

Some Patterns of Nature Imagery in the Oresteia

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SOME PATTERNS OF NATURE IMAGERY IN  
THE *ORESTEIA*<sup>1</sup>

One of the more evident hallmarks of Archaic Greek literature, which distinguishes it from works of the Classical period not so much perhaps in kind as in degree, is the experience of nature as a sensitive sounding board for events in the moral sphere. In the processes of nature the Archaic poet sees moral action and character disclosed, amplified, completed, imitated. The same order, the same *δίκη* governs both spheres. This interpenetration is so complete that Archaic poetry with equal facility endows nature with personality and delineates human action and character in terms of impersonal physical phenomena. But nothing about this characteristic so separates Archaic from later literature as its explicit awareness that the benevolence or hostility of nature *depends upon* the moral decisions of men, especially of rulers.<sup>2</sup>

Though it may be said that Aeschylus bestrides the division between the Archaic and Classical periods, he seems to be most Archaic in his use of nature imagery. Nature in the *Oresteia*, both actual and as metaphor of internal states, appears in a pattern consonant with and asserting the movement of the entire trilogy. The progress of gods and men through time and

<sup>1</sup> This essay, in a somewhat altered version, is a portion of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Northwestern University (*Time and the Pattern of Change in Aeschylus' Oresteia*, 1963).

Unless otherwise noted, the text and line-numbering are those of Gilbert Murray, *Aeschylus septem quae supersunt tragoediae* (corrected second ed., Oxford, 1957).

<sup>2</sup> Examples which immediately come to mind are the blameless king of *Od.*, XIX, 109-14, and the just and unjust cities of Hesiod, *Op.*, 225-47 (both of which passages bear striking similarities of detail to Aeschylus' description of the glorified Athens in the *Eumenides*, 907-9, 937-87). For more thorough discussion and examples of this characteristic of Archaic poetry, see Hermann Fränkel, *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums*<sup>2</sup> (Munich, 1962), especially the references in the section of his systematic index entitled "Die Gesetzlichkeit in der Natur für Analogieschlüsse auf das Menschenleben benutzt," pp. 599 f., and Charles Paul Segal, "Nature and the World of Man in Greek Literature," *Arion*, II, 2 (1963), pp. 19-53.

suffering toward a more desirable state of being is not played out against a static or neutral backdrop of nature, but rather one whose lineaments change in a pattern paralleling the moral development in the drama. In the *Agamemnon* man is surrounded by a hostile world, "blossoming" with ugliness, evil, and pain under a shower of blood, where flowers are blighted and leaves withered, a world of foul and noxious weather, storms, dreadful darkness, and "terrible light." In the *Choephoroi* the moral development represented by Orestes is paralleled by the fact that images from vegetative nature are divided between good and evil, while light and darkness, wholesome light and evil light mingle ambiguously, and the action ends with a sudden and unexpected "storm" descending on the house. In the *Eumenides* earth is seen flowering forth with abundant blessings under a clement sky and protected from blight by the Eumenides; the powers of light and the daughters of Night join in harmony, and night itself becomes truly *εὐφρόνη*.

### *Vegetation*

Two things are to be noted about vegetation imagery in the trilogy. In the first place, it is used of the sinister growth and proliferation of evil and pain frequently in the *Agamemnon*, more sporadically in the *Choephoroi*, and not at all in the *Eumenides*. Secondly, of the remaining images in this category those in the first play deal almost exclusively with blighted, withered, or dying vegetation, but are gradually replaced in the other two plays, especially in the closing scene of the *Eumenides*, by images of abundant crops and vegetation protected from harm.

The first of these patterns—the flowering or blossoming of evil—is composed of images which range from such as appear to have been weakened, stock metaphors (e.g., those which simply use the verb *βλαστάνειν*)<sup>3</sup> to some of the more startling oxymora of the trilogy. In the *Agamemnon* the Herald describes the

<sup>3</sup>I have hesitated to include in this category of metaphors those phrases which simply employ the verb *βρῦειν* (*Ag.* 169; *Cho.* 69, 588) which, though used especially of the swelling and teeming of plant life, cannot in the strict sense be called a metaphor when applied outside the area of vegetation.

Aegean sea as “blossoming with corpses and wrecks” after the storm (659 f.):

ὄρωμεν ἀνθοῦν πέλαγος Αἰγαῖον νεκροῖς  
ἀνδρῶν Ἀχαιῶν ναυτικοῖς τ' ἐρειπίοις.

Helen, in an analogous metaphor, is called a “heart-tearing flower of desire” (δηξίθυμον ἔρωτος ἄνθος, 743). The chorus speaks of insatiable woe “sprouting” from good fortune (755 f.):

ἐκ δ' ἀγαθᾶς τύχας γένει  
βλαστάνειν ἀκόρεστον οἰζύν.

Orestes is envisioned by Cassandra as a “mother-killing plant” (μητροκτόνον φῆγμα, 1281), while his mother Clytemnestra, in what is perhaps the most violent of these images,<sup>4</sup> compares herself, spattered with the bloody “dew” of her murdered husband, to the crop that “rejoices” in the rain of Zeus (1390-2):

βάλλει μ' ἐρεμῆ ψακάδι φοινίας δρόσου  
χαίρουσαν οὐδὲν ἦσσαν ἢ διοσδότῳ  
γάνει σπορητὸς κάλυκος ἐν λοχεύμασιν.

The blood of Agamemnon, says the chorus, is the “last and perfect garland of flowers” with which Helen has crowned herself (1459 f.):<sup>5</sup>

νῦν τελέαν πολύμναστον ἐπιηθίσω  
δι' αἰμ' ἀνιπτον . . . .

In the closing scene, Clytemnestra admits that the “harvest” of evils already reaped is a grievous one (1655):

ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰδ' ἐξ αὐτῶν πολλὰ δύστηνον θέροσ.

<sup>4</sup> E. Fraenkel, *Aeschylus, Agamemnon: Commentary* (Oxford, 1950), *ad loc.*: “The horror is unescapable when the sweet miracle of carefully tended sprouting and growth of crops becomes a symbol of inhuman gloating over murder. Nothing can bring out the fury of hate more strongly than the loving detail of κάλυκος ἐν λοχεύμασιν, in which, as in the words of Aphrodite in the *Danaïds*, the birth of all created life is seen as a homogeneous process.”

<sup>5</sup> I have not included the ἀπανθίσαι of Murray's text at 1662 in this analysis because I feel that better sense is made of the passage by the ἀπαντῆσαι suggested by James H. Oliver, “On the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus,” *A. J. P.*, LXXXI (1960), pp. 313 f.

This motif of evil as a harvest has already appeared in less emphatic metaphors: harvesting the crop of one's error (*καρποῖτο τὴν ἀμαρτίαν*, 502), and harvesting the fruit of falsehood (*τὰ ψευδῆ . . . καρποῦσθαι*, 620 f.).

In the *Choephoroi* the pattern is continued in only four metaphors. Orestes asks the chorus to crown his prayerful libations with the flowers of lamentation (*κωκυτοῖς ἐπανθίζειν*, 150). In the first stasimon, among the *δεινά* to be observed in nature are the awesome meteors which "blossom" between earth and sky (*βλαστοῦσι καὶ πεδαίχμοι λαμπάδες πεδάοροι*, 589 f.). In the closing scene, the chorus watches pain "blossom" in Orestes (*πάθος ἀνθεῖ*, 1009). Related to the agricultural images of the harvest in the *Agamemnon* is the image of newly-plowed furrows on the cheeks of the mourning chorus (24 f.):

*πρέπει παρῆς φόινισσ' ἀμυγμοῖς  
ὄνυχος ἄλοκι νεοτόμῳ . . . .*

The movement of the second pattern—from vegetation as unhealthy or destroyed to vegetation as fruitful—begins in the *Agamemnon* with the extended metaphor of Argos and the house of Atreus as vegetation injured in one way or another. The Argive elders are plants with withered foliage (*φυλλάδος ἦδη κατακαρφομένης*, 79 f.), while the "flower" of Argive youth is broken and worn away by the noxious winds from the Strymon (*πνοαὶ δ' ἀπὸ Στρυμόνος . . . τρίβῳ κατέξαινον ἄνθος Ἀργείων* 192-97). Clytemnestra compares the house to a blasted plant (perhaps a vine) which, as long as the root remains, gives promise of foliage (966):

*ρίξης γὰρ οὔσης φυλλὰς ἔκετ' ἐς δόμους.*

The intentionally ironic statement is unfulfilled in Agamemnon's case, but as it applies to Orestes it vaguely points to a renewed growth for the house—a resolution unintended by Clytemnestra. (There is the same suggestion of a possible return of vigor in the blasted plant in the Herald's remark: ". . . if any ray of the sun still finds Menelaus alive," literally "green," *χλωρός*, 677.) In the same context, Clytemnestra's reference to the vintage of the bitter grape (970) conjures up an image that can hardly be separated from the imminent murder. Troy and the house of Priam are set forth in the same

kind of imagery, except, of course, that no hope of rebirth suggests itself. Under the mattock of Zeus, the seed of the whole land has perished (σπέρμα πάσης ἐξαπόλλυται χθονός, 528); Paris has stripped the foliage (ἔθρισεν, 536) from his father's house—both of which images make ironic the description of the lovers' landing at the mouth of the Simois "rich in foliage" (Σιμόεντος ἀκτὰς ἐπ' ἀεξιφύλλους, 696 f.).

In the *Choephoroi* the vague hope that the house of Atreus may revive is once more expressed in the image of plant growth—the massive trunk burgeoning from the tiny seed (204):

σμικροῦ γένοιτ' ἂν σπέρματος μέγας πυθμῆν.

But there is still the imminent danger of the stump's rotting through (ἀνανθεῖς πυθμῆν, 260). And Orestes is threatened with a devouring blight-like disease (λιχῆν, 281) should he fail to comply with Apollo's mandate.

In the *Eumenides* the Erinyes threaten the land with a blight that will strike vegetation as well as animal life (λιχῆν ἄφυλλος ἄτεκνος, 785=815). But in pleas which are ultimately honored, Apollo asks the Erinyes not to render his and Zeus' oracles fruitless (ἀκαρπώτους, 714), and Athene begs them not to send ἀκαρπία on Athens (801), not to frustrate the operation of "all that brings forth fruit" (καρπὸν φέροντα πάντα, 831), not to permit the καρπὸν γαίας to fail (907). She herself is like a gardener (ἀνδρὸς φειτυποίμενος δίκην, 911) toward her citizens, and the Erinyes are to be "weeder-out" (ἐκφορωτέρα, 910) of the impious, so that the growth of the just may experience no check (912). In the first statement of their acceptance, the Erinyes pray that earth may burgeon forth (ἐξαμβρῦσαι)<sup>6</sup> luxuriantly with benefits under the sun's bright light (921-6), an image which cancels out the harsh πολλὰ μὲν γὰρ τρέφει δευὰν δευμάτων ἄχην of *Cho.* 585 f., and realizes the weak hope of the Argive elders that Zeus might send "an abundant gift from yearly furrows" (δόσις ἐκ Διδὸς ἀμφιλαφῆς τε καὶ ἐξ ἀλόκων ἐπετειᾶν, *Ag.* 1014 f.). They pray that Athens may escape tree-blighting wind, bud-withering heat, and ἀκαρπία (938-42):

δενδροπήμων δὲ μὴ πνέοι βλάβα—  
τὰν ἐμὰν χάριν λέγω—

<sup>6</sup> Pauw's reading.

φλογμὸς ὀμματοστερεῖς φυτῶν, τὸ  
 μὴ περᾶν ὄρον τόπων,  
 μηδ' ἄκαρπος αἰα-  
 νῆς ἔφερπέτω νόσος.

*Weather*

The weather imagery in the trilogy is characterized by subtle modulation between the actual and the metaphoric, with an unmistakable pattern of development from unnatural inclemency to clemency.

The pattern is introduced in the opening lines of the *Agamemnon* with the Watchman observing the stars "that bring χεῖμα καὶ θέρος to men" (5): "winter and summer" or, another meaning of the same words—"storm and harvest." We are soon to hear of the bitter winters and summers these stars have brought to the Argives at Troy, the storms at Aulis ten years before, the storm which the Argive fleet is to encounter on the Aegean, the bloody storm on the house of Atreus, and the δύστηνον θέρος (1655), the "grievous harvest" spoken of by Clytemnestra. At Aulis, despite Calchas' prayer, the army was overclouded and struck beforehand by the lightning<sup>7</sup> of divine spite (131). The metaphorical lightning announces the actual storms at Aulis as well as the metaphorical storm on the house of Atreus: adverse winds (ἀντιπνόους, 149) delay the ships and bring about the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Just as the changeable currents between Chalcis and Aulis (παλιρρόχθους ἐν Αὐλίδος, τόποις, 191) symbolize the ἀμηχανία of the king, the stormy north-easter from Thrace, inducing tedium and starvation, rotting ships and cables, ruining the flower of Argive youth (193-8), symbolizes the adverse winds of fortune to which Agamemnon finally yields (ἐμπαίοις τύχαισι συμπνέων, 187). To charm away the physically noxious Thracian gales (ἐπφῶδον Θρηκίων ἀημάτων, 1418) the "winds of his purpose" become as noxious morally (219 f.):

φρενὸς πνέων δυσσεβῆ τροπαίαν  
 ἄναγνον ἀνέρον . . . .

The honor he aims at will earn him a thunderbolt from Zeus (470).

<sup>7</sup> προσηπνέω—struck, "as though by lightning" (Wecklein's comment cited by Fraenkel [above, note 4], *ad loc.*). The proximity of κνεφάσση certainly warrants this interpretation.

In a series of sharp details, the Herald describes the inclement weather at Troy as well as the storm encountered on the return voyage. Clytemnestra had already visualized the frosts and dews from which victory had freed the Argives (335 f.); now the Herald paints a more vivid picture of this same vermin-breeding dew (reminding us of the dew-soaked bedding of the Watchman, *ἔνδρυσόν . . . εὐνήν* 12 f.), of “bird-killing winters” with intolerable snow from Mt. Ida, and of midday heat so windless that “the sea lay in waveless slumber” (563-6). The final detail of this picture stands in marked contrast to the violence of the sea during the storm which later descended upon the Argives. To be sure, Agamemnon had set sail at a time most unpropitious for sailing according to Hesiod’s almanac (*Op.* 618-30)—the setting of the Pleiades (826).<sup>8</sup> But the Herald’s reference to the allegiance sworn between traditional enemies, fire and water (650 f.), gives to this particular storm an unnatural cast. The same Thracian winds that had been “unsparing of the ships at Aulis” (195) now shatter them one upon another in a “disaster of evil waves” (*δυσκύμαντα . . . κακά*) and driving rain (*σὺν ζάλῃ τ’ ὀμβροκτύπῳ*, 654-6). The

<sup>8</sup> Fraenkel (above, note 4) and Mazon, *Eschyle*, II (Paris, 1955), *ad* 826, feel that *ἀμφὶ Πλειάδων δύσιν* refers to time of night rather than time of year. Verrall is unfairly dismissed in a brief footnote, and his, to my mind, telling reference to the setting of the Pleiades as dangerous for sailing is nowhere alluded to in Fraenkel’s discussion. Agamemnon’s remark here, in the midst of his boast of victory, is an ironic reminder of the high price of that victory to an audience well-schooled in their Hesiod.

I strongly suspect, too, that this reference has a medical connotation for an author whose use of Hippocratic terminology is well known (see J. Dumortier, *Le vocabulaire médical d’Eschyle et les écrits hippocratiques* [Paris, 1935], and W. B. Stanford, *Aeschylus in his Style* [Dublin, 1942], especially pp. 54-8). The setting of the Pleiades, according to Hippocratic doctrine, was one of those dangerous periods when diseases especially come to a crisis (*Airs, Waters, Places*, II: *δεῖ . . . φυλάσσεσθαι . . . καὶ ἔτι πλειάδων δύσιν. τά τε γὰρ νοσεύματα μάλιστα ἐν ταύτησι τῆσιν ἡμέρησιν κρίνεται*). Followed immediately as it is by the extended metaphor of envy as a *disease* and of the *polis* as *diseased*, in need of *φαρμάκων παιωνίων* (848) and of cautery or surgery (*κέαντες ἢ τεμόντες*), this reference to the setting of the Pleiades may be an ironic way of indicating that the “disease” has reached its crisis and needs more immediate attention than Agamemnon purposes to give it.



hostility of inorganic nature is total: earth (666), air (654), fire and water (651) combine in the slaughter and havoc.

From this tempest Agamemnon is preserved only to be destroyed in the metaphorical storm that inundates the house of Atreus. Mockingly, Clytemnestra speaks of him as the preserver of the house against inclement weather: he is (unless line 900 is to be rejected) daybreak after the storm (*κάλλιστον ἦμαρ . . . ἐκ χείματος*), shade against the dog-star's heat (*σκιάν . . . σερίου κυνός*, 967), warmth in winter (*θάλλπος . . . ἐν χειμῶνι*, 969), coolness in summer (*ψῦχος ἐν δόμοις*, 971). Agamemnon's subsequent murder bodes ill for the house now left unprotected. Cassandra's simile at 1180 ff. of a wind blowing up increasingly higher waves suggests Agamemnon's death as the latest and heaviest wave to strike the house. His blood is a drizzle of dew that enriches the evil plant Clytemnestra (*ψακάδι φοινίας δρόσου*, 1390). But its end signals to the chorus a far heavier down-pour of blood that threatens to destroy the house (1533 f.):<sup>9</sup>

δέδοικα δ' ὄμβρον κτύπον δομοσφαλῆ  
τὸν αἵματηρόν. ψακὰς δὲ λήγει.

The words *ὄμβρον κτύπον* recall *ζάλη ὄμβροκτύπη* (656) in the description of the storm at sea; the house, like a ship, is about to encounter a storm of which Agamemnon's death has been but a preliminary shower, a storm accompanied by a "frost that devours the young" (*πάχνη κουροβόρω*, 1512). (This pattern of the storm-tossed ship, as we shall see, is continued in the *Choephoroi* and the *Eumenides*.)

The downfall of Troy is also metaphorically alluded to in terms of inclement weather. The blast of giant Zephyr blew Helen to Troy (*Ζεφύρου γίγαντος αἶρα*, 692)—a wind appropriate to Helen inasmuch as it combines the connotations of sensuality and destructiveness.<sup>10</sup> On her arrival she showed a "temperament of windless calm" (*φρόνημα μὲν νηνέμον γαλάνας*, 740, which of course reminds us of the unbearable windless heat of 566), a dangerous calm, as it turns out, issuing in "squalls of destruction" (*ἄτης θύελλαι*, 819).

<sup>9</sup> With Fraenkel, Mazon, and Page among others, I choose not to read *ψακὰς δὲ λήγει* as a question.

<sup>10</sup> For Zephyr as a destructive wind, cf. *Il.*, IX, 5; XXI, 334; XXIII, 200; *Od.*, V, 295, and Vergil, *Aen.*, I, 131; *Geor.*, I, 371.

In the *Choephoroi* the hostility of all the elements still occupies an emphatic position. In the opening strophe of the first stasimon, as in the Herald's description of the storm in the *Agamemnon*, earth, air, fire, and water are represented as the sources of danger to man (585-92, though strictly speaking the only phenomenon of weather mentioned is the "wind-driven wrath of the hurricane"—*ἀνεμόεντ' . . . αἰγίδων . . . κότον*). But this consideration is introduced only to assert the more awesome consequences of "storms" in the moral order with which the rest of the stasimon is occupied. Throughout the rest of the play Aeschylus employs no images of actual weather, but concentrates upon the elaboration of the metaphoric storm against the house of Atreus forecast by the Argive elders. Here in the second play it seems already to have struck, bringing with it a "frost of sorrow" which touches even the chorus of captive women (*πένθεσιν παχνομένη*, 83). Electra's tears are like sea-waves raised by winter storms (*σταγόνες ἄφαρκτοι δυσχίμου πλημυρίδος*, 186), and Orestes is threatened by Apollo with "stormy (or wintry) doom" (*δυσχειμέρους ἄτας*, 271 f.) should he hesitate to obey the god's command. These less emphatic images cluster around the central weather-metaphor of the storm-embattled ship carried over from the previous play. Orestes and Electra, as the survivors of the house of Atreus, are "whirled in storms like seafarers" (201-3):

*ἀλλ' εἰδότας μὲν τοὺς θεοὺς καλούμεθα,  
οἷοισιν ἐν χειμῶσι ναυτίλων δίκην  
στροβούμεθ' . . . .*

The word *στροβούμεθ'* recalls the *στρόβω* of the storm-description in the *Agamemnon* (657), just as the speaker's hope of rescue from the storm (*εἰ δὲ χρὴ τυχεῖν σωτηρίας*, 203) recalls the *τύχη σωτήρ* (*Ag.* 664) that had preserved Agamemnon's vessel from destruction. In the context of this extended metaphor Orestes' remark before the gates of the house—"It is time for searaiders to drop anchor" (*ᾠρα δ' ἐμπόρους μεθίναυ ἄγκυραν*, 661 f.) suggests the hope of escape from stormy waters. The winds momentarily become favorable under the guidance of Hermes, "who is most expert in filling the sails of an enterprise, if he wishes" (813 f.):

*. . . ἐπεὶ φορώτατος  
πρᾶξιν οὐρίσασσι θέλων.*

The chorus thinks it foresees an opportunity of singing the "women's song for winds set fair" (*θῆλυν οὐριοστάταν*, 821)—*πλεῖ τάδ' εὖ*, "Fair sailing ahead" (824). But the wind suddenly shifts: we are once again reminded of the storm in the *Agamemnon*, for Orestes is whirled about again (*τίνες σε δόξαι . . . στροβοῦσιν*, 1051 f.), and the *σωτήρ*, as in *Agamemnon's* case, seems to have rescued an Atreid from one storm only to expose him to a worse one (1073 f.). A third storm strikes the house, a sudden and unexpected<sup>11</sup> gale after calm weather (1065-7):

*ᾔδε τοι μελάθροισ τοῖς βασιλείοις  
τρίτος αὖ χειμῶν  
πνεύσας γονίας ἐτελέσθη.*

In the *Eumenides*, the metaphor of the storm-harassed vessel is continued. In Clytemnestra's words, Orestes' vessel must be driven by the bloody wind of the Erinyes (137):

*σὺ δ' αἰματηρὸν πνεῦμ' ἐπουρίσασα τῷ . . . .*

Later they threaten the shipwreck of the unjust man (550-7), but any application of this image to Orestes is cancelled through his ultimate *rescue* by Athene and Zeus *Sotēr*, god of safe voyages<sup>12</sup> (*σώσασα*, 754; *τρίτου Σωτήρος*, 759 f.; *σῶζει*, 761). The dark and stormy waves of the Erinyes' wrath subside under Athene's persuasion (832):

*κοίμα κελαινοῦ κύματος πικρὸν μένος.*

The thunderbolt of a more benign Zeus stays under lock; it is not required (828 f.).

In studied contrast to the hostility of the elements emphasized in the *Agamemnon* and in the first stasimon of the *Choephoroi*, the climax of the *Eumenides* presents a vision of favorable winds working in combination with the other three elements, earth, fire, and water, to benefit the life of man (903-6):<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> So reads the scholion on *γονίας*.

<sup>12</sup> On Zeus *Σωτήρ* as god of safe voyages, see LSJ *s.v.* *σωτήρ* 2.

<sup>13</sup> For the efficacy of the winds in promoting the fertility of the earth, cf. the Tellus (or Italia) slab on the south side of the east doorway of the *Ara Pacis*. The relief, which is clearly of fifth-century inspiration, depicts the goddess Tellus (or Italia) flanked by two other goddesses,

ὅποια νίκης μὴ κακῆς ἐπίσκοπα,  
καὶ ταῦτα γῆθεν ἔκ τε ποντίας δρόσου  
ἐξ οὐρανοῦ τε, κἀνέμων ἀήματα  
εὐηλίως πνέοντ' ἐπιστείχων χθόνα.

(Note the close parallel between γῆθεν—ποντίας—κἀνέμων here and γᾶ—πόντιαί—κἀνεμόεντ' at *Cho.* 585 ff., with the substitution of the more attractive εὐηλίως for the ominous λαμπάδες of *Cho.* 590. Note also that a beneficial δρόσος replaces the uncomfortable dew and the "dew of blood" in the *Agamemnon*.) Harmful winds, like those which at Aulis wore away the flower of Argos, and excessive heat, like that which oppressed the Argives at Troy, are to be kept from the land by the Eumenides (938).

### *Light and Darkness*

Like weather imagery, the imagery of light and darkness, of day and night, is a skillful blend of the actual and the metaphoric. The pattern is characterized in the first play by a corruption of light as the natural symbol of life, joy, and safety<sup>14</sup> into a symbol of vengeance, death, and destruction, while in the last play it assumes its wholesome connotation, and darkness, which throughout the first two plays had been synonymous with the adverse and the sinister, becomes, like the Erinyes, a symbol of the benevolent and the gracious. The theme of moral ambiguity in the *Choephoroi* is supported by the image of shadowy obscurity (σκότος) which dominates that play.

The *Agamemnon* begins in the actual darkness before dawn and moves into daylight, but on the moral plane darkness prevails: this day, in Clytemnestra's words, is the child of the previous night (265, 279)—like its parent it will be dark with destruction; the evil thing which, as the chorus suspects, is about to occur is "shrouded in night" (νυκτηρεφές, 460), and they can only "mutter in darkness" (ὑπὸ σκότῳ βρέμει, 1030); the "light in the night" (φῶς ἐν εὐφρόνῃ, 522) which, according

one riding a swan, the other a sea monster. These goddesses have been thought to be wind divinities.

<sup>14</sup> For φῶς as a word often conveying an undertone of rescue from danger, see Wilamowitz on Eurip., *Heracles*, 563, cited by Fraenkel (above, note 4) *ad Ag.* 522, and examples in the latter. For a rapid survey of the role of light-metaphors in Greek literature, see Dorothy Tarrant, "Greek Metaphors of Light," *C. Q.*, N. S. X (1960), pp. 181-7.

to the Herald, Agamemnon brings to Argos, is not kindled; Justice that blazes (*λάμπει*) in sooty dwellings leaves the palace of Atreus in gloom (773-80). What light there is signals doom, past and future. The beacon-flame from Ida which marks the destruction of Troy brings a similar fate to the house of Atreus. On its appearance, the Watchman predicts that it will be the signal for many choruses (23 f.):

*φάος πιφαύσκων καὶ χορῶν κατάστασιν  
πολλῶν ἐν Ἄργει . . . .*

But it signals a chorus of a different kind from those he means—the chorus of Erinyes, alluded to by Cassandra, that never leaves the house (1186 f.):

*τὴν γὰρ στέγην τήνδ' οὐποτ' ἐκλείπει χορὸς  
σύμφθογγος οὐκ εὐφωτος.*

The beacon-flame will give Clytemnestra cause to raise an *ὄλολυγμός* (28), a cry of exultation, not for Agamemnon's victory as the Watchman says and she herself falsely asserts before the murder (587), but for her own victory over Agamemnon (1236). In Clytemnestra's speech describing the progress of the beacon-fire (282-316) it becomes, as it were, a living being that finally "shoots down upon the house of Atreus, true offspring of its parent flame at Mt. Ida"; it becomes as ill-omened for the house of Atreus as that kindled from the burning city of Troy (310 f.):

*κἄπειτ' Ἄτρειδῶν ἐς τόδε σκίπτει στέγος  
φάος τόδ' οὐκ ἄπαππον Ἰδαίου πυρός.*

The verb three times used of its movement, *σκίπτει* (302, 308, 310), is the same used in the ode that follows to characterize the flight of Zeus' arrow against Paris (366).

Next to the beacon, and, as it were, in answer to it, the fire from Clytemnestra's altars of sacrifice is given special emphasis (88-96, 596 f.). Sinister emblem of Clytemnestra's prayer for success in her murderous enterprise, it proves to be a deception, since the chorus misreads the intent for which it was kindled. Like the beacon-flame, it possesses dramatic spatial scope—its light reaches the sky (*οὐρανομήκης λαμπὰς ἀνίσχει*, 92 f.)—to symbolize the confident power at Clytemnestra's disposal. Both

the blaze at the altars and the beacon-flame are examples of the *φῶς αἰνολαμπές* spoken of by the chorus, "the light that burns with dreadful brightness" to herald the bane of the unjust man (388 f.).

Around these two major images cluster less emphatic but related examples of light in a sinister or adverse sense. Clytemnestra, in a false display of fidelity, ironically asks what light is sweeter (*τί . . . φέγγος ἥδιον*) for a wife to behold than when she can throw open the gates to her husband on his return from the field (601-4). Later her adultery is symbolized by the fire which Aegisthus kindles at her hearth (1434-6):

οὐ μοι Φόβου μέλαθρον ἑλπίς ἐμπατεί,  
 ἔως ἂν αἴθη πῦρ ἐφ' ἐστίας ἐμῆς  
 Αἴγισθος, ὡς τὸ πρόσθεν εὖ φρονῶν ἐμοί.

After the storm on the Aegean the bright light of the sun (*λαμπρὸν ἡλίου φάος*) shines down upon a sea littered with corpses and wreckage (658-60). Earlier, in a similar image, the chorus had said that the lamentable sequel to Iphigeneia's sacrifice would become clear in the rays of the rising sun (254):

τορὸν γὰρ ἤξει σύνορθρον αὐγαῖς.

The chorus speaks of death in terms of the "rays of setting life" (*βίου δύντος αὐγαῖς*, 1123). The rays of sunlight in Cassandra's elaborate metaphor at 1180 ff. will disclose, she says, a wave of woe. She prays to the sun as to her "last light" (*Ἥλιω δ' ἐπεύχομαι πρὸς ὕστατον φῶς*, 1323 f.<sup>15</sup>). Aegisthus greets the "kindly light of day" (*ὦ φέγγος εὐφρον ἡμέρας*, 1577), but "kindly," *εὐφρον*, juxtaposed with *ἡμέρας*, suggests *εὐφρόνη*, the euphemism for *night* (cf. 265, 279, 337, 522): what he sees as daylight is really the sunless night into which he and the house of Atreus have sunk. The same sun which he greets here will shine upon his own corpse at the end of the *Choephoroi* (985 f.).

The action of the *Choephoroi*, in terms of the imagery of light and darkness, is a struggle to bring light back to the darkened house of Atreus.<sup>16</sup> A hateful, sunless gloom has shrouded the house (51 f.):

<sup>15</sup> I follow Fraenkel, Mazon, Page, and others in retaining *Ἥλιω* (FTri) rather than Jacob's correction, *ἡλίον*, favored by Murray.

<sup>16</sup> In the discussion which follows, I have designedly omitted lines

ἀνήλιοι βροτοστυγείς  
δνόφοι καλύπτουσι δόμους.

The shadowy chariot of night is driven forth as the avenger enters the house (νυκτὸς ἄρμ' ἐπείγεται σκοτεινόν, 660 f.). Orestes is himself the light of rescue for the house (φίλον τ' Ὀρέστην φῶς ἄναψον ἐν δόμοις, 131), or else the bearer (or kindler) of that light (ἐλευθερίας φῶς λαμπρόν, 809 f.,<sup>17</sup> πῦρ καὶ φῶς ἐπ' ἐλευθερία δαίω, 863 f., πάρα τὸ φῶς ἰδεῖν, 961—972). He is further seen as the bearer of the light of vengeance to Agamemnon's darkness (σκοτῶ φάος ἀντίμοιρον, 319): the *κοπτος* is an attempt to rouse the king from darkness to light (ἄκουσον ἐς φάος μολών, 459).

The usurpers dwell in the darkness of fear and delusion. Clytemnestra, who had boasted that her hopes would never tread the halls of fear as long as Aegisthus kindled her hearth fire (*Ag.* 1434-6), is troubled now by "terrors that roam by night" (νυκτιπλάγκτων δειμάτων, 524); many lamps, "obscured by the darkness" must be lighted to comfort her (536 f.):

πολλοὶ δ' ἀνῆθον, ἐκτυφλωθέντες σκότῳ,  
λαμπτήρες ἐν δόμοισι δεσποίνης χάρι.

61-5, though the imagery of light and darkness is evidently there, because the text is hopelessly corrupt, and every critical interpretation of it which I have seen is weak. Perhaps the most serious recent attempts to cope with the passage are N. B. Booth's articles, "Aeschylus *Choephoroi* 61-65," *C. Q.*, N. S. VII (1957), pp. 143-5, and a later attempt to fit the passage into its more general context, "The Run of the Sense in Aeschylus *Choephoroi* 22-83," *C. P.*, LIV (1959), pp. 111-13. Booth feels that the verb *ἐπισκοπεῖ* (61) here means "watches over" in the sense of "protects," "assists," so that the general meaning of the passage is "Only those fully in the light can revenge at once; others, in the twilight, have to wait; others, held by the night of death, can do nothing at all."

This interpretation still has serious weaknesses. First, though one can find examples of *ἐπισκοπεῖ* "implying the activity of a tutelary god, who watches over a city and *protects* it," the subject of the verb here is not the goddess *Δίκη* but *ῥοπή Δίκης*, not Justice but the scales of Justice. Second, to stretch the meaning (even by implication) of *ἐπισκοπεῖ* from "watches over" (= "protects," "assists") to "takes vengeance" would appear to be overbold. Finally, if *νύξ* in line 65 means death, what precisely does it mean to say that Orestes is ἐν μεταίχμιῳ σκότῳ? Booth nowhere tells us.

<sup>17</sup> Note how the rest of the sentence—. . . ἰδεῖν φίλοις ὕμμασιν ἐκ δνοφερᾶς καλύπτρας—echoes and, as it were, answers the δνόφοι καλύπτουσι of the *parodos* (52).

These lamps, with their tenuous flames, struggling against the surrounding darkness, confined to the house, symbolizing Clytemnestra's unsuccessful struggle against fear, are the ironic counterparts of the λαμπτήρ . . . ἡμερήσιον φάος . . . ὡς τις ἥλιος σέλας (*Ag.* 22, 288), leaping from Troy to Argos, and the sacrificial fires whose light soars heavenward (*Ag.* 92), symbolizing her limitless daring in the previous play. Hermes Νύχιος (728), who can bring night's darkness on the eyes (νυκτὸς προῦμμάτων σκότον φέρει, 817), appears to be on the side of the avengers to delude the queen and her paramour.

But Orestes too is in danger of darkness. Apollo has threatened him with a fate similar to Clytemnestra's, should he reject the task of vengeance—terror in the night (ἐκ νυκτῶν φόβος, 288), the shadowy stroke of the dead (τὸ . . . σκοτεινὸν τῶν ἐνεργέρων βέλος, 286). And the "light of rescue," which he was to have kindled by his vengeance does not in the end break forth. An ambiguous dawn finds him launched on an uncertain quest for purification at the "deathless glow of Apollo's fire" (πυρὸς . . . φέγγος ἄφθιτον, 1037), and pursued by the daughters of Night.

Though light is employed in its pure and wholesome connotation in the *Choephoroi*, it is still an uncertain light, expected but never kindled. Examples of the sinister light that shines in the *Agamemnon* are found here too, though with less frequency: the flaming, pitch-soaked *tunica molesta*<sup>18</sup> in which the Coryphaeus wishes to see the usurpers tortured to death (ἐν κηκίδι πισσῆρει φλογός, 267 f.), the "savage jaw of flame" that consumes corpses (πυρὸς μαλερὰ γνάθος, 325), the dangerous λαμπάδες πεδάοροι in the first stasimon (590), and, later in the same ode, the lighted torch, "agemate" of Althaea's son, the burning of which precipitates his death (602-11).

In the *Eumenides* the relationship of the Erinyes to night and their sunless habitat are the major motifs of the image pattern of light and darkness until the Erinyes are reconciled. They are the children of Night (322, 416, 745, 792=822, 845=879); they dwell in evil darkness (κακὸν σκότον, 72), in sunless light (ἀνυγλίω λάμπα, 387), and sunless gloom (δυσῆλιον κνέφας, 396);

<sup>18</sup> Concerning the *tunica molesta*, see Farnell's article on this passage in *C. Q.*, IV (1910), p. 185, cited by Rose (above, note 11) *ad* 267 f.



one offers them sacrifices only by night (*νυκτίσεμνα δειπνα*, 108). Their work is to shroud the unjust man in the "darkness of his defilement" (*κνέφας . . . μύσους*, 378) and his house in a "murky mist" (*δνοφεράν τιν' ἀχλύν*, 379). Such is the darkness that threatens to engulf Orestes and his house, and which seems for the moment to be stronger than Apollo's *πυρός φέγγος ἄφθιτον*, until Athene's persuasion prevails.

With the establishment of harmony, both light and darkness, enemies no longer, become symbolic of all that is desirable and salutary to the Athenian citizenry. The daughters of Night pray for bright and beneficial sunlight on Athens (*εὐηλίας*, 906; *φαιδρὸν ἀλίου σέλας*, 926), and the disappearance of bud-killing rays (*φλογμοὺς ὀμματοστερεῖς*, 939). The *φῶς αἰνολαμπές* of the *Agamemnon* is displaced by the *φῶς ἱερόν* (1005) of the torches with which the Eumenides are escorted to their new home. These *λαμπάδες*, which signal a glorious *ὀλολυγμός* (1043=1047), contrast with the *λαμπάς* from Troy which inspired Clytemnestra's sinister *ὀλολυγμός* over her sacrificial victim in the *Agamemnon*. Clytemnestra's altars, blazing with sacrifices for success in Agamemnon's murder, are counterbalanced by the wholesome sacrificial fires which are to burn to the Eumenides (*θύη πρὸ παιδῶν καὶ γαμηλίου τέλους*, 835; *σφαγίων . . . σεμνῶν*, 1006 f.; *θυσίαις*, 1037). Night, whose children have become *εὐμενίδες*, becomes truly and not merely euphemistically *εὐφρόνη*; the concept figures prominently in the closing scene (992, 1030, 1034<sup>19</sup>):

τάσδε γὰρ εὐφρονας εὐφρονες αἰεὶ  
μέγα τιμῶντες κτλ.

. . . τὸ φέγγος ὀρμάσθω πυρός,  
ὅπως ἂν εὐφρων ἦδ' ὀμίλια χθονὸς  
τὸ λοιπὸν εἰάνδρουσι συμφοραῖς πρέπη.

βᾶτε νόμῳ, μεγάλαι φιλότιμοι  
Νυκτὸς παῖδες ἄπαιδες, ὑπ' εὐφροني πομπῆ.

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<sup>19</sup> I follow Mazon and Rose (after Burney) in reading *εὐφρονη* rather than *εὐθύφρονη* at 1034. *εὐφρονη* is needed for metrical respension and makes for a fine play on words in combination with *Νυκτός*.