XXIII. The Serpent at the Breast

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The serving women in the *Choephoroe* describe to Orestes how Clytemnestra dreamed she gave birth to a serpent, laid it in swaddling clothes, and offered it her breast, from which it sucked forth milk and gore (527–33 in Murray's OCT):

Xo. τεκεῖν δράκοντ' ἔδοξεν, ὡς αὐτὴ λέγει.
Op. καὶ ποῖ τελευτᾷ καὶ καρανοῦται λόγος;
Xo. ἐν σπαργάνοισι παιδὸς ὁρμίσαι δίκην.
Op. τίνος βορᾶς χρῄζοντα, νεογενὲς δάκος;
Xo. αὐτὴ προσέσχε μαστὸν ἐν τωνείρατι.
Op. καὶ πῶς ἄτρωτον οὖθαρ ἦν ὑπὸ στύγους;
Xo. ὥστ' ἐν γάλακτι θρόμβον αἵματος σπάσαι.

This terrible portent, which dominates the latter half of the play, is a leitmotiv of the entire *Oresteia*, for the serpent imagery becomes a multivalent[1] representation of love replaced by cruelty in the relationship between a mother and her child. The ascent to dominance and the ultimate rejection of the serpent imagery parallel the triumph and the defeat of the incestuous adultery and the ritual of child-sacrifice passed as a legacy from one generation to the next.

The first choral ode of the *Agamemnon* contains a provocative prayer to Artemis, as the protectress over the tender lion whelps and the suckling young of every kind (141–2),

δρόσοις ἀέπτοις μαλερῶν λεόντων
πάντων τ' ἀγρονόμων φιλομάστοις,

to bring a good and peaceful result from auspicious yet violent portents. The wording of this passage is built upon in the parable

[1] Thus I seem to disagree with Eduard Fraenkel (*Agamemnon*, [Oxford 1950] 3.561), who says in discussing the *leont' analkin* of *Ag.* 1224 "that in Cassandra's words, as in other oracles, the various beasts take the place of definite individual men precisely because of their characteristic qualities."

of the suckling lion whelp which at maturity shows its true savage nature (*Ag.* 717–36):

ἔθρεψεν δὲ λέοντος ἶ-
νιν δόμοις ἀγάλακτον οὖ–
τως ἀνὴρ φιλόμαστον. . . .

χρονισθεὶς δ'ἀπέδειξεν ἦ-
θος τὸ πρὸς τοκέων. . . .

ἐκ θεοῦ δ'ἱερεύς τις ἄ-
τας δόμοις προσεθρέφθη.

The parable indicates the brutish reversal that is likely to manifest itself in each member of the house.[2]

The nightmare serpent that sucks forth gore from the breast of Clytemnestra suggests the truth of the parable with specific reference to Orestes, no longer a *philomastos* but an *hiereus atas*. There is no ambiguity; the dramatic situation has been building up to his taking vengeance upon her, and she has cause to fear only him. When he learns of the apparition, he deduces that if the serpent was wrapped in the swaddling clothes in which he himself was wrapped, and if it sought to take the same breast as he himself took, then it surely represented himself (*Cho.* 542–50). Clytemnestra asks pity for the breast that gave him suck (*Cho.* 896–8), but he follows the bidding of Apollo and seems to fulfill the premonition from the dream.

Yet the serpent imagery is used also for Clytemnestra. When Cassandra foresees the murder of Agamemnon, she names her an amphisbaena (*Ag.* 1233). After the murder Orestes calls upon Zeus to avenge the orphaned brood of an eagle slain by an adder (*Cho.* 248–9). And the serving women urge Orestes (*Cho.* 831–2) to take revenge by summoning up the courage of Perseus (who slew the Gorgon, the snake-woman). Orestes slays Aegisthus (who had been called a woman in *Ag.* 1625), and immediately afterwards slays Clytemnestra. The serving women then congratulate him for having slain two serpents (*Cho.* 1047).

The Argive queen causes us to think of an Egyptian queen. Shakespeare's Cleopatra is called the serpent of old Nile (*Antony and Cleopatra* 1.5.21), and the serpent of Egypt (2.7.26), and like Clytemnestra she is remorseless and sensual. She also shows the

[2] Bernard M. W. Knox, "The Lion in the House," *CP* 47 (1952) 17–25.

perversion of mother-love; for when she places the asp to her bosom, she bids her handmaiden peace (5.2.308–9): "Dost thou not see my baby at my breast, That sucks the nurse asleep?" The imagery indicates that a serpentine woman visualizes her suckling offspring in herpetomorphic terms. Cleopatra accepts these terms, but Clytemnestra is terrified and therefore seems the less inhuman.

The serpent imagery, like the amphisbaena, moves both ways: Clytemnestra and Orestes each assume the role of the serpent towards the other. After he has slain her, he is pursued by the Furies, who appear like Gorgons (*Eum.* 48–9) and thus have the nature of the serpent-woman for whose death they seek requital. They chant their resolve to suck gore from him (*Eum.* 265), as in the dream the serpent sucked gore from Clytemnestra. In this way the serpents appearing to him suggest his mother, while the serpent that appeared to her suggested her child. The image does not represent either person only, but becomes a symbol of the unnatural relationship between them.

Neither of the first two plays contains any personage who is not a living mortal. The third play takes place in a different realm, and the only important living mortal in it is Orestes. The Furies claim him, Apollo pleads for his salvation, and Athene is the judge. The action is shown dramatically, yet it may be interpreted as taking place in Orestes' mind. The distorted phantasms of Clytemnestra from his conscience argue against the sense of religious duty that impelled him to avenge his father, and his concept of justice renders the decision.

We are prepared for a verdict of acquittal, for a garrulous nurse has lugubriously described how she took Orestes from his mother as an infant in swaddling clothes and cared for his wants and needs (*Cho.* 750–7). His exact age at this time cannot be named with absolute certitude, but the fact that the nurse received him from his father's hands (*Cho.* 762) rather than from his mother's suggests that he had just been born. The word *trophos* is used in the *Odyssey* as an epithet for Eurycleia, who was the wet-nurse of Odysseus (*Od.* 19.482–3), and it would seem the *trophos* of the *Oresteia* was similarly the wet-nurse of Orestes. At length the nurse has the mission of summoning Aegisthus without his retinue, but the elementary and impersonal nature of this task cannot explain the dramatic necessity of her long reminiscence.

If the passage matches in significance the other parts of the trilogy, its chief function is surely to show that the woman who lovingly nourished the babe Orestes was not his mother. Clytemnestra's appeal for pity on the breast that gave him suck (*Cho.* 896–8) is accordingly a brilliant deceit.

There is in any case no reason to give credence to Clytemnestra's words, since she is an adept at grand deception. Her protestations of the anxiety she felt for Agamemnon (*Ag.* 855–905) have a majestic falseness; and when she greets Orestes with an invitation to warm baths (*Cho.* 670), she is less extending an hospitable invitation than delighting in an ironic remembrance of her ruthlessness. Her appeal for pity (*Cho.* 896–7),

> ἐπίσχες, ὦ παῖ, τόνδε δ' αἴδεσαι, τέκνον,
> μαστόν,

may therefore with complete conformity to her character be an ingenious fabrication. The verbally similar supplication by Hecuba (*Il.* 22.82–3),

> Ἕκτορ, τέκνον ἐμόν, τάδε τ' αἴδεο καί μ' ἐλέησον
> αὐτήν, εἴ ποτέ τοι λαθικηδέα μαζὸν ἐπέσχον,

is a desperate cry from a mother's heart and contrasts powerfully with the equally desperate but cold invention of Clytemnestra's.

Thus the dream appears a false omen: Orestes cannot be thought the serpent in swaddling clothes to which Clytemnestra offered her breast, if she did not fill for him as a child this most tender office of a mother. The bond between them is loosened by the denial that an image connecting them is valid. The bond is then broken completely by Apollo's argument that the mother has no part in procreation but only gives nurture to the implanted seed (*Eum.* 658–9). Orestes is freed from Clytemnestra and reprieved: she is neither nurse nor parent. As the metaphysic of the trilogy moves away from the law of inherited guilt, the serpent loses its reference to Orestes and becomes Clytemnestra alone. By the pattern of imagery as well as by the more explicit dramatic development, the violation of nature in the mother-child relationship is shown due to Clytemnestra and not to Orestes. Apollo's execration upon the Gorgon-like Furies to suck gore elsewhere (*Eum.* 179–84) and their assumption of the role of Kindly Spirits mark the repudiation of the old law and the banning of the serpent.

Thyestes' imprecation (*Ag.* 1602) at first appears to be working its effect. Agamemnon has sacrificed Iphigenia and seems about to destroy Orestes, too, in lying unavengeable except by means that would destroy the avenger. Clytemnestra's vaunt to be the incarnation of the ancient curse (*Ag.* 1500–1) is borne out as true by the likelihood that the curse will propagate itself through her and infect Orestes. The serving women fear the thrice-aged judgment that to the doer it must be done (*Cho.* 313). But the close of the trilogy shows the judgment put aside. Orestes has extirpated the serpent that had ravaged his family.