

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 (πέπλοισι περιπετῆ [233]; κρόκου βαφὰς δ' ἐς πέδον χέουσα [239]). There are two interpretations of the lines in question. Most scholars regard the verbal adjective περιπετῆς in line 233 as passive, the dative πέπλοισι 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-Jones³ 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 περιπετῆς 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.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the Greek text is that of G. Murray, *Aeschyli Tragoediae*² (Oxford 1955). The following editions will henceforth be referred to by the name of editor alone: John Denniston and Denys Page, *Agamemnon* (Oxford 1957); Eduard Fraenkel, *Agamemnon* II (Oxford 1950); Paul Mazon, *Eschyle* II (Paris 1925); F. A. Paley, *Tragedies of Aeschylus*⁴ (London 1879); A. W. Verrall, *Agamemnon*² (London 1904). I wish to thank Professor William M. Calder III of Columbia University for his assistance.

² According to Wilamowitz (*Gr. Trag.* II⁵, 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*.

³ “The Robes of Iphigenia,” *CR* 66 (1952) 132–35.

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 *περιπετής* 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 enjambement across the end of the stanza, a rare phenomenon.⁷

φράσεν δ' ἀόζοις πατήρ μετ' εὐχὰν
 δίκαν χιμαίρας ὑπερθε βωμοῦ
 πέπλοισι περιπετῆ παντὶ θυμῶ
 προνωπῆ λαβεῖν ἀέρδην,
 235 στόματός τε καλλιπρώρου
 φυλακᾶ κατασχεῖν
 φθόγγον ἀραῖον οἴκοις,
 βία χαλινῶν τ' ἀναύδω μένει·
 κρόκου βαφᾶς δ' ἐς πέδον χέουσα
 ἔβαλλ' ἕκαστον θυτήρων
 240 ἀπ' ὄμματος βέλει φιλοίκτω . . .

The part played by Iphigenia's robes in 233 could be the same as that described in 239. The phrase *πέπλοισι περιπετῆ παντὶ θυμῶ προνωπῆ*, although inserted within the order given by Agamemnon (*φράσεν . . . λαβεῖν ἀέρδην*), is not part of his command but a contribution of the chorus which anticipates their description in the next strophe.⁸

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

⁸ Cf. Fraenkel, *ad loc.* p. 134: “*πέπλοισι περιπετῆ* 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.

πέπλοισι περιπετῆ should not be rendered by the paraphrase “enwrapped in robes,” but translated literally as “fallen round by robes,”⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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. . .*”¹¹ She is described as she will look above the altar, not at the moment when the attendants seize her. The words *πέπλοισι περιπετῆ παντὶ θυμῷ προνωπῆ* are closely connected by alliteration, recurrence of sound linking the disjointed phrases in lieu of syntactical connection;¹² perhaps an added reason for assuming that every word in the phrase refers to Iphigenia, that the robes are hers. *παντὶ θυμῷ* 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

⁹ This is the literal meaning of the phrase if *περιπετῆς* is taken as passive. Against such an interpretation, Lloyd-Jones, *op.cit.* p. 133, argues that *περιπετῆς* is used as a passive in only one other place (*Ajax* 906f). Furthermore, no other derivatives of *πίπτω* ending in *-πετῆς* are passive. However, neologisms and *hapax legomena* abound in Aeschylus. The freedom with which he uses language makes it unlikely that the poet would be deterred by the absence of a parallel formation in Buck-Peterson’s *Reverse Index of Greek Nouns and Adjectives*. In addition, *argumentum ex silentio* is a tenuous one since we possess only a tenth of his work. Lloyd-Jones himself concludes that “for *περιπετῆς* to be passive is not impossible, but at the same time not probable.” In Aeschylus one should expect the improbable, the unexpected.

περιπετῆς might also be related to *πετάννυμι*. Adjectival derivatives of this verb which end in *-πετῆς* are not found before the fourth century; but, once again, this is not a decisive argument. However, *πίπτω* gains an edge on *πετάννυμι* when the falling robes of 233 are related to the flow of saffron in 239.

¹⁰ Lloyd-Jones, *op.cit.* p. 135, has shown that *ἐς πέδον* need not mean that the robes actually fall on the ground. The phrase can also mean “toward, i.e., in the direction of, the ground.”

¹¹ The derivation and meaning of *προνωπῆ* are uncertain. It is glossed by *προνευκυῖαν*. The majority of commentators and translators refer it to Iphigenia’s position as the attendants attempt to seize her. Paley *ad loc.* suggests “with her head leaning over the altar. . . . It was the custom to kill the victim held aloft in this position, that the lifeblood might sprinkle the altar.” This interpretation is adopted by Lloyd-Jones and Page. The amphora which Maas, *loc.cit.* (*supra* n.4) offers as illustration of the scene gives it added weight.

However, the word is used figuratively in *E. Alc.* 143 (*cf.* 186) to describe the “slipping away of consciousness and vital force” (Fraenkel, *ad loc.* p. 134). There is no need to choose between the literal and figurative sense of the word here. *προνωπῆ* describes the actual position of Iphigenia, head hanging over the altar, and at the same time, suggests her inner state.

¹² See Walter Porzig, *Die attische Tragödie des Aischylos* (Leipzig 1926) 86: “. . . wie die stilistische Anapher ein Mittel ist, Sätze zur Periode zu binden, so bindet die Alliteration Wörter klanglich zu Gruppen.”

established by alliteration. However, just as in the question of whose robes are meant, the words will bear both interpretations.¹³

If *παντὶ θυμῶ* 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.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 *παντὶ θυμῶ* in 233 suggests the description in 240–43 when Iphigenia pleads with all her heart¹⁵ but cannot speak. Both *παντὶ θυμῶ* 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

¹³ Lloyd-Jones, *op.cit.* p. 134, takes *πέπλοισι περιπετῇ* (understood as active) *παντὶ θυμῶ* together: “she clasped his robes with all her heart.” According to Page, *ad loc.* p. 90, one can only make sense of *παντὶ θυμῶ* if Lloyd-Jones’ interpretation of *περιπετῇ* is adopted: “On any other view *παντὶ θυμῶ* has to be taken with *λαβεῖν ἀέροδην*, 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, *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.”

¹⁴ Paley *ad loc.* suggests that *παντὶ θυμῶ* might refer to Iphigenia if taken closely with *προνωπῆ*. He translates “fainting in all her soul”; Verrall and Mazon render “desperately bowed down.”

¹⁵ *παντὶ θυμῶ* is used in this sense with *λιτάνευε* in *P. Nem.* 5.31. It occurs with the verb *αἰνῶ* in *Eum.* 737f.

but twice? What is the significance of the metaphor *κρόκου βαφάς χέουσα*? 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

¹⁶ Cf. Otto Hiltbrunner, *Wiederholungs- und Motivtechnik bei Aischylos* (Bern 1950) 3–5.

¹⁷ *Ag.* 239, saffron dye: *Ag.* 1020, blood; *Cho.* 48, 66–67, 401, blood; *Eum.* 478–79 and 786, poison of the Furies; *Eum.* 261–63 and 653, blood.

¹⁸ See Hiltbrunner, *op.cit.* pp. 62–63 and R. F. Goheen, “Aspects of Dramatic Symbolism in the Oresteia,” *AJP* 76 (1955) 118–20.

¹⁹ *κηκίς* means any substance which spurts or oozes; it is also used of dye. *βαφή* means literally “dipping into liquid,” especially dye. It is a metaphor for blood in *Pers.* 317. Clytemnestra uses the word ironically in 612: she knows no more of infidelity than of *χαλκοῦ βαφαί*, the dipping of bronze, which suggests the weapon to be dipped in her husband’s blood; so F. A. Paley, *Aeschylus Translated into English Prose*² (Cambridge 1871) 150 n.l. It is uncertain what process is referred to: the coloring of bronze, the tempering of bronze (an

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 connection 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 entangled²⁰ when the lethal blow is struck. Aeschylus employs the same word, "garment" (εἶμα), for both.²¹ The splendor and richness of the cloth on which Agamemnon walks is emphasized repeatedly; in 1383 Clytemnestra calls the robe *πλοῦτον εἵματος κακόν*, "evil wealth of garment." In *Choephoroi* Orestes describes the robe, now dyed with blood which has destroyed its variegated color (1011–13):

*φᾶρος τόδ', ὡς ἔβαψεν Αἰγίσθου ξίφος.
φόνου δὲ κηκίς ξὺν χρόνῳ ξυμβάλλεται
πολλὰς βαφὰς φθείρουσα τοῦ ποικίλματος.*

The unusual words *βαφαί* 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 *φοινικοβάπτοις* (1028); at its opening Iphigenia is slain while the saffron dyed robe (*κρόκου βαφάς*) spills round her.²²

In the lyric scene between Cassandra and the chorus the sacrifice at Aulis is recalled (1121–24). These lines echo two separate images, related 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. *στάζει δ' ἀνθ' ὕπνου πρὸ καρδίας μνησιπήμων 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 *χαλκός* 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 *εἶματα* 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 *εἶματα* of the article unrolled before Agamemnon does not mean that this article is actually a garment 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. *πετάσμασιν* in 909 or *ὑφάς* 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 *εἶματα* in order to establish their connection with the robe, thus making Clytemnestra's role in the carpet scene parallel to the actual murder.

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

βαφὰς δ' ἐς πέδον χέουσα become a saffron-dyed drop which races toward the heart: ἐπὶ δὲ καρδίαν ἔδραμε κροκοβαφῆς σταγών. 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);

ἄτε καὶ δορὶ πτωσίμοις
ξυνανύτει βίου δύντος ἀυγαῖς.

Immediately thereafter Cassandra beholds the murder of Agamemnon. Clytemnestra strikes him, ἐν πέπλοισιν λαβοῦσα, having caught him amid robes. Thus the robe-entangled death of Agamemnon follows an evocation of the scene at Aulis, the picture of Iphigenia πέπλοισι περιπετῆ, κρόκου βαφὰς δ' ἐς πέδον χέουσα.²³

The vivid description of Iphigenia at Aulis, the robes which fall round her as saffron dye pours like blood²⁴ 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 πέπλοισι περιπετῆ, one which is particularly significant in reference to 1126–28. περιπίπτω with the dative can mean “to fall upon misfortune” (see LSJ s.v. περιπίπτω II. 3: σοὶ αὐτῶ π . . . ’ 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, *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 *κροκος* is not used “to describe anything colored red before the Roman poets of the Augustan age” (*ibid.*) is not an insuperable difficulty. κροκοβαφῆς σταγών 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, *Commentary on the Surviving Plays of Aeschylus II* (“Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen,” Nieuwe Reeks, Deel 44 2 [Amsterdam 1958]) 22.