμοιοπρεπεῖς*). Like the hypocrites to whom she refers (793–4: *καὶ ξυγχαίρουσιν ὁμοιοπρεπεῖς ἀγέλαστα πρόσωπα βιαζόμενοι*), the cloth only appears to be a reciprocal favour-offering, while also serving as a reminder of Iphigenia's aborted wedding and death (*Ag.* 600–2, 623–4; *Cho.* 89–90).

For Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, the nuptial cloth represents conflicting values, discursive evidence of their marital discord. For his part, Agamemnon's resistance to trampling on (*patein*, *bainein*) the cloth suggests that he took it to be important ritually and economically. From a ritual perspective, he refers to it as if it were a sacred garment (922: *θεοῦς τοι τοῖσδε τιμαλφεῖν χρεῶν*) or as having a sacred significance, 'do not adore by strewing my path with vestures . . . it is the gods whom we should honour with such ceremonies' (921). To walk on it would be an act of desecration, treating it like a footmat (926: *ποδοψήστρων*). As further evidence of the sanctity of the cloth, he regarded walking on it

²¹ Notably, the trilogy ends with the incorporation of the Erinyes, renamed the Eumenides (the Kind Ones), in the social fabric of the new order, with Athena proclaiming (*Eum.* 834–6): 'you shall win the fruits in offerings for children and the marriage rites for always': *τὰκροθίνα θήη πρό παιδῶν καὶ γαμηλίου τέλους ἔχουσ' ἐς αἰεὶ τόνδ' ἐπαυέσεις λόγον*.

²² A. J. N. W. Prag (n. 7), 73 (n. 23), 122, discusses how in his *Oresteia*, Stesichorus used Hesiod as the source for Agamemnon's 'ruse whereby (Iphigenia) was decoyed to Aulis on the pretext of marrying Achilles'. Aeschylus would most likely have been familiar with both versions.

as a 'barbarian act' (919: βαρβάρου φωτὸς δίκην), recalling Herodotus' description of the tapestries in Xerxes' tent.²³ Moreover, if the cloth is a royal nuptial cloth, then it would be a household treasure, worth its weight in gold – or silver and purple in this case (948–9: πολλή γὰρ αἰδῶς δωματοφθορεῖν ποσὶν | φθείροντα πλοῦτον ἀργυρωνήτους θ' ὑφάς; 957: εἶμ' ἐς δόμων μέλαθρα πορφύρας πατῶν).

For her part, Clytemnestra refers to the cloth as a robe or bed coverlet (*heimata*), thereby situating it in a nuptial context (960: εἰμάτων βαφάς; cf. 963). For example, she refers to '(garments) stained from the rich sea' (946), to 'the dyeing of vestures' (960), or to 'the treading underfoot of many robes' (963). In addition to being a robe, the cloth would also be a nuptial blanket under which the marriage is consummated in the conjugal bed (*koiṭē*). As such, it would be associated with the marriage bed, as well as with the roof over the couple's head and all that is signified by the *oikos*.²⁴ In addition, inferential evidence scattered throughout the play suggests that Clytemnestra's nuptial cloth incorporated (or, more likely, that Aeschylus wanted his audience to imagine that it incorporated) the *ekphrasis* of woven iconography for a paradigmatic purpose.

Nuptial Cloths and Cautionary Tales

Several strands of evidence in the *Agamemnon* suggest that Aeschylus wanted his audience to imagine that Clytemnestra's nuptial cloth depicted a mythohistoric story. Furthermore, such a reading would help to clarify some of the more puzzling aspects of the play: the staging of the 'love triangle' (Clytemnestra–Agamemnon–Cassandra) where Cassandra stands silently for nearly 300 lines, the allusions by Clytemnestra, Cassandra, and the Chorus to the myth of Tereus, Procne, and Philomela, and, perhaps most daunting, Cassandra's seemingly incoherent 'visions'.

But first, what precedents existed in antiquity for the incorporation of iconography on nuptial cloths, presumably for paradigmatic purposes?

²³ Tapestry cloths used 'to create a sacral enclosure separated from the profane world originated in the East': Sebesta (n. 9), 39; O. Broneer, 'The Tent of Xerxes and the Greek Theatre', *University of California Publications in Classical Archaeology* 1 (1944), 305. As Herodotus 9. 82 reports, the Greeks' first experience of such a curtained enclosure could well have been Xerxes' field tent that was captured after the battle of Plataea, in which Aeschylus is believed to have fought.

²⁴ Scheid and Svenbro (n. 5), 66, in discussing Plato's *Statesman*, maintain that throughout ancient Greek literature and thought, there is a symbolic connection between *stegasma* (roof as house and home, *oikos*) and *skepasma* (fabric). They maintain that it follows logically: nuptial robe is to bed, as roof is to house.

And, would the use of, or allusion to, a woven, patterned, or story-cloth stage-prop be consistent with their use in any of Aeschylus' other plays? Both archaeological and literary evidence confirm that nuptial cloths in antiquity depicted mythohistorical scenes, sometimes as cautionary tales.²⁵

Oakley and Sinos maintain that the popularity of tales about wedding disasters in myths depicted on vases and on nuptial story-cloths stems from the Greek belief that brides and grooms, who are about to experience one of life's peak experiences, are vulnerable to the gods' envy. Apparently a popular mythological subject depicted on fifth-century Attic vases and *epinetra*, the wedding procession of Peleus and Thetis, Achilles' parents, is part of a mythic complex that includes the story of their nuptial picture cloth. In Catullus 64, the poet spends over 200 out of 409 lines describing their purple nuptial story-cloth. It is said to depict a cautionary tale about the failed nuptials of Ariadne, daughter of Minos, King of Crete, and Theseus, the slayer of the Minotaur and later founder of Athens.

According to Prag, as well as Taplin, and other classical scholars, Aeschylus was fond of using 'vivid and complex' images and fabrics in his productions, 'which he might have seen first on works of art'.²⁶ He is reported to have used 'gorgeous or impressive spectacular effects', such as Egyptian and oriental dresses, tapestries, and voluminous robes as stage props in the *Supplices*, the *Persae*, and the *Agamemnon*.²⁷ As mentioned earlier, Aeschylus' interest in using tapestries as stage props recalls his and his audience's familiarity with Xerxes' tent. Furthermore, in the *Choephoroi*, Electra refers to a cloth she wove for Orestes as a child that depicts animal figures, which would have appeared as a stage prop (*Cho.* 231–2).

In the *Agamemnon*, we find scattered clues alluding to possible imagery depicted on Clytemnestra's cloth, imagery that is thematically apt in the context of the play. The first clue comes from the staging of the 'carpet scene'. Aeschylus' critics have asked why he included

²⁵ Because Greco-Roman nuptial cloths are reputed to have depicted mythohistorical scenes (Barber [n. 9: 1994], 229–31), often as cautionary tales (Oakley and Sinos [n. 6], 11), it is plausible that *Agamemnon* offers scattered clues (as in mock tapestry technique: *empassein*) about the iconography (actual or meant for the audience to imagine it) on Clytemnestra's nuptial cloth.

²⁶ Prag (n. 7), 80 (nn. 98, 111), 123–4; Taplin (n. 2), 308 ff.

²⁷ *OCD* (Oxford 1970), 18, on Aeschylus' fascination with foreign lands and art, as well as his fondness for spectacular stage props and effects. Taplin (n. 2), 308, 313, 314, refutes the claim that the cloth's sole purpose is for spectacular effect, arguing that it is both a strongly symbolic (albeit enigmatic) 'tapestry-coverlet' and a 'rich tapestry-garment', so 'delicate' and 'finely woven' that 'even to tread on it with bare feet will spoil it'.

Cassandra on the stage with Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, only to leave her standing by silently for three hundred lines. Meridor has observed that, 'When it becomes obvious that the queen controls the threshold of the palace, and that under the cover up of celebrating her husband's victorious homecoming, she will refuse him entry until he walks on the purple fabric spread out between the carriage and the palace, Cassandra puts the conflict into strong relief and complicates it by her very presence'.²⁸ Aeschylus' reason for this stage tension, as well as the staging of this scene, begins to emerge when Clytemnestra refers to Cassandra as a swallow (1050: *χελιδόνος δίκην*). After being, abducted, raped, and silenced by having her tongue cut out, Philomela was transformed into a swallow. But, more on this later.

A second clue about the imaginary iconography of the cloth relates to Aeschylus' staging of the 'carpet scene'. Why does Aeschylus set in the foreground on stage the 'love-triangle' (Clytemnestra–Agamemnon–Cassandra) and, as Meridor asks, how does Cassandra 'complicate (this husband and wife reunion) with her presence'? One reason may lie in the way that this staging serves to highlight the thematic similarities to the Atreidai's family-history of tragic 'love triangles' – hence, the fated perpetuation of tragic flaws. Specifically, the Atreus–Aerope–Thyestes triangle tragically foreshadows that of Agamemnon–Clytemnestra–Aegisthus as well as that of Clytemnestra–Agamemnon–Cassandra, who are here highlighted on stage together. Moreover, Cassandra's role in this scene may be to remind the audience of a mythic love triangle involving poor Philomela, that involving her brother-in-law and sister: Tereus–Procne–Philomela.

Like the Agamemnon–Clytemnestra–Cassandra triangle in the foreground on stage, Philomela's is a story about a husband's lust for another woman and the marriage bed defiled. While it is unclear whether Clytemnestra's elaborate stage-prop was in fact a woven story cloth (as opposed to an easier to fabricate painted linen), it is reasonable to assume that Aeschylus wanted his audience to imagine it as such by alluding to the myth of Philomela in his staging and in several speeches. Like Ariadne and Theseus' tale of deceit and betrayal on Peleus and Thetis' nuptial cloth, Clytemnestra and Agamemnon's may depict a similar cautionary tale about mythohistorical love triangles and their tragic fates. If true, the play's multiple allusions to the rape of Philomela are quite apt, given that both play and myth concern similar

²⁸ R. Meridor (n. 3), 39.

issues: adultery and betrayal, infanticide, and weaving a story-cloth to reveal the truth.

Throughout the 'carpet scene' and immediately thereafter (1029–148), Clytemnestra, Cassandra, and the Chorus allude to the myth of Philomela, suggesting that they all have a common visual point of reference, that is, the cloth lying on the ground in full view. After Clytemnestra emerges briefly from the palace, referring to Cassandra as a 'swallow', the Chorus refers to 'my heart outrunning my *tongue*' (1029), thereby creating a thematic link from 'swallow' and 'tongue' to Philomela. A few lines later, Clytemnestra, again referring to Cassandra, joins those two images in one statement: 'Nay, if she is not, like a *swallow*, possessed of an unintelligible foreign *tongue* ... I attempt to persuade her by my words' (1050–2).

In addition to staging Cassandra as a 'silent Philomela' and later referring to her as a swallow, several passages (1095–7, 1142–5, 1146–8) compare Cassandra's grief to that of Philomela's sister, Procne, and to her murdered son, Itys. Like Atreus killing and cooking his brother Thyestes' children, Procne murdered and fed Itys to his father, Tereus; she was subsequently changed into a nightingale and Philomela into a swallow. Speaking to the Chorus before entering the palace and facing her own death, Cassandra alludes to the gruesome fates that befell Thyestes' and Tereus' children: '...babes crying because of their slaughter and their roasted flesh that their father devoured!' (1095–7). In these lines, is Cassandra merely recalling or visualizing these scenes from the mythic past or is she actually describing what she can see on the cloth spread out in front of her?

Perhaps the answer lies in the fact that the Chorus also refers to (because they can see) Procne when speaking to Cassandra: 'with melancholy mind bewails with 'Itys, Itys' her life that has woe flourishing on either side, a nightingale' (1142–5).²⁹ As if referring to the same images that the Chorus sees, Cassandra, who at this point would be walking across the cloth on her way into the palace, also mentions Procne: 'Oh the death of the melodious nightingale: her the gods cloaked in a feathered shape' (1146–8). If the images associated with the myth of Philomela were produced solely by the mind of a deranged prophet (Cassandra), then why would the Chorus also refer to them and,

²⁹ Taplin (n. 2), 309, asserts that 'the maids took up the cloth behind Agamemnon' after he walked across it; however, there is no evidence to support this reading. Conversely, the fact that the Chorus and Cassandra continue to allude to the myth of Philomela as Cassandra steps out of the chariot (around 1072; see Taplin, *op. cit.*, 318) and walks into the house (1072–1330) suggests that she may be walking across the cloth while she and the Chorus refer to its iconography.

moreover, why did Clytemnestra initiate these allusions earlier unless all three are referring to iconography of the myth of Philomela on the cloth?

Finally, the theory that Clytemnestra's cloth depicts scenes from the myth of Philomela may help to explain the complex nature of Cassandra's visionary outbursts and epideictic exclamations. The perceptual complexity of Cassandra's 'visions' may relate to Aeschylus' penchant for intertwining past, present, and future. Consequently, one can separate Cassandra's 'visions' into several types: images that recount the mythic past (myths of the Atreidai), images of acts taking place in the present, offstage but envisioned (the death of Agamemnon), images of acts that have not yet occurred (her own death), and epideictic references to iconography associated with the myth of Philomela in present view before herself and the Chorus.

Let us look at examples of Cassandra's ecstatic visions in contrast to her immediate perceptions of imagery on the cloth. The visionary Cassandra witnesses Agamemnon's murder, which is taking place offstage in the immediate present: 'Ah, Ah! alas, alas! What is this that *comes in view*? (ἔ ἔ, παπαῖ παπαῖ, τί τόδε φαίνεται); 'Some net of Hades? Nay, but the snare that *shares his bed*' (1114–16). However, in confusion, she assumes that the Chorus also sees the murder: 'Ah, ah! Look, look!' (ἀὰ, ἰδὸν ἰδού); 'In a garment she has caught him' (1125–7).

In contrast, both Cassandra and the Chorus refer to 'the testimony', that is 'here' of the murdered children, then to Itys and, finally to 'the wordy arts'. When Cassandra points to Thyestes' and/or Tereus' murdered children, it is as if they are physically (or visually) present: 'for *here* is the *testimony* that I trust: *here* are babes crying...!' (1095–7). In this passage, one might argue that Cassandra is not merely recounting scenes from the mythic past; instead, she is describing what she and the Chorus can see on the cloth before them (as Cassandra walks across it) and that Clytemnestra also saw and was familiar with, possibly because she wove the cloth.

Evidence suggesting that the Chorus too can see the iconography on the cloth appears where they compare Cassandra's outcries to those of Procne over the death of her son: 'Frenzied art thou... insatiate of lamenting cry, alas, with melancholy mind bewails with "Itys, Itys" her life that has woe flourishing on either side, a nightingale' (1142–5). Immediately thereafter, Cassandra echoes the Chorus' allusion to Procne: 'Oh the death of the melodious nightingale: her the gods cloaked in a feathered shape' (1146–8). To this the Chorus, who are

not visionaries, but who can also see the story cloth respond: 'By (uttering) evil do the wordy arts (*πολυεπεῖς τέχνηαι*) of prophets bring fear to learn' (1133–5). Notably, *πολυεπεῖς τέχνηαι* can refer not only to Cassandra's prophecies, but also to the iconography on the cloth.

In sum, what critics may have overlooked in reading Cassandra's visionary passages is that she takes the *present* moments immediately before facing her death not only to prophesy about the *future* and to reflect upon the *mythic past*, but also to 'read' the cautionary tale woven into Clytemnestra's nuptial story cloth. If one imagines that it depicts the rape of Philomela, the cloth would have 'told' a story that both wife and concubine could relate to on a personal level, a tale whose poignancy resided in its unmistakable similarities with the Atreidai's tragic family history. Such a reading of the cloth, its imagery, and its symbolism is consistent with what we know about Aeschylus' penchant for interlacing past, present, and future in the fabric of his plays, as well as his fondness for elaborate and exotic (oriental) stage-props.

Conclusion

Aeschylus' was a visual culture that relied upon the mnemonic and symbolic power of *ekphrasis* and iconography, which sometimes appeared on woven textiles used for ritual purposes. Above all, *kharis* was a visual power that emanated, in large part, from woven pictures. For fifth-century poets who produced a material text, the idea of a written text was still interwoven with the textile arts. For Aeschylus as a dramatic poet, the visual power of patterned cloth carried over to the charisma of speech. It is no surprise, then, that the *Agamemnon* alludes to various mythological and actual story-cloths, and that it refers self-consciously to the 'wordy arts' (*πολυεπεῖς τέχνηαι*). Finally, for Aeschylus' audience, the cloth was no mere rug; rather, it served as a symbolic object through which important issues in Athenian civic life could be set in the foreground. Not unlike Clytemnestra's bridal cloth, Aeschylus' *Oresteia* harnesses the visual and symbolic power of the textile arts to weave a narrative text(ile) about the importance of reconciling the tension (*στάσις*) between the old and new social orders in fifth-century Athens.