Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1478–1480

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The Chorus of Elders, after being informed of Agamemnon’s murder at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra, addresses the daimon who has engendered so many misfortunes for the race of the Tantalids (1468–1471). Clytemnestra approves of the chorus’s new insight into what has just transpired (1476) and calls the daimon τριπάχυντον, “thrice-gorged.” Tyndareus’ daughter goes on to explain that from such a daimon comes the desire to lick blood, so that a new discharge of pus is brought forth before the old wound is healed (1478–1480). I give Page’s text:¹

ἐκ τοῦ γὰρ ἔρως αἱματολοιχὸς νείραι τρέφεται· πρὸν καταλήξαι τὸ παλαιὸν ἔχος, νέος ἵχωρ.

1480


νείραι, the Portus-Casaubon-Wellauer conjecture for the MSS. reading νείρει, has become, in M. L. West’s words,² the modern vulgate, accepted as such and printed by F. A. Paley.³

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² *Studies in Aeschylus* (Stuttgart 1990) 222.

³ *The Tragedies of Aeschylus* (Oxford 1861) 436.

Fraenkel offered two reasons in support of νείραι: (1) From Hsch. ν 245 νειραί κατωτάται. οἱ δὲ κοιλίας τὰ κατώτατα and schol. Lycoph. 895 τὸ δὲ ἐννηροῖς τοῖς κοίλοις ἢ τοῖς καθύγροις, νείραι might be taken to mean “lowest, deepest, imis medullis” and not just “bowels.” This usage agrees with the usual site where desire is engendered and lodged in Greek and Latin poetry. (2) There would be no need to posit the ellipse of a verb if νέος ἰχώρ were put in an apposition to ἔρως αἱματολοιχὸς νείραι τρέφεται, “The craving caused by the δαίμων, a craving for murder (αἱματολοιχός), manifests itself in fresh disease (before the old one has ceased).”

4 Aeschyli tragoediae (Berlin 1914).
5 The Agamemnon of Aeschylus (London 1904).
6 Aeschylus II (London/New York 1926).
7 Index Aeschylen (Leiden 1964).
10 Aeschyli tragoediae cum incerti poetae Prometheo (Stuttgart/Leipzig 1998).
11 Aeschyli tragoediae 236 on Ag. 1480.
12 Other editors and translators offer the following translations: “For therefrom is bred this craving of the maw for blood to lick, ever new gore (?) ere the old woan be done” (Verrall); “For it is by his doing that a craving for blood to lap is nourished in the belly, new pus before the old woe has ceased” (Fraenkel); “From him it cometh that the lust for lapping blood is fostered in the maw; ere ever the ancient wound is healed, fresh blood is spilled” (Smyth).
13 Aeschylus, Agamemnon III 701–702.
15 Fraenkel, Aeschylus, Agamemnon III 702, following R. H. Klausen, Aeschyli
Regardless, Denniston and Page on the one hand and West on the other offered a number of objections of considerable weight against Wellauer’s conjecture. To begin with, the bowels are not the site of any feeling in Greek poetry.\textsuperscript{16} The form νεϊρ- for νεαιρ- occurs very seldom, and there are no other parallels for the pro-substantival use of the adjective νεϊρος in the whole of Greek literature save for Hsch. v 245.\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, there is just one verb (τρέφεται) to govern two substantives (ἔρως, ἱχώρ), and the ellipse of the main verb in the following clause (πρὶν καταλῆξαι τὸ παλαιὸν ἡχός, νέος ἱχώρ) makes for a very unusual nominal sentence.\textsuperscript{18} Additionally, if νεϊρα were the correct reading, the appearance of the form νειρεί in the MSS. would be hard to account for.\textsuperscript{19}

In my opinion, Fraenkel’s reasons do not support adequately the Portus-Casaubon-Wellauer conjecture. First, and leaving aside the matter of the adjectival or pro-substantival nature of νεϊρα, Hesychius’ gloss cannot be adduced in order to document the meaning “entails” (= medullae) for a pro-substantival usage of νεϊρα. If anything, it clearly points towards the meaning “abdomen, bowels” (ἡ κάτω κοιλία, Ar. Ran. 485).\textsuperscript{20}

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\textsuperscript{16} West, Studies 222; Denniston/Page, Aeschylus, Agamemnon 206.


\textsuperscript{18} Denniston/Page, Aeschylus, Agamemnon 206, West, Studies 222.

\textsuperscript{19} G. Hermann, Aeschyli Tragoediae (Leipzig/Berlin 1852), believed νεϊρει to be the dative of an unattested substantive νεϊρος.

\textsuperscript{20} Hsch. v 246 νεϊρῃ κοιλίᾳ κοιλία ἐσχάτη; cf. Choenob. De orthographia 241.22–24 νεϊρᾳ- σημαίνει δὲ τὸ ἐσχατὸν μέρος τῆς γαστρὸς ... εἰς αὐτὴν γὰρ πορεύεται τὰ ἐσθιόμενα; Erotian. Hippocr. coll. 97.9; Suda ν 282; Eust. II. II 144.22 Erbse; schol. II. 5.239 νεϊρῇ δ’ ἐν γαστρὶ τῷ σωῷ ἐντέρῳ ἢ τῇ κύστι; schol. Nic. Alex. 20 νεϊρῃ[ε] (a) νεϊρᾳ τὸ βάθος τῆς γαστρος, (b) τῆς κάτω τῆς κοιλίας. See also Blomfield, Aeschylos Agamemnon 305: “infima pars ventris. viscera. κοιλία ἐσχάτη. Hesych. eadem quae νεϊρῃ. Hom. II. Ε 539 νεϊρῇ δ’ ἐν γαστρὶ”; Schneidewin, Aeschylos Agamemnon 177.
usage of νεῦρα as a metonym for “entrails as the locus of desire” is, so far as I can tell, undocumented. Rather, such a notion was usually conveyed by the phrase ὑπὸ σπλάγχνων (≈ medullae).21 Desire manifests itself also in the lungs πλευμόνες,22 heart ὑπὸ καρδίην,23 breast ἐν στήθεσι,24 στέρνοις,25 spirit ὑπὸ ψυχῆ26, soul ψυχῆ27, brains φρένες,28 liver ἥπαρ,29 and even the bones.30 I have been unable to locate a single passage where the belly31 or the bowels are said to be the seat of ἔρως.

With regard to the second of Fraenkel’s reasons in support of the modern vulgate, i.e., that νέος ἰχώρ is put in apposition to ἔρως ἀἵματολοιχὸς νεῖραι τρέφεται, it is certainly true that the meaning of the phrase, so construed, would fit the common amatory motif of desire as sickness.32 There are indeed parallels for the conceit of love as an infested or suppurating wound

21 Herod. 1.57; Theoc. 7.99; Mosch. 1.17; Dion. Hal. AR 11.35.4; Anth. Gr. 5.56.4, 6.260.6; Opp. Hal. 4.17. See also W. Headlam and A. D. Knox, Herodas. The Mines and Fragments (Cambridge 1922) 42; A. S. F. Gow, Theocritus II (Cambridge 1950) 156.
22 Soph. fr.941.7, 15 R.
25 Anth. Gr. 5.293.4.
26 Hom. Il. 14.316; Anth. Gr. 5.47.2, 9.442.2; Mus. 240.
27 Eur. Hipp. 527; fr.431.3 K.; Anth. Gr. 5.267.10, 10.29.2, 12.80.1, 12.91.1, 12.92.8, 12.157.2.
29 Theoc. 11.16, 13.71; Anth. Gr. 5.224.1; Anacreont. 33.27–28; schol. Theoc. 11.16.
31 The only apparent exception occurs in Achaenian Aetion (TrGF II 20 f 6), ἐν κενῇ γάρ γαστρὶ τὸν καλὸν ἔρως / οὐκ ἔστι, but this is clearly a metaphorical use.
While this is true, it must be born in mind that there are no parallels in the whole of Greek literature to support the notion that it is ἔρως itself that is the pus (ἰχώρ) rather than the wound (ἐλκος) from which the purulent discharge oozes forth. The difference is very significant, and can be illustrated e.g. by Anth.Gr. 5.225, ἐλκος ἔχω τὸν ἔρωτα· δέ εיך δὲ μοι ἐλκος ἰχώρ / δάκρυνον, ὦτειλής οὕποτε τεθσομένης (Macedonius Consul).

Therefore, νείραι is not sufficiently defended and cannot stand. On such grounds, West was inclined to assume that the MSS. reading νείρει conceals a verb and not a noun. Such had been the diagnosis made by D. S. Margoliouth and A. E. Housman as well, and hinted at by Blomfield. For my part, I submit that νείρει is indeed the corruption of a verb, which I believe to be κείρει. In support of my conjecture I offer the following arguments (i–iv) from Aeschylean and Homeric usage, as well as from dramatic meaning.


35 On the strength of this passage I had initially considered that νείρει τρέφεται might be a corruption of ν�� ῥεῖ τρέφεται <τε>, a rising tricolon, but while such a conjecture may be palaeographically easier, it creates more problems than it solves, construction-wise.

36 Studies in Aeschylus 222.


39 For his part, G. Thomson, The Oresteia of Aeschylus II (Cambridge 1938) 110, took νείρει τρέφεται to be a corruption of the unfamiliar compound νεαροτροφεῖται, “to be nourished anew.”

40 Aeschyl Agamemnon 306; “in hoc loco subaudientum videtur ἣτει.”
(i) Confusion of ν and χ, although not frequent, can be documented in the MSS. of *Agamemnon*:41

17 ἐντέμνον MVT : ἐκτέμνον (ss. F ἐν) FG

541 ἐκδακρύειν T : ἐκνόμως

1473 ἐκδακρύειν schol. vet. in T: ἐνδακρύειν (antem correctionem) FG

while confusion of initial ν and κ appears in *Pers.* 310 νικώμενοι M: νικώμενοι O.42

(ii) The verb κείρω and its compounds such as ἐπικείρω are documented in the Aeschylean corpus with the meaning “dese-care, vastare” (*Supp.* 666, *Pers.* 953) and “demetere, occidere” (*Pers.* 921, 951), as well as in Sophocles.45 Therefore, it is safe to posit that κείρω belongs to the tragic lexis. The thrice-gorged δαίμων of Tantalus’ race (1476–1477) is ultimately the cause of the hunger for blood that devours (κείρει) them. Notice that in *Pers.* 921 (as well as in Soph. fr.210.37) the subject of the action expressed by ἐπικείρω is a δαίμων also: οὓς νῦν δαίμων ἐπέκειρεν. It might be countered that κείρω construed without need of an explicit direct object is a remarkable construction, but on the other hand it is quite easy to supply a pronominal direct object from the previous line (1476–1477, τὸν τριπάχυντον / δαίμωνα γέννης τῆσδε κικλήσκων). So far as I can tell, κείρω construed in absolute use is documented at least once in the Homeric corpus with the meaning “eat up, destroy utterly,” in *Od.* 1.376–378 (= 2.141–143) ἐὰν δ’ ἦμιν δοξέως τόδε λοιπόν καὶ ἀμείνον / ἕμμεναι, ἄνδρος ἐνός βίοτον νήπιον ὑπόθαι, / κεῖρετ’. Doubtlessly Aeschylus might have come across these lines. Furthermore, there are a number of passages in the Aeschylean corpus where a transitive verb does not take a pronominal personal object as

41 ν might also have been affected by the nearness of νέος (1480).
43 Italie, *Index Aeschyleus* 152 s.v. κείρω 2.
44 Italie, *Index Aeschyleus* 106 s.v. ἐπικείρω.
would be expected.\textsuperscript{46} To limit ourselves to \textit{Agamemnon}, see Ag. 69 (ὑποκαίων οὐ' ἐπιλέβθων), 369 (ἐποφαίζεν ὡς ἐχωρινεί),\textsuperscript{47} 917 (αἰνεῖν, cf. 1403), 1069 (ἐπουχτόμω), 1082 (ἀπώλεος), 1128 (τύπτευ), 1562 (ἐκτίνει). Thus, the construction of \textit{κείρω} without an explicit direct object is compatible with Aeschylean practice.\textsuperscript{48}

I turn now to arguments from dramatic sense and meaning. My contention here is that Aeschylus portrays the daimon as a savage beast that causes a monstrous lust for blood to prey (\textit{κείρει}) on the race of the Tantalids, and whose repeated bites leave infected wounds that do not cease to suppurate. Such a conceit would resonate with the portrayal of other monstrous deities in the \textit{Agamemnon}, such as the Erinyes.

(iii) What dramatic purpose might \textit{κείρει} serve, and would it offer a better sense than \textit{νείρει}? The daimon who arouses the desire to lap blood (ἐρως αἱματολοιχός) is described as “thrice-gorged” (τριπάχυντον 1476) and assimilated to a crow perched (ἐκταθείς) on top of a corpse\textsuperscript{49} (1472–1473). The bestial nature of the daimon comes through also in the use of χηλῇ βαρείᾳ (1660) to describe its clawed or cloven feet.\textsuperscript{50} Therefore, the feeling he engenders, ἐρως αἵματολοιχός, acquires the traits of a flesh-eating beast that licks blood, an image that can be illustrated from Ag. 827–828 ὀμηστὴς λέων / ἄδην ἔλειξεν αἵματος τυραννικοῦ, Sept. 692 ὀμοδαιμίς ... ἰμος.\textsuperscript{51} Precisely, one of the meanings of \textit{κείρω} in Homer is “tear, eat greedily, of


\textsuperscript{47} See Fraenkel’s note, \textit{Aeschylus, Agamemnon} II 193.

\textsuperscript{48} For a parallel of an asyndetic verb without a direct object see T. W. C. Stinton, \textit{Euripides and the Judgement of Paris} (London 1965) 1–77, at 71, on Eur. \textit{Andr}. 289. As for the explicative asyndeton that the reading \textit{κείρει} (or any other verb) would introduce in 1478–1480, see e.g. Ag. 951, 1261, 1284, 1428, and Fraenkel, \textit{Aeschylus, Agamemnon} II 432–433, III 582, 597, 673.

\textsuperscript{49} Fraenkel, \textit{Aeschylus, Agamemnon} III 699–700.


\textsuperscript{51} Cf. also Opp. \textit{Hal}. 2.453 τόσοος ἐρως καὶ τούτων ἐν ἰχθύσιν αἵματος ἀν-δρόν.
beasts” (LSJ s.v. III.1):\footnote{Suda x 1478, East. Il. 3.253.22, schol. Il. 11.559 [xei\u03b7ai] kòstai tois òdòsouin. òsthein, métàfítikos. See also H. Ebeling, Lexicon Homericum I (Leipzig 1885) 745 s.v. xeïrò 2, “depascor.”} II. 11.560 (a donkey) xeïrêi tê éisefi-
thôn báthu lýmôn (cf. Lycoph. Alex. 215 lýmânta xeïrînta ôdònta kai ãnàthos lýmôn), II. 21.203–204 (eels and fishes) tòv mèn áo’
ëggêlëis tê kai ãthôes ãmápeténnto / òdïmôn ãrêpetômenoi ép-
veîrînto xeiôntes, Od. 11.578 (vultures) γûpe dé mûn ékâ-
terôs parìmêno õtâro xeiônto. It would be expected for such a
beast-like daïmon to be said to “devour” (xeïrêi) the race of
Tantalus, just as its intervention is said to “bite” the chorus’s
heart: 1469–1471 δâîmôn, õs ... / krâtôs <t’> iôîphîxîn èk 
gynnâkov / xarîdôdîrîntov èmî xraîtvînêv.\footnote{Contrast Ag. 740 ðêjîthûmôn èfòtov ãnòv. The link between xarî-
dôdîrîtov èid xêïthûmôs had been noticed by Blomfield, Aeschylis Agamemnon 305, and Schneidewin, Aeschylus Agamemnon 176.} Furthermore, the
daïmon is closely linked to acts of human flesh-eating in that he
metes out punishment for the cannibalistic feast served by
Atreus: 1501–1502 toûd’ ò pàlaiòs dhômûs âlástovor / Atrèovs
chûleîvov õthoîntîvov.

(iv) The Erînyes are traditionally said to drink blood.\footnote{The connection between âîmâltoîlîcôs and the Erînyes as seen in Eum. 193, 205, 305 had been noticed already by Klausen, Aeschylí quae supersunt 274.} In Ag. 1188–1190 Aeschylus portrays these demons as a chorus of
blood-drinking (kài mûn péiïwîs àv’, ... / brôtêion ãîmia) revellers. More relevantly, the Erînyes are described also as
beast-like monsters (Eum. 192–193 lêóntov èntîrov âîmâtô-
orôfou / õîzêîn toutâtov eiôs) intent on feeding on human
blood (264–266 âlî, ântîdînna déi s’ âpò àvîntos ðîfêîv / èrgûðînèv èk meîlêòv pèlânîv- âpô õî sôû / bòscaîn ðêrîmâm
pòmâtoù dûsîttov).\footnote{Schneidewin, Aeschylus Agamemnon 180, identifies mèlâs Àrês with èfòs âîmâltoîlîcôs.} Another entity closely related to the ac-
tion of the âlástov, Ares, is portrayed as forcing his way through
human blood in order to render justice to the blood clots left
out after the eating of Thyestes’ children: 1509–1512 bîàçê-
The characterization of the alastor as a carnivorous monster that eats up the Tantalids, which I propose, fits well and parallels thematically the gruesome portrayal of other avenging deities, such as the Erinyes and Ares, as devouring fiends intent on punishing the ghastly feeding of Thyestes’ children to his father.

Taking arguments i–iv into account, the text and punctuation I propose for Ag. 1478–1480 are as follows (West’s colometry):

εξ τοῦ γὰρ ἔρως αἰματολοιχὸς κείρεται· τρέφεται πρὶν καταλῆξαι τὸ παλαιὸν ἄξος νέος ἰχώρ.

1480

It is from him that comes the desire to lick blood that devours (them): before the old wound ceases, new pus is bred.

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On Ares’ portrait as a flesh-eating fiend in Agamemnon see Verrall, The Agamemnon of Aeschylus 84, and compare Hom. Il. 5.289 αἰματος ἄταος Ἀρης, Aesch. Sept. 244 τοῦτο γὰρ Ἀρης βόσκεται, φόνῳ βροτῶν.

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