

## THE FIRES OF THE ORESTEIA

ONE of the most basic features of the imagery employed by Aischylos in the *Oresteia* is the consistent perversion of normally propitious aspects of human existence, with the result that they become sinister and destructive.<sup>1</sup> As Anne Lebeck puts it, 'in *Agamemnon* those forces which should be beautiful, benevolent, and life-giving are converted into their opposites'.<sup>2</sup> Male and female interchange their proper roles, sacrificial language cloaks impious deeds of vengeance, the hunting of animals turns into the hunting of men, the wealth of the house of Atreus becomes the blood in which that house is drenched, and the fertility of the whole land is corrupted by its application to death instead of life.<sup>3</sup> The deliberate misuse to which Aischylos puts each of these structures has been well surveyed; taken together they lend dramatic reinforcement to a central theme of the *Oresteia*, that man's world is in a state of chaotic disorder from which it will not recover until the dilemma of vengeance *v.* justice has been solved. What I should like to do here is to trace out a similar arrangement in the substantial fire imagery of the trilogy.<sup>4</sup> Fire, of course, as Aischylos himself tells us in the *Prometheia*, is one of the basic tools of mankind, a device used to provide many of the comforts of civilisation. Yet the same element, when handled improperly, may also ravage and destroy (compare the problems encountered by the satyrs in the *Prometheus Pyrkaeus*<sup>5</sup>). In the case of the *Oresteia*, from the initial beacons of the *Agamemnon* to the final counterpointed torches of the *Eumenides*, I suggest that fire repeatedly serves to symbolize the destructive aspects of vengeance, returning to its normal beneficent function only in the procession of the trilogy's close when vengeance itself has been harnessed to the demands of justice.<sup>6</sup> Hopefully the following look at specific occurrences of fire imagery in the three plays will bear this suggestion out.

### I. THE AGAMEMNON

The trilogy opens with Klytaimestra's watchman crouched on Agamemnon's roof. In the course of his lament he tells us that he awaits a signal out of the darkness, the message which will end his vigil:

καὶ νῦν φυλάσσω λαμπάδος τὸ σύμβολον  
ἀνγὴν πυρὸς φέρουσαν ἐκ Τροίας φάτιν (8-9)<sup>7</sup>

'So now I watch for the token of the beacon, the gleam of fire bearing news from Troy'. The beacon, then, the *λαμπάς*,<sup>8</sup> represents the first literal appearance of fire in the play: a line of bonfires will announce Troy's capture. We might imagine that this signal would be welcome in several ways—as the end of the watchman's labours, as the first report of a great victory, and quite simply as a light to dispel the black of night.<sup>9</sup> Yet the Greek itself

<sup>1</sup> I am most grateful to Professor William Nethercut for reading and offering suggestions on this paper.

<sup>2</sup> A. Lebeck, *The Oresteia: a Study in Language and Structure* (Washington, 1971) 69. Cf. also 131, 133.

<sup>3</sup> On these inversions cf. F. I. Zeitlin, *TAPA* 96 (1965) 463-508; P. Vidal-Naquet, *PP* 129 (1969) 401-25 (especially 417-8); R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *JHS* 68 (1948) 130-47.

<sup>4</sup> Such imagery has been treated before, most notably by J. J. Peradotto in an excellent article on nature motifs in the trilogy in *AJP* 85 (1964) 378-93. Professor Peradotto gives a concise summary of all the light images, including many of those involving fire. The present article attempts to approach that idea from a different direction, and to suggest that Aischylos uses fire here, not simply as an aspect of light, but as a central destruction symbol for the

whole trilogy.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *fr.* 455, 456 (Mette).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. B. M. W. Knox on the use of the lioncub image in *CP* 47 (1952) 18.

<sup>7</sup> All citations, unless otherwise noted, are from Page's Oxford text (1972). The following standard commentaries are referred to only by author: E. Fraenkel, *Agamemnon* (Oxford, 1950); J. D. Denniston and D. Page, *Agamemnon* (Oxford, 1957); G. Thomson, *The Oresteia of Aeschylus* (Amsterdam, 1966).

<sup>8</sup> Literally 'torch'; thus Aischylos in his initial reference to the beacons looks forward already to the closing torches of the *Eumenides*.

<sup>9</sup> For the Greek use of light as a symbol of triumph and salvation cf. R. Bultmann, *Philologus* 97 (1948) 1-15, and D. Tarrant, *CQ* 10 (1960) 181-7.

is so phrased as to carry more ominous overtones: lines 8–9 create a forceful link between the beacon to come and the fire which initiates it,<sup>10</sup> so that in place of a comforting illumination we have the disturbing glow of Troy's destruction. The moment of triumph and jubilation is undercut by considerations, however brief, of the cost at which it has been won. The watchman's second mention of the beacon continues this line of thought with a different kind of ambiguity:<sup>11</sup>

νῦν δ' εὐτυχῆς γένοιτ' ἀπαλλαγῆ πόνων  
εὐαγγέλου φανέντος ὀρφναίου πυρός. (20–1)

'Now may there come a fortunate release from toils, when fire, messenger of good news by night, has appeared.' He means the lines surely as a hope that when (or as) the fire messenger appears, a fortunate release from troubles may emerge. But the whole of line 21 may perhaps also be taken rather in apposition with πόνων; ὀρφναίου, moreover, may signify a 'dark' fire, grim and ungodly, rather than simply a fire in the night.<sup>12</sup>

The appearance of the actual beacon now breaks into this clouded thought, and the watchman greets it alertly:

ὦ χαῖρε λαμπτήρ νυκτὸς ἡμερήσιον  
φάος πιφαύσκων καὶ χορῶν κατάστασιν  
πολλῶν ἐν Ἄργει τῆσδε συμφορᾶς χάριν. (22–4)

'Hail, torch of night,<sup>13</sup> showing forth a light like unto day, and a setting up of many choruses in Argos for the sake of this event.' Once more, as Peradotto notes,<sup>14</sup> the poet employs a subtle irony. The λαμπτήρ, hailed here as giving rise to choruses, will indeed bring victory songs to Argos, as the watchman supposes, but it will also bring a very different kind of chorus, the dread Furies who appear to Orestes after the death of Klytaimestra. Thus again fire becomes the conveyor of something other than the auspicious resolution we might have expected. The remainder of the watchman's speech adds further indications of a central role: Klytaimestra is urged to raise a cry of triumph<sup>15</sup> in answer to the beacon (τῆδε λαμπάδι, 28), and at line 33 the beacon itself appears to participate actively in the action by casting dice (τρίς ἕξ βαλούσης τῆσδέ μοι φρυκτωρίας), though the watchman mistakes their significance.<sup>16</sup> But fire assumes subtler forms as well, and perhaps we might see another development of the imagery in the watchman's reference to the companions of his vigil. During his enforced watching, he tells us, he has come to know the whole company of the stars, the

λαμπροὺς δυνάστας, ἐμπρέποντας αἰθέρι  
ἀστέρας, ὅταν φθίνωσιν, ἀντολὰς τε τῶν (6–7)

'bright lords, stars clear in the high aither, when they wane and their risings'.<sup>17</sup> The

<sup>10</sup> Note that the *chain* of beacons has not yet been explained; thus we are left with a literal impression of the actual fire of Troy bringing the news.

<sup>11</sup> On the many possibilities for this kind of ambiguity in Aischylos cf. W. B. Stanford, *Ambiguity in Greek Literature* (Oxford, 1939) 137–62; note also Lebeck's statement of method (*op. cit.* n. 2) 3.

<sup>12</sup> Fraenkel (II 15) and Page (68) both observe that elsewhere ὀρφναῖος always means 'dark'. Here the literal meaning would seem to be, as they also observe, 'in the darkness', but surely Aischylos intended more. Cf. φῶς αἰνολαμπές at l. 389.

<sup>13</sup> Some difference of opinion exists over whether νυκτὸς should be construed directly with λαμπτήρ, as I have done here, or more generally with φάος (thus yielding 'light in the night'). Since both constructions are possible it seems likely that both were

intended, but surely we can give preference to the more forceful image; we already know that it is night.

<sup>14</sup> Peradotto (*op. cit.* n. 4) 389. This chorus of Furies is specifically mentioned at 1188 ff.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Zeitlin (*op. cit.* n. 3) 507 for the restoration of the ὀλοληγμός to its proper function at the end of the trilogy.

<sup>16</sup> For the context of the reference cf. Fraenkel II 19–20. He himself comments that the concept of a beacon throwing dice is 'very bold'. The triple six is clearly fortunate, but whether for Agamemnon or Klytaimestra remains to be seen.

<sup>17</sup> The mss. ἀντολὰς is preferred here to Pages' ἀντολαῖς. For arguments that l. 7 is a gloss cf. Fraenkel II 6–9; against this Thomson, II 10; I 63.

beacon, then, is not the only light the watchman sees; the vault of heaven is lit with many points of light which might seem like fires in the night sky.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, these lights are 'bright lords', that is, the stars are made the rulers of this universe, while their waning and rising (if line 7 is genuine) would be yet another kind of succession illustrating the pattern of bloodshed, the death of transgressors and the rise of the inevitable avenger. Atreus, Thyestes, Agamemnon, Klytaimestra, Aigisthos—these would be the lords who shine clear in the endless cycle of retribution.<sup>19</sup>

If this reading of the prologue is correct, the stars will represent the general law of violence and blood debt in the cosmos, while the beacon fire suddenly blazing forth will be the specific manifestation of that process in present time.<sup>20</sup> Priam and his city have been destroyed; their star sets while Agamemnon's rises. But as one star vanishes and another appears, so one fire kindles another, and the beacon shining out from Troy finds an answering response in the fires which spread through Argos<sup>21</sup>, the sacrifices ordered by Klytaimestra to the celebration of her own murderous intent. In a poetic sense the fires lit throughout the city balance those doubtless spreading across Troy, but they are also an extension of the beacons which carry the news of Troy's destruction to Argos.<sup>22</sup> Then too there is an interaction with the sacrificial imagery of the trilogy; as Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigeneia that he might take Troy, so Klytaimestra presents offerings that she may kill Agamemnon. In each case the proper use of sacrifice is impiously perverted to an evil end.<sup>23</sup> We see the flames everywhere, at every altar, reaching up to heaven—*ἄλλη δ' ἄλλοθεν οὐρανομήκης λαμπὰς ἀνίσχει* (92–3).<sup>24</sup> We learn too with what these flames are fed—the guileless persuasion of pure salve, the royal unguent from the inner chambers of the house:

*φαρμασσομένη χρίματος ἄγνου  
μαλακαῖς ἀδόλοισι παρηγορίαις  
πελάνω μυχόθεν βασιλείω. (94–6)*

The composition of the *πέλανος* has been much argued. On the literal level it is surely, as Fraenkel supposes,<sup>25</sup> the pouring on of oil to feed the flames. But on the poetic level, beyond the immediate meaning, may not *πελάνω βασιλείω* indicate 'royal blood',<sup>26</sup> the generations of bloodshed that haunt the innermost recesses of the house of Atreus? Symbolically it is this blood which Klytaimestra pours on the flames of her vengeance to make them burn more brightly, just as later she spreads blood-coloured robes for Agamemnon to tread upon.<sup>27</sup> Thus the fire at Argos answers the fire from Troy: sacrifice for lives sacrificed, and passions fuelled by the spreading conflagration.

Klytaimestra herself has entered the stage at some point during the *parados*.<sup>28</sup> She now announces Troy's sacking, and explains to the elders, in a speech of thirty-five clearly

<sup>18</sup> Homer (*Il.* viii 553–6) makes a very distinct comparison between watch fires and the stars: cf. Bultmann (*op. cit.* n. 9) 4. As for Aeschylus himself, nothing in his extant work can be used to demonstrate conclusively that he conceived of stars as fire (unless perhaps *Sept.* 388). But such an idea was common enough among the Presocratics (Herakleitos and Anaximander in particular), and certainly Pindar had some such idea in mind when he called the sun the warmest of all stars (*Ol.* i 5–6). Cf. also below on *Cho.* 585–90.

<sup>19</sup> Note the use of *ἐπαντείλασαν* in reference to Klytaimestra rising from her bed at l. 27. The scholiast goes so far as to add *ὡς ἐπὶ ἄστρων ἢ σελήνης*. Both Fraenkel (II 18) and Page (69) find this far-fetched, but perhaps we underestimate Aeschylus.

<sup>20</sup> The words *καὶ νῦν* beginning l. 8 seem to reinforce this impression of a shift from general pattern to specific example.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Peradotto (*op. cit.* n. 4) 389.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Lebeck (*op. cit.* n. 2) 172.

<sup>23</sup> Zeitlin (*op. cit.* n. 3) 502, notes that Klytaimestra's action follows close upon the chorus' insistence that unyielding tempers *cannot* be softened by sacrifices.

<sup>24</sup> Note here the use of *λαμπὰς*, the beacon of the watchman's speech, for the sacrificial fires.

<sup>25</sup> Fraenkel II 54–5.

<sup>26</sup> *LSJ* defines *πέλανος* as 'any thick liquid substance' and adds several specific references to blood, among them the *ἐρυθρὸν πέλανον* which the Furies threaten to draw from Orestes' limbs at *Eum.* 265. Cf. also *πέλανος αἵματοσταγῆς* (*αἵματοσφαγῆς*) at *Pers.* 816. It should, however, be conceded that in such parallels *πέλανος* usually has a clarifying epithet.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. R. Goheen, *AJP* 76 (1955) 115–20, and Lebeck (*op. cit.* n. 2) 84–6.

<sup>28</sup> Page (75–6) would have her appear by l. 83; Fraenkel (with full discussion, II 51–2) argues perhaps more logically for an entrance at l. 254.

repetitive lines, the chain of beacons which has brought the news. Scholars, of course, have enjoyed pin-pointing the various locations, but it is questionable whether an Athenian audience expecting poetic drama would have shared their enthusiasm. In point of fact the description is neither necessary—Klytaimestra's assertion that Troy was taken would have been quite sufficient—nor realistic—distances of a hundred miles are not to be covered by beacon fires, even such magnificent ones.<sup>29</sup> Why then does Aischylos take such pains with this passage? To create suspense, perhaps. But any suspense the situation might have held is largely eliminated by the statement of the beacon's message at the beginning of the speech; once we know that Troy has fallen Klytaimestra's device for discovering the fact is not of major interest. On the other hand, the means by which retribution spreads from generation to generation is of substantial interest as a central problem of the trilogy. And the succession of beacons, each setting off the lighting of another, creates I think an elaborate allegory for this process. Fire leaps from one mountain to the next, passing high over even the sea (*πόντον ὥστε νωτίσαι*, 286). It gathers strength as it advances forward (*σθένουσα λαμπὰς δ' οὐδέ πω μαυρουμένη*, 296). On occasion it burns more fiercely than was ordered (*πλέον καίουσα τῶν εἰρημένων*, 301).<sup>30</sup> And throughout the entire passage it plays a kind of double role. On one level, as Lloyd-Jones notes,<sup>31</sup> it is always the same fire, the force of destruction generated by Troy (*φάος τὸδ' οὐκ ἄπαππον Ἰδαίου πυρός*, 311) and passing through the night to Argos. But on another level each separate fire kindles a new one, as each murder kindles vengeance. We should note too that Klytaimestra's second speech (320–50) gives ominous reinforcement to such symbolism. The beacon speech conveys the triumph and brilliance of Agamemnon's victory through images of exultant fire flashing from mountain to mountain; the following address, phrased in answer to the chorus' request for more details, turns that victory into a brutal catalogue of wrongs done at Troy,<sup>32</sup> and closes with the clear suggestion (338–40) that vengeance will follow upon impiety, just as the fire ultimately swoops down on Agamemnon's house (*ἐς τόδε σκίηπει στέγος*, 310). The beacons are thus a reiterated presentation of the fire principle. They represent the ever-renewed outbreak of retribution, yet they are all part of one time-honoured law—life for life.

The beacon speech is not the end of the beacons, however. At line 475 the elders of the chorus return to the subject with an image that extends the reach of the fires:

πυρός δ' ὑπ' εὐαγγέλου  
 πόλιν διήκει θοὰ  
 βάξις——  
 τίς ὦδε παιδὸς ἢ φρενῶν κεκομμένος  
 φλογὸς παραγγέλμασιν  
 νέοις πυρωθέντα καρδίαν, ἔπειτ'  
 ἀλλαγᾶ λόγου καμεῖν;  
 γυναικὸς αἰχμᾶ πρέπει  
 πρὸ τοῦ φανέντος χάριν ξυναινέσαι. (475–7, 479–84)

'Swift rumour produced by the fire messenger of good news runs through the city . . . but who is so childish or struck from his senses that he allows his heart to be fired by the

<sup>29</sup> In the second edition of his commentary on the *Agamemnon* (1904) Verrall concedes that such a distance might be spanned in very clear weather. How Klytaimestra could count on such weather is another matter, and one that should trouble only the meteorologist.

<sup>30</sup> Page (96) translates 'burning more than the aforementioned' but even he admits this to be prosaic. For the translation used here cf. Fraenkel (II 159) and Thomson (II 30). Certainly nothing could be more appropriate to a drama in which numerous figures take vengeance beyond what is their due.

<sup>31</sup> F. M. Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (London, 1907) 148–9, and H. Lloyd-Jones, *Aeschylus: Agamemnon* (1970) 33–4, are among the very few commentators willing to allow these beacons any sort of poetic content, but I cannot agree with Lloyd-Jones' interpretation of them as the 'avenging power of Zeus'. With regard to *ἄπαππον* cf. the chorus' thoughts at 750 ff.

<sup>32</sup> Ll. 326–9 with their description of the bereaved at Troy may well look back to Agamemnon's butchering of his own daughter as well as forward to Klytaimestra's murder of her husband.

announcement of the flame only to weary at a change of tidings? It is in the nature of a woman to praise fortune before it has shown itself clearly.' The chorus here stands apart from Klytaimestra; she is the one whose heart is *fired* by the news of the beacons.<sup>33</sup> Thus Aischylos achieves a direct link between the signal fire and the corresponding fire it kindles in the queen who is to become the newest participant in the chain of murders. She herself comments that they will all soon know whether the relays of fire bear truth (*λαμπάδων φαεσφόρων/φρυκτωριῶν τε καὶ πυρὸς παραλλαγῆς*, 489–90),<sup>34</sup> or whether the light has deceived their minds (*φῶς ἐφῆλωσεν φρένας*, 492). In actual fact both alternatives hold true; the elders' minds are deceived as to the real significance of the beacons, yet they will soon learn how real that significance is.

Several other points in the *Agamemnon* also stress the destructive side of fire, thus suggesting a more general system of imagery working outward from the beacons. At line 650 and following we find the herald's description of the strange disaster that struck the Akhaian fleet on leaving Troy. *ξυνάμοσαν . . . πῦρ καὶ θάλασσα*—'Fire and water, though they were enemies before, conspired together, and they showed tokens of their faith by destroying the ill-fated army of the Argives.' Here fire is a basic element thrown into turmoil by the crimes of Agamemnon; cosmic order is disrupted, and fire breaks out in the ships as they sail away from the impious firing of the Trojan city. That Troy has been fired (if we doubted that fact) Agamemnon will tell us later, in announcing upon his arrival at Argos that the captured city is now only smoke and ashes (818–20). And we have already seen another kind of fire at Troy—the one used by Ares to cremate the dead whose ashes he sends back to Greece as a *πυρωθέν* . . . *ψῆγμα* (440–2). Fire's productive capacity as a refiner of metals is here perverted to a cruelly destructive end, while wealth becomes a purveyor of death through the substitution of reduced corpses for the expected gold dust.<sup>35</sup>

Kindled fires also suggest another image in the *Agamemnon*—the hearth. The grief caused by Helen's flight and the harder pains caused by going after her—these evils lie at the hearth (*ἐφ' ἐστίας*, 427) of Menelaos and of those who sent their men to war. The hearth thus becomes the place where many of the play's sufferings are most directly felt.<sup>36</sup> Such dramatic geography is subsequently continued in the narrative by a different kind of *ἐστία*—the altar at which Klytaimestra will sacrifice her victims. As she herself tells the elders, she has little time to waste luring Cassandra into the palace:

*τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἐστίας μεσομφάλου  
ἔστηκεν ἤδη μῆλα πρὸς σφαγᾶς πάρος. (1056–7)*

“They are already standing at the central hearth—the sheep, that is—prepared for slaughter(?).”<sup>37</sup> Of course the sacrifice Klytaimestra has in mind is Agamemnon; he is the one who stands around the hearth, ready for slaughter.<sup>38</sup> Cassandra and the elders pick up the same image at the end of the following dialogue, when she draws back in horror from the palace:

<sup>33</sup> I confess I do not follow Page's reference to 'the awkwardness of the metaphor *πυρωθέντα καρδίαν*' (Page 115). For possible fire imagery in *ὁ θῆλυς ἔρος* (ms *ἄρος*) *ἐπινέμεται* (485) cf. Thomson II 46.

<sup>34</sup> Note the contrast between the *παραλλαγῆς* and the *ἀπαλλαγῆ* desired by the watchman in the play's opening line.

<sup>35</sup> On this image cf. Lebeck (*op. cit.* n. 2) 180 and Zeitlin (*op. cit.* n. 3) 499. The perversion of wealth is of course also carried out by the fusion of blood and riches in Agamemnon's carpet.

<sup>36</sup> Note here again that a normally propitious aspect of everyday life, in this case the hearth, centre of home and family, becomes instead a symbol of loss and ruin.

<sup>37</sup> The text is Murray's, based on Musgrave's *πάρος* for *πυρός*. Page (162–3) expresses general

doubts and questions in particular *πρὸς σφαγᾶς* with the meaning 'to the slaughter'. Merkelbach's rearrangement of the lines to

*τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἐστίας ἤδη πάρος  
ἔστηκε μῆλα πρὸς σφαγᾶς μεσομφάλου*

gives perhaps the most satisfactory sense, though it is hard to part with the directness of the mss. *σφαγᾶς πυρός*. Of course Page is right in noting that 'it is not fire that slaughters the victims' literally, but the figurative imagery would be quite consistent with Aischylos' use of fire elsewhere.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Knox (*op. cit.* n. 6) 22, Vidal-Naquet (*op. cit.* n. 3) 417, and Zeitlin (*op. cit.* n. 3) 467–8. As before, in the offerings made throughout the city, fire and sacrifice interact to an impious end.

Κα. φόνον δόμοι πνέουσιν αίματοσταγή.  
 Χο. καὶ πῶς; τοδ' ὄζει θυμάτων ἐφεστίων.  
 Κα. ὁμοίος ἀτμός ὡσπερ ἐκ τάφου πρέπει. (1309-11)

The house 'breathes forth slaughter', and though the chorus mistakes its nature, they unwittingly identify what Cassandra has sensed: the coming butchery of sacrificial victims—herself and Agamemnon—at the hearth. The breath which issues forth stands out (*πρέπει*) like that from a grave. The hearth, then, is again the scene of destruction. Before it housed the sorrows brought on by Paris and Agamemnon; now it becomes the scene of new bloodshed. But we are not yet finished. Though Agamemnon has in one sense kindled this last fire against himself, as surely as he fired Troy, his wife is a woman of many motives, and there is another factor involved. As Klytimestra tells the elders, she feels no fear while Aigisthos lights fire in her hearth:

ἔως ἂν αἴθη πῦρ ἐφ' ἐστίας ἐμῆς  
 Αἴγισθος. (1435-6)

With these lines the hearth imagery assumes its full implications. As Aigisthos kindles a fire in Klytimestra's . . . *ἐστία*, so he kindles the fires of passion and vengeance in her heart. And this fire is closely related to the beacons, the fires at Troy, and the sacrifices at Argos. Ironically, Klytimestra believes she has nothing to fear when it is lit. But Aischylos' use of the hearth motif shows that it is the fire itself which must be feared. The hearth furnishes suitable material, a mind which can ignite in slaughter and ruin. As such it intensifies the theme of self-willed disaster in the play.<sup>39</sup>

In this way, I believe, Aischylos manipulates fire consistently throughout the *Agamemnon* to emphasise points at which vengeance and destruction are especially manifest. But fire is a complex symbol, and citing places where it is mentioned or implied will not necessarily exhaust the poet's use of it. For example, fire involves light as well as heat, and light is especially difficult to deal with because it appears so often and in so many forms. Clearly the light of the beacons is a valid target for this analysis because it springs from fire, but what of the sun's light that brings corpses to flower on the surface of the Aegean (658-60)? Destruction is also involved here, yet perhaps Aischylos does not mean us to see the same symbolic agent at work. No answer will be certain, and rather than stretch the imagery beyond what is credible, I will cover only a few points which do seem to reflect the beacons and other fires in a more general sense. At line 389 the evil of men led on by persuasion

πρέπει δέ, φῶς αἰνολαμπές, σίνος

'shines out, a dark-glittering light, a baleful mischief'. The connection between light and disaster is self-apparent here.<sup>40</sup> *πρέπει* may perhaps echo line 30, where the beacon shone forth (*ὁ φρυκτός . . . πρέπει*). And the *φῶς αἰνολαμπές*, while it looks forward to the dark gleam of base metal, surely also looks back to the beacon shining through the darkness. The same idea appears at line 522, where the herald hails Agamemnon as *φῶς ἐν εὐφρόνη φέρων*, 'bearing a light in the night'. Granted that such words may come naturally to an admiring servant, they still suggest Agamemnon as the bearer of destructive light to Argos, a light shining in darkness, a beacon.<sup>41</sup> Klytimestra carries the motif one step further when she asks what light is sweeter than a returning husband (*φέγγος ἡδίου*). Agamemnon thus becomes the light itself.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Note also ll. 968-9, where Agamemnon's return is said to bring *heat* to the hearth of the house:

καὶ σοῦ μολόντος δωματῖν ἐστίαν  
 θάλλπος μὲν ἐν χειμῶνι σημαίνει μολόν.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Peradotto (*op. cit.* n. 4) 390.

<sup>41</sup> Thomson (I 49) suggests here a reference to the

Mysteries. Taken together with the watchman's last words at *Agam.* 39 such an illusion might well reflect a symbolic structure in which torches veiled by darkness are gradually made to reveal their secret.

<sup>42</sup> Cf. Bultmann (*op. cit.* n. 9) 8-9.

Other references to light in the *Agamemnon* bear upon the relationship between fires shining in the night and the much brighter light of day. The watchman's previously-cited description (22–3) of the beacon as showing forth a *ἡμερήσιον φάος*, a 'light like unto day', suggested a conception of that beacon as something to dispel night, to herald the dawning of a new day. Similarly Klytaimestra at line 264 links the news of the beacons with the coming day:

εὐάγγελος μὲν, ὥσπερ ἡ παροιμία,  
ἕως γένοιτο μητρὸς εὐφρόνης πάρα

'A good messenger, as the saying goes, may dawn be coming from its mother night', while Aigisthos at line 1577 actually hails day as the righter of past wrongs:

ὦ φέγγος εὐφρον ἡμέρας δικηφόρου

'O kindly light of justice-bearing day.' In all these instances the hope is illusory;<sup>43</sup> day does not bring an answer to the problems of retribution. Nor should we expect it to, since the trilogy ends not in daylight, but in the torchlit darkness of night. Such a conclusion, moreover, is actually prefigured by one image in the play. Justice, the chorus tells us, shines in smoky dwellings, and honours the righteous life (*Δίκη δὲ λάμπει μὲν ἐν δυσκάπνοις δώμασιν*, 772–4). To call this *Δίκη* 'retribution' would be very convenient to the system of imagery thus far described, but the context denies that possibility. *Δίκη* here looks forward to a real Justice, a Hesiodic figure who will shun the guilty and turn toward the upright.<sup>44</sup> As such she anticipates the possible beneficence of fire and its related light in a cosmos where justice is honoured. In other words, justice and retribution are two sides of the same coin, and they share the same symbolism. We have seen throughout this first play of the trilogy that retribution is often symbolised by fire shining out in darkness; now we discover that justice may also appear in such a guise, though it will not assume it permanently until the end of the trilogy. Aeschylus for one brief instant shows us that transfigured fire in connection with transfigured *Δίκη*, then returns to the harsh laws of the *Agamemnon*.<sup>45</sup>

## 2. THE CHOEPHOROI

Appearances of fire in the *Choephoroi* are considerably fewer. The most striking image occurs at lines 536–7, when the chorus explains to Orestes the purpose of their sacrifice at the tomb. Klytaimestra has awoken in terror in the dead of night and ordered lamps to be lit:

πολλοὶ δ' ἀνήθοντ' ἐκτυφλωθέντες σκότῳ  
λαμπτήρες ἐν δόμοισι δεσποίνης χάριν  
πέμπει δ' ἔπειτα τάσδε κηδείους χράς.

'Many lanterns blinded in darkness were kindled in the house because of the queen. And then she sent these funeral libations.' The action here repeats that of the *Agamemnon*. There the series of beacons (*ὦ χαῖρε λαμπτήρ*, *Agam.* 22) shone out through the darkness and caused Klytaimestra to send forth sacrifices. Here the torches of the house (*λαμπτήρες*) flare up, and once more Klytaimestra sends out sacrifices, though this time in fear, not celebration. Thus the patterns of the *Agamemnon* continue.<sup>46</sup> Fires of vengeance still burn

<sup>43</sup> Cf. l. 492: *φῶς ἐφήλωσεν φρένας*. Vidal-Naquet (*op. cit.* n. 3), 401, also comments on the 'éclat trompeur' of the opening.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *Op.* 217–37, 256–62.

<sup>45</sup> I add here briefly several indirect references to fire: at l. 1097 Cassandra sees the children of Thyestes holding their *roasted* flesh (*ὀπτὰς τε σάρκας*) in their

hands, and at l. 849 Agamemnon declares the problems of Argos curable by *burning* or cutting (*κέαντες ἢ τεμόντες*—Klytaimestra of course chooses cutting).

<sup>46</sup> Zeitlin, however, does note (*op. cit.* n. 3, 482–3) a shift in the eagle imagery which lends sympathy to Orestes. We should also keep in mind that Elektra

in the palace of Atreus, but Agamemnon's widow will now be victim rather than kindler; the torches which before indicated the father's return now signal that of the son.

Other points also extend the themes of the *Agamemnon*. The chorus in its parodos laments the troubles of the house—*ἰὼ πάνοιζυς ἐστία, ἰὼ κατασκαφαὶ δόμων*, 49–50—thus the hearth reappears as the focus of suffering and ruin. Again, at line 264 the chorus hails Orestes and Elektra as *σωτῆρες ἐστίας πατρός*—saviours of the hearth of their father. And so they shall be, for by killing their mother they sustain that hearth and the bloodshed for which it has come to stand (though Aischylos has so phrased the thought that it may also designate them as restorers of the hearth to its rightful domestic function). The particular passage then continues with a related fire image; the chorus, having identified Orestes and Elektra with the hearth, add a curse against Aigisthos and Klytaimestra:

*οὐς ἴδοιμ' ἐγὼ ποτε  
θανόντας ἐν κηκίδι πισσῆρει φλογός.* (267–8)

'Whom may I see dying in the dripping pitch of fire.' The flames thus leap from the hearth to destroy their victims, and the fire becomes, as at Troy, the active agent of disaster. The reference to pitch, moreover, suggests torches, the *λαμπτήρες* which Klytaimestra will light in the house. Once more the beacon-fire motif is linked to bloodshed.<sup>47</sup>

Thus the hearth imagery establishes that Orestes will continue the chain of killing in which Agamemnon has already played his part. Orestes himself calls his father a *σκότῳ φάος ἀντίμοιρον* (319), a light standing against the darkness,<sup>48</sup> much as the herald did in the first play (*Agam.* 522). At line 131 (though this depends on an emendation<sup>49</sup>), Orestes becomes the light:

*φίλον τ' Ὀρέστην φῶς ἀναψύων ἐν δόμοις.*

'Kindle dear Orestes as a light in the house.' Here Agamemnon is apparently asked to fire the house through his son. Whatever the true reading of the line, Orestes is certainly connected with the kindling of fire and light in a later choral ode when the chorus awaits the outcome of his confrontation with Aigisthos. They frame the question in terms of victory for one man or the other. Orestes' death, to their mind, will bring destruction upon the house (861–2). His triumph, on the other hand, will bring freedom and wealth:<sup>50</sup>

*πῦρ καὶ φῶς ἐπ' ἐλευθερία  
δαίων ἀρχαῖς τε πολισσονόμοις  
ἔξει πατέρων μέγαν ὄλβον.* (863–5)

The chorus mistakenly believes that fire, the death of Aigisthos, will mean release from the troubles of the house and enjoyment of its prosperity (much as the watchman and Klytai-

at least begins to break the chain of corrupted sacrifices by refusing to offer the prayers Klytaimestra has ordered.

<sup>47</sup> Still another reference to torches may perhaps be seen at *Cho.* 386–7, where the ms. reads *πενκῆεντ' ὀλολνγμόν*. The text, however, may be corrupt: cf. W. B. Stanford, *Aeschylus in his Style* (Dublin, 1942) 108–9.

<sup>48</sup> This is admittedly a much-vexed passage, which in Murray's text reads as follows:

*ὦ πάτερ αἰνόπατερ, τί σοι  
φάμενος ἢ τί ρέξας  
τύχοιμ' ἂν ἑκαθεν οὐρίας  
ἔνθα σ' ἔχουσιν εὐναί,  
σκότῳ φάος ἀντίμοιρον;*

The problem lies primarily in the referent of *φάος*.

If l. 319 is taken with what precedes *φάος* could refer to Orestes, Agamemnon, or whatever Orestes brings (*οὐρίας*) to Agamemnon. On the other hand, if we punctuate definitively after *εὐναί* then *σκότῳ φάος ἀντίμοιρον* becomes a separate phrase (so Page, Thomson). This last possibility does not seem to add much to the sense. Of the other three, keeping in mind Thomson's point that the purpose of Orestes' speech is to win Agamemnon's help, not his happiness, I have chosen Agamemnon and construed *φάος* accordingly. But the matter is clearly questionable.

<sup>49</sup> The ms. reading is *πῶς ἀνάξομεν*, emended by Wilamowitz following Schneidewin. Page's adoption of *φῶς τ' ἀναψων* weakens the imagery to no good purpose.

<sup>50</sup> The text is Murray's.



mestra believed in the *Agamemnon*). The end of the *Choephoroi*, of course, gives ample evidence of quite a different outcome. Kindling this fire only brings the Furies to avenge it. The legacy of fire is not to be solved so easily.

We come now to the second stasimon. At line 629 the chorus reproaches Klytaimestra for her treachery, adding

τίω δ' ἀθέρμαντον ἔστιαν δόμων  
γυναικείαν τ' ἄτολμον αἰχμάν.

'I honour<sup>51</sup> a cold hearth, and a womanly temper without boldness.' The hearth reappears here in an obvious echo of the *Agamemnon*—the cold ἔστια admired by the chorus stands in direct contrast to the ἔστια of Klytaimestra fired by Aigisthos (*Agam.* 1435–6). The context of this reference also contains several other intriguing fire images. At the beginning of the stasimon, for example, we find:

πολλὰ μὲν γὰρ τρέφει δεινὰ δειμάτων ἄχρη  
πόντιαί τ' ἀγκάλαι κνωδάλων ἀνταίων βρούοσι  
[πλάθουσι] βλαστοῦσι καὶ πεδαίχμοι λαμπάδες πεδάοροι. (585–90)

'Earth nourishes many terrible things, fearful evils, and the arms of the sea teem with hostile monsters. And lanterns hanging in mid-air spring up (draw near?).'<sup>52</sup> The text suffers from corruptions, but clearly the heavenly lanterns, the λαμπάδες, are grouped together with the terrors of earth and sea as forces of destruction. Whatever cosmic phenomenon Aischylos intended them to represent, they constitute certainly a renewed manifestation of the beacon motif, lights hanging between earth and aither much as the beacons leaped from mountain to mountain. We may also see an echo of the related imagery suggested for the company of the stars, the bright lords of the opening of the *Agamemnon*. Here again the heavens seem to nourish fires which presage the coming disaster. Second, Aischylos employs fire directly in one of the stasimon's myths, the story of Meleager. There can hardly be much doubt over which details the poet wanted to emphasise; Althaia, mother of Meleager, is shown in the very moment of casting the brand into the hearth:

τὰν ἄ παιδολυμὰς τάλαινα Θεστιάς μήσατο  
πυρδαῆ τινα πρόνοιαν, καταίθουσα παιδὸς δαφουὸν  
δαλὸν ἤλικ'. (605–8)

'And the wretched child-destroying daughter of Thestios contrived it, that firelit fore-planning, kindling the reddened torch of kindred age with her son.'<sup>53</sup> Fire destroys the brand, as it destroys Meleager. And Althaia, like Klytaimestra, kindles that fire. These same lines also illustrate the link between physical and mental process suggested at line 475 of the *Agamemnon*. There Klytaimestra's heart was fired by the beacons; here Althaia contrives a 'firelit foreplanning'. The fire of the torch has spread to her mind as well, and inflamed it with an incestuous hatred typical of its context.<sup>54</sup> Seen in such a light, I think, the chorus' praise of a cold hearth at the end of the ode is only too appropriate.

There remains one other reference to fire in the *Choephoroi*, a reference which looks forward to the transformation of symbols in the *Eumenides* as shining Justice, Δίκα δὲ λάμπει, looked toward it in the *Agamemnon*. Orestes has killed his mother and Aigisthos; now he

<sup>51</sup> Page adopts *τίω* in preference to the ms. *τίων* printed by Murray, and surely with good reason: for *Klytaimestra* to honour a cold hearth would contradict all the previous imagery.

<sup>52</sup> The text is Murray's.

<sup>53</sup> The text is Murray's; for the full story of

Meleager's death cf. Bakkhylides 5. 136–54.

<sup>54</sup> The various domestic murders of this ode—mother killing son, daughter killing father, wives killing husbands—are well brought out by Winnington-Ingram (*op. cit.* n. 3) 138–9, and Lebeck, *CP* 62 (1967) 183–4.

senses the madness approaching, and calling on Apollo as agent of the deed, he reveals the precautions he has taken:

καὶ νῦν ὄρατέ μ' ὡς παρεσκευασμένος  
 ξὺν τῷδε θαλλῷ καὶ στέφει προσίξομαι  
 μεσομφαλόν θ' ἴδρυμα, Λοξίου πέδον  
 πυρός τε φέγγος ἄφθιτον κεκλημένον  
 φεύγων τόδ' αἶμα κοινόν· οὐδ' ἐφ' ἐστίαν  
 ἄλλην τραπέσθαι Λοξίας ἐφίετο. (1034-9)

'Now observe how, fitted out with bough and garland, I shall supplicate the shrine of centre earth, the land of Loxias, and the light of the fire men call imperishable, as I flee the shedding of kindred blood. For to no other hearth did Apollo command me turn.' Fire here takes on a different connotation altogether: the hearth is now the hearth of Delphi, and it signifies Orestes' salvation, not his destruction. This transformation of imagery is of course bound up with the action of the whole trilogy. Vengeance and bloodshed are in process of becoming the retribution of impartial justice; thus it is not surprising that Orestes should proceed from one kind of fire to another. 'To no other hearth did Apollo command me turn', he says. He has shunned the old ἐστία of the past and put his trust instead in the one fire which can save him, as he has put his trust in Apollo's oracle. Fire still represents destruction, but that destruction now begins to show signs of operating under the laws of civilisation. For the first time we begin to feel, the chorus' pessimism notwithstanding, that it may yet show us the way out.

### 3. THE EUMENIDES

References to fire in the third play of the trilogy are fewer still, but very much to the point. The old fire, the old hearth, is grimly recalled by Klytimestra's exhortation to the Furies:

καὶ νυκτίσεμνα δεῖπν' ἐπ' ἐσχάρα πυρός  
 ἔθουον, ὧραν οὐδενός κοινήν θεῶν. (108-9)

'Night-worshipping feasts I sacrificed upon a hearth of fire, at an hour apart from all the gods.' She continues to honour the old laws of retribution by which she slew and was slain. Her hearth is not Apollo's hearth, but an altar to the forces of night, dread deities with whom the Olympians have no contact. Thus the Furies are set against the ordinances of Apollo. Each side has its own ἐστία: at the Furies' Klytimestra sacrifices blood for blood; at Apollo's Orestes sacrifices in order to be purified (πρὸς ἐστία θεοῦ Φοίβου καθαρμοῖς, 282-3).<sup>55</sup> And he is purified, because he killed only at the express command of the god.

The scene then shifts to Athens, where we find still another hearth, the hearth of Athena supplicated by Orestes (ἐστίας ἐμῆς πέλας, 440). Obviously this new hearth is an extension of Apollo's hearth at Delphi, since Orestes is a suppliant here as well. Delphi marked the first stage of purification; Athena's hearth, the city of Athens, will be the arena of reconciliation, the locus in which fire and the retribution for which it stands are finally altered. With Orestes' trial and acquittal the physical solution of the trilogy is accomplished, but the Furies must still be persuaded to accept the verdict. Athena approaches this task with a variety of inducements, among them the promise of a dwelling in Athens which the Furies shall hold

λιπαροθρόνοισιν ἡμένας ἐπ' ἐσχάrais (806)

<sup>55</sup> Compare l. 169, where the Furies reproach Apollo for having defiled his sanctuary ἐφ' ἐστίῳ . . . μιάσματι. With characteristic ambiguity Aischylos leaves open the question of whose hearth the pollution corrupts.

'sitting on shining thrones near hearths/altars'. She thus offers the Furies the chance to transfer their retribution to a new home, a new hearth where it will function under the guidance of Athenian justice. The Furies then accept, and the conversion of violence into protection by law is complete. It should be no surprise, therefore, that the conversion of fire into a beneficent symbol is also complete. The close of the play (and the trilogy) features the reappearance of the beacons in the form of torches.<sup>56</sup> At line 1005 Athena promises to conduct the Furies *πρὸς φῶς ἱερὸν τῶνδε προπομπῶν*, 'by the holy light of these escorts'. At 1022 she sends them off *φέγγει λαμπάδων σελασφόρων*, 'by the gleam of light-bearing torches'. At 1029 she encourages *τὸ φέγγος . . . πυρός*, 'the gleam of fire'. And at 1041 the Furies are escorted out rejoicing *πυριδάπτω λαμπάδι*, 'in the fire-devouring torch'. Apparently Aeschylus does not wish the point to be missed, since he tells us four times that the Furies are led to their new home by a torchlight procession.<sup>57</sup> The line of torches repeats the chain of beacons and sacrificial fires in the *Agamemnon*. It repeats the torches that light the palace in the *Choephoroi*. It summarises and re-echoes all the appearances of fire in the trilogy. But the torches have altered unmistakably in the course of that trilogy. It is not simply that one fire has replaced another; rather precisely the same complex of symbols Aeschylus used for the law of retribution now means retribution under law. We note, of course, that fire still has its destructive properties: the *πυριδάπτω λαμπάδι* assures that. Yet this is destruction, or the threat of destruction, put to a constructive purpose. Because men have learned to judge questions of right and wrong in a civilised manner, because the Furies have been made into champions of justice and prosperity, even fire has transformed itself accordingly.<sup>58</sup> The beacon fires the watchman waited for have finally brought *ἀπαλλαγή*, release, to mankind.

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<sup>56</sup> Cf. Peradotto (*op. cit.* n. 4) 392. As we come full circle, so to speak, Klytaimestra's remark at *Agam.* 314 takes on perhaps fuller significance:

*νικᾶ δ' ὁ πρῶτος καὶ τελευταῖος δραμών.*

<sup>57</sup> The crimson robes donned by the Furies at this point in the play suggest a transformation parallel to that of fire into a beneficent element: *φοινικοβάπτοις* in l. 1028 surely recalls the purple carpet spread by Klytaimestra and the whole complex of blood images created by Aeschylus for the trilogy (cf. Goheen, *op. cit.* n. 27, 122-4, and Lebeck, *op. cit.*

n. 2, 84-6). Now, however, this imagery as well is converted into gladness and prosperity for mankind. We might even find in the vermilion-clad Eumenides a reiteration of the torches guiding the procession to its new home.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. the *Prometheus Bound*, where the harnessing of fire plays such an important role in man's progress toward civilization. There man's ability to use fire to constructive ends is a literal facet of civilization, whereas here it functions primarily as a symbol of other facets.