The Robe of Iphigenia in *Agamemnon*

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The choral lyric (104–263) immediately following the anapestic parodos of *Agamemnon*\(^1\) closes with a description of the sacrifice at Aulis in which the robes of Iphigenia play a prominent part (πέπλοιοι περιπετή [233]; κρόκου βαφάς δ’ ἐσ πέδων χέονσα [239]). There are two interpretations of the lines in question. Most scholars regard the verbal adjective περιπετής in line 233 as passive, the dative πέπλοιοι as instrumental, and translate “wrapped round in her robes” (Fraenkel, Headlam, Mazon, Smyth, Verrall). Line 239 is taken to mean that Iphigenia disrobes completely,\(^2\) “her saffron garment falling on the ground.” Professor Lloyd-Jones\(^3\) recently offered a more convincing interpretation than the earlier view that Iphigenia sheds her peplos. Line 239, which means literally “pouring dye of saffron toward the ground,” describes Iphigenia raised above the altar; from her body, held horizontally,\(^4\) the robe trails down.

In the same article Lloyd-Jones ingeniously suggests that περιπετής is active, the robes those of Agamemnon. Iphigenia kneels before her father in supplication, “with her arms flung about his robes.”\(^5\) Professor Page remarks, “This interpretation has great advantages: the thought and the language are now both of a normal type. . . .”\(^6\) Such an advantage is questionable, since neither the thought nor the language of this passage are normal. Rather they are lyrical: disconnected phrases follow one another in rapid succession, evoking a strange and dreamlike picture.

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2 According to Wilamowitz (Gr. *Trag.* II, p. 59) her clothes are torn off by the “rough fist” of the attendants, while according to Fraenkel she strips voluntarily; an interesting difference in Zeitgeist.


4 See P. Maas, “*Agam.* 231ff Illustrated,” *CQ* 44 (1951) 94.

5 Lloyd-Jones, *op. cit.* p. 133.

6 Page, *ad loc.* p. 90.
The following interpretation is not intended to supplant that of Lloyd-Jones, but rather to point out a possible area of meaning hitherto overlooked. The phrase could mean “falling round his robes”; it suggests more than that, however, for the very reason that one cannot determine whether περιστετής is active or passive, whether the robes belong to Agamemnon or Iphigenia. The line would be as unclear to the audience for which it was written as it is to the modern philologist. Too often commentaries on Aeschylus lapse into fruitless argument over the one “right” meaning of a line which has several. Ambiguity in Aeschylus is not obfuscation of the “real” meaning, but multiplication of the meanings possible. Scholars err in attempting to impose upon Aeschylean lyric a clarity and coherence which it was never meant to possess.

The relation between the two strophes provides a key to the passage. They are closely connected; if the manuscript tradition is correct, there is even enjambment across the end of the stanza, a rare phenomenon.  

φράσεν δ’ ἀόξιος πατήρ μετ’ εὐχάν
δίκαιν χιμάρας ὑπερθε βωμόδ
πέπλοιοι περιστετή παντὶ θυμῷ
προνοπῆ λαβεῖν ἄερδην,

235 στόματος τε καλλιπρόφρο
φυλακάς κατασχεῖν
φθόγγοιν ἀραίοιν οἴκοις,

βία χαλινῶν τ’ ἀναίδω μένει·
κρόκοιν βαφάς δ’ ἐς πέδον χέουσα
ἐβάλλ’ ἐκαστον θυτήρων

240 ἀπ’ ὅμματος Βέλει φιλοίκτῳ …

The part played by Iphigenia’s robes in 233 could be the same as that described in 239. The phrase πέπλοιοι περιστετή παντὶ θυμῷ προνοπῆ, although inserted within the order given by Agamemnon (φράσεν … λαβεῖν ἄερδην), is not part of his command but a contribution of the chorus which anticipates their description in the next strophe.  

7 See Walther Kranz, “Zwei Lieder des Agamemnon,” Hermes 54 (1919) 309–10. Murray follows Triclinius in emending τε to δε and deleting δε in the following line. Most editors, however, accept the MS reading.

8 Cf. Fraenkel, ad loc. p. 134: “πέπλοιοι περιστετή describes the appearance of Iphigenia during the sacrifice, but this is not part of the order given to the ministrants. She is described as she is when the men lay hands upon her ….” It is only with the last sentence that I disagree.
πέλουσι περιπετη should not be rendered by the paraphrase "enwrapped in robes," but translated literally as "fallen round by robes," that is, "with robes falling round her"; not, however, in the sense that her clothes are falling off. Just as in 239, she is lifted above the altar; the robe flows round her, trailing toward the ground. The word order in 232–35 is important. "Her father bade the attendants after the prayer (to take her up) like a she-goat above the altar fallen round by robes with all (her or their) heart, head hanging..." She is described as she will look above the altar, not at the moment when the attendants seize her. The words πέλουσι περιπετη ποντι θυμω προωνυή are closely connected by alliteration, recurrence of sound linking the disjointed phrases in lieu of syntactical connection; perhaps an added reason for assuming that every word in the phrase refers to Iphigenia, that the robes are hers. ποντι θυμω is frequently (e.g., by Fraenkel, Headlam-Thomson, and Smyth) taken with the infinitive as part of the command to the attendants ("resolutely," "with stout heart to raise her") rather than as describing Iphigenia. This also breaks the connection...
established by alliteration. However, just as in the question of whose robes are meant, the words will bear both interpretations.\textsuperscript{13}

If \textit{παντὶ θυμῷ} is taken as referring to Iphigenia, its meaning is developed in the next strophe. The phrase would then be construed as an adverbial modifier ("with all her heart") although there is no verb or adjective to which it is attached.\textsuperscript{14} This may be bold; it is not, however, too bold for Aeschylean lyric. The language of this passage is abrupt and elliptical. Its meaning does not become clear until amplified in the strophe which follows. The single phrase \textit{παντὶ θυμῷ} in 233 suggests the description in 240–43 when Iphigenia pleads with all her heart\textsuperscript{15} but cannot speak. Both \textit{παντὶ θυμῷ} and the wordless entreaties of the next strophe are preceded by mention of robes flowing to the ground.

It might be objected that the preceding interpretation violates the natural order of events. Can one assume that Aeschylus has inserted within the command given by Agamemnon a description of Iphigenia as she looks after that command is executed? If Aeschylus were presenting a strictly chronological account of the scene such an objection would be valid. But he is not concerned with the evocation of a clear historical picture; the very language of the passage prevents its hearers from forming one. The thoughts of the chorus are carried here and there. They seize now upon one moment of the sacrifice, now upon another, without regard for temporal sequence. The memory of Aulis fills them with horror and dread. These feelings are communicated by their incoherence, by the disordered dreamlike sequence of the events which they narrate. At last they break off, refusing to describe the consummation of that sacrifice which, as they fear, will bring ruin upon their king.

The following questions have yet to be considered: why is Iphigenia’s flowing robe described with such emphasis in the parodos not once

\textsuperscript{13} Lloyd-Jones, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 134, takes \textit{πέπλους περιπετῇ} (understood as active) \textit{παντὶ θυμῷ} together: "she clasped his robes with all her heart." According to Page, \textit{ad loc.} p. 90, one can only make sense of \textit{παντὶ θυμῷ} if Lloyd-Jones’ interpretation of \textit{περιπετῇ} is adopted: "On any other view \textit{παντὶ θυμῷ} has to be taken with \textit{λαβέω ἀέρην}, and it is really intolerable that Agamemnon should make a point of telling the attendants ‘not to be half-hearted’ about their task..." Professor William H. Willis remarks, \textit{per litteras}, against Page: "Page’s ‘intolerable’ and ‘grotesque’ are themselves intolerable: naturally Agamemnon must urge his men to perform ‘with all their heart’ a task which they’re likely to find abhorrent."

\textsuperscript{14} Paley \textit{ad loc.} suggests that \textit{παντὶ θυμῷ} might refer to Iphigenia if taken closely with \textit{προσομνῆ}. He translates "fainting in all her soul"; Verrall and Mazon render "desperately bowed down."

\textsuperscript{15} \textit{παντὶ θυμῷ} is used in this sense with \textit{λυτάνευε} in P. \textit{Nem.} 5.31. It occurs with the verb \textit{αἴνω} in \textit{Eum.} 737f.
but twice? What is the significance of the metaphor κρόκου βαφῆς χέννας? Word and image in Aeschylus are not chosen with reference to the immediate context alone; they function as parts of a larger whole, a system of imagery and ideas which recur throughout the trilogy, connected by verbal repetition. The language of the present passage is as vivid as it is difficult to interpret. The unusual words, the striking image stand out, impressing themselves upon the hearer. They are not easily forgotten, but echo in the memory when a similar word or phrase appears.16

The curse upon the house of Atreus demands a never-ending stream of blood. To right old wrong new wrong must be committed; once blood is spilt more blood must flow. The clearest statement of this theme occurs in Choephoroi (312–13; 400–404); but from the beginning of the trilogy it is suggested by a variety of related images which involve dripping or flowing. There is the oozing wound which will not heal, the steady drip of fear around the heart, the poison drops with which the Erinyes threaten to blight Attica. There is also the image of colored cloth trailing on the ground. The different images of liquid flowing are interwoven with one another and with the bloodshed which they represent by repetition of the phrase “pouring (or falling) to the ground.”17 Words for dye are used in ominous evocation of the bloodshed to come, then used figuratively of blood itself (Cho. 1011–13), thus reinforcing the associative connection between bright cloth and blood. This image becomes a concrete object of perception in each of the three plays: the crimson tapestries in Agamemnon and the blood-dyed robe in Choephoroi are spread upon the ground (Ag. 908ff; Cho. 983ff); in Eumenides the cycle of bloodshed is ended when the Semnai don robes of scarlet (1028).18

After persuading Agamemnon to enter the palace, Clytemnestra utters a speech filled with ominous undertones. She mentions the dipping (βαφαί) of garments in a sea of spurting dye (κηκίς)19 deep red
in hue and endlessly renewed (958–60). Agamemnon’s blood is soon to
dye the garment in which she entangles him. There is a close connec-
tion between the path of tapestry in which Agamemnon is trapped
symbolically, persuaded against his better judgement to set foot upon
it, and the robe in which his feet are actually entangled when the
lethal blow is struck. Aeschylus employs the same word, “garment”
(εματος), for both. The splendor and richness of the cloth on which
Agamemnon walks is emphasized repeatedly; in 1383 Clytemnestra
calls the robe πλούτον εματος κακῶν, “evil wealth of garment.” In
Choephoroi Orestes describes the robe, now dyed with blood which has
destroyed its variegated color (1011–13):

φάρος τὸδ’, ὑς ἐβαψεν Αἰγίσθουε ξίφος.
φόνον δὲ κηκίς ξὺν χρόνῳ ξυμβάλλεται
πολλὰς βαφὰς φθείρουσα τοῦ ποικιλματος.

The unusual words βαφαι and κηκίς were used in the carpet scene; the
dark red dye and variegated color of the “garments” is mentioned
several times (910, 946, 957, 959; 923, 926, 936). At the close of the
trilogy the Semnai don robes which are φόινικοβάπτοι (1028); at its
opening Iphigenia is slain while the saffron dyed robe (κρόκου βαφάς)
spills round her.

In the lyric scene between Cassandra and the chorus the sacrifice at
Aulis is recalled (1121–24). These lines echo two separate images, rela-
ted but not identical, which appeared in the parodos. In 179 the chorus
spoke of anxiety dripping round the heart; in 239 they described
Iphigenia pouring dye of saffron toward the earth. In 1121 they unite
the two. στάξει δ’ ἀνθ’ ὑπνον πρὸ καρδίας μανιστήμων πόνος and κρόκου

adunaton), or the tempering of iron. See Fraenkel, ad loc. p. 304. Whether the metal is
immersed in dye or in cold water, the phrase has an ominous undertone since καλάς often
means “weapon” (LSJ s.v. II) and βαφή is itself an ominous word in Agamemnon as a result of
its repeated association with blood.

20 Described thus at Cho. 982 and 988–1000.

21 εματος is used of the “carpet” in 921, 960 and 963. The word literally means “garments.”
Page, ad loc. p. 148, is justified in pointing out the error in LSJ where the meaning “carpet”
is ascribed to the word on the strength of its use here (and in one passage of Sophocles).
Page himself, however, falls into new error. The fact that Aeschylus uses the word εματα of
the article unrolled before Agamemnon does not mean that this article is actually a gar-
ment and not a carpet as he argues, but that Aeschylus has, for some reason, chosen to
substitute the word “garments” for some more normal word indicating rugs or coverlets (e.g. πετάμωσον in 909 or ἐφάς in 949). Page’s literal interpretation of the language used by
Aeschylus denies the existence of metaphor. I suggest that Aeschylus calls the carpet of
tapestries εματα in order to establish their connection with the robe, thus making Clytem-
nestra’s role in the carpet scene parallel to the actual murder.

22 See Hiltbrunner, loc.cit. (supra. n.17).


\[\betaafo\delta' \varepsilon\pi\varepsilon\delta\varepsilon\chi\vareut\varepsilon\] become a saffron-dyed drop which races toward the heart: \(\varepsilon\pi\iota \varepsilon\kappa\vareut\varepsilon \varepsilon\theta\vareut\varepsilon\vareut \varepsilon\kappa\rho\kappa\beta\alpha\phi\heta \sigma\tau\alpha\gamma\omega\). The image then expands to include a new element. To the steady drip of fear and dye of saffron the chorus add life-blood which ebbs from men fallen in battle (1122–23);

\[
\acute{\upsilon} \kappa\alpha\iota \delta\omicron\rho\iota \pi\tau\omega\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron\iota
\xi\nu\nu\nu\nu\upsilon\upupsilon\upsilon\upsilon \beta\omicron\upsilon\omicron \delta\omicron\upsilon\omicron \sigma\upsilon\gamma\upsilon\sigma\upsilon.
\]

Immediately thereafter Cassandra beholds the murder of Agamemnon. Clytemnestra strikes him, \(\varepsilon\nu \pi\varepsilon\lambda\omicron\omega\iota\upsilon \lambda\alpha\beta\omicron\omicron\alpha\sigma\alpha\), having caught him amid robes. Thus the robe-entangled death of Agamemnon follows an evocation of the scene at Aulis, the picture of Iphigenia \(\pi\varepsilon\lambda\omicron\omega\iota\upsilon \pi\varepsilon\mu\iota\tau\eta\heta, \kappa\rho\omicron\kappa\omicron \beta\alpha\phi\delta' \varepsilon\pi\varepsilon\delta\varepsilon\chi\vareut\varepsilon\].

The vivid description of Iphigenia at Aulis, the robes which fall round her as saffron dye pours like blood upon the ground, gain in significance when related to the imagery and action surrounding the death of Agamemnon. The prominence of robe and dye in the parodos gives a first intimation of the importance which they acquire in the course of the trilogy.

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\[23\] I am indebted to Professor William H. Willis for still another interpretation of \(\pi\varepsilon\lambda\omicron\omega\iota\upsilon \pi\varepsilon\mu\iota\tau\eta\heta\), one which is particularly significant in reference to 1126–28. \(\pi\varepsilon\mu\iota\tau\eta\heta\) with the dative can mean “to fall upon misfortune” (see LSJ s.v. \(\pi\varepsilon\mu\iota\tau\eta\heta\) II. 3: \(\sigma\omicron \alpha\nu\tau\omega \pi \ldots \)’ to fall into one’s own snare’ Hdt. 1.108, cf. 8.16, Luc. D. Mort. 26.2, Aeschin. 47.13). Iphigenia is “caught in her (own) robes,” as Agamemnon is to be caught in his.

\[24\] I agree with Lloyd-Jones, \textit{op.cit.} p. 134, that the drops of saffron are not Iphigenia’s blood; however, the image chosen to describe her robe suggests the blood soon to be shed. The fact that \(k\rho\kappa\omicron\beta\alpha\phi\heta\) is not used “to describe anything colored red before the Roman poets of the Augustan age” (ibid.) is not an insuperable difficulty. \(k\rho\kappa\beta\alpha\phi\heta \sigma\tau\alpha\gamma\omega\) in 1120 apparently refers to blood (or if it is taken to mean bile, it is, nonetheless, at once compared to blood). Iphigenia’s blood is about to pour upon the ground; when, in such a context, Aeschylus describes her as pouring saffron liquid toward the ground, the suggestion of blood is unavoidable. Choice of the color saffron is perhaps dictated by its association with festive dress. Iphigenia dons a saffron robe to attend a sacred rite, unaware of the part she is to play when the ritual is performed. See H. J. Rose, \textit{Commentary on the Surviving Plays of Aeschylus II} (“Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen,” Nieuwe Reeks, Deel 44 2 [Amsterdam 1958]) 22.