

"Saffron-colored" Terms in Aeschylus

By ROBERT J. EDGEWORTH, Baton Rouge/Louisiana

Two phrases in the *Agamemnon*, each apparently a reference to saffron dye, have occasioned puzzlement and contention among critics. A possible solution to the difficulties can be suggested along new lines.

The two phrases occur at lines 239 and 1121–22. The first one is part of the chorus' description of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, who is described as *κρόκου βαφᾶς δ'ἔς πέδον χέουσα*. She is shedding something, but what? The traditional interpretation is that she sheds her robe.¹⁾ A second interpretation is that she is shedding her blood, as the sacrifice begins.²⁾ Most recently N. B. Booth has argued that she is shedding tears, and that here *κρόκου βαφᾶς* = "tears."³⁾

Booth's arguments rest on context: Iphigeneia cannot disrobe when she is bound and gagged, and no blood is shed before line 249. His conclusion is sound, yet he himself is so uneasy with part of his conclusion – i. e., that tears are here called "saffron-colored" – that he suggests (p. 89 n. 8) that emendation of *κρόκου βαφᾶς* "to a word or words meaning 'tears'" may be necessary (but see p. 94). He is forced to press the point that "... it is notoriously hard for us to understand Greek colour words ..." (p. 94). True enough! And in his 1987 reprise: "With the 'tear' interpretation, the difficulty of the colour still exists, certainly ..." (p. 64).

But an easier and fuller solution is at hand. A term which can modify tears in Greek tragedy is *χλωρός*: Sophocles *Trachiniae* 848, Euripides *Medea* 906 & 922, *Helena* 1189.⁴⁾ The tendency to interpret the adjective as "pale" in such passages was corrected in 1974 by E. Irwin, who argued convincingly that the basic meaning of *χλωρός* is "moist" or "fresh."⁵⁾ This meaning is perfectly adapted to tears.

¹⁾ E. g. Eduard Fraenkel, ed., *Aeschylus Agamemnon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950) II p. 137: "*κρόκου βαφᾶς*: a garment dyed with saffron."

²⁾ Thus Paul Maas, "Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 231 ff., illustrated," *Classical Quarterly* n. s. 1 (1951) p. 94; more recently Jean Bollack, ed., *L'Agamemnon d'Eschyle* [= *Cahiers de Philologie* 6 & 7] (Lille: 1982).

³⁾ Nathaniel B. Booth, "Two Passages in Aeschylus *Agamemnon*," *Eranos* 77 (1979) pp. 85–95; and "A Further Note on *κρόκου βαφᾶς* in Aeschylus *Ag.* 239," *ibid.* 85 (1987) pp. 64–65.

⁴⁾ Booth is aware of this (p. 94 n. 11), but does not draw the conclusion.

⁵⁾ Eleanor Irwin, *Colour Terms in Greek Poetry* (Toronto: Hakkert, 1974) pp. 31–78, esp. p. 33.

Now, *χλωρός* and *κρόκινος* occupy adjacent and partially overlapping positions on the spectrum of color adjectives. True, *χλωρός* is often applied to the bright green of vegetation, but in tragedy it is also applied to a range of objects (such as sand and honey) which are indisputably yellow.⁶⁾

I suggest that in this passage Aeschylus was looking for a more ornate synonym for *χλωρός*, not in the sense of any color but in the sense of "moist," and that he chose *κρόκος* at least in part because of its affinity to *χλωρός*. Hence *κρόκου βαφάς* = "drops of moisture" (tears).⁷⁾ The participle suits this interpretation perfectly, since the most common use of *χέω* is in the pouring of liquids.

The second passage occurs in 1121–22, when the chorus reacts to Cassandra's intimations of doom by saying:

*ἐπὶ δὲ καρδίαν ἔδραμε κροκοβαφῆς
σταγῶν.*

The traditional interpretation identifies this "drop" as blood.⁸⁾ But, since the adjective was taken to mean "yellow," the noun was sometimes identified as bile.⁹⁾

Booth argues that this phrase, too, means "tears," and that in Aeschylus the heart is the reservoir and receptacle of emotion, not of mere hemoglobin.¹⁰⁾ Here he is on less solid ground. The chorus intends to say, "Your words make me feel fear"; liquids are important to the Greek notion of fear, but not tears in particular, the principal association of which is with grief rather than with fear.

In his English edition of the *Agamemnon*, Hugh Lloyd-Jones comments in part on line 1121 as follows: "... Homer speaks of 'yellow fear.' The blood is called 'the drop of saffron dye,' not because it

⁶⁾ References in Irwin, *loc. cit.*, and in Helmut Dürbeck, *Zur Charakteristik der griechischen Farbenbezeichnungen* (Bonn: 1977) *s. v.*

⁷⁾ The phrase could also be taken as = "beads of perspiration," which would fit the desperation of the heroine, but not the grandeur of the passage.

⁸⁾ Thus Scholiast M: *ἡ σταγῶν τὸ αἷμα*, which Fraenkel (III p. 507) calls "the obvious interpretation," adding: "We need not look for something more sophisticated."

⁹⁾ E.g. Rose, *A Commentary on the Surviving Plays of Aeschylus* [= *Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde, n. r. 64*] (Amsterdam: 1958) II p. 80: "The 'yellow drop' is blood heavily charged with yellow bile ..."

¹⁰⁾ Booth (1979) pp. 90–93.

itself is yellow, but because it makes the face go yellow."¹¹) Lloyd-Jones is thinking of Homer's *χλωρόν δέος* (found nine times in the Homeric epics). In the light of Irwin's findings, that phrase should be understood as "moist fear" or "clammy fear" (cf. our expression "a cold sweat," associated with fear). The Greek concept of fear is that it dries one out internally while bringing moisture to the skin, i. e. bodily fluids move from inside the body to outside.¹²)

Lloyd-Jones is correct in taking the force of the adjective here as proleptic: this is a "moist drop" (using *κροκοβαφής* = "moist" again by analogy with *χλωρός*) not merely by tautology, but because it brings forth the moisture associated with fear.

A word of caution is in order. In arguing his case Booth stresses: "... there is a great difference in colour between 'purple' and 'saffron' ..."¹³) So it would appear. On the other hand, several passages give one pause. At Aeschylus *Persae* 659 the sandal of Darius is described as *κροκόβαπτον ποδός εὔμαριν*. A yellow sandal seems meaningless; but a purple one would be in keeping with notions of royalty and pretensions of divinity, as seen in the famous "carpet-walking" scene in the *Agamemnon*.¹⁴) In Pindar *Nemean* i. 38, the swaddling clothes of Heracles are described as *κροκωτὸν σπάργανον*: if yellow, the reference is pointless; if purple, it suits the royal and godly status of Heracles. And cf. Euripides *Phoenissae* 1491, *στολίδος κροκόεσσαν ἀνεῖσα τρυφάν* (Antigone's robe).

It is already established that the ancient purple dye could produce more than one color, including red, purple, light violet, pink, and even black, depending upon the amount of dye and the amount of sunlight used during the fixing process.¹⁵) A single term, *πορφύρεος*, can refer to any of the hues produced from the *πόρφυρα* dye. Moreover, it appears that the Romans possessed a term, *luteus*, which could mean yellow or pink as context demanded;¹⁶) so the notion of

¹¹) Hugh Lloyd-Jones, ed., Aeschylus *Agamemnon* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970) p. 78.

¹²) R. Edgeworth, "Sappho Fr. 31. 14 L-P," *Acta Classica* 27 (1984) pp. 121-24; cf. Irwin, pp. 62-68, favoring the connection of bile and fear.

¹³) Booth (1987) p. 64.

¹⁴) See Meyer Reinhold, *History of Purple as a Status Symbol in Antiquity* [= Collection Latomus 116] (Brussels: 1970).

¹⁵) Alexander Dedekind, *Ein Beitrag zur Purpurkunde* (Berlin: 1898); J. André, *Étude sur les Termes de Couleur dans la Langue Latine* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1949) pp. 90-102, esp. p. 92; Helmut Gipper, "Purpur," *Glotta* 42 (1964) pp. 39-69.

¹⁶) R. Edgeworth, "Luteus: Pink or Yellow?" *Glotta* 63 (1985) pp. 212-220.

a single term bridging more than one hue is not objectionable *per se*. If science should establish that the *κρόκος* could at times produce a dye more red than yellow, the passages mentioned immediately above would yield more satisfactory interpretations, and the case for *κροκοβαφής* = "red," hence \cong "blood," would be greatly strengthened.