

The Bond of Consanguinity between Mother and Daughter: *Agamemnon* 1417–1418 and 1525

Giulia Maria Chesi

IN AESCHYLUS' *AGAMEMNON*, Clytemnestra talks about the mother-daughter relationship as a bond of consanguinity on two occasions: at 1417–1418, after the murder of Agamemnon, when she asserts, in front of the chorus, the righteousness of her violent deed, and at 1525, in the long lyrical-epirrhematic exchange with the chorus in the exodos. I argue that her view of the mother-child bond as a tie of consanguinity affects her own representation of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, and of the relations of *philia*. Moreover, it establishes a continuity in the discourse about motherhood between the *Agamemnon* and the *Eumenides*.

In 1417–1418, Clytemnestra describes Agamemnon as the sacrificer of his own child, refers to Iphigeneia as the child to whom she has given life, and depicts Iphigeneia's death as the necessary condition to win favorable winds for sailing to Troy and waging war:¹

ἔθυσεν αὐτοῦ παῖδα, φιλάτην ἐμοὶ
ὠδῖν', ἐπῳδὸν Θρηκίων ἀημάτων

he sacrificed his own child, the she-child I laboured
to launch on her life-lot, to charm the winds of Thrace

As has been observed, the word ὠδίς expresses the biological

¹ Translations are, with a few variations, from H. Lloyd-Jones, *Aeschylus. The Oresteia* (Berkeley 1979). The translation of φιλάτην ἐμοὶ ὠδῖν' is by T. Harrison, *Plays Four. The Oresteia* (London 2002).

bond of consanguinity between a mother and her child, and precisely the relation between the female child and its mother at the moment of giving birth.² It seems important to link ὄδῖς to θύειν. Read with θύειν, ὄδῖς brings out the insoluble clash between the one who gives birth (the mother figure) and the one who kills for the sake of war (the father figure). In this interpretation, revenge for the sacrifice of Iphigeneia represents, from Clytemnestra's maternal perspective, the punishment of Agamemnon's warlike violence against the inviolable bond of consanguinity between a mother and the creature of her womb.³ Therefore, contrary to a common view, Clytemnestra does not seem to be giving voice to the pain of a "disturbed

² N. Loraux, *Les mères en deuil* (Paris 1990) 79–80: "la fille, on s'en souvient, pouvait être désignée comme *ōdis*, d'un nom qui renvoie au vécu même de l'accouchement, dans sa durée et sa douleur, mais avant que la séparation de la mère et de l'enfant ne soit accomplie." Thus, as Loraux (137 n.93) says, ὄδῖς properly designates the female child in relation of her mother, and not just the child in relation to the female. For this meaning of ὄδῖς cf. J. Dumortier, *Le vocabulaire médical d'Eschyle et les écrits hippocratiques*² (Paris 1975) 28: "ōdis signifie le fruit de la douleur, l'enfant ... *ōdis* sera l'enfant, par rapport à la femme." R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Studies in Aeschylus* (Cambridge 1983) 110, notes that ὄδῖς, like ἔρνος in 1525, designates "the intimate physical connection between mother and child."

³ On Agamemnon's warlike violence and the sacrifice of Iphigeneia see N. G. L. Hammond, "Personal Freedom and its Limitations in the *Oresteia*," *JHS* 85 (1965) 42–55, at 42–47; J. Peradotto, "The Omen of the Eagles and the *ēthos* of Agamemnon," *Phoenix* 23 (1969) 237–263, at 255–257; E. R. Dodds, "Morals and Politics in the *Oresteia*," in *The Ancient Concept of Progress* (Oxford 1973) 45–63, at 57; E. Petrounias, *Funktion und Bedeutung der Bilder bei Aischylos* (Göttingen 1976) 151–152; P. Vellacott, "Has good prevailed? A Further Study of the *Oresteia*," *HSCP* 81 (1977) 113–122, at 115; T. Gantz, "Inherited Guilt in Aischylos," *CJ* 78 (1982) 1–23, at 11–13, and "The Chorus of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*," *HSCP* 87 (1983) 65–86, at 75–77; Winnington-Ingram, *Studies* 83; B. Seidensticker, "Charakter und Charakterisierung bei Aischylos," in J. Jouanna and F. Montanari (eds.), *Eschyle à l'aube du théâtre occidental* (Geneva 2009) 205–256, at 242–243. These scholars, however, refer to the chorus' description of Iphigeneia's sacrifice and not to Clytemnestra's representation of Iphigeneia's death.

tragic woman.”⁴ Rather, she appears to be criticising, from a maternal point of view, the violence of the father: by killing his own daughter in order to sail to Troy, Agamemnon has broken the continuity of life between a mother and the fruit of her womb. In this sense, Clytemnestra, like the chorus in the parodos (224–227), seems to be concerned with the public purpose of her daughter’s death: the chorus casts Agamemnon as the sacrificer of his daughter (ἔτλα δ’ οὖν θυτῆρ γενέσθαι θυγατρός), and portrays Iphigeneia’s sacrifice as the *condicio sine qua non* for the beginning of the Trojan War (προτέλεια ναῶν).⁵

There is a further consideration we can suggest. A reading of Iphigeneia’s sacrifice from the narrative perspective of Clytemnestra’s explanation at 1417–1418 does not pose the *why*-question “Why does Agamemnon sacrifice Iphigeneia?” to the text. In fact, it does not treat Agamemnon as a *person*, i.e. as a “psychological character”⁶ whose characterisation and motivations may provide reasons for Iphigeneia’s sacrifice. On the

⁴ Cf. E. Hall, *The Theatrical Cast of Athens* (Oxford 2006) 67: “From Clytemnestra in *Agamemnon* (1417–18) through to Euripides’ *Medea* (248–51) and onwards, appealing to the pain of childbirth had been a rhetorical marker of the emotionally disturbed tragic woman.”

⁵ I differ from H. Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford 2001) 213: “For Clytemnestra, Iphigeneia is viewed ... as *her* child by right of her birth pains ... The public concerns that the chorus views as involved in Agamemnon’s choice—Paris’ violation of Zeus’ laws of hospitality, the will of the army—play no role in her representation of the event.” On the expression προτέλεια ναῶν see F. Zeitlin, “The Motif of the Corrupted Sacrifice in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*,” *TAPA* 96 (1965) 463–508, at 466: according to Zeitlin προτέλεια at 227 evokes the preliminary sacrifice to marriage, which, in the case of Iphigeneia, is her own sacrifice preliminary to the war against Troy. See also A. Lebeck, “Imagery and Action in the *Oresteia*,” in E. Segal (ed.), *Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford 1983) 73–83, at 81. For the chorus’ portrayal of Agamemnon as the father of Iphigeneia cf. 231 (φράσεν δ’ ἀόζοις πατῆρ), 243 (πατρὸς κατ’ ἀνδρῶνας εὐτραπέζους), 245–246 (ἀγνῆ δ’ ἀταύρωτος ἀυδᾶ πατρὸς φίλου).

⁶ I borrow the expression from S. Goldhill, “Character and Action,” in C. Pelling (ed.), *Characterization and Individuality in Greek Literature* (Oxford 1990) 100–127, at 112.

contrary, it poses the *how*-question of Iphigeneia's death: "How does Clytemnestra talk about Iphigeneia's sacrifice?" Thus, it treats Clytemnestra as a *figure*, i.e. as a character whose way of speech constructs a specific discourse on sacrifice and violence: for Clytemnestra, as we have seen, the sacrifice of Iphigeneia breaches the inviolable mother-daughter bond, and accordingly represents a form of violence against the intimate relation between mother and daughter. Relying on Goldhill, we can see that this shift from the *why*-question to the *how*-question about Iphigeneia's sacrifice calls upon us to read Clytemnestra's language as a constitutive part of the play and of its narrative, and, at the same time, it prevents us from considering her language merely as the expression of her motivations and her psychological characterisation.⁷

As in 1417–1418, in lines 1525–1526 as well Clytemnestra portrays her child, whose death has been much lamented, as the exclusive fruit of the maternal womb:

ἀλλ' ἐμὸν ἐκ τοῦδ' ἔρνος ἀερθὲν
τὴν πολὺκλαυτὸν ἴτ' Ἰφιγένειαν†

But my child raised up from him,
Iphigeneia, much bewailed

Clytemnestra speaks these lines in her last confrontation with the chorus, as she tries to justify the death of Agamemnon as the retaliation for the sacrifice of Iphigeneia (1521–1529). We have to look carefully at these lines. It might seem *prima facie*

⁷ Following Barthes, Goldhill discusses at length the difference between *person* and *figure* as well as the relation between figure, language, and discourse in Greek tragedy, taking the *Oresteia* as a key study. Cf. esp. *Characterization* 108 on Orestes: "What is recognized here (as Orestes recognizes and is recognized by Electra) is not merely a bounded, unique, and autonomous individual. Rather, the language in and through which the figure of Orestes is formulated is part of the (figural) language of the trilogy, part of its specific textual dynamics, part of its *narrative*. The language does not merely express his 'character', nor does it merely offer access to an individual 'character'. The representation of a fictional figure is (over)determined by the fictional narrative in which the figure plays a part."

that for Clytemnestra the conception of her daughter is the result of her sexual encounter with her husband. However, we may also consider Clytemnestra to be actually claiming that the male, in the process of reproduction, is just the donor of sperm, and the woman, instead, the only *genetrix* of the child. The text seems to support this. Line 1525 reads: “my shoot that I conceived from him”:⁸ when Clytemnestra affirms that she has conceived her child “from this man here” (ἐκ τοῦδ’ ... ἀερθὲν), she clearly represents Iphigeneia as *her* daughter (ἐμὸν ... ἔρνος) and not as their *common* child.⁹ We find an echo of Clytemnestra’s representation of the child as the fruit of the maternal body also at 898, in the context of her welcome-speech to Agamemnon: she describes the Atreid as the only child of the father: μονογενὲς τέκνον πατρί, “only-begotten child to a father.” We might, however, detect a sarcastic tone in this phrase. The dative πατρί, read as a dative of possession, expresses the idea that Agamemnon is the son of his father and the only guarantor of the continuity of the genealogical line of the Atreids (cf. Fraenkel ad loc.). Yet, read as a dative of reference, it also seems to imply that sons are born of their fathers *according to the fathers’ point of view*.¹⁰

⁸ Cf. the translations of P. Mazon, in P. Vidal-Naquet, *Eschyle. Tragédies* (Paris 1982): “Au beau fruit que j’avais de lui”; E. Medda, in V. Di Benedetto, *Eschilo. Oresteia. Agamennone, Coefore, Eumenid* (Milan 1999): “Ma al mio germoglio, che da lui avevo concepito”; A. H. Sommerstein, *Aeschylus. Oresteia* (Cambridge [Mass.] 2008): “the offspring that I conceived by him.”

⁹ I differ from Winnington-Ingram, *Studies* 110–111, who argues that Clytemnestra’s revenge represents the violence of a wife against her husband, and not the violence of a mother against the father of her child, as Clytemnestra at 1417 and 1525 describes Iphigeneia as hers and Agamemnon’s child: “Clytemnestra describes her daughter as *philtatē odis* (1417); later as *ermos*, a shoot or branch (1525) ... In each case the phrase is completed by words expressive of the father’s share in the child. ‘His own child, my dearest birth-pang’ (1417f.). ‘My branch raised up by him’ (1525) ... Thus both the offences of which Clytemnestra accuses her husband are sins against marriage and strike at the status of the woman in marriage.”

¹⁰ For a different reading of this line see Sommerstein, *Aeschylus* 103 n.185: “Agamemnon is not, of course, an only son; this phrase, like the

But there is more to say on the expression ἐμὸν ἐκ τοῦδ' ἔρνος ἀερθέν, and on the autonomy of the maternal body in generating life that is implied in this image. The assimilation of the embryo to a shoot (ἔρνος) seems to suggest a biological continuity between a mother and the baby in her womb: as a shoot grows from a branch, so a baby does from the maternal body. It is not by chance, then, that Apollo, in his speech in defence of Orestes, will use the word ἔρνος of the embryo (*Eum.* 660–661, 665–666):

τίκτει δ' ὁ θρόσκων, ἢ δ' ἄπερ ξένω ξένη
ἔσωσεν ἔρνος, οἷσι μὴ βλάβῃ θεός

the begetter is the male, and she as a stranger for a stranger
preserves the offspring, if no god blights its birth

οὐ κέν σκότοισι νηδύος τεθραμμένη,
ἀλλ' οἷον ἔρνος οὔτις ἂν τέκοι θεά

and she was not nurtured in the darkness of the womb,
but is such an offspring as no goddess might bear

Apollo's re-appropriation of ἔρνος indicates how much the god's and Clytemnestra's discourses about motherhood differ from one another. For Clytemnestra, the child is the offspring of the maternal womb: the maternal body is the condition of life; the baby is the fruit of the mother's body. For Apollo, instead, the child is the offspring of his father (τίκτει δ' ὁ θρόσκων). Furthermore, according to the god, the mother does not give life to her baby, i.e. the mother's body does not nurture the life of the baby in her womb (οὐ κέν σκότοισι νηδύος

previous three, metaphorically describes him as one on whom depends the whole safety of the house and/or the city." Of course, Agamemnon is not the only child of Atreus (Menelaos is his brother). Thus, it could be argued that the phrase "a father's only son" implies a reference to Orestes (who is the only son of Agamemnon) and that it expresses a presentiment of Orestes' revenge. However, referred to *pais* or to *teknon*, the adjective μονογενής means "the only member of a kin or kind, hence, generally, only, single" (LSJ), "unicus" (Italic). Moreover, one should bear in mind that here Clytemnestra is speaking of Agamemnon.

τεθραμμένη). Whereas Clytemnestra describes the mother-child bond as a physical relation of consanguinity (the mother's womb as the origin of life), Apollo reduces the mother-child dyad to a *merely* physical relation: the mother's body, as Apollo says, is by definition a foreign host to a foreign guest, i.e. a stranger to a stranger (ἡ δ' ἄπερ ξένῳ ξένη ἔσωσεν ἕρνος).¹¹

We can detect a continuity in the discourse about motherhood in the *Agamemnon* and the *Eumenides*. In the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra depicts the mother-daughter dyad as a bond of consanguinity; in the *Eumenides*, the Furies sees the mother as the condition of life and the mother-child relation as a kinship based on consanguinity with the mother.¹² Apollo's, Clytemnestra's, and the Furies' difference of attitude towards the role of the mother in procreation does not concern, then, just the discourse about motherhood in *Eumenides*. In the *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra's view of motherhood as a biological tie of consanguinity anticipates the Furies' view of motherhood in *Eumenides*, and stands already in opposition to Apollo's patrilinear notion of procreation.

Clytemnestra's representation of the mother-child dyad as a bond of consanguinity may help expand upon why she talks about Iphigeneia as her *philos*. Of course, the characterisation of the child as *philos* is a banality for a parent—as attested by

¹¹ It is worth remembering that the biological theory of Apollo, that suggests that the mother is not the genitor of the child but an empty vessel for the reproduction of the father's children, does not rely on undisputed grounds in the Presocratic medical tradition. On Apollo's bias and its relation to Presocratic medical discourse see H. Bals, "Die Zeugungslehre und Embryologie in der Antike," *QGMed* 5 (1936) 1–82; Peretti, "La teoria della generazione patrilinea in Eschilo," *ParPass* 11 (1956) 241–262; W. Rösler, *Reflexe vorsokratischen Denkens bei Aischylos* (Maisenheim am Glan 1970) 77–87; O. Kember, "Anaxagoras' Theory of Sex Differentiation and Heredity," *Phronesis* 18 (1973) 1–14; S. Föllinger, *Differenz und Gleichheit. Das Geschlechterverhältnis in der Sicht griechischer Philosophen* (Stuttgart 1996) 49; J.-B. Bonnard, *Le complexe de Zeus. Représentations de la paternité en Grèce ancienne* (Paris 2004) 119–141.

¹² *Eum.* 230, 261, 271, 304, 514, 605–608, 653.

the words engraved on many gravestones. However, there may be something more at stake in Clytemnestra's depiction of her child as *philos*: it may illustrate how she conceives the difference between kindred and social ties. Clytemnestra uses φίλος in relation to her child as the fruit of her womb (1417–1418): ἔθυσεν αὐτοῦ παῖδα, φιλάτην ἐμοὶ ὄδι'ν, “he sacrificed his own child, the she-child I laboured to launch on her life-lot.” As the rhetoric of appropriation¹³ of the word φίλος shows, Clytemnestra conceives the mother-daughter relation as a bond of *philia* which links persons related by maternal blood. This generates an over-evaluation of kinship relations through the *maternal* body, and a corresponding under-evaluation of social ties through marriage: seeing herself as a mother, Clytemnestra does not see herself as a wife. This separation leads to a tragic conflict: in explaining her killing of Agamemnon as a mother's revenge for her daughter and *philos*, she suppresses the fact that as a mother, who acts *for* her daughter and therefore *against* the father of her daughter, she acts inevitably as a wife *against* her husband.¹⁴ Clytemnestra's use of φίλος in 1372–1376 points in this direction:

πολλῶν πάροιθεν καιρίως εἰρημένων
 τᾶναντί' εἰπεῖν οὐκ ἐπαισχυνθήσομαι·
 πῶς γάρ τις ἐχθροῖς ἐχθρὰ πορσύνων, φίλοις
 δοκοῦσιν εἶναι, πημονῆς ἀρκύστατ' ἂν
 φάρξειεν ὕψος κρείσσον ἐκπηδήματος;

Before I said much to suit the time,
 but I shall feel no shame to say the opposite.
 For if one has in hand acts of enmity against enemies
 who seem to be friends, how else can one fence up the nets

¹³ I use the expression as S. Goldhill does, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge 1986) 46: “It is this sort of one-sided laying claim to evaluative and normative words that I term ‘the rhetoric of appropriation.’”

¹⁴ Cf. F. Zeitlin, “The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*,” *Arethusa* 11 (1978) 149–184, at 158: “If the female overvalues the mother-child bond, her own unique relationship, she will, in turn, undervalue the marriage bond.”

of harm to a height beyond overleaping?

Clytemnestra speaks these lines after the murder of Agamemnon, trying to provide a justification for her murderous action: she says that she has fought against the one whom she treated as her *philos* but who in fact was not, i.e. against Agamemnon as her husband (φίλος here refers to αἰδοῖον πόσιν in 600 and her description of Agamemnon as “venerable husband”). Clearly, according to Clytemnestra’s rhetoric of appropriation of the word φίλος, the bond of *philia* even seems to exclude any expression of social kinship through marriage. This implication of the separation of the female roles as mother and as wife inevitably undercuts the legitimacy of Clytemnestra’s explanation for the murder of Agamemnon as recompense for Iphigeneia’s sacrifice. It is an important point, which corroborates the complexity of the Aeschylean discourse on inter-familial violence and Clytemnestra’s revenge. On the one hand, we cannot dismiss her violent deed: by avenging the death of her daughter, she acts as a mother against the paternal violence of Agamemnon.¹⁵ On the other hand, however, she also acts as the murderous wife of her husband. It is in this impossibility of acting *merely* as a mother *or* as a wife that we shall find the tragic dimension of Clytemnestra’s murderous action. Tragic, we might say, is her over-simplification of her female role: as a woman with a child, she is not *just* the wife of the child’s father; nonetheless, she is not *just* the mother of her own child either. In this interpretation, the Aeschylean text, by the example of Clytemnestra, explores the limits of simplifying, as character *in* the text and as reader *of* the text, what cannot be easily simplified: the (social) role of a woman with child.

In conclusion, I have argued first that Iphigeneia, from Clytemnestra’s maternal point of view, is the fruit of her mother’s womb and therefore that she is tied to her mother by an

¹⁵ Cf. similarly Foley, *Female Acts* 233: “Why should a mother tolerate what the chorus itself describes as the horrific, perverted, and unwilling sacrifice of her daughter?”

inviolable bond of consanguinity and *philia*. Accordingly, (a) Clytemnestra's claim to the autonomy of the maternal body in reproduction, and (b) her defence of the biological bond of *philia* between mother and daughter are the crucial elements of her explanation of the murder of Agamemnon as retaliation for the father's violence. Second, we have seen that Clytemnestra's explanation of Iphigeneia's sacrifice does not turn the murder of Agamemnon into a legitimate act, but allows us to question Clytemnestra's violence against Agamemnon, her husband and the father of Iphigeneia. Finally, I have argued that an analysis of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, according to Clytemnestra's explanation, makes it possible to explore her language as a part of the play's narrative about sacrifice and inter-familial violence.¹⁶

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Institut für Klassische Philologie
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
Unter den Linden 6
10099 Berlin, Germany
giuliamaria@cantab.net

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