CLEDONOMANCY IN THE ORESTEIA.

I

At one point in the closing scene of the Agamemnon, Aegisthus meets the challenge of force by the chorus of Argive elders with a counter-threat (1652):*

\[\text{άλλα κάγω μὴν πρόκωπος οὐκ ἀναίνομαι θανεῖν.}\]

“Well then, I too have sword in hand and do not shrink from death.” The elders see a happy omen in these words and formally accept it:

\[\text{δεχομένως λέγεις θανεῖν σε· τὴν τόχην δ’ αἱροῦμεθα.}\]

“You speak of your death. So be it. We accept the outcome.”¹ Had this last line, through one or another of the many vicissitudes of scribal transmission, slipped from the text, or had Aeschylus himself not even written it, one is sorely tempted to wonder how many of the poet’s commentators would have found anything particularly ominous (or even ironic) in Aegisthus’ οὐκ ἀναίνομαι θανεῖν. Dreams are another matter. We tend to be sensitive enough to their prophetic import in Greek literature,


¹ The critical dispute over the distribution of these lines need hardly concern us here. The point made remains the same whoever utters the ominous words or accepts them. MSS σε in 1653 is problematical. We should, with Lobel, probably read γε.
so that, for example, few readers will not have long anticipated Orestes’ interpretation of his mother’s dream at 
*Choeophoroi*, 540 ff. But when it comes to the possibility of ominous language, it has been the practice of philologists for the most part to maintain a conservative silence before anything that is not so clearly labelled as *Ag*., 1652 f.²

For a further example, one not so clearly labelled, we might ask how many commentators have found anything ominous in the closing lines of the parodos of the *Agamemnon* (255-7):

\[
\text{πέλοιτο δ’ οὖν ἃ ‘πὶ τοῦτων εὖ πράξις, ὥς θέλει τὸδ’ ἀγχιστὸν ‘Ἄπιας γαίας μονόφρουρον ἕρκος.}
\]

Are we safe in seeing in them, with Méautis, a good omen for Clytemnestra: “la réponse des dieux à ses préoccupations secrètes, un véritable κληθόν, qui intensifia dans son coeur la joie criminelle et monstrueuse qu’avait éveillée en elle la nouvelle de la prise de Troie”?³

What we are dealing with here is cledonomancy,⁴ an important if not so well-known form of divination practiced in antiquity. Λ κληθόν in this sense is an apparently casual utterance heard by a man when he is deeply preoccupied with some plan, project, or hope, and understood by him as an omen of the outcome of his preoccupation. It was felt that such an utterance might have the power of bringing about an effect, “not indeed irrespective of its meaning, but other than the meaning or intention of the person who carelessly uttered it” (Halliday), or, from another point of view, that a god makes of the speaker an instrument for presaging the future, much as he might use an inspired prophet or bird in flight (Bouche-Leclercq). So Odysseus sees a good omen (χαίρειν δὲ κλεθόν) in the banal and casual remark of one of the suitors (Od., XVIII, 112 f.): “Stranger, may Zeus

² See note 14, below.
and the other immortals give you your heart’s greatest desire.”

And earlier in the Odyssey (II, 33-5), Aegyptius, without realizing who has called the assembly at Ithaca, prays that whoever did so may see the fulfilment of his designs—which Telemachus takes as a favorable omen (χαίρε δὲ φημῇ). Then there is the well-known “Cauneas”—the cry of the Caunian fig-seller, which Marcus Crassus could have read as a warning (cave ne eas) not to sail on his fatal Parthian expedition (Cic., De Divin., II, 84), and the child’s cry “tolle, lege! tollē, lege!” which figures so dramatically in Augustine’s conversion to Christianity (Conf., VIII, 12). κλέδονες were thought to have been more fully certified as divinely inspired if, as in the examples cited, they were completely unexpected, and the speaker’s intention and meaning were remote from the preoccupation of the hearer. Calculated anticipation of kIédones generally tended to render them doubtful to a Greek (though not to a Roman), because it impaired the purely accidental character of the revelation. To the ancient mind, it was in circumstances which we, from a scientific standpoint, would call “purely accidental”—free of human intervention and control—that divinity seemed most operative in signalling its intentions. Still, as long as the source of the

6 Note that this is much the same kind of utterance as Ag., 255, referred to above. But obviously the dramatist cannot at this point make Clytemnestra’s recognition of the omen as explicit as the narrative poet is free to do.

Bouché-Leclercq (p. 156) here sees the suitors’ promise to conduct the beggar Ierus to the land of the cruel king Echetus (rather than the casual remark preceding it) as the kIédon, and so as a forecast of their own imminent death and journey to Hades. This is at best strained, if not wholly incorrect.

8 Bouché-Leclercq, pp. 158 ff.

7 This tendency to find the divine in the “accidental” or to refuse to accept the notion of an “uncaused” event is a particular characteristic of mythical thought, if not an abiding habit of the mind. Ernst Cassirer, Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, II: Mythical Thought, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven, 1955), esp. pp. 43 ff., makes particularly fruitful reading in this respect. “Science is content if it succeeds in apprehending the individual event in space and time as a special instance of a general law but asks no further ‘why’ regarding the individualization as such, regarding the here and now. The mythical consciousness, on the other hand, applies its ‘why’ precisely to the particular and unique. It ‘explains’ the individual event by postu-
utterance remained quite ignorant of the hearer's preoccupation, one might wait for or actually seek out a *klēdōn*, with as much hope of reliability as when looking for traces of the future at Delphi or in the entrails of an animal. In *Od.*, XX, 100-21, Odysseus prays for just such an utterance (*φήμην τὸς μοι φάσων*), and, hearing the prayer of a meal-grinder that the suitors might eat their last meal in the house, rejoices in the omen (*χαίρειν δὲ κληδόνι*). So also in Callimachus (*Epigr.*, 1) the Mysian stranger, uncertain whether to marry a girl of his own class or one of higher station, is sent into the street for his answer by Pittacus of Mytilene. There he hears a chance cry from youngsters spinning tops, "Keep to your own track!" (*τὴν κατὰ σαυτὸν ἔλα*), and accepts it as an omen (*παύσιν κληθόνα συνθέμενος*).8 Indeed, at certain oracular shrines ⁹ the consultant left with ears stopped after making his inquiry, his response being the first utterance heard after unstopping his ears outside.

Closely allied to the concept of cledonomancy if not a species of it is the experience of names as omens of individual destiny (*ὄνομα ὅρνυς, omen nomen*). Plato's *Cratylus* clearly attests to the boundless dexterity of the Greek imagination in interpreting the meaning of a name, in struggling to discover a close correspondence between inner reality or ultimate destiny and name.¹⁰ For a people close to mythical thinking, the name, as Cassirer says,

lating individual acts of the will. . . . It begins with the intuition of purposive action—for all the forces of nature are for myth nothing other than expressions of a demonic or divine will" (pp. 48 f.).

⁸ "Out of the mouths of babes . . . ." Plutarch tells us that among the Egyptians the chance remarks of children were considered to be particularly rich in ominous content (*De Is. et Os.*, 14).

⁹ E.g., the oracle of Apollo Spodios at Thebes, of the *Klēdones* at Smyrna, of Hermes Agoraios at Pharae in Achaea, and the sanctuary of Apis in Egypt (Paus., VII, 22, 3-4; IX, 11, 7).

¹⁰ The Parmenidean contrast between onoma and on (B 8, 38 f., B 19) as well as the more radical doctrine of Gorgias that being is incomunicable (B 3) can have scarcely affected more than a small fraction of the audience attending tragic performances in the mid-fifth century. Whether Aeschylus himself believed in the efficacy of the kind of divination under discussion or merely used it for his dramatic purposes is not a question that need concern us here. But see on this point the stimulating article of Thomas Rosenmeyer, "Gorgias, Aeschylus, and *Apatē*," *A. J. P.*, LXXVII (1955), pp. 225-60.
expresses what is innermost and essential in the man, and it positively 'is' this innermost essence. Name and personality merge. In rites of initiation a man is given a new name because what he receives in the rite is a new self. The name of a god above all constitutes a real part of his essence and efficacy. It designates the sphere of energies within which each deity is and acts.\footnote{11 Cassirer, pp. 40 f. See also Sir James Frazer, The New Golden Bough, ed. Theodor H. Gaster (Doubleday Anchor repr., Garden City, N. Y., 1961), pp. 107-12, and the bibliography on p. 126.}

This attitude has early precedent in Athena’s pun on Odyssey’s name (τί νόι οἱ τόσον ὁδὸσαο, Ζεῦ; Od., I, 62; compare Autolycus’ reason for giving him that name, Od., XIX, 407-9), and Pene-lope’s disposition on the gates of ivory and horn (Od., XIX, 560-γ),\footnote{12 It should be noted also that in their poetic effect Homeric epithets often come very close to being significant names, or extensions of names, summing up essence or defining by dominant characteristic, much like the cult titles of divinities.} and is later reduced to a delicate pseudo-science in the hands of Artemidorus of Daldis, whose Oneirokritikon is full of elaborate cledonomantic interpretations of names appearing in dreams. Readers of Aeschylus will not have to be reminded of the cledonomantic role names play in his dramaturgy.\footnote{13 For a complete list see W. Schmid, Gesch. d. griech. Lit., I, 2 (1934), p. 297, n. 3.} One immediately thinks of Apollo the Destroyer (ἀπόλλων, Ag., 1081), Zeus the Ultimate Cause (διὸς Διὸς, Ag., 1485),\footnote{14 At the risk of appearing presumptuous, I would call Fraenkel’s hesitancy at this passage paradigmatic of the conservativism of that too scientific philology mentioned earlier in this paper and of the aesthetic myopia which not infrequently mars otherwise brilliant scholarly achievement. As much as Fraenkel will admit is that "διὸς has an appeal to the ear" and that Blass and Norden "have suggested very plausibly that Aeschylus has in mind here the etymology of the god’s name which is later found in Plato (Crat. 396a,b) and particularly in the Stoa..." That “appeal to the ear” is no idle jingle, and what is merely a plausible suggestion to Fraenkel is, I should think, an elementary poetic fact, documented—one might even say poetically glossed—far more securely by παρηγέτα (which immediately follow διὸς in the text) than by Plato, the Stoa, Blass, or Norden.} the Strife-bringing Erinys (ἰὼς Sept., 723-6), Prometheus the Fore-thinker (P.V., 86), Dike the daughter of Zeus (Διὸς κόρα,
Cho., 948), and Helen the Wrecker (ἴλενας, ἱλανδρος, ἱλίπτολις, Ag., 689).

The efficacy of klédones, as of curses and blessings, derives from the mythic experience of the intrinsic potency of language in general. About this experience Cassirer tells us that

the basic assumption is that word and name do not merely have a function of describing or portraying but contain within them the object and its real powers. Word and name do not designate and signify, they are and act. In the mere sensuous matter of language, in the mere sound of the human voice, there resides a peculiar power over things. Primitive peoples ‘exorcise’ threatening events and catastrophe, seek to avert eclipses, storms, etc. by song and loud outcry and noise-making. But the mythical-magical power of language is truly manifested in articulated sound. The formed word is itself restricted and individual: each word governs a specific realm of being, over which it may be said to exert unlimited and sovereign power.\(^\text{15}\)

Adapting the proposition of Leucippus (fr. 2) we might sum up the ideal form of this experience in the expression οὐδὲν ῥῆμα μάτην γίνεται. We may go a step further in the aetiology of cledonomancy and see it ultimately as a function of the mythical experience of interpenetration at all levels of reality, where nothing is accidental, where the principles of causality are post hoc, ergo propter hoc and juxta hoc, ergo propter hoc,\(^\text{16}\) where things mirror one another, pass into one another, become one another, indeed are one another.\(^\text{17}\) In such a world, the spoken


\(^\text{15}\) Cf. Cassirer, pp. 43-9, especially his sources cited in note 18 on p. 45.

\(^\text{17}\) It is rare to find a scholar who can speak of the mythic experience of reality without unfavorably comparing it, whether openly or by implication, with logical and scientific modes of understanding. Few men, if any, are more sensitive to this phenomenon than Eric Voegelin. I know of no more sympathetic or more beautiful description of the mythic experience of interpenetration (which he calls “participation”) than the following, which I cannot forbear to quote in its entirety (Order and History, I: Israel and Revelation [Baton Rouge, 1956], p. 3):

Whatever a man may be, he knows himself a part of being. The great stream of being, in which he flows while it flows through him, is the same stream to which belongs everything else that
word is thought to possess twofold power: it may be an index of what is happening or will happen, or it may actually precipitate events. In practice, these two aspects are not often easy to distinguish. In our original example (Ag., 1652), does Aegisthus’ ὡκ ἀναίνομαι θανεῖν become an omen for the Argive elders because it merely signals his death, or because it will actually cause his death? It is hard to say. On the other hand, the coryphaeus clearly fears that Cassandra’s explicit reference to Agamemnon’s death may bring it about, for he quickly enjoins her to keep auspicious restraint on her tongue (1247): 18

εὐφημον, ὡ τάλανα, κοίμησον στόμα.

Even a careless word, then, may have as much potency as a formal incantation, like the kommos of the Choephoroi or a “binding curse” like that of the Erinyes in the Eumenides (ὑμνος δέσμος, 306 ff.). 19

drifts into his perspective. The community of being is experienced with such intimacy that the consubstantiality of the partners will override the separateness of substances. We move in a charmed community where everything that meets us has force and will and feelings, where animals and plants can be men and gods, where men can be divine and gods are kings, where the feathery morning sky is the falcon Horus and the Sun and Moon are his eyes, where the underground sameness of being is a conductor of magic currents of good or evil force that will subterraneously reach the superficially unreachable partner, where things are the same and not the same, and can change into each other.

18 Auspicious restraint (euphēmein; compare the Roman favere linguis) is especially necessary on solemn or critical occasions, as at sacrifice, the purpose of which may be thwarted by an untoward word.

19 The belief in the potency of language even applies to the written word. Closely related to the hymnoi desmoi are the katadesmoi and katadeseis (Latin dirae and defixiones) which were quite popular throughout the ancient world (and still are in some parts of Europe). Plato attacks the ἀγάμαι καὶ μάντειν who use them (Rep., II, 364 C), and in the Laws (X, 909 B) prescribes severe punishment for them. These “binding curses” in written form, inscribed on lead tablets or potsherds, have been discovered in many parts of the Mediterranean world, but the oldest examples come from Greece, most of them from Athens. Cf. Nilsson, I, pp. 800-4 (note 5 on p. 800 contains the best conspectus of the literature on “binding curses”); W. K. C. Guthrie, The Greeks and Their Gods (Beacon paperb. repr., Boston, 1955), pp. 270-4; E. R. Dodds, The Greeks and the Irrational (Berkeley, 1961), pp. 194 f., Edward M. Thompson, An Introduction to Greek and Latin
It goes without saying that hypersensitivity to the spoken word is implied in cledonomancy and is an obvious characteristic of the orally oriented society that Athens was in Aeschylus’ day and still remained even late in the fifth century. To appreciate such a phenomenon is difficult for those whose culture entails the mass production and habitual use of books. Easy access to books tends to limit attentiveness and retention. The book trade at Athens was nothing more than embryonic even late in the fifth century, although literacy, it now seems, may have been fairly widespread. Yet, even where both widespread literacy and a thriving book trade later existed, cledonomancy showed no signs of weakening; Artemidorus’ Oneirokritikon, with its cledonomantic interpretations, dates from the late second century B.C. Still, in trying to assess the degree of sensitivity to the spoken word and the use of cledonomancy in mid-fifth century Athens, one must not assume that Athenians were forever on the lookout for klédones, like the Nandi of East Africa, for whom nearly everything has ominous significance and who spend most of their day keeping strict score of good and bad omens towards an evening reckoning of their status in the eyes of heaven. Judging by the examples so far referred to, it is clear that cledonomancy only applies to extremely critical situations, moments of heightened awareness and earnest

Paleography (Oxford, 1912), pp. 11 f. The epigraphical sources may be found in these authors, but see especially R. Wünsch, I.G., III, 3, Appendix. For examples outside Attica, cf. A. Andollent, Defixionum Tabellae (Paris, 1907).


21 William Howells, The Heathens: Primitive Man and His Religions (Garden City, N. Y., 1948), p. 70. It is against just such superstitious scrupulosity that Cicero is arguing in relating the already mentioned story of Marcus Crassus and the Caunian fig-seller (De divin., II, 84): Quando enim ista [sc. omnia] observans quieto et libero animo esse poteris, ut ad rem gerendam non superstitionem habeas, sed rationem ducem? . . . Quae si suscipiamus, pedis offensio nobis et abruptio corrigiae et sternumenta erunt observanda.
whether mancy the Odysseus' Joyce's parts immune bears better, with nor such-and-such disclosure conversation is immune from the ignorance, uncertainty, and difficulty of interpretation that plague the dramatis personae and their counterparts in real life when confronted by klédones. It is only after the event that one may with absolute certainty judge that such-and-such an utterance was a klédôn or that it was properly understood. Like all forms of divination, klédones are, as Aeschylus' Prometheus says, δύσκριτοι (P.V., 486 f.). Not everything that happens is a sign, nor every utterance a klédôn, nor is even the professional interpreter invariably reliable.

22 One modern example among many that could be cited: James Joyce's use of significant names and ominous dreams in Ulysses. The so-called Joycian “epiphany” is actually secularized (or, perhaps better, metaphorical) divination, and when it involves random bits of conversation (as it does more often than not) it is literary cledonomancy plain and simple. By an “epiphany” Joyce meant a sudden disclosure of the whatness of a thing, “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself” (Stephen Hero [New Directions edition, New York, 1944], p. 211). Joyce, like his hero, Stephen, made a collection of such epiphanies, the manuscript of which is presently in the Joyce collection of the library at the State University of New York at Buffalo.

23 Greek literature generally shows a healthy scepticism when it comes to the mantis and his interpretations, long before the heyday of the sophist “enlightenment.” A few of the more obvious examples: in book I of the Iliad (106 ff.), Agamemnon calls Calchas' interpretation in question (just as the chorus in the Agamemnon suggests he should have done at Aulis: μάντιν οἴνιμα ἔγωγ [186]; compare Odysseus' incredulity about Calchas' interpretation of the portent at
Neither in real life nor in drama may one reasonably expect a man to examine every word for its cledonomantic possibilities. Yet, a dramatist is in a position to fashion, and his audience to understand, even the most random utterances as klédones signalling the future. The dramatist occupies the standpoint of a god with respect to the dramatic action, and can manipulate language to foreshadow the outcome, like the name of Helen in the Agamemnon, προνοιασι τοῦ πεπρωμένου γλῶσσαν ἐν τῷ κέλδον (683-5). The effect of such a device is to endow the dramatic events with the shape of universality or necessity of the kind that Aristotle admires in tragic plots (Poet., 1452a). For a klédón implies purpose on the part of a power able to bring an event into being or foreknowledge of the place of such an event in an inevitable pattern (προνοιας τοῦ πεπρωμένου). Part of the pleasure of this type of tragedy must, no doubt, be described as being in on the divine secret. But without reference to a traditional belief in the availability of hints into the hidden design of future events, and to the agonizing difficulty of discerning and interpreting them, this collusion, as it were, of author and audience easily modulates from tragic pity and fear to the less sympathetic posture of the satirist. It is for this reason that literary cledonomancy, so far as Aeschylean dramaturgy is concerned, may be a better critical term for the verbal part of what has traditionally (and often vaguely) been called tragic irony.

Aulis [II., II, 299 f.]; at Iliad, XII, 230 ff., Hector denounces the seer Poulydamas and his craft in the most violent terms; Priam says that had the order to go to Achilles' tent for his son come from μάρτις θυοσκόβοι or ἱερῆι rather than from the goddess herself, he would have called it a lie and refused to accept it (XXIV, 220-2). In the fifth century, of course, the Oedipus Tyrannus displays the widest range of critical attitudes, from the belief of the chorus that mantic wisdom is merely one among many ways of discovering the truth (497-503) to Jocasta's sweeping condemnation of the seer's art. That questioning the interpretation of an oracle or sign by an individual mantis was not considered reprehensible and that it occurred more and more often during the course of the fifth century is clear from James H. Oliver, The Athenian Expounders of the Sacred and Ancestral Laws (Baltimore, 1950), pp. 12 ff.

24 See note 21, above.

25 The confusing nature of "irony" as a critical term is seen in the fact that it is used of tragedy, comedy, satire, and the pedagogic
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II

To believe that the word is capable of evoking the deed is basic to cledonomancy, and it is just such a belief that is expressed by the chorus and the Herald (and, to a lesser extent, the Watchman at lines 36-9) in the Agamemnon. The Herald is afraid to defile what he thinks is an auspicious day with disastrous news (636 f.):

εὔφημον ῥμαρ αὐτ πρέπει κακαγγέλω γρλώση μαίνειν.

But he has already done so, albeit unwittingly, at line 527 by verifying what we know is Clytemnestra’s secret hope (concealed beneath her public statement of concern, 338-47) that the Argive army may have sacked Trojan sanctuaries, thereby earning divine displeasure.26 Again, at 573 f. (ἡμίν δὲ τοῖς dissimulation of Socratic dialectic (only the last of which a Greek might have understood by the term, and even then as a vice rather than as a virtue: cf. Aristotle’s cool attitude toward it in N. E., IV, 7, 1127a22 ff., where it is an extreme opposite alazoneia, and Theophrastus’ devastating attack upon the eiron in the first essay of his Characters). For a brief survey of the protean transformations undergone by this word, see G. G. Sedgewick, Of Irony, Especially in Drama (Toronto, 1948), pp. 3-27. It will become evident in the ensuing discussion that the concept of cledonomancy covers a far wider range of verbal phenomena than “dramatic irony” (meaning language mocked by the reality of the play), e.g., the calculated avoidance of ill-omened language, out of fear of its untoward effect.

26 βωμοὶ δ’ ἄιστοι καὶ βέων ἄδιρματα. The second half of the line even matches that of line 339 in Clytemnestra’s remarks. In addition, it is not unreasonable to suppose that βωμοὶ δ’ ἄιστοι would have recalled that part of the first stasimon where the chorus spoke of the divine punishment incurred by the man who “has kicked the great altar of Justice out of sight” (λακτίσαντι μέγαν Δίκαιον βωμον εἰς ἀφάνειαν, 383 f.).

Fraenkel, following Salzmann and others, argues for the deletion of 527, mainly because no herald as pious as this one seems to be would have boasted of an action so offensive to Hellenic religious sensitivities. But the authenticity of the line would seem to be a dramatic necessity and is so defended by Dennison-Page (Aeschylus, Agamemnon [Oxford, 1957], pp. 120 f.) on the grounds that otherwise the important question of possible sacrilege by the Argives would be nowhere answered.

Clytemnestra’s wish at 341-50 may well have struck an Athenian audience as divination by opposites, a form of cledonomancy by which one says publicly the opposite of what he hopes the gods have determined. For examples in Homer, see C. H. Whitman, Homer and the
λοιποῖσιν Ἀργείων στρατοῦ/νυκά τὸ κέρδος), his words are a ringing confirmation of the queen's counterfeit fear (341 f.):

ερως δὲ μή τις πρότερον ἐμπίπτη στρατῷ
πορθεῖν ἄ μή χρὴ κέρδεσιν νικώμενοι.

As for what concerns Clytemnestra's more immediate plans, two casual remarks of the Herald seem like cledonomantic assurances of success. Within five lines of his entrance he says, "I never hoped to die here in Argos and to be buried like others in the land I love" (506 f.):

οὐ γὰρ ποτ' ἦχουν τῇ Ἀργείᾳ χθονὶ
θανῶν μεθέξειν φιλτάτου τάφου μέρος.

Later, after the description of the loss of the fleet in the storm at sea, he slips even more dreadfully: "If now there are any survivors, surely they speak of us as dead men" (671 f.):

καὶ νῦν ἐκεῖνων εἰ τις ἐστὶν ἐμπνέων,
λέγουσιν ἡμᾶς ὡς ὅλωλότας, τι μὴν;

Who but the most prosaic of readers cannot imagine Clytemnestra's silent response, δεχομένη λέγεις θανεῖν σε?

The chorus is even more sensitive to the potency of language. During their long and detailed description of the binding of Iphigeneia for sacrifice in the parodos, the girl's name is not once mentioned, almost as if to do so would hasten the retribution that must come from her murder.27 We have already noted how, on the occasion of Cassandra's unambiguous reference to Agamemnon's impending death, the coryphaeus cries out in alarm against her δισφημία (1247). And yet, as a matter


27 The same fear apparently motivates Calchas in his interpretation of the portent of the eagles and the hare (126-37). While he is quite explicit and (for a seer) remarkably clear in identifying the eagles as the Atreidae and the hare as Troy, he becomes evasive in the matter of the unborn young and what they correspond to in the real world—primarily, the innocent victims of the devastation at Troy (cf. 327 f. [with Weil's emendation, φυτάλμων παιδῶν γέρωντες], 461 f., and 358-61). He knows how unwise it would be to refer too explicitly to that part of the omen which is unpropitious (κατάμωφα, 145), the cause of Artemis' anger.
of fact, the chorus’ own most explicit reference to Agamemnon’s death (1338-42) is followed immediately by the cry of the king from within, almost as if the murderers had been waiting for their cue, or as if this single failure to couch their fears in cautious vagueness has ominously invited the disaster; indeed, the repetition, θανοῦσι θανῶν ... θανάτων, has all the ring of an incantation:

νῦν δ’ εἰ προτέρων αἵμα ἀποτείσσει
καὶ τοίς θανοῦσι θανῶν ἄλλων
ποινὰς θανάτων ἐπικρανεῖ,
τίς τὰν εὖξαυτό βροτῶν ἄσυνει
δαίμον φῦναι τάδ’ ἁκοῦν;

The chorus, laboring under its preoccupation with impending doom, tries very hard to avoid a too explicit expression of their fears for Agamemnon. So, for example, when they catch sight of the Herald, they say that he will either give them firmer grounds for their joy at Clytemnestra’s beacon speech or else—but here they break off and leave the alternative unexpressed (498 f.):

ἀλλ’ ἡ τὸ χαρὲν μᾶλλον ἐκβάξει λέγων·
τὸν ἀντίον δὲ τοῖς δ’ ἀποστέρων λόγον.28

Yet time and again the burden of their inmost thoughts slips out in unpropitious utterance. In the parodos, the simile of the vultures robbed of their young (49-54) turns into something more appropriate to Clytemnestra robbed of Iphigeneia than to Menelaus deprived of Helen, and betokens divine vengeance upon Agamemnon just as much as upon Paris.29 When they speak of the guilty man unable to appease divine wrath (69-71), their words once again carry an unlucky double reference to Paris and Agamemnon. They unwittingly subvert their closing prayer that affairs may turn out favorably despite their lamentable prospect by adding the ill-omened clause which we noted earlier in our discussion (255-7): “May prosperity crown these events, just as Clytemnestra wishes. . . .”

Again, in the first stasimon, the chorus begins by celebrating

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28 Compare Cho., 1031 f.
29 On this point see E. T. Owen, The Harmony of Aeschylus (Toronto, 1952), pp. 65 f.
the vengeance of Zeus upon Paris, but ends with dark allusions, which, though presumably meant as generalizations, point straight to Agamemnon: the anger of Zeus against the man fortunate without justice (464), the πτολεμωρθης (472, the very term used in addressing Agamemnon at 782) responsible for many deaths (461), praised to excess (468, as Agamemnon by Clytemnestra). In the same way in the second stasimon, a consideration of the divine vengeance taken upon Paris and Troy leads to ill-omened statements suggesting that the same fate awaits Agamemnon. The parable of the lion cub in the house prefigures Clytemnestra’s murder of the king no less than it recalls the doom of Priam’s house through Helen.30 The designation of Paris as αἰωνέλεκτος (713) suits Agamemnon as well (he is called διάδαμαρ at 1319). When the chorus speaks of that Justice which, “with no reverence for the power of wealth stamped with praise” (δύναμιν οὐ σέβοντα πλοῦτον παράσημον αἶνα, 779 f.), deserts the house that possesses it, and honors the righteous life (ἐναίσημον . . . βίον, 775), they are unconsciously prophesying the fusion of wealth and disproportionate praise which the treading of the purple symbolizes; Agamemnon later implies that Clytemnestra’s praise is not righteous (ἐνασίμως αἰνεῖν, 916 f.), and shows some hesitancy about “ruining the house” by spoiling its wealth, represented by the tapestries (948 f.):

πολλὴ γὰρ αἰδὼς δωματοφθερεῖν ποσίν
φύροντα πλοῦτον . . .

Clytemnestra also directs the ill-omened utterance of the chorus at the house of Atreus when she praises its wealth (962, 1043):

πένεοθαι δ’ οίκ ἐπίσταται δόμος.
. . . ἀρχαιοπλοῦτον διεπτότων πολλῆ χάρις.

The κλεδόν comes true quite literally when Agamemnon is en-meshed in “the evil wealth of robe” (πλοῦτον εἵματος κακόν, 1383).

The chorus has watched Agamemnon walk over the tapestries, summing up and fulfilling in that one gesture all their judgments about the fate that awaits wealth, praise, and injustice.

30 The interpretation is that of Bernard Knox in “The Lion in the House,” C. P., XLVII (1952), pp. 17-25.
They have seen Clytemnestra effortlessly inducing her husband to do this deed, and, by her flattery, strengthening the application of their kliédones to him and the house. Clytemnestra's climactic prayer to Zeus Teleios to accomplish his own and her designs, which are now so clearly one and the same, brings home to the chorus the realization that events are truly turning out ὡς θέλει τὸν Ἀγαμέμνον Ἄρτας γαῖας μονόφρουρον ἵρκος. These cumulative revelations, added to their abiding preoccupation with inevitable destiny, lead the chorus to the mantic terror which opens the third stasimon and the abulic despair at its close. Reproducing the run of the sense in this ode is complicated by a number of things: a hopelessly corrupt text in the second strophe, the emotional agitation of the chorus itself (KvKXov'uevov KEap, 977; ο7yrvpovtLecvas fpevo'6, 1034), and its fear of expressing its premonitions too explicitly. Nonetheless, the following paraphrase is offered, not without some trepidation, as a generally workable reconstruction of the poetic logic of the passage, its verbal content as well as the unspoken assumptions that give it support, impetus, and direction.

975-1000: The problem is that the chorus has seen Agamemnon and the army return safely. Yet they are more and more terrified by what they have since observed in Agamemnon's behavior and Clytemnestra's apparent plans, and by their own conviction that no one does what Agamemnon has done and escapes retribution. Feeling (kardias 977, thymos 993, splanchna 995, kear 997, kardia 1028, phrenos 1034) mantically knows for a certainty what the rational, calculating mind only vaguely apprehends—the imminent murder of Agamemnon. Is any remedy possible?

1001-16: Some critically dangerous states are remediable. Two such critically dangerous states are excessive wealth and health, for sickness is next-door neighbor to health, and uninterrupted prosperity, like a too direct sea-route over hidden reefs, leads to its opposite. But remedies are at hand for both. Excessive wealth a man may himself remedy before disaster occurs by the timely jettisoning of excess cargo; as for the sickness that comes from famine (vŷστιν νόσον, 1016), Zeus can remedy that after the event by bestowing abundant crops in compensation.

1017-34: By contrast, the present situation involves a man's
death, for which there is no remedy. Zeus’ moira has made the situation irreparable on two counts: (1) *after* the event, there is no resurrection to compensate for death (like abundant crops after famine), for Zeus has nullified the efficacy of incantations to raise the dead (witness his treatment of Asclepius); (2) furthermore (unlike the timely action of jettisoning cargo), any words *before* the event are fruitless, since Zeus’ moira—here the automatic retribution which follows upon such actions as Agamemnon’s—makes Agamemnon as good as dead already and keeps the chorus from accomplishing any timely purpose whatever.

Their speech has all along served another purpose than their own; it has provided Clytemnestra with klèdones endorsing the congruence of Zeus’ moira and her own designs. No words (or actions) running counter to that moira and those designs can be expected to succeed. If anything, they make matters worse by hastening the destined events. The paralysis of will and despair reach the point of metaphysical formulation in the closing lines of the ode (1025-33):

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ei δὲ μὴ τεταγμένα
μοῖρα μοίραν ἐκ θεῶν
ἔργη μὴ πλέον φέρειν,
προφθάσαι καρδία
γλώσσαν ἄν τάδ’ ἔξεχει.


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This formulation in turn receives its dramatic demonstration in the pathetic escape from action into inane discussion which follows Agamemnon’s death-cry (1343-71). Here they restate

31 Up to this time they had made a few abortive attempts to save the king, couched in language too oblique to be understood. Their sinister remark that they had cause for fear in Agamemnon’s absence (550), and the disguised suggestion that Clytemnestra’s boast of conjugal fidelity is false (615 f.) are both utterly lost on the simple Herald. The too general nature of their warning to Agamemnon himself (782-809) obscures the more immediate source of danger in Clytemnestra’s plot.

a previous observation (1017-24) about the impossibility of words to charm life back into a corpse (1360 f.)—

δυσμηχανῶ
λόγους τὸν θανόντα ἀνιστάναι πάλιν—

and end on the sheer edge of comedy with the limp epistemological principle that the mantic inference of murder requires more substantial grounds than outcries to that effect (1366-7):

ἡ γὰρ τεκμηρίουσιν ἐξ οἰμογνάτων
μαντενοσύμμεσθα τᾶνθρος ὡς ὀλωλότος;

Distrust in the efficacy of language to accomplish or signify anything other than Zeus’ preordained purpose can go no further than this cledonomancy-in-reverse.

By contrast to the chorus’ despair and inaction, Clytemnestra’s elpis is based upon the conviction that her plans congreue with the moira of Zeus. While they complain of being able to accomplish nothing kairion by speaking (1033), she can boast after the murder of having used language kairiōs (1372). But Clytemnestra herself does not escape the implications of her own unpropitious utterances—kledones so far as the audience is concerned—though their fulfillment does not occur until the Choephoroi. Her vigorous rejection of dream portents (275) will be her undoing in the second play. Her own ironic “dipping of bronze” simile (χαλκοῦ βαφᾶς, 612) points ahead not only to Agamemnon’s death but to her own and Aegisthus’ as well,

She is characterized by her ἐλπίδων κέαρ (11), the chorus, by the precise opposite: κυκλούμενον κέαρ (997); for her, οὐ . . . φόβον μέλαθρον ἐλπίς ἐμπατεῖ (1434), while they by contrast have no ἐλπίδος φίλον θράσος (994). The relationship of elpis to Clytemnestra’s industry and the contrasting inaction of the chorus coincides with the representation of elpis in the Prometheus Bound as the gift of Prometheus to mankind to replace the animal certainty about death, thus clearing the way for ambition and industry (248-50):

Πρ. θυρητοὺς γ' ἐπανασα μὴ προδέρκεσθαι μέρον.
Χο. τὸ ποῖον εὐρόν τήσει φάρμακον νόσου;
Πρ. τυφλᾶς ἐν αὐτοῖς ἐλπίδας κατήφκαια.

After the murder, Clytemnestra can boast of having been the instrument through which a divine avenger worked (1497-1504). Compare 912 f.:

τὰ δ' ἀλλὰ φροντὶς οὐχ ὑπὲρ μικωμένη
θῆσει—δικαίως σὺν θεοὶς εἰμαρμένα.
for in the second play Orestes is to strike with "swift-footed bronze" (ποδόκει χαλκεύματι, 576), "forged ahead of time" for the usurpers by Fate (προχαλκεύει δ' Ἀίσα φασανονργός, 647). When she speaks of Orestes as the guarantor of her and Agamemnon's marriage pledges (878),

εμὼν τε καὶ σών κύριος πιστωμάτων,

she has ironically designated him as her murderer, for as kyrios of the pledges, he must recompense his father for their violation. Later, in the Choehoroi, the exposure of her breasts and the accompanying plea for mercy (896-8)—

ἐπίσευξε, ὦ παῖ, τόνδε δ' αἴδεσαι, τέκνον, μαστόν, πρὸς ὑ σὺ πολλὰ δὴ βρίζων ἀμα σύλλοισιν ἐξήμελλας εὐτραφεῖς γάλα,

initiates the fulfillment of her portentous nightmare as it was described at line 531:

ἀντὰ προσέγχε μαστόν ἐν τώνείρατι.

Her excuse for taking a lover in Agamemnon’s absence is that it is painful for women to be kept from their men (920)—ill-omened words now that Aegisthus is dead:35

ἄλγος γυναιξίν ἄνδρος ἐργεσθαι, τέκνον.

Finally, her exegesis of the dream snake as Orestes is immediately followed by the dream’s fulfillment (929). As for her paramour, Aegisthus, he fares no better. In the Agamemnon in addition to the klédón at 1652 (which served as our starting-point in this essay), he slips as badly as the Herald at another point (1610):

οὗτῳ καλὸν δὴ καὶ τὸ καθανεῖν ἐμοί—

"With things as they now stand, I would consider even death a beautiful thing."

In the Choehoroi, Orestes and the chorus are quite conscious of the power of language to affect events. He explicitly warns them against ill-omened utterances (581)—

35 In the same vein, Orestes had earlier said to his mother: φιλεῖς τοῦ ἄνδρα; τογάρ ἐν ταύτῳ τάφο/κείσῃ (894 f.), and after the murder, he refers to the victims as φίλοι δὲ καὶ νῦν (978).
CLEDONOMANCY IN THE “ORESTEIA.”

ιμίν δ' ἐπαινῷ γλῶσσαν ἐβφημον φέρειν,

and bids them speak only ta kairía (582); they themselves search for means of fulfilling this injunction (720 f.):

πότε δὴ στομάτων
δεῖξομεν ἱσχύν ἐπ' Ὀρέστη;

One of their pious remarks (780)—

μέλει θεοίσιν ὄνπερ ἀν μέλη πέρι,

closely echoing Clytemnestra’s prayer to Zeus in the Agamemnon (974), bodes well for Orestes, suggesting the shift of divine support from Clytemnestra to her son. But they too slip unconsciously into klédones later fulfilled contrary to their intentions. They have in mind, of course, Agamemnon’s murder when they speak of slaughter rousing up an Erinys from those slain in the past to bring fresh disaster upon disaster (402-4):

βοᾷ γὰρ λογίς Ἕρων
παρὰ τῶν πρότερον φθιμένων ἄτην
ἐπάγονσαν ἐπ' ἄτην.

But the words themselves refer as well to Clytemnestra’s murder, the attack of the Erinies upon Orestes, and the seemingly undiminished power of disaster (μένος ἄτης, 1076) with which the play ends. And just as the Argive elders warned Cassandra against ill-omened words, yet seemed to bring on Agamemnon’s death by too explicit reference to it, so here the coryphaeus, apprehensive about Orestes’ allusions to his exile and possible death, warns him to use more cautious language (1044 f.)—

μηδ' ἐπιζευγθῆς στόμα
φήμη πονηρά μηδ' ἐπιγλωσσῶ κακά—

yet his own untimely allusion to the murdered pair as snakes (δρακόντων, 1047) seems immediately to conjure up the Erinies, πεπλεκταιμέναι πυκνοὶ δράκουσιν (1050). 38

38 For the Erinys as snake, see Jane Harrison, Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion (Cambridge, 1922), pp. 232-7. On p. 37 (fig. 55) Miss Harrison reproduces a scene from an early black-figure “Tyrrenian” amphora (cf. also J. d. I., VIII [1893], pl. 1, and Pfuhl, M. u. Z., fig. 207), in which a snake is rising up out of the body of a
In the *Eumenides*, cledonomancy has no part, mainly because the speakers are for the most part gods. But in addition to that, the attitude toward language and its power has changed together with nearly everything else in the apocalyptic conclusion of the trilogy. In the *Agamemnon*, the chorus’ hopeless inertia was the result of a determinist view of the world together with a belief that language accomplishes only what the gods have preordained to happen.\(^{37}\) Where words can accomplish no autonomous purpose and can only expedite the fulfillment of one’s worst fears, silence is all that is left.\(^ {38}\) Language is tortuously indirect where it is not actually repressed (like the Watchman’s—βοῦς ἀπέλαυσσεν μέγας βέβηκεν, 39) or suppressed (like Iphigeneia’s φθόγγων ἄραϊν, 237), and even the most direct and primitive form of oral communication—Agamemnon’s cry for help at 1343 and 1345—is left unanswered allegedly for lack of supporting evidence. By contrast, the *Eumenides* concentrates upon the secular, civilizing efficacy of language. After an ineffectual bout of mutual verbal abuse by Apollo and the Erinyes, we are presented with Athena’s *peitho* as a paradigm of language free of superstitious dread and capable of accomplishing the union of opposing forces without which the community cannot murdered woman (Clytemnestra? Eriphyle?) to pursue the killer (Orestes? Alcmæon?) as he escapes with drawn sword.


\(^{38}\) The chorus’ attitude verges on that of some primitive societies in which the taboos on naming fearful objects are so intense and numerous that the extinction of all speech is a real threat. Cf. Heinz Werner, *Die Ursprünge der Metapher* (Leipzig, 1919), p. 77. This work is an exhaustive analysis of the origins of metaphor as a deliberate substitution to avoid the frank designation of tabooed objects. See also Wayne Schumaker, *Literature and the Irrational* (Washington Square repr., New York, 1966), pp. 91-108.
exist. This *peitho* is a free and active instrument, and its use contrasts sharply with the passivity and fatalism which cledonomancy involves.

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39 Discourse is, of course, an indispensable element of the whole concept of communal life and especially of the *polis*. For an Athenian, the opposite of *anarchia* was *peitharchia* (*Antigone*, 676), obedience to the laws based, as the word implies, upon persuasive speech rather than fear of brute compulsion. In Thucydides' classic description of *stasis* at Corcyra, the internal disintegration of the *polis* is accompanied by the decomposition of traditional verbal meanings (III, 82, 4). One of Aristotle's proofs that man is by nature a *politikon zoon* is that he alone among animals possesses speech, the natural purpose of which is to communicate that for which the *polis*-partnership is formed—the advantageous and the harmful, and therefore the right and the wrong (*Pol.*, 1253a8-19).