

THE OMEN OF THE EAGLES AND HARE (*AGAMEMNON* 104–59): FROM AULIS TO ARGOS AND BACK AGAIN

Sommerstein has recently argued that the famous omen in the parodos of the *Agamemnon* must take place in Argos, not in Aulis as is almost universally accepted in the scholarly literature.¹ This is not as trivial an issue as it may appear, for it does make a 'substantial difference to our understanding and appreciation of the parodos',² especially in regard to the shifting relationship between the *oikos* and the community which forms a major theme of the trilogy. Sommerstein's attempt to demonstrate that the audience could have only Argos in mind when they hear of the eagles' attack on the pregnant hare ultimately fails, however, and Aulis must remain the more likely setting for the event.

To begin at the end. In concluding his argument, Sommerstein suggests that modern readers have wrongly projected back onto their reading of the parodos of the *Agamemnon* the omen of the serpent and the sparrows which is recounted by Odysseus in the second book of the *Iliad* (2.299–332).³ Although Sommerstein admits that the 'Aeschylean omen is designated to put its audience in mind of the Homeric one', he believes that the differences between the two would prevent a hearer from adopting 'a *recherchée* [sic] interpretation' based on a literary allusion when the 'logic of the passage' points to Argos.⁴ But from all the evidence we have, in pre-Aeschylean sources there was only one omen interpreted by Calchas before the troops set sail for Troy, and that was the sparrow and snake omen at Aulis.⁵ For an Athenian audience hearing about the events just before the Greeks sailed for Troy, any allusion to a bird omen would most *naturally*, I think—not in some *recherché* fashion—conjure up Aulis. That the omen turns out to involve different species would of course strike the audience as significant and demand interpretation, but there would be no compelling reason to doubt it appeared at Aulis.

The chorus makes only one statement about the location of the events: the eagles appear ἵκταρ μελάθρων (116). Although most translations render this 'near the palace', Sommerstein observes that this cannot be correct if we are to imagine ourselves at Aulis—there would be no 'fixed royal palace' on the beach. Fraenkel (ad loc.) points out, however, that in Euripides' *Iphigeneia at Aulis* μέλαθρον and μέλαθρα (612, 678, 685; perhaps also 1340), as well as δώματα (440, 820, 854), are used to refer to the temporary lodging of the Atreidae. Sommerstein counters that in Euripides' play these are references to the *skene*, whereas Aeschylus' audience was looking at a stage depicting the palace at Argos. But linguistic usage clearly allowed μέλαθρα to

¹ A. H. Sommerstein, 'AESCH. AG. 104–59 (The Omen of Aulis or the Omen of Argos?)', *Museum Criticum* 30–1 (1995–6) [1997], 87–94. The line numbering and Greek text are from Page's OCT.

² Sommerstein (n. 1), p. 87.

³ Ibid., p. 93.

⁴ Ibid., p. 93.

⁵ For bibliography on the dramatist's debt to Homer, see my article 'The serpent and the sparrows: Homer and the parodos of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*', *CQ* 49 (1999), 396–407. Aeschylus may have known other accounts of the sparrow/snake omen, but Homer's would certainly have been foremost on his mind. The version in the *Cypria* seems to have been very close to Homer's; see Proclus' summary, Apollod. *Epit.* 3.5, and M. Davies, *The Epic Cycle* (Bristol, 1989), 43–4.

mean the kings' temporary residence, and given the audience's expectations that the events take place in Aulis, the word most easily refers to the encampment of the Greek leaders on the shore (ships are mentioned in the very next verse, reminding us of the littoral setting).⁶

Still, Sommerstein wonders: how would the audience have any way of knowing that the action of the omen being described by the chorus was in fact taking place at Aulis? He notes that there was no traditional connection between the omen and the sacrifice of Iphigenia. It is not until 134 that there is any specific link made in the text between the omen and the sacrifice; we do not begin to hear of Aulis until 184–5, and only at 190–1 is the location specifically mentioned. The only house we have heard of by verse 116 is that of the Atreidae at Argos which has been visible to us from the start of the play and is referred to explicitly five times in the prologue (3, 18, 27, 35, 37). There is, he decides, nothing to tell the audience that they could be anywhere other than near the palace at Argos: '... how on earth can he [the spectator] be expected to put aside all this and think of a temporary residence at an Aulis, to which no reference has yet been made?'⁷

A few minor objections first. Aeschylus may have invented the connection between the omen and the sacrifice, but the audience certainly knew of an omen that inaugurated the expedition to Troy, and they also knew of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, and they knew that both occurred at Aulis. Aeschylus innovates by making the omen apply to Iphigenia, but the audience does not need to link the omen immediately with Iphigenia to believe both events are located at the traditional site. The prophet's ultimate connection of the attack on the hare with the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter is strengthened if the two 'sacrifices' occur at the same spot.

And although the only 'house' we have heard of so far in the play is that of the Atreidae in Argos, *μέλαθρον* is not used to refer to that domicile. Instead we encounter a *στέγη* (3), *οἶκος* (18, 35, 37), and *δόμος* (27)—all in the prologue and spoken by the watchman, not the chorus.⁸ Still, if we have had our experience limited only to Argos, it might be reasonable to argue that one more reference to a building of any kind must be to what is before our eyes. But in fact while our eyes have been focused on Argos, our ears and minds have been led all over the Aegean long before the reference to the omen. From the opening anapaests of the chorus we have been taken on a voyage through both time and space—Argos is merely a convenient port of departure for the chorus's memories.

The first words of the parodos take us back ten years and far away from Argos: it has been ten years since the Atreidae set out to seek vengeance against Priam, putting

⁶ Similarly, the Greek encampment at Troy is called *μέλαθρα* in Euripides' *Troades* 154. Although Aeschylus elsewhere in the trilogy uses the word for more permanent royal halls or for the family and its destiny (ten times; the word is not used in any other extant play by him), the tragedian here may be drawing from epic for this allusion (see Fraenkel on 116 and 770–1). In Homer the word often refers to a royal palace (or roof/roof-beam), but at *Il.* 9.204 Achilles' temporary residence (*κλισίη*) along the seashore is called a *μέλαθρον* (cf. 9.640). Similarly, Anchises' pastoral hut (*κλισίη*) on the hills of Ida is labelled a *μέλαθρον* (*Hymn. Hom. Ven.* 173). The word, when referring to an edifice, seems to mean 'domicile' and thus can refer to anything from a tent to a palace, to temples and shrines (homes of the gods; e.g. Pind. *Pyth.* 5.40; Eur. *I. T.* 69, 1216; *Phoen.* 205; *Ion* 738, 1373, *Tro.* 1317), to the humble cottage of the agrarian husband of Electra (Eur. *El.* 78), and to the caves of Philoctetes (Soph. *Phil.* 147, 1453) and Polyphemus (Eur. *Cyc.* 491, here with irony).

⁷ Sommerstein (n. 1), p. 89.

⁸ In its recollections of past events, the chorus makes no reference to the house. The only implicit allusion to the royal dwelling is in the chorus's address to Clytemnestra (especially 96).

underway a thousand-ship fleet of Argives (στόλον Ἀργείων χιλιοναύτην, 40–7). The first geographic image of the parodos turns out to be the departure from Aulis. After an elaborate simile, we are told that Zeus sent the sons of Atreus against Alexander for the sake of one ‘wife of many husbands, to place many bone-wearying struggles on Trojans and Greeks alike’ (60–7). The chorus has moved on to envisioning the exhausting battle at Troy. That, they sum up, is where the events of the past ten years have left things: ἔστι δ’ ὅπη νῦν / ἔστι (67–8). Only now do we arrive explicitly at the present and in Argos (72–103). But immediately the chorus returns to its memories (108–9) and we are once again being launched back ten years to . . . where? As the chorus replays the past we have every reason to suspect that we are travelling once again in space as well as time back to Aulis.

The language the chorus uses to describe the omen (109–21) echoes its earlier recollection of the trip from Aulis to Troy. The first words—Ἀχαιῶν δῖθρονον κράτος, Ἑλλάδος ἥβας / ξύμφρονα ταγάν—recall the opening reference to the Atreidae as the διθρόνου Διόθεν καὶ δισκῆπτρου / τιμῆς ὄχυρόν ζεύγος Ἀτρειδᾶν (43–4) who lead the 1,000-ship fleet of Argives (Ἀργείων, 45) to Troy. Sommerstein suggests that ‘the description of the Atreidae in 109f. as the commanders of “the Achaians” and of “the youth of Hellas” does not entail that they had the whole Achaian/Hellenic army with them at the time’. He notes that the omen has particular importance to the ‘commanders’ (104, 111, 114–15, 125), and so it is ‘more than possible that the scene we are meant to imagine is not that of the Atreidae marching away from the palace at the head of the Argive troops, but that of the two kings themselves, accompanied only by their personal staff (including Calchas) and servants, coming out of the palace to go and join an (Argive) army that had mustered at a convenient parade-ground outside the city walls’.⁹ But it is more natural to take such references to their leadership over the ‘youth of Hellas’ as indicating that they are in fact the leaders of the entire Greek force gathered for the expedition to Troy. This particular expression, for example, for the youth of Hellas (Ἑλλάδος ἥβας) is very similar to one used later by the chorus—ἄνθος Ἀργείων—in referring explicitly to all the Greek troops worn down at Aulis (194–8).¹⁰

The verb of the sentence also harks back to the chorus’s earlier recollection of the voyage to Troy. The (as yet unmentioned) omen ‘sends’ off (πέμπει, 111) the Atreidae to the land of Teucer just as a god had sent (πέμπει, 59) an avenging Fury for the vultures and Zeus sent (πέμπει, 61) the sons of Atreus against Alexander. Perhaps it is possible to imagine, as Sommerstein does, that the old men want us to think of the trip from the front door of the palace of Argos to an army waiting outside the city walls, but we know nothing about this movement, either from tradition or from Aeschylus’ play itself.¹¹

⁹ Sommerstein (n. 1), p. 91, n. 12.

¹⁰ Although earlier references to Agamemnon and Menelaus (e.g. 42, 60 109, 114, 124) direct our attention to the significance of the action for these individuals, this does not mean that the rest of the Greeks were not with them when the omen appeared. The Atreidae are the *leaders* (a fact that is emphasized throughout the parodos) of the fleet of Greeks heading to Troy and so they represent the entire mission. This is parallel to the use of the names of Priam (40) and Alexander (61) to stand for the victims of the vengeance that will be wreaked on *all* of the Trojans (67; cf. 113). Similarly, the most natural interpretation of such collective references as Ἀργείων (45) is to all of the Greeks, as at 197–8, not literally to only the ‘Argive troops’.

¹¹ I suppose it is also possible that both references to being ‘sent’ against Alexander (61) and Troy (113) could be metaphorical or refer to the very first leg of that journey, from the porch of the palace to the plains or harbour of Argos, but this is surely an odd and unprecedented way to think about the expedition.

We get the first direct reference to the omen in 112 with *θούριος ὄρνις Τευκρίδ' ἐπ' αἶαν*, a bird (omen) that sends the commanders of the youth of Hellas to the land of Teucer. The bird turns out to be an eagle, and suddenly there are two of them, but Aeschylus carefully locates his innovation in its traditional setting by telling us that the king of birds appears to the king of *ships*: *οἰωνῶν βασιλεὺς βασιλεύει νε-ῶν* (114–15). Why would the Atreidae be referred to as admirals if they were leaving their palace to join their Argive army? How much more reasonable it is to take this as another reference to the brothers' role at Aulis, where in fact they are in charge of the 1,000-ship armada preparing to sail to Troy. Agamemnon is similarly called the 'elder leader of the Achaean ships' (*ἡγεμῶν ὁ πρέ-σβυς νεῶν Ἀχαιϊκῶν*, 184–5) by the chorus towards the end of their Hymn to Zeus in the very context of the Greeks' inability to sail (*ἀπλοῖα*, 188) from Aulis.

According to Sommerstein, certain words—especially *ὄδιον* (104), *πέμπει* (111), *κέλευθος* (126), *ὀδίῳ* (157), and the participle *στρατωθέν* (134)—suggest that the 'omen appeared to the two kings just as they were setting out from their palace on their journey . . . to Aulis and the war', a 'moment of exceptional augural significance'.¹² He offers no explanation, however, for the particular appropriateness of the first four of these words for a trip to Aulis. The verb *πέμπει* in fact echoes the chorus's earlier reference to the attack on Troy from Aulis rather than the path to Aulis. These are the only two certain appearances of *ὄδιος* in Greek, and neither case tells us anything at all about the location of the omen.¹³ On the other hand, it seems to me that *κέλευθος* (126) must allude to the entire expedition to Troy. Calchas begins his prophecy with a direct reference to the sack of Troy: *χρόνῳ μὲν ἄγρῃ Πριάμου πόλιν ἄδε κέλευθος* (126). This clearly echoes the first words of the parodos—*δέκατον μὲν ἔτος τόδ' ἐπεὶ Πριάμου / μέγας ἀντίδικος* (40–1; cf. *Il.* 2.329)—which refer to the expedition from Aulis. Would Calchas really refer to the Atreidae and their personal staff and servants exiting the palace as a *κέλευθος* and thus the very expedition (cf. *κέλευθον καὶ στρατεύμ' ἐφ' Ἑλλάδα*, *Pers.* 758) that would take Troy?¹⁴

Sommerstein argues that by metre and position *στρατωθέν* is emphasized, 'pinpointing the time of danger as the time when the whole army has been gathered together (sc. at Aulis), in contrast with the time at which Kalchas is speaking, when Agamemnon and Menelaos are leaving Argos with, presumably, only the Argive contingent. If the united army is already in being, *στρατωθέν* is redundant and its emphatic placement pointless'.¹⁵ Calchas has just interpreted the omen to mean that Troy, in time, will fall, and he suspects that there is a dark side to it as well: *οἶον μὴ τις ἄγα θεόθεν κνεφά-ιση προτυπὲν στόμιον μέγα Τροίας / στρατωθέν* (131–3). Sommerstein's translation runs as follows:

no divine resentment cast its dark shadow upon
the great instrument forged to clasp Troy, smiting it in advance
when it has been mustered.

¹² Sommerstein (n. 1), pp. 90–1 and notes 8–11.

¹³ The word appears twice in conjectures in Euripides: *El.* 162, *Hyppisyle* 1.4.30; see Denniston–Page on 104. I follow Sommerstein in avoiding the murky waters of verses 104–6, for which see especially Fraenkel *ad loc.*

¹⁴ One might ask what Calchas was doing in Argos at all. Sommerstein assumes he is part of Agamemnon's personal staff, but the tradition is ambivalent about Calchas' place of origin and says nothing about his staying at Argos before the expedition. (We do hear that Agamemnon came to persuade the prophet, 'living in Megara', to accompany him to Troy [Paus. 1.43.1], but that does not tell us anything about what happened subsequently.)

¹⁵ Sommerstein (n. 1), pp. 90–1 and notes 10–12.

This rendering, however, works just as well with the traditional interpretation. The prophet hopes no malice from the gods will bring harm to the army that is *right here and now* ready to go (rather than at some unspecified moment in the future). The participle emphasizes just how close the Greeks were to leaving for Troy when calamity hit Aulis in the form of Artemis' resentment.¹⁶

Sommerstein concludes that by placing the omen at Argos, Aeschylus redirects the Homeric omen away from the fate of the expedition against Troy to the plight of the house of the rulers of Argos: 'The omen appeared "near the house", and its prime significance is for the house [οἴκοις βασιλείοις, 157] . . . in Aeschylus . . . [the omen] concerns not the army (which is indeed going to suffer, for reasons that have nothing to do with the omen) but the Atreidai and their kin. The *parodos*, like the prologue, puts us clearly on notice that this is going to be the tragedy of an οἶκος'.¹⁷ But there is a great difference between saying that this is the tragedy of a house and insisting that everything of importance must take place at the house itself—we never make it back to Argos at all in the final play of the trilogy, although Argos is brought vividly to our attention in one politically charged passage (*Eum.* 754–74). Even after the action described by the chorus clearly moves to Aulis in Sommerstein's own interpretation, we find references to the house in Argos: δόμων ἄγαλμα (208), φθόγγον ἀραιὸν οἴκοις (237), ἀνδρῶνας (243–7)—characters do not have to 'be' in Argos to reflect upon the fate of the Atreids. More importantly, the trilogy is not just a tragedy about a house, but about how the events within a house alter, or reflect the alteration of, human society in general. By locating the omen in its traditional setting of Aulis, we are asked from the beginning of the drama to put the fate of the house of Atreus into a larger context. What happens here affects the soldiers, their families and cities, and the entire structure of human justice—it has, quite simply, cosmic implications.

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¹⁶ According to Sommerstein, the Hymn to Zeus (160–83) 'in effect accompanies the journey of the Atreidai from Argos to Aulis' (pp. 91–2 and notes 14 and 15). This seems a needlessly complicated vision of the action. Note also Aeschylus' use of καὶ τόθ' (184) to take up the narrative once more after the hymn. Fraenkel, after comparing other similar uses, concludes (on 184) that 'here καὶ τόθ' clearly refers to the events of which we were told before the hymn began'.

¹⁷ Sommerstein (n. 1), pp. 91, 94.