POLITICS OF CONSUMPTION AND GENEROSITY IN THE CARPET SCENE OF THE *AGAMEMNON*

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WHEN ARISTOPHANES POKED FUN at Aeschylus in the *Frogs,* he remarked that Aeschylus used to place characters such as a grieving Achilles or Niobe on stage, entirely muffled up, sitting silently for long stretches of time without so much as grunting (911–13). The "Aeschylean silence" was a powerful dramatic tool,[1] which Aeschylus skillfully exploited to combine dignity and tension. In the *Agamemnon,* however, Aeschylus goes beyond silence. Agamemnon's unfortunate arrival from Troy and rapid departure for Hades is the central event of the play, to which the returning hero lends his name. He does not, however, appear on stage until line 783 or speak until line 810, almost exactly halfway through the play (1673 lines total). Once on stage, his presence is brief. Less than 180 lines later, he vanishes from the stage and enters the palace, to complete his performance a few lines later as a bloody corpse rolled out before the audience as a ghastly spectacle. Yet, Agamemnon's brief appearance, though just over 10 percent of the play, is the pivot around which all action turns. This scene dramatizes both visually and verbally the transition from victor to victim, using gesture and action to foreshadow and, in some measure, explain the fate that awaits the returning hero. While some have argued against placing too much emphasis on this part of the play, Agamemnon's rapid trip across the stage is one of the most controversial and complexly signifying events in Aeschylus' most heavily studied play.

Students of Aeschylus quickly learn how complex and problematic a text can be. Long before modern critics had begun to question whether determinate, normative interpretations were the appropriate goal for literary analysis, Aeschylean scholarship had provided ample evidence that consensus on a closely studied literary text was not a realistic goal. Virtually every sentence in the Aeschylean corpus has provoked dispute of one kind or another, and the figure of Agamemnon is no exception. To Eduard Fraenkel, Agamemnon presents himself as an ἀνὴρ εὐσεβής, "a pious man." He is a lawful monarch who is "at pains to emphasize the constitutional checks to his authority." Above all, he appears, just before leaving the stage, "as the true gentleman he always is."[2] Lloyd-Jones once even alluded to "the

1. O. Taplin, "Aeschylean Silences and Silences in Aeschylus," *HSCP* 76 (1972): 57–97.

2. E. Fraenkel, ed., *Aeschylus "Agamemnon,"* vol. 2 (Oxford, 1950) on 811 (p. 374), 845 (p. 388), and 944 ff. (p. 429).

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empirical fact" that "we find ourselves at this point regarding Agamemnon not with contempt but with compassion."[3] Others such as Denniston and Page, however, took a dimmer view of the king. Agamemnon secretly longs for "oriental luxuriance" and "grovelling prostrations abominated by the Greeks," and privately wishes that he could freely indulge in a proud posture that "outrages the feelings of decent men and insults the gods."[4]

To many readers of the play, these comments, however, say as much about British society as they do about fifth-century Athens, and some more recent critics have tried to retreat from such judgmental questions. According to Thomas Rosenmeyer, Agamemnon "is a victorious general, the embodiment of a literary type, but he has no dramatic life of his own. His only function in the play, other than his initial speech of homecoming, is to be tempted to step on the materials, and thereby to fall. Whatever else is said or sung about him in the play concerns the Agamemnon of tradition, and perhaps the Agamemnon whose underworld existence will be of some importance in the rest of the trilogy."[5]

Rosenmeyer's approach, however, goes too far and cuts the interpretative knot. Agamemnon enters in dramatic fashion. He makes a strong impression on the audience and we should not underinterpret the text because the questions posed reveal additional complexity and remind us of how subjective our own reactions must necessarily be. We can, I think, safely assume that Agamemnon's appearance may have been as ambiguous and as polysemic in the fifth century as it is in modern times.[6] The remainder of this paper will examine the central act of Agamemnon's entry—his hesitant decision to enter his home on a path strewn with purple cloth—and will explore various perspectives on this event. Agamemnon's walk upon the purple was a highly tendentious spectacle that did not reflect universal Hellenic values. Rather, Aeschylus has constructed a scene that provides a biased and ideologically charged picture of consumption and expenditure. The Carpet Scene is intensely political, but its politics are of a type that traditional political analysis of the *Oresteia* has overlooked, playing against the subtle "moral foundations and instrumentations of men living in groups"[7] rather than articulating any party or factional perspective.[8] It is constructed in such a way as to reflect and to legitimate prescriptive social norms that not all Athenians, and certainly not all Hellenes, would have shared. This paper argues that the traditional terms in which critics have framed Agamemnon's gesture have escaped closer scrutiny because they fall in line with the assumptions of western capitalist society and are thus largely invisible.

3. H. Lloyd-Jones, "The Guilt of Agamemnon," *CQ* 56 (1962): 196.

4. J. D. Denniston and D. Page, eds., *Aeschylus "Agamemnon"* (Oxford, 1957) on 915 ff. (p. 149); for a survey of the interpretations that scholars have offered for Agamemnon's behavior, see, for example, S. Goldhill, *Language, Sexuality, Narrative: The "Oresteia"* (Cambridge, 1984), pp. 69–74 and 167–69.

5. T. Rosenmeyer, *The Art of Aeschylus* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), p. 221.

6. For a complex (though generally negative) analysis of Agamemnon, see A. J. Podlecki, "Polis and Monarch in Early Attic Tragedy," in *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory,* ed. J. Peter Euben (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1986), pp. 87–94.

7. R. Kuhns, *The House, the City and the Judge* (New York, 1962), p. v.

8. Thus A. J. Podlecki, *The Political Background of Aeschylean Tragedy* (Ann Arbor, 1966) and M. Gagarin, *Aeschylean Drama* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976) scarcely mention the Carpet Scene.

Agamemnon's behavior, it will be argued, is problematic from at least two perspectives. If the dominant Athenian demos was shocked that he walked upon the carpet, others in Greece and doubtless in Athens would have faulted him for the hesitant and pusillanimous manner in which he performed this gesture. At the same time, however, the Chorus presents a third interpretation, assuming that Agamemnon's action is an apotropaic destruction of wealth, calculated to bleed off, as it were, a bit of his excessive good fortune. If we accept the interpretation of the Chorus, then there is nothing improper about Agamemnon's actions at all. This paper attempts to give shape to the latter two interpretations, which have generally escaped notice.

WHAT AGAMEMNON DOES

Agamemnon's first utterance is an extended and formal speech announcing his return from Troy. His first words are directed to the polis and to its particular divinities. (We should note that he neither addresses the divinities to which an aristocrat would have had peculiar access through cults restricted to the genos, nor does he call upon divinities of international, panhellenic influence.) He carefully directs his gratitude to the θεοὶ ἐγχώριοι of Argos (810). Following the conventions of his time, he treats his success as manifest proof of divine support (811–12, 821–22). The gods were his partners and were responsible for both his return and the ultimate success of his expedition. The Greeks annihilated Troy as instruments of divine justice.

Once done with the gods of the polis, Agamemnon turns his attention to the chorus of elders who greet him, acknowledging the proper center of authority within this patriarchal society. After praising the trustworthiness of the aged chorus, Agamemnon seeks to take his leave of the public sphere. He moves to enter his palace and the household within which lies his personal hearth (851 νῦν δ' ἐς μέλαθρα καὶ δόμους ἑφεστίους). Once again, he promises to offer his greetings to the gods, but this time he will face the divinities associated with his particular oikos. To these he attributes his safe return (853) and the victory, which he prays will remain at his side (854).

Clytemnestra interrupts her husband's transition from the public to the private space of the household. As a respectable wife she would normally restrict her actions to the oikos and to its maintenance. Not only does she physically leave this circumscribed area, she pushes her reunion with Agamemnon out into the street and renders public an act that should remain private and that is properly located within the home.

Much has been made of the exaggerated flattering rhetoric that Clytemnestra employs (895–903):

νῦν ταῦτα πάντα τλᾶσ' ἀπενθήτῳ φρενί 895
λέγοιμ' ἂν ἄνδρα τόνδε τῶν σταθμῶν κύνα,
σωτῆρα ναὸς πρότονον, ὑψηλῆς στέγης
στῦλον ποδήρη, μονογενὲς τέκνον πατρί,
καὶ γῆν φανεῖσαν ναυτίλοις παρ' ἐλπίδα,

κάλλιστον ἦμαρ εἰσιδεῖν ἐκ χείματος, 900
ὁδοιπόρῳ διψῶντι πηγαῖον ῥέος.
τερπνὸν δὲ τἀναγκαῖον ἐκφυγεῖν ἄπαν.
τοιοῖσδέ τοί νιν ἀξιῶ προσφθέγμασιν.

Wilamowitz compared the tone of Clytemnestra's remarks as well as several specific metaphors to a hymn of the Middle Kingdom to Khakaure Sesostris III, and her speech probably reflects a consciousness of the flowery rhetoric generally employed for the potentates of the Near East.[9] Later rhetorical handbooks would have a formal name for Clytemnestra's speech at 855–903. She delivers the λόγος ἐπιβατήριος, "arrival speech," such as provincial officials later delivered when men of importance arrived to take up office. Menander Rhetor's description of a typical welcoming address suggests that such effusiveness had, at least by the imperial period, begun to shape Greek rhetoric generally (*Treatise* 2 378):

ἀλλ' ἥκεις μὲν ἐπ' αἰσίοις συμβόλοις ἐκ βασιλέως λαμπρός, ὥσπερ ἡλίου φαιδρά τις ἀκτὶς ἄνωθεν ἡμῖν ὀφθεῖσα· οὕτω πάλαι μὲν ἀγαθὴ φήμη διήγγειλε τὴν ἐπ' αἰσίοις ἄφιξιν καὶ εὐκταιοτάτην μοῖραν τῶν ὑπηκόων. [10–14]

νυκτὸς καὶ ζόφου τὰ πάντα κατειληφότος αὐτὸς καθάπερ ἥλιος ὀφθεὶς πάντα ἀθρόως τὰ δυσχερῆ διέλυσας, καὶ ἐργάσῃ τοῦτο καὶ οὐ παραδραμεῖς, ὅτι τοίνυν ἀνέπνευσαν ἅπαντες ὥσπερ νέφους τινὸς τῶν δεινῶν παρελθόντων. [22–26]

Agamemnon, as we will see, shows himself keenly sensitive to the behavioral boundaries that he, as a returning monarch, might outrage. He does not, however, object to Clytemnestra's speech, and in fact praises it in a way that we might expect Menander Rhetor to approve (914–17):

Λήδας γένεθλον, δωμάτων ἐμῶν φύλαξ,
ἀπουσίᾳ μὲν εἶπας εἰκότως ἐμῇ·
μακρὰν γὰρ ἐξέτεινας· ἀλλ' ἐναισίμως
αἰνεῖν. παρ' ἄλλων χρὴ τόδ' ἔρχεσθαι γέρας.

Agamemnon has been gone a long time and Clytemnestra rightly drew out her speech, giving her words enough length to lend them weight (just as Menander Rhetor urges the speaker "to elaborate" his topic and "not to pass it quickly"). Agamemnon's measured response suggests a consciousness and acceptance of the rhetoric appropriate to the occasion.

Agamemnon does not object to the message but the messenger. The γέρας, a formal prize or privilege, to address the returning βασιλεύς belongs to someone else, definitely a man and probably someone who is not οἰκεῖος, i.e., a member of the same household as Agamemnon. Clytemnestra transgresses her proper space in the oikos as she transgresses her position as a woman. Her actions and location together violate the expected norms of her society and she initiates the chain of transgressions that will encircle Agamemnon in this scene.

9. U. von Wilamowitz, "Lesefrüchte," *Hermes* 62 (1927): 287–88; E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian* (Oxford, 1989), p. 206; for a translation, see M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings,* vol. 1 (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1973–80), pp. 199–200.

Clytemnestra's major challenge to Agamemnon is not effusive rhetoric but the suggestion that Agamemnon walk from his chariot to his home over purple cloth. Agamemnon finds the idea horrifying and at first refuses to do such a thing, yielding only to his wife's determined requests. Virtually all critics of the play have felt that when Agamemnon placed his feet on the expensive cloth pathway, he somehow sealed his fate. Those who emphasize repeated images, such as Anne Lebeck, see in the gesture a sign that points outwards to other actions.[10] "Thus the force of this scene, the theatrical center of the play, is almost entirely symbolic. As Xerxes' 'outrageous' bridging of the Hellespont is a symbol of his real *hybris* in contravening the *moira* of the Persians by his attack on Greece, so, too, Agamemnon's treading on the purple serves as a spectacular, on-stage symbol of his hybristic deed at Aulis, his real outrage against gods and men."[11] In the carpet scene, "the arrogance and folly in the heart of Troy's conqueror are given magnificent external expression."[12] "It is open to doubt whether this is in fact an impious deed in itself, and it is certainly not for this trivial offense that Agamemnon dies."[13] Trampling the cloth is only a symbol that points backwards in time to Agamemnon's true offense, the sacrifice of his daughter at Aulis,[14] or perhaps merely an indication of Agamemnon's stupidity.[15]

Others such as John Jones and, more recently, Simon Goldhill stress the act itself: "Agamemnon at first refuses to step on the cloths spread for him. He recognizes a meaning in the act of stepping on the tapestries which is not befitting his status as a mortal, Greek male. He cannot tread that path 'without fear'. This reluctance has been well analyzed in terms of traditional Greek attitudes. The wanton destruction of the household property that his trampling of 'these tinted splendours' represents, is in absolute opposition to the normal ethos of the household, which aims at continuity and stability of wealth and possessions."[16] Jones speaks of "a wanton wounding of the body of the house. . . . his homecoming is a harming of his house, the lucid externality of this equivalence presenting a complete and painful dramatic sense: the thing is done, it shows itself."[17]

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR THE CARPET SCENE

Before pursuing the internal significance of the cloth-strewn path, we need to locate its position within the wider cultural context. Agamemnon instantly recognizes and misrecognizes the complex signification of the

10. A. Lebeck, *The "Oresteia": A Study in Language and Structure* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), pp. 74–79.
11. D. J. Conacher, *Aeschylus' "Oresteia": A Literary Commentary* (Toronto, 1987), p. 38, n. 71.
12. C. J. Herington, *Aeschylus* (New Haven, 1986), p. 120.
13. O. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford, 1977), p. 311.
14. Taplin, *Stagecraft,* pp. 311–12; K. J. Dover, "The Red Fabric in the Agamemnon," in *Greek and the Greeks: Collected Papers,* vol. 1 (Oxford, 1987), p. 154.
15. Dover, "Red Fabric," p. 158: "The act is more like that of a man smoking a cigarette while filling a tank with petrol in hot weather than that of a man planting an explosive device in a rival's car. Our reaction to stupidity is different from our reaction to evil."
16. S. Goldhill, *Reading Greek Tragedy* (Oxford, 1986), p. 11.
17. J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London, 1962), pp. 86–87.

cloth: "Do not, as if I were some foreigner, grovel before me with wide-mouthed acclaim" (919–20 μηδὲ βαρβάρου φωτὸς δίκην / χαμαιπετὲς βόαμα προσχάνῃς ἐμοί). Later (935–36), Clytemnestra argues that Agamemnon should not hesitate to perform a gesture that Priam, seen here as a type of the eastern despot, would have willingly embraced:

Κλ. τί δ' ἂν δοκεῖ σοι Πρίαμος, εἰ τάδ' ἤνυσεν;
Αγ. ἐν ποικίλοις ἂν κάρτα μοι βῆναι δοκεῖ.

Carpets were not a regular part of Greek culture—even among the upper classes—until the time of Alexander, and even then, the use of carpets (like the term τάπης)[18] seems to have been a foreign import, a custom long practiced by the potentates of the Near East and only lately adopted by Greeks.[19]

Clytemnestra precedes her reference to the carpet with a more general observation that points eastward to the daily rituals by which the great king dramatized his power (905–7):[20]

νῦν δέ μοι, φίλον κάρα,
ἔκβαιν' ἀπήνης τῆσδε, μὴ χαμαὶ τιθεὶς
τὸν σὸν πόδ', ὦναξ, 'Ιλίου πορθήτορα.

The conqueror of Troy should not place his foot upon the ground. According to Athenaeus (12.514B = *FGrH* 690, frag. 2b), the fourth-century historian Dinon claimed that the Persian king never set foot upon the ground when he, as Agamemnon is about to do at 908, stepped out of his chariot:

ὁπότε δὲ καὶ ἀπὸ τοῦ ἅρματος κατίοι, φησί, βασιλεύς, οὔτε καθήλλετο ὀλίγου ὄντος ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν τοῦ ὕψους οὔτε διὰ χειρῶν ἐρειδόμενος, ἀλλ' αἰεὶ αὐτῷ χρυσοῦς δίφρος ἐτίθετο καὶ τούτῳ ἐπιβαίνων κατήει· καὶ ὁ βασιλέως διφροφόρος εἰς τοῦτο εἵπετο.

The king would not hop down even a little way or lower himself down with his arms, but always placed his foot first upon a χρυσοῦς δίφρος, a golden stool. The διφροφόρος appears in Persian art,[21] and Herodotus (3.146.3) terms Persians of highest rank διφροφορεύμενοι, presumably since they imitated this custom of the king.

Once the king had made his decorous descent from the chariot, he still refrained from placing his feet directly upon the ground. The fourth-century historian, Herakleides of Cyme (*FGrH* 689), apparently described the way in which the Persian king converted his life into a theater that dramatized his power even for those of the inner circle. None outside of the palace ever caught sight of the king when he was on foot—he was always mounted on a chariot or, occasionally, on horseback. At one point, Herakleides describes

18. See P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire Étymologique de la langue grecque,* vol. 4 (Paris, 1977), s.v. τάπης.

19. See A. Schroff, "Tapes," *RE* 4A (1932): 2252; see for example the carpet which appears in Callixenus of Rhodes' description of Ptolemy Philadelphus in Ath. 5.197.

20. Plut. *Alex.* 37.4, *Them.* 16.2; Chares of Mitylene at Ath. 12.514E; for other Greek sources, see S. K. Eddy, *The King is Dead: Studies in the Near Eastern Resistance to Hellenism, 334–31 BC* (Lincoln, Neb.,1961), p. 44, n. 16; for a general survey of the Persian kingship (as seen through our Greek sources), ibid., pp. 37–64. The author wishes to thank E. McIntosh and M. Cool Root for help on the Persian material.

21. See E. F. Schmidt, *Persepolis,* vol. 1 (Chicago, 1953), pl. 51; reprinted in D. B. Thompson, "The Persian Spoils in Athens," in *The Aegean and the Near East: Studies Presented to Hetty Goldman,* ed. S. Weinberg (Locust Valley, NY, 1956), pl. xxxvii; on these customs generally, see Thompson, "Persian Spoils," p. 288.

the precise manner in which the king would move through the elite 1,000 troops of his palace guard (Ath. 12.517B–C = *FGrH* 689, frag. 4):

> καὶ διῄει διὰ τῆς τούτων αὐλῆς πεζὸς ὑποτιθεμένων ψιλοταπίδων Σαρδιανῶν, ἐφ' ὧν οὐδεὶς ἄλλος ἐπέβαινεν ἢ βασιλεύς. ὅτε δὲ εἰς τὴν ἐσχάτην αὐλὴν ἔλθοι, ἀνέβαινεν ἐπὶ τὸ ἅρμα, ἐνίοτε δὲ καὶ ἐφ' ἵππον· πεζὸς δὲ οὐδέποτε ἐωράθη.

The regularized procession portrayed in Herakleides depicts, in reverse, Agamemnon's passage from the chariot into his inner household. "Rolling out the red carpet for royalty" seems to have been an old custom in the Near East—thus, in the Gospel according to Mark, for example, the population of Jerusalem hails the arrival of Jesus of Nazareth and strews his way both with palms and with their own πέπλοι.[22]

The Athenian audience that first looked on as Agamemnon descended from his chariot had recently pondered similar ostentation in a Greek who had returned home triumphant over the wealthy foreigners to the east. The general Pausanias, a member of the Spartan royal family, was the leader of the Greek forces at Plataea, the allied victory that crushed the Persian invasion force and vastly augmented Spartan prestige.[23] Athenians were long used to watching their victors for new and unacceptable ambitions. In the seventh century, the aristocrat Cylon, victor in the Olympic games, sought unsuccessfully to make himself tyrant of Athens (e.g., Thuc. 1.126). The Athenian tyrant Peisistratus acquired prominence in military campaigns against the neighboring Megarians (Plut. *Sol.* 8, Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 14.1). Pausanias had, however, carried his ambitions a stage further, presenting himself not as a tyrant but aping instead the arrogance and pretension of the Persian king, whose forces he had destroyed.

Pausanias had begun to cultivate the friendship of the Persian king shortly after Plataea. He rescued some friends and relatives of the king when he took the city of Byzantium and surreptitiously sent them home safely as an act of good-will (Thuc. 1.128). They carried with them a message that offered Pausanias' help in subjugating Greece in return for marriage to his daughter. Xerxes responded favorably, but his encouragement seems to have unbalanced Pausanias (Thuc. 1.130.1):

> ταῦτα λαβὼν ὁ Παυσανίας τὰ γράμματα, ὧν καὶ πρότερον ἐν μεγάλῳ ἀξιώματι ὑπὸ τῶν Ἑλλήνων διὰ τὴν Πλαταιᾶσιν ἡγεμονίαν, πολλῷ τότε μᾶλλον ἦρτο καὶ οὐκέτι ἐδύνατο ἐν τῷ καθεστῶτι τρόπῳ βιοτεύειν, ἀλλὰ σκευάς τε Μηδικὰς ἐνδυόμενος ἐκ τοῦ Βυζαντίου ἐξῄει καὶ διὰ τῆς Θρᾴκης πορευόμενον αὐτὸν Μῆδοι καὶ Αἰγύπτιοι ἐδορυφόρουν, τράπεζάν τε Περσικὴν παρετίθετο καὶ κατέχειν τὴν διάνοιαν οὐκ ἐδύνατο, ἀλλ' ἔργοις βραχέσι προυδήλου ἃ τῇ γνώμῃ μειζόνως ἐς ἔπειτα ἔμελλε πράξειν.

Ultimately, Pausanias became increasingly harsh and arrogant towards the allied forces, and his impolitic leadership alienated the allies, driving them to seek leadership from Athens. The "trifles" or minor affairs to which Thucydides alludes are, however, more germane than Pausanias'

22. Mark 11:8 καὶ πολλοὶ τὰ ἱμάτια αὐτῶν ἔστωσαν εἰς τὴν ὁδόν, ἄλλοι δὲ στιβάδας, κόψαντες ἐκ τῶν ἀγρῶν.

23. See, for example, Dover, "Red Fabric," pp. 156–57; Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian,* p. 204.

manner to his subordinates. Thucydides generally expresses little interest in external appearance, and apologetically includes Pausanias' Median and Egyptian bodyguards, his Median dress, and luxurious Persian dining habits because of the great impression that they made—such a retinue, surrounding a Spartan general, evidently made a strong, probably garish and outlandish, impression on the Greek world.

Pausanias' excesses also made a strong impression on later tradition. Plutarch refers to the many overbearing acts in which he engaged "because of his excessive power and silly pomposity" (*Cim.* 6.2 πολλὰ δι' ἐξουσίαν καὶ ὄγκον ἀνόητον ὑβρίζοντος) and Diodorus to the Persian luxury (11.44.5 τὴν Περσικὴν τρυφήν) that Pausanias affected. Herodotus' account of Pausanias is the most peculiar and simultaneously perhaps the most revealing of all. He alludes in passing to Pausanias' intrigues with Xerxes (5.32) and to his subsequent arrogance (8.3.2), but he loyally praises Pausanias' achievement at Plataea (9.64). "Much of the utterance attributed to Pausanias (9.45–82 *passim*) shows an officer of traditional rectitude, diplomatic in dealing with his allies, difficult as they could be, and restrained in victory. An anecdote shows his consideration for an unfortunate lady, and can hardly have been included for any other purpose than to praise the victor."[24]

One story that follows the Greek victory is particularly striking (Hdt. 9.82). Pausanias comes upon the luxurious tent that Mardonios had lately occupied. Amused at its luxuries, he ordered Mardonios' servants to prepare the regular meal that they would have prepared for their master, while giving the same command to his own Spartan servants. When the elaborate Persian feast was set beside his own simple meal, he pointed to this spectacle as evidence of Mardonios' foolishness (Hdt. 9.82.3 τοῦδε τοῦ Μήδων ἡγεμόνος ἡ ἀφροσύνη). As How and Wells remark in their commentary on this passage: "This contrast (cf. ch. 78n.) between Persian luxury and Spartan hardiness is rather strangely assigned to Pausanias, who himself within a year or two fell into the luxurious and despotic habits of an Eastern Sultan." Strange it may have been, but we should note that Pausanias does not scorn Persian luxury. Rather, he acknowledges the value and attraction of such material comforts and ridicules Mardonios for seeking such things from men as poor as the Spartans.

Pausanias had indulged in his bizarre behavior twenty years before the tritagonist playing Agamemnon climbed into his stage-prop chariot and rolled down the parados to face the audience.[25] It would be too much to say that Agamemnon had become a second Pausanias when his foot hit the purple cloth strewn before him, but Pausanias' behavior and the spectacle of a Spartan aping Persian luxury had clearly seized the Greek imagination (otherwise, these details would not have found their way, however

24. K. H. Waters, *Herodotos the Historian* (Norman, Oklahoma, 1985), p. 142.

25. Others have assumed that the third actor would have played Cassandra (e.g., B. Knox, *Word and Action* [Baltimore, 1979], p. 42), but Cassandra's role was extremely demanding, with a long, difficult choral section. It seems unlikely that the third actor would receive such a choice role. The same actor would probably have played Pylades in the *Libation Bearers* and Apollo in the *Eumenides,* neither of whom performs lyric passages and both of whom are almost bluff exponents of traditional patriarchal authority.

reluctantly, into the austere text of Thucydides).[26] Pausanias' example had prepared the older members of the audience to assess Agamemnon's procession. Once again, the great leader of a Panhellenic force had fallen to the customs of a people whom militarily he had crushed.

But if Agamemnon's gesture of proceeding from chariot to home across a path of expensive cloth imitates the pomp of the great king, it misrecognizes, or at the least misrepresents, the act to which it alludes. After Agamemnon yields to Clytemnestra, his last words on stage are εἶμ' ἐς δόμων μέλαθρα πορφύρας πατῶν (957). His diction suggests that he still sees his action as improper. Elsewhere in the *Agamemnon,* the verb πατέω describes a damaging, disrespectful, and shocking act.[27] The language of the text makes it clear that Agamemnon is not going to walk upon carpets—tough fabric designed from the start for others to tread upon it. Clytemnestra introduces the issue by urging her attendants to lay down the πετάσματα (909), a word used to describe cloth that is to be spread out and viewed in its full width. Both Agamemnon and Clytemnestra term them εἵματα (921, 963), "garments," while Agamemnon nervously frets about the ἀργυρώνητοι ὑφαί (949), "fabric purchased with silver." Agamemnon and Clytemnestra both seem to assume that this material was not designed to be walked upon and that Agamemnon's actions will damage the cloth: "There is great shame to squander one's household, destroying with one's feet wealth and fabric purchased with silver" (948–49 πολλὴ γὰρ αἰδὼς δωματοφθορεῖν ποσὶν / φθείροντα πλοῦτον ἀργυρωνήτους θ' ὑφάς). Clytemnestra does not object that carpets are designed for this purpose. Instead, she agrees that the cloth will be destroyed but argues that more can be obtained (958–65).

We cannot now determine precisely how Aeschylus intended this passage to be viewed. He and his audience could conceivably have misunderstood the Near Eastern ritual. Unfamiliar with rugs, they could have assumed that every step the great king took consumed expensive cloth. Certainly the use of carpets shocked Xenophon's puritanical sensibilities. Carpets were, in his account, a recent innovation foreign to the "upbringing and self-control of the Persians" (*Cyr.* 8.8.15 τότε μὲν γὰρ ἔτι τῇ ἐκ Περσῶν παιδείᾳ καὶ ἐγκρατείᾳ ἐχρῶντο). They appear in Persian society as a sign of "Median softness" (ἡ τῶν Μήδων μαλακία). In any event, the Aeschylean narrative heightens even further the meaning of the Persian gesture, adding to its pomp even greater extravagance.

OTHER INTERPRETATIONS OF THE CARPET SCENE

Virtually all readers of the play acknowledge the extravagance implicit in the carpet scene. Whether or not we draw specific connections between

26. So Dover, "Red Fabric," p. 157, and Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian,* p. 204, likewise emphasize that there is no reason to think that Aeschylus wanted his audience to make a direct connection between Agamemnon and Pausanias.

27. Thyestes "treads upon his brother's bed" (1193 εὐνὰς ἀδελφοῦ τῷ πατοῦντι) when he commits adultery with Atreus' wife; the Chorus says that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus trample underfoot the house's name (1356–57 οἱ δὲ τῆς μελλοῦς κλέος / πέδοι πατοῦντες). The unequivocally negative term is λακτίζω (*Ag.* 383, 885, 1624). On the imagery of treading underfoot, see Lebeck, "*Oresteia,*" pp. 74–75.

Agamemnon and such historical figures as Pausanias, we analyze Agamemnon's actions as part of a conventional dialectic between Hellenic restraint and foreign excess. Agamemnon clearly oversteps the boundaries of moderation, and his act points towards, even if it does not justify, his subsequent murder. His own misgivings and reluctance make such an interpretation clear. If we follow Agamemnon's lead, however, we take as self-evident a position that is highly tendentious, and render flat and static a highly charged and forceful position. The Carpet Scene does not reproduce conventional Greek norms, but instead functions like a filter that selects one strain of thought and one marked ideological position. The Carpet Scene does not so much reproduce as produce normative values of Athenian society.

Even within the play itself, the Chorus offers an interpretation of Agamemnon's actions which differs from that of Agamemnon and which readers, focused on the preceding scene, have normally overlooked. In the second strophe of the following ode (1008–13), the Chorus remarks:

καὶ πρὸ μέν τι χρημάτων
κτησίων ὄκνος βαλὼν
σφενδόνας ἀπ' εὐμέτρου—
οὐκ ἔδυ πρόπας δόμος
πλησμονᾶς γέμων ἄγαν,
οὐδ' ἐπόντισε σκάφος.

The commentaries clearly document ἐκβολή, the idea to which this passage alludes. Aristotle refers in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (3.1110a8–11) to αἱ ἐν τοῖς χειμῶσιν ἐκβολαί, the fact that sailors will throw cargo overboard during a storm to lighten the ship, and the concept seems to have been well known. Another chorus in Aeschylus, in fact, mentions it in passing (though the usage is different, on which see Hutchinson on *Septem* 769–71). Later in the play (*Ag.* 1567–76), Clytemnestra will vainly appeal to the same principle, praying that the δαίμων that has troubled the house will spare them what little remains and leave them alone.

Critics of the play have paid relatively little attention to the third stasimon, other than to ponder the difficult textual problems that this chorus contains. Neither Fraenkel nor Denniston and Page make any attempt to connect this stanza with the preceding scene. (In his note titled "the third stasimon as a whole,"[28] Fraenkel in fact only discusses 975–1000.) Rosenmeyer explores the relationship between 1001 ff. and the murder of Cassandra that follows rather than with the scene that precedes. Conacher and Goldhill emphasize the contrast at 1001 ff. between curable and incurable. Conacher notes "a faintly Solonian reminiscence in the sequences of 'weal and woe'" but concludes that "the contrast between 'blood once shed,' for which there is no remedy, and the dangers of mere wealth, which prudent jettisoning can cure (1008–21) is . . . surely

28. Fraenkel, "*Agamemnon*," 2:451–52, following the note on 998 f.

Aeschylean." For Goldhill, the incurable evil "is the ultimate lack of narrative control."[29]

The ἐκβολή of 1008–13, however, connects very naturally to the action that precedes it. An ἐκβολή represents a conscious attempt to ward off misfortune by willingly giving up a portion of one's current wealth. The reference points back to the destruction of the cloth, which the Chorus here chooses to interpret as an apotropaic gesture. The Chorus, despite its misgivings and criticisms, remains staunchly loyal to Agamemnon, and it is not surprising that they place his actions with the carpet in the most positive light they can. The *locus classicus* for calculated, apotropaic destruction of wealth occurs in Book 3 of Herodotus, where Amasis urges Polycrates, the tyrant of Samos, to do something about his excessive prosperity before something truly terrible happens. Polycrates subsequently performs a literal ἐκβολή. He formally enters a warship, orders its crew to row far out to sea and then throws his most precious treasure, a seal-ring, overboard (3.41). This gesture alludes to normal ἐκβολή, and this theatrical allusion reinforces Polycrates' goal: he tosses the ring into the sea—an act that, Herodotus tells us, caused him great pain—because he wishes to ward off total disaster.

The Chorus goes on to echo one of Clytemnestra's arguments (1014–16):

> πολλά τοι δόσις ἐκ Διὸς ἀμφιλα-
> φής τε καὶ ἐξ ἀλόκων ἐπετειᾶν
> νῆστιν ὤλεσεν νόσον.

Material loss, if not catastrophic, is incomplete. Wealth regenerates itself over time, and Agamemnon should not begrudge the destruction of cloth, however valuable (958–62):

> ἔστιν θάλασσα—τίς δέ νιν κατασβέσει;—
> τρέφουσα πολλῆς πορφύρας ἰσάργυρον
> κηκῖδα παγκαίνιστον, εἱμάτων βαφάς. 960
> οἶκος δ' ὑπάρχει τῶνδε σὺν θεοῖς, ἄναξ,
> ἔχειν· πένεσθαι δ' οὐκ ἐπίσταται δόμος.

The land and the sea are inexhaustible. Just as the sea nurtures the shellfish from which the precious purple dye is extracted (958–59 θάλασσα . . . τρέφουσα), Zeus' flourishing gift from the yearly furrows annihilates famine (1014–16). An ἐκβολή, however painful, is a short-term problem and the cyclical nature of fortune may have occupied a conventional role in the rhetoric of ἐκβολή: in Herodotus (3.40), Amasis begins his advice to Polycrates by stressing that mortals should seek to alternate good fortune with bad and should hope for a natural rhythm that varies success with occasional failure.

Agamemnon, of course, gives voice to an immediate interpretation of the purple carpet. He is, at least initially, horrified at the prospect of damaging the expensive cloth and at indulging in such wanton, public

29. Goldhill, "*Oresteia*," p. 81.

consumption. His reaction has guided almost all readers of the play, but his horror is deceptively familiar. Agamemnon is, in one respect, a good example of *homo economicus,* carefully husbanding his material resources so that he can accumulate wealth and so that he can avoid unnecessary outlays. Phrases such as "the wanton destruction of the household property"[30] implicitly accept this perspective, and Agamemnon's hesitation certainly anticipates prejudices that Max Weber would make famous in his study, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.* There are, however, other ways in which to view the destruction of this expensive cloth. The thrifty *homo economicus* is not such a universal phenomenon, for economic decisions are often "embedded" (to use the term made famous by the economic historian Karl Polanyi) within a social context. In other words, people often expend large quantities of wealth not to generate additional revenue but to serve some purely social goal that produces no material return.[31]

Before pursuing different perspectives within the Greek world, let us first turn to the ethnographic records for a different perspective on the Carpet Scene. The ethics of consumption are not universal, and we can, at least to illustrate the existence of other habits of thought, point to value-systems within which Agamemnon's actions would have provoked very different reactions. The Kwakiutl Indians of the Northwest Pacific area of North America, for example, attracted considerable attention in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They had evolved a complex series of feasting and gift-giving called *potlach* that had evolved over centuries. In the late nineteenth century, with inexpensive European-made goods moving into the region through trade, this institution developed very rapidly and reached new levels of intensity. Chiefs and clans conducted an on-going "war of property," each challenging rivals to exceed costly gifts that could not be refused. Most of the *potlach* centered on the exchange of valuables, but the rivalry between chiefs and clans found "its strongest expression in the destruction of property. A chief will burn blankets, a canoe, or break a copper, thus indicating his disregard for the amount of property destroyed and showing that his mind is stronger, his power greater, than that of his rival. If the latter is not able to destroy an equal amount of property without much delay, his name is 'broken.' He is vanquished by his rival and his influence with the tribe is lost, while the name of the other chief gains correspondingly in renown."[32] The Kwakiutl are particularly well-known because they were studied by the famous anthropologist Franz Boas, but "fighting with property" (as one

30. Goldhill, *Reading,* p. 11.

31. On the problems inherent in applying the rational decision-making assumed by neo-classical economic theory in non-capital societies and for a summary of the bitter controversy that this problem inspired, see, for example, S. Plattner, *Economic Anthropology* (Stanford, 1989), pp. 6–15; for a discussion of Polanyi's work, see W. C. Neale and A. Mayhew, "Polanyi, Institutional Economics, and Economic Anthropology," in *Economic Anthropology: Topics and Theories,* ed. S. Ortiz (Lanham, Md., 1983), pp. 11–20; S. C. Humphreys, *Anthropology and the Greeks* (London, 1978), pp. 31–75.

32. F. Boas, *Kwakiutl Ethnography,* ed. H. Codere (Chicago, 1966), p. 93.

monograph on the *potlach* has been titled)[33] is a widespread phenomenon well known to economic anthropologists.[34]

A Kwakiutl audience would certainly respond to the Carpet Scene very differently from most modern European critics. The destruction of cloth would probably be familiar, for Agamemnon's gesture would be an assertion of power and status. Such an interpretation is, in fact, appropriate and finds oblique expression in the play. Clytemnestra urges Agamemnon "not to feel shame at the blame apportioned by men" (937 μή νυν τὸν ἀνθρώπειον αἰδεσθῇς ψόγον). In treading upon the cloth, Agamemnon should show disregard for the blame that his actions will inspire. The destruction is an assertion of power, both economically (since Agamemnon can afford to destroy the cloth) and socially (since he is sufficiently powerful to ignore his fellow citizens).

Nevertheless, our hypothetical Kwakiutl audience may well have found Agamemnon's behavior as scandalous as traditional critics, but for precisely the opposite reason. Agamemnon's performance is embarrassing because he does not understand the ethics of generosity. Agamemnon does not err when he walks upon the purple. He errs because of the niggardly, hesitant, and small-minded way in which he gradually allows himself to be convinced. He frets about the expense (948–49) and cannot even fully embrace the gesture. He does agree to walk upon the cloth, but nervously calls upon his servants to remove his boots beforehand (944–47). He cannot rid himself of his misgivings and sturdily tramp his muddy boots over the fine cloth, but seeks half measures that satisfy no one. Neither a proud conqueror nor a successful Solonic exponent of restraint, he walks barefoot into the house, an indecisive figure, groping for a middle ground that is not open to him.

The Kwakiutl perspective may contrast with that of the Athenian demos, but there were, as will be argued below, members of the Greek world who also admired conspicuous consumption. Before exploring the praise of consumption, however, we will first consider the opposite perspective. "Solonic" restraint is, in fact, an issue of some importance in this scene, for Agamemnon's exchange with Clytemnestra anticipates the dramatic (and fictitious) encounter of Solon and Croesus in Book 1 of Herodotus. Broadly speaking, the acting head of the household (Croesus/Clytemnestra) receives a newcomer (Solon/Agamemnon) in a manner calculated to display the overwhelming wealth of the household. Croesus orders his servants to lead Solon around to all his treasuries and to point out to him all the great and prosperous things that he had (Hdt. 1.30.1 κελεύσαντος Κροίσου τὸν Σόλωνα θεράποντες περιῆγον κατὰ τοὺς θησαυρούς. καὶ ἐπεδείκνυσαν πάντα ἐόντα μεγάλα τε καὶ ὄλβια). Likewise, as Agamemnon uneasily walks across the fabric, Clytemnestra comments

33. H. Codere, *Fighting with Property: A Study of Kwakiutl Potlaching and Warfare 1792–1930* (New York, 1950).

34. For a succinct survey of ethnographic materials that relate generosity to the establishment of rank and power, see M. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago, 1972), pp. 246–63.

upon this act with boasts about the wealth of the house (961–62 οἶκος δ' ὑπάρχει τῶνδε σὺν θεοῖς ἅλις / ἔχειν· πένεσθαι δ' οὐκ ἐπίσταται δόμος).

In both cases, the newcomer does not (at least immediately) accept the simplistic equation of wealth and prosperity. Solon, of course, dismisses Croesus' material wealth as at best a partial help. Wealth can help one weather misfortune, but it is better to be lucky and not face misfortune in the first place (Hdt. 1.32.6). Summarizing his long analysis of human experience, Solon explicitly states that a mortal cannot be judged ὄλβιος until he has completed his life (1.32.7 εἰ δὲ πρὸς τούτοισι ἔτι τελευτήσῃ τὸν βίον εὖ, οὗτος ἐκεῖνος τὸν σὺ ζητέεις, ὁ ὄλβιος κεκλῆσθαι ἄξιος ἐστί· πρὶν δ' ἄν τελευτήσῃ, ἐπισχεῖν, μηδὲ καλέειν κω ὄλβιον ἀλλ' εὐτυχέα). The conqueror Agamemnon anticipates the exact point that Solon would make in Herodotus' history (*Ag.* 925–30):

> λέγω κατ' ἄνδρα, μὴ θεόν, σέβειν ἐμέ.
> χωρὶς ποδοψήστρων τε καὶ τῶν ποικίλων
> κληδὼν ἀυτεῖ· καὶ τὸ μὴ κακῶς φρονεῖν
> θεοῦ μέγιστον δῶρον. ὀλβίσαι δὲ χρὴ
> βίον τελευτήσαντ' ἐν εὐεστοῖ φίλῃ.
> εἰ πάντα δ' ὡς πράσσοιμ' ἄν, εὐθαρσὴς ἐγώ.

We must not judge anyone ὄλβιος until he has "completed his life (βίον τελευτήσαντα) with dear good fortune." Sophocles and Euripides express this sentiment in strikingly similar terms, combining forms of ὄλβιος and τελευτάω,[35] but the later tragic passages were all probably composed after Herodotus' Solon. On the other hand, most scholars assume that Herodotus probably began active work on his *Histories* ca. 450, or just a few years after the *Oresteia* had been produced.[36] While it is not impossible that Herodotus' Solon specifically echoes Agamemnon,[37] it is at least as likely that both passages draw upon more general *topoi* about wealth and ὄλβος. The contrast between Agamemnon and Solon is, however, especially revealing. The wealth heaped up in Croesus' storerooms, great and spectacular as it may be, has no effect upon Solon, and he shocks Croesus with his tales of Tellus and of Cleobis and Biton. Agamemnon, on the

35. Eur. *Andr.* 100–2 χρὴ δ' οὔποτ' εἰπεῖν οὐδέν' ὄλβιον βροτῶν, / πρὶν ἂν θανόντος τὴν τελευταίαν ἴδῃς, Soph. *OT* 1528–30 θνητὸν ὄντ' ἐκείνην τὴν τελευταίαν ἰδεῖν / ἡμέραν ἐπισκοποῦντα μηδέν' ὀλβίζειν, πρὶν ἂν / τέρμα τοῦ βίου περάσῃ μηδὲν ἀλγεινὸν παθών, frag. 646.1–3 οὐ χρή ποτ' εὖ πράσσοντος ὀλβίσαι τύχας / ἀνδρός, πρὶν αὐτῷ παντελῶς ἤδη βίος / διεκπεραθῇ καὶ τελευτήσῃ δρόμον. The *Pandora* (system 2.3 [Harvard, 1990]) search program applied to the entire *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (Pilot CD ROM #C [Irvine, 1987]) for ολβ- and -τελευτ- within four lines of one another locates 26 references, of which 8 come from Herodotus and 6 from Hdt. 1.30–33. For an example of this sentiment expressed without forms of ὄλβιος and τελευτάω, see Eur. *Heracl.* 863–66.

36. The latest datable events mentioned by Herodotus take place at the opening of the Peloponnesian War, but Herodotus had clearly been at work on the *Histories* for some time. "Its 'ideal' date is closer to the 440s than the 420s," according to *The Cambridge History of Greek Literature* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 428. The date at which Herodotus ceased work is more controversial than his starting point: for an argument that Herodotus was still working between 420 and 414, see Ch. Fornara, "Evidence for the Date of Herodotus' Publication," *JHS* 91 (1971): 25–34; idem, "Herodotus' Knowledge of the Archidamian War," *Hermes* 109 (1981): 149–56.

37. Of the 26 collocations of ολβ- and -τελευτ- in the *TLG*, outside of Aeschylus only 6 passages in Pindar predate Herodotus. All of these six passages (*Ol.* 2.30–35, *Ol.* 5.22–24, *Pyth.* 12.28–32, *Nem.* 11.13–16, frags. 131a and 137 S.-M.) discuss the relationship between ὄλβος and the limited term of mortal life, but, despite a general similarity of theme, none of them echoes the striking similarity of phrase and utterance that the Aeschylean and Herodotean passages share.

other hand, gives clear expression to the basic ideas on which the Herodotean Solon would develop, but, unlike Solon, he cannot adhere to his proper sentiments. Agamemnon briefly plays the Solonic role of wise man, uninterested in material wealth, but only so that he can with his own words recall a moral standard that is beyond him.

The cloth spread before Agamemnon is expensive not simply because it is embroidered (and thus required a large surplus of labor to produce) but because Clytemnestra boasts that her husband will cross "a path strewn with purple" (910 πορφυρόστρωτος πόρος). The dye *porphyra* was extremely expensive, and purple cloth signified great wealth. The orators mention *porphyra* only once, where Isocrates refers to the peculiar fascination with which men view *porphyra* and gold (*Panath.* 12.39 πορφύραν καὶ τὸν χρυσὸν θεωροῦμεν). Outside of the *Agamemnon,* only one other text from the classical period refers to πορφύρεα εἵματα.[38] Πορφύρεα εἵματα play a role in three passages of Herodotus. When Pythermos of Phocaea comes to Sparta as a representative of the Ionians, he (unwisely) puts on a πορφύρεον εἷμα (Hdt. 1.152.4), but his lavish Ionian style leaves the Spartans unmoved. Later, Cambyses sends the Ethiopians, among other luxuries, a πορφύρεον εἷμα at Herodotus 3.20.4. Just as the flamboyant garment contrasts Ionian with Spartan, this gift forms the basis of a story that makes a similar comparison of Persian and Ethiopian. The Ethiopian king (3.22.6) scorns the expensively dyed cloth as "trickery," and similarly dismisses gifts of expensive gold jewelry. In both of these cases, possession of *porphyra* implies something foreign, soft, and adulterated. In defending Persian life, Xenophon explicitly tells us that purple cloths were in fact a Median, not a Persian, custom (*Cyr.* 1.3.2).

The third Herodotus passage in which "purple cloths" appear is of greatest interest. Herodotus carefully describes a gesture at Delphi by Croesus, one of the most famous near-Greeks (1.50.1):

> μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα θυσίῃσι μεγάλῃσι τὸν ἐν Δελφοῖσι θεὸν ἱλάσκετο· κτήνεά τε γὰρ τὰ θύσιμα πάντα τρισχίλια ἔθυσε, κλίνας τε ἐπιχρύσους καὶ ἐπαργύρους καὶ φιάλας χρυσέας καὶ εἵματα πορφύρεα καὶ κιθῶνας, νήσας πυρὴν μεγάλην, κατέκαιε, ἐλπίζων τὸν θεόν μᾶλλόν τι τούτοισι ἀνακτήσεσθαι· Λυδοῖσί τε πᾶσι προεῖπε θύειν πάντα τινὰ αὐτῶν τούτῳ ὅ τι ἔχοι ἕκαστος.

Croesus' sacrifice and his overall behavior in Herodotus provide some interesting points of comparison with Agamemnon. Here, as in Aeschylus, the purple cloth is presented only to be destroyed. Croesus is, for all his ties to Greece, a Lydian and, because of these close ties, served as the paradigm of eastern luxury in the Greek imagination. Both Aeschylus and Herodotus associate such destruction of luxury goods with a sacrifice to the gods. Clytemnestra argues that Agamemnon might have vowed to destroy the cloth as a gift to the gods (see *Ag.* 933–34), but Agamemnon's initial reaction implies that the cloth is a sacrifice to him personally, as if

38. Note, also, *Supplementum Hellenisticum* 958.13: a fragmentary elegy speaks of wealthy Medes and goes on to scorn those who dress in πορφύρεα εἵματα and anoint their soft bodies with myrrh (15–16: μύροισ[ιν / μαλακὸν χρῶτα λιπαινόμενο[ς). Though post-classical in date, this text draws upon older traditions about Medes and Persians.

he were himself divine. In Aeschylus, the object of the sacrifice is, at best, ambiguous and raises disturbing questions.

The Herodotean Croesus offers one further point of comparison with Agamemnon. In return for previous benefits, Croesus invited Alcmeon of Athens to visit him at Sardis and presented him a gift of all the wealth that Alcmeon could carry out of his storeroom (Hdt. 6.125). Alcmeon literally rolled back and forth in piles of gold-dust, stuffing his clothes and even his mouth with gold. When, bulging with wealth, he staggered out of the treasury, he looked like anything but a normal man (125.4 παντὶ δὲ τεῳ̃ οἰκὼς μᾶλλον ἢ ἀνθρώπῳ). Croesus' reaction is especially relevant to this discussion. Rather than being outraged at Alcmeon's rapacity or dismayed at the magnitude of what Alcmeon had acquired, Croesus is filled with laughter at the sight of the greedy Alcmeon (125.5 ἰδόντα δὲ τὸν Κροῖσον γέλως ἐσῆλθε). Croesus answered greed with a gesture of triumphant generosity. He gave Alcmeon all the gold that he already had and an equal amount besides. Here, Croesus serves as the classic figure whose great-heartedness and generosity are inexhaustible. He is the μεγαλοπρεπής whom Aristotle would systematically describe in the *Nicomachean Ethics* (4.1122a18–23a20). Agamemnon, by contrast, is hesitant and cannot accept the burden of μεγαλοπρέπεια. He cannot reconcile himself to the destruction of his wealth and is thus shown to lack the stature that a Croesus attains.

If Agamemnon falls short of μεγαλοπρέπεια, Aeschylus provides us with a character who knows full well the rhetoric of generosity. Clytemnestra plays the role of open-handed head of the household, for she conceives the gesture of walking upon the cloth and she shames Agamemnon into carrying it through. She, not Agamemnon, understands the psychology of the μεγαλοπρεπής: it is proper for the ὄλβιος to yield to those beneath him (941 τοῖς δ' ὀλβίοις γε καὶ τὸ νικᾶσθαι πρέπει). As Agamemnon steps upon the purple cloth, she exults in the act and in the destruction of this valuable property (958–60). With Agamemnon alive, the household, like a tree with healthy roots, will easily restore itself and will prosper indefinitely. Clytemnestra's words at 958–74 assume the great-heartedness that her husband cannot himself achieve. Her actions not only show Agamemnon to be pusillanimous, but establish the strength of her own transgressive nature; for she acts the dominant male role that one would expect Agamemnon to fill.

Recent work on Pindar has greatly expanded our understanding of μεγαλοπρέπεια and its use in the archaic and classical period.[39] Pindar's patrons had the time and wherewithal not only to be victorious at the Panhellenic competitions, but were able to commission one of the leading poets of the day to compose poems that would place these victories in the permanent poetic canon of Greek literature. Along with Simonides (who seems to have invented the genre) and Bacchylides, Pindar constructed

39. L. Kurke, *The Traffic in Praise: Pindar and the Poetics of Social Economy* (Ithaca, 1991), pp. 163–256.

poems that framed the achievements of this elite in the conservative values of their class. Their work thus served not only to record in permanent literary form the specific victories but also to construct a picture of the victor, his family, and his polis, which in some sense justified their success.

Consider for example the flattering advice that Pindar offers Hieron—flattering, because Pindar is urging on Hieron a course of action that the poem by its existence implies that he has already taken (*Pyth.* 1.87–94):

> εἴ τι καὶ φλαῦρον παραιθύσσει, μέγα τοι φέρεται
> πὰρ σέθεν. πολλῶν ταμίας ἐσσί· πολλοὶ μάρτυρες ἀμφοτέροις πιστοί.
> εὐανθεῖ δ' ἐν ὀργᾷ παρμένων.
> εἴπερ τι φιλεῖς ἀκοὰν ἀδεῖαν αἰεὶ κλύειν, μὴ κάμνε λίαν δαπάναις· 90
> ἐξίει δ' ὥσπερ κυβερνάτας ἀνήρ
> ἱστίον ἀνεμόεν. μὴ δολωθῇς, ὦ φίλος, κέρδεσιν εὐτράπλοις· ὀπιθόμβροτον
> αὔχημα δόξας
> οἷον ἀποιχομένων ἀνδρῶν δίαιταν μανύει
> καὶ λογίοις καὶ ἀοιδοῖς· οὐ φθίνει Κροίσου φιλόφρων ἀρετά·

As tyrant of Syracuse, Hieron was the richest and most powerful individual Greek of his time. The historical sources indicate that he was also one of the most ruthless, but Pindar denies this aspect of the accumulation and maintenance of power. Instead, power and wealth are the source for inexhaustible and limitless generosity. They allow Hieron to scorn expense and give him the material foundation on which he can base a persona that transcends petty jealousies. Pindar scorns, here as always, "glib pursuit of profit,"[40] and stresses that his patrons are beyond such mean concerns.

Pindar's advice does not only apply to tyrants. In his ode for Psaumis of Camarina, Pindar declares: "Always, when it is a question of excellence, toil and expense strive to accomplish a deed that is shrouded in danger" (*Ol.* 5.15–16 αἰεὶ δ' ἀμφ' ἀρεταῖσι πόνος δαπάνα τε μάρναται πρὸς ἔργον / κινδύνῳ κεκαλυμμένον). In his ode for Phylacidas of Aegina, we hear: "for if a man, rejoicing in expense and toil, achieves godly excellence, and a divinity sows the seed of lovely fame in him, then he already casts his anchor on the farthest shore of prosperity, since he is honored by the gods" (*Isthm.* 6.10–13 εἰ γάρ τις ἀνθρώπων δαπάνᾳ τε χαρεὶς / καὶ πόνῳ πράσσει θεσδμάτους ἀρετάς, / σύν τέ οἱ δαίμων φυτεύει δόξαν ἐπήρατον, ἐσχατιαῖς ἤδη πρὸς ὄλβου / βάλλετ' ἄγκυραν θεότιμος ἐών). In *Isthmian* 5, he praises the family of Cleonicus because "no thought of the expense fretted away their devotion to their hopes" (*Isthm.* 5.57–58 οὐδ' ὁπόσαι δαπάναι / ἐλπίδων ἔκνισ' ὄπιν). Likewise, the family of Melissus from Thebes "did not keep their curved chariot from competing in the general contests; striving against all of Greece, they rejoiced in spending their wealth on their horses. Those who attempt nothing face silence and obscurity" (*Isthm.* 4.28–30 οὐδὲ παναγυρίων ξυνᾶν ἀπεῖχον / καμπύλον

40. *Isthm.* 1.51 is the only passage in which Pindar does treat κέρδος as a clearly negative goal, and in this context Pindar is reinterpreting the quality: the highest κέρδος is not monetary, but a good name among one's friends at home and abroad (1.51 εὐαγορηθεὶς κέρδος ὕψιστον δέκεται. πολιατᾶν καὶ ξένων γλώσσας ἄωτον).

δίφρον, Πανελλάνεσσι δ' ἐριζόμενοι δαπάνᾳ χαῖρον ἵππων. / τῶν ἀπειράτων γὰρ ἄγνωστοι σιωπαί). In his poem for Herodotus of Thebes, we hear: "If a man has devoted his whole spirit to excellence, sparing neither expense nor toils, it is right to grant the boast of manliness to those who achieve excellence, with an ungrudging mind" (*Isthm* 1.42–45 εἰ δ' ἀρετᾷ κατάκειται πᾶσαν ὀργάν, / ἀμφότερον δαπάναις τε καὶ πόνοις, / χρή νιν εὑρόντεσσιν ἀγάνορα κόμπον / μὴ φθονεραῖσι φέρειν / γνώμαις).

We already noted that Agamemnon does not measure up to the openheartedness implied by true μεγαλοπρέπεια, and a further comparison with the norms prescribed by Pindar reveals how far Agamemnon falls short of this quality. Aeschylus does not, however, simply depict an Agamemnon who does not meet "Pindaric" standards. He subtly portrays a type of consumption that would offend his audience even if Agamemnon embraced this consumption freely. Pindar's patrons can boast of their wealth not only because they pretend to despise it, but because they consume their property in ways that allay the envy of others.[41] Hieron, for example, lavishes his wealth on hospitality and uses it to be a generous and kindly host. For Hieron, wealth is a tool whereby he can be a more affable host and treat his friends with greater consideration. He acquires wealth to expend it in the service of others. At the same time, the other victors, private citizens within their poleis, freely expend their stored wealth to pursue αἱ ἀρεταί, the prized qualities admired by all citizens, and to produce a glory in the Panhellenic games that will reflect on their polis and its citizens as a whole.

Agamemnon, however, destroys the expensive cloth for no useful purpose. He is not using his wealth to be more hospitable to his friends or to serve some grand design. Clytemnestra urges him to indulge in this gesture to dramatize pleasure at his return and the prosperity that allows him to perform this gesture in the first place. Pindar presents the rich man's case for justifying his wealth: he does not use it for his own pleasures, but to serve some other higher goal. Aeschylus sketches the opposing view: the wealth belongs solely to the rich man's household and serves to dramatize his status and superiority to his fellows.

CONCLUSION:
EGALITARIAN ETHICS AND THE POLITICS OF GENEROSITY AT ATHENS

We will conclude this paper by briefly relating Aeschylus' treatment of Agamemnon to the shared values of democratic Athenian society. Traditional humanist analysis has praised the evolution of justice and of a stable polis that emerges during the *Oresteia*. Others have been more critical, emphasizing the ideological justification of male domination that takes place in the trilogy.[42] Almost all critics have, however, seen the *Oresteia* as a formative literary work that, far from being a passive mirror

41. Kurke, *Traffic*, pp. 163–94.

42. E.g., F. Zeitlin, "The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Myth-Making in the *Oresteia*," *Arethusa* 11 (1978): 149–84.

of its time, contributed to the "invention of Athens" and to the definition of what it meant to be an Athenian citizen in the mid-fifth century. The Carpet Scene focuses attention on a major attitude that was general among the Greek elite of the time and that also played a major role in the maintenance of Athenian democracy: the suspicion of material symbols of wealth and prestige. Thucydides (1.6.3–4), for example, remarks that the Greeks had only recently adopted a more egalitarian lifestyle:

> καὶ οἱ πρεσβύτεροι αὐτοῖς τῶν εὐδαιμόνων διὰ τὸ ἁβροδίαιτον οὐ πολὺς χρόνος ἐπειδὴ χιτῶνάς τε λινοῦς ἐπαύσαντο φοροῦντες καὶ χρυσῶν τεττίγων ἐνέρσει κρωβύλον ἀναδούμενοι τῶν ἐν τῇ κεφαλῇ τριχῶν· ἀφ' οὗ καὶ Ἰώνων τοὺς πρεσβυτέρους κατὰ τὸ ξυγγενὲς ἐπὶ πολὺ αὕτη ἡ σκευὴ κατέσχεν. μετρίᾳ δ' αὖ ἐσθῆτι καὶ ἐς τὸν νῦν τρόπον πρῶτοι Λακεδαιμόνιοι ἐχρήσαντο καὶ ἐς τὰ ἄλλα πρὸς τοὺς πολλοὺς οἱ τὰ μείζω κεκτημένοι ἰσοδίαιτοι μάλιστα κατέστησαν.

The luxuriant clothing, which advertised the wealth of its owner, gave way to a more moderate form of dress.[43] Cloth could be expensive and served as a powerful signifier of wealth. Agamemnon's gesture harkens back to an earlier generation that had exploited finely made cloth as an emblem of power.

This pretended disdain for material prosperity came from elites who feared the social mobility that money and fluid wealth in the sixth century made increasingly possible.[44] This ideological position evolved to protect the entrenched ἀγαθοί from those who converted wealth into status, but it was also admirably suited to the needs of Athenian democracy. The wealthy of Athens maintained their position by ostentatiously expending their wealth in public services, obligatory and volunteer, such as the fitting out of a trireme or the production of tragedies.[45] The Carpet Scene reproduces in dramatic form the suspicions and mistrust that Athenians still harbored about the rich and the powerful. Aeschylus presents an Agamemnon who expends wealth for no communal purpose and who cannot even match the fearless generosity to which Pindaric rhetoric lays claim. Aeschylus does not reject Pindar's construction of the μεγαλοπρεπής. He simply replaces it with a different and less flattering model of the rich man's behavior.

This anti-elitism may have helped to hold Athenian society together, creating a framework in which the rich survived but purchased their survival by ostentatious and constant service to their community. Nevertheless, the anti-elitism remained an ideological stance, an argument exploited by its practitioners to maintain their own position rather than a

43. For a detailed discussion of this passage in Thucydides and of its significance, see A. E. Geddes, "Rags and Riches: The Costume of Athenian Men in the Fifth Century," *CQ* 37 (1987): 307–31.

44. On this, see Kurke, *Traffic,* esp. her discussion of *Isthm.* 2, pp. 252–56; L. Gernet, *The Anthropology of Ancient Greece,* trans. J. Hamilton and S. J. and B. Nagy (Baltimore and London, 1981), pp. 286–87. There is a large literature exploring the effect of money exchange on traditional societies in modern times and its unsettling effects; see, for example, J. C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak* (New Haven, 1985); S. Gudeman, *The Demise of a Rural Economy* (New Haven, 1978).

45. For an extensive discussion of the dynamics of this system, see J. Ober, *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens* (Princeton, 1989), pp. 192–247 and *passim.*

principle rigorously enforced. The Athenians who spoke so warmly of μετριότης, "moderation," and κοσμιότης, "balanced behavior," in their law-courts, collectively played the μεγαλόφρων in their dealings with the rest of Greece during the empire. Plays such as the *Suppliants* and *Heraclidae* of Euripides portrayed an Athens that was above petty disputes, and the final recourse of help from the weak and the oppressed. Overwhelming power and wealth, the open-handedness of the μεγαλοπρεπής, are major themes that underlie the funeral oration of Pericles. The Athenians as a whole live beyond the need for fear and secrecy. Because they were free men, they did not need to exercise constantly as professional soldiers. No statement better combines the dialectic of generosity and domination than Pericles' proud boast (Thuc. 2.40.4–5):

> καὶ τὰ ἐς ἀρετὴν ἐνηντιώμεθα τοῖς πολλοῖς· οὐ γὰρ πάσχοντες εὖ, ἀλλὰ δρῶντες κτώμεθα τοὺς φίλους. βεβαιότερος δὲ ὁ δράσας τὴν χάριν ὥστε ὀφειλομένην δι' εὐνοίας ᾧ δέδωκε σῴζειν· ὁ δὲ ἀντοφείλων ἀμβλύτερος, εἰδὼς οὐκ ἐς χάριν, ἀλλ' ἐς ὀφείλημα τὴν ἀρετὴν ἀποδώσων. καὶ μόνοι οὐ τοῦ ξυμφέροντος μᾶλλον λογισμῷ ἢ τῆς ἐλευθερίας τῷ πιστῷ ἀδεῶς τινὰ ὠφελοῦμεν.

The Athenians seek no return for their help and confer benefits without regard to expediency. Pericles is open to criticism because his words are manifestly untrue (at least in the analysis of self-serving Athenian actions that Thucydides presents). At the same time, however, his generosity should, in light of the foregoing analysis of the *Agamemnon,* seem at the least more complex. Like the Kwakiutl chief who smothers his guest in a generosity that he cannot repay, Pericles' open-handed, selfless support dramatizes the gulf that separates Athens from all other states, belittling their status and praising Athens. For Pericles' assertion of generosity without expectation of return goes hand in hand with Athens' assertion of power and domination over its allies. If Athens' internal adherence to an ethic of material restraint rendered it stronger, its external power politics of generosity must have incurred as much hatred and resentment as they did gratitude. The *Oresteia* outlined a brilliant, but partial, vision of what Athens could be.

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