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The Oresteia. A Study in Language and Structure by Anne Lebeck

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REVIEWS

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ANNE LEBECK. *The Oresteia. A Study in Language and Structure.* (Publications of the Center for Hellenic Studies.) Washington: Center for Hellenic Studies, 1971; distr. by Harvard University Press. Pp. ix, 222. \$8.50.

Lebeck's central thesis is that themes and images in the *Oresteia* unfold in intricate, significant patterns, and that the development of these patterns parallels and coincides with the development of gnomic statement and dramatic action. The peculiar form of this development is characterized by an introductory presentation of several major themes that is brief, problematical, enigmatic, "proleptic," followed (not always immediately) by recurrences which gradually elaborate its inchoate meaning, replacing obscurity with clarity, problem with solution, perplexity with equanimity, discord with harmony. This form is discovered within each single lyric, in the development from lyric to lyric, and from play to play.

In the first of four parts the study concentrates on this development of theme and image in and between the lyric portions of the *Agamemnon*, especially the parodos. Parts three and four submit the *Choephoroi* and the *Eumenides* to the same kind of analysis. Part two broadens its scope to the whole trilogy to demonstrate "the way images are interwoven by associative repetition." No short review could do justice to the richness of Lebeck's analysis; let a few instances serve to exemplify its pattern. Weak old age and the honor due it is a theme introduced by the Argive elders in the parodos of the *Agamemnon* to describe themselves, but it prepares us for a prominent concern in the *Eumenides*, the presumed forceful suppression and dishonor of the Erinyes at the hands of the younger Olympians with a new form of justice. Similarly, the central meaning of the famous Zeus-"hymn" is the search for his nature through his name, only partially and vaguely communicated here in the words *Dios* and *etetus* (165-66); but this half-buried etymology becomes explicit later in *io ie diai Dios panaitiou panergeta ktl.* (Ag. 1485-87), and *teleion hupsiston Dia* (Eum. 28), and reaches full dramatic realization in the outcome of the trilogy. More complicated is the theme of the endless flow of blood in the *Agamemnon* which appears successively as image (179-80, 239, 958-60, 1121-22), as dramatic action and concrete object (in the carpet scene), and finally as direct lyric statement (1018 ff.). A particularly fine example of prolepsis in the *Eumenides* is the short history of the Delphic shrine in the prologue, which, by the equal reverence given chthonic (1) and Olympian (21) divinity, and by the description of the double provenience of Apollo's mantic authority — at once matrilinear and patrilinear, chthonic and Olympian — prepares us in embryo for the subsequent conflict and eventual equilibrium.

What looks like an aversion to overwriting has in a few cases resulted in skewed emphasis or weakened effect. In her discussion (following Knox) of the lion-parable (Ag. 717ff.) and of Orestes' matricide, Lebeck's insistence on the likeness between Orestes and his parents as killers disregards the more important contrasts between them as moral agents — contrasts which ultimately disprove or, better, transcend the parable and its associated gnome (*to dussebes gar ergon ktl.* 758ff.). On the theme of parenthood in the trilogy she is excellent, but in discussing the matricide, where the *tek*-root figures so prominently, she misses *teknon* at Cho. 912, and, what is more important, the fact that Clytemnestra's five uses of *teknon* in addressing Orestes (Cho. 896, 910, 912, 920, 922) are matched by Orestes' five references to his father (905, 909, 915, 925, 927) — following the instructions of the Chorus (if Murray's version of a much vexed text is right: *epausas throeousa pros se 'Teknon,' 'Patros' auda* 828-29). Her point about the theme of justice as a firm and fixed foundation would have been strengthened by adverting to the derivation of *pagos* (Areios 685, 690) from *pegnumi* as explicitly as she cites that of legal words like *themis* and *thesmos* from *tithemi*.

This is a patient, well organized book, written with fat-free, Spartan economy and a closeness to the Aeschylean text that will carry it well out of all but the

specialist's range. Its greatest weakness may be its failure to anticipate and thus to fortify itself against the inevitable demurrals of more traditional philologists who will not share, as this reviewer does, its assumptions about the nature of the literary transaction and the complex interconnectedness of images or, for that matter, of any elements in an artistic structure. Classical philology has in practice maintained a strong positivist strain best satisfied by questions of literal meaning that yield prescriptive answers, generally impatient with ambiguity, allusiveness, polysemy, inclined therefore to reduce rather than to comprehend the *plurality* of meaning that is the very nature of poetic discourse. When it comes to the interpretation of poetic discourse, "the statement that claims to be exclusively right is categorically wrong," as Lebeck puts it, rightly but too concisely to persuade the univocal mentality endemic in our field. What she means, of course, is that the dramatic work is apprehended under many modalities, *none of them prescriptive*: by the author himself at various stages of composition and with altering degrees of clarity; by an audience, contemporary or otherwise, the members of which will vary enormously in their ability to hold in mind and interrelate elements of a structure which might be separated by hundreds of lines, during a specifically paced and irreversible oral performance; by readers, ranging from mere diversion-seekers to gorgon-eyed scholar-critics, all with the same variety of structure-grasping ability, each controlling for himself the pace of the literary transaction and capable of interrupting and reversing it at will. Add another important variable: the effect of repeated performances or readings on the same audience or reader. In short, the ontological and epistemological status of the literary work is a complex issue. To undercut its complexity by asking, for example, whether an Athenian audience would have grasped the complicated nexus of themes and images discovered by Lebeck would no longer be, like hers, a hermeneutic enquiry, but a historical one. To interpret a literary work, as Lebeck has set out to do, is to be prepared to uncover connections, patterns, meanings which are really there, whether or not consciously accessible to the original audience or even to the poet himself. This should not be construed as an invitation to or justification of mere impressionism. The work has a structure of its own which resists the infinite vagaries of subjectivity, and imposes limits, however flexible, upon whatever hypothesis we construct beside the text to make its details intelligible.

Methodological considerations of this kind would have added suasive power to what is still far and away the most sensitive criticism of the *Oresteia* to appear in years.

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WARREN A. SHIBLES. *Models of Ancient Greek Philosophy*. London: Vision Press; New York: Humanities Press, 1971. Pp. iii, 155. \$7.50.

This book is best described as a romp through the history of ancient philosophy up to Aristotle. Shibles provides discussions of the major pre-Socratics (minus Anaximenes), then longer summary accounts of the contents of some of Plato's and Aristotle's works. The book is devoid of scholarship. The author shows no knowledge of Greek, quoting published translations throughout (chosen on no apparent principle and sometimes, e.g. in the chapter on Thales, without indication of source). His references to ancient texts are haphazard: a quoted passage is referred to "Aristotle, *Poetics*" (p. 12), an isolated passage (in fact from the *Phaedrus*) is cited simply as "263b" (p. 93), and Aristotelian passages are never given full references (the fullest references are on p. 17, where we get the page and line of Bekker and the title of the treatise and number of the chapter but are not told which *book* is in question!). He quotes as a "fragment" of Anaximander what obviously contains only the words of Simplicius (or Theophrastus) (p. 24).

The author has tried to unify his discussion to some extent by emphasizing that what he calls "models" or "metaphors" for interpreting reality lie at the center of the philosophies he discusses. This leads to serious distortions: Hera-