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READING AESCHYLEAN IMAGES:
MATRICIDE AND THE BLOOD IN MATERNAL MILK
IN CLYTEMNESTRA'S DREAM



In Aeschylus' *Choephoroi*, Orestes' matricide can plausibly be interpreted as an act of retributive justice that allows the son to win back the power of his murdered father, and to restore his own male identity as his father's legitimate heir.¹ In order to be at least in part legitimate, matricide is represented by Orestes, and by the other *dramatis personae*, as an absolutely necessary act. Accordingly, throughout the play, Clytemnestra is depicted as an adulterous wife, who squanders the wealth of her husband (*Cho.* 132-137, 764, 893-894, 906-907, 915-921, 942-945, 973-976, 991-992), as a female tyrant, who usurps the power of king Agamemnon (*Cho.* 267, 377, 537, 658, 664, 700), and as a bad mother, who does not take care of her children (*Cho.* 132, 190-191, 239-242, 421-422, 750-757, 913). As a bad mother and a bad wife, who murders her husband and the father of her children, Clytemnestra deserves to die. However, as I claim, the characters' attempts to project on Clytemnestra a negative image as wife and queen and to suppress her motherhood are not completely successful in the end. Given the constraints of an essay, I will limit myself here to a discussion of the characters' difficulty to withdraw Clytemnestra's motherhood. As a key-example of my claim, I will take the so-called dream-scene, perhaps one of the most famous scenes of the *Oresteia*.

Queens in Aeschylus tend to dream. Atossa dreams in *Persae* (*Pers.* 176-214); Clytemnestra in *Choephoroi* (*Cho.* 523-539). Clytemnestra

1. Cf. Kitto (1956) 56, Gagarin (1976) 99, Goldhill (1984) 194, Roux (1984) 79, Meier (1988) 147-48, Zeitlin (1978) 158.

dreams that she gives birth to a serpent, wraps it in swaddling clothes, and offers it her own breast to feed it on blood and milk.² This dream has all the features of a nightmare. It disturbs; it terrifies:³

Cho. 32-35: τορὸς γὰρ ὀρθόθριξ δόμων
ὄνειρόμαντις ἐξ ὕπνου κότον πνέων
ἄωρόνκτον ἀμβόα-
μα μυχόθεν ἔλακε περὶ φόβωι

Cho. 523-524: οἶδ', ὦ τέκνον, παρῆ γάρ· ἔκ τ' ὄνειράτων
καὶ νυκτιπλάγκτων δειμάτων πεπαλέμενη

Cho. 535: ἦ δ' ἐξ ὕπνου κέκλαγγεν ἐπτοημένη

Cho. 929: ἦ κάρτα μάντις οὐδ' ὄνειράτων φόβος

Something strikes Clytemnestra with horror; not least a chromatic hallucination — the whiteness of the maternal milk stained by the redness of the mother's blood. So far as I can tell, almost nothing has been said in Aeschylean scholarship about this image.⁴ Where should we begin? From the mother's menstrual blood which gives life, I suggest.

As Hérítier has shown in her studies, the African tribe of the Samo, the Accadian physicians and the physicians of early modern Europe, all prescribed sexual abstinence for lactating women.⁵ The reason was not fear of unwelcome pregnancies, but rather the idea that the flood of semen during copulation may move menstrual blood up to the breast

2. On the image of the serpent in western culture, cf. Sarcassano (1997).

3. In this paper, the Greek text of *Choephoroi* is that of Garvie (1986).

4. As far as I can tell, only Céu Fiahlo (2010) 113 has written on the image of blood and milk in Clytemnestra's dream: "The connection between the two elements — the blood and the breast-feeding — is very important in *The Libation-Bearers*. This alliance is particularly emphasised by the symbolic language in Clytemnestra's dream (*Cho.* 523ff.) because the person who suckles on the milk does so until he sucks the blood from the mother's breast. The child is portrayed as a serpent coming out of the maternal womb. It is simultaneously the symbol of the Atreids' own fertility and the symbol of betrayal. Orestes sees himself in it and thus identifies with that same act of betrayal."

5. Cf. Hérítier (1996) 154-57.

and cause milk to curdle. Thus, respect for the dietary order between mother and child denies to the lactating woman the pleasure of sex. By closer reading, the dream scene of *Choephoroi* and the oneiric image of blood in maternal milk may also tell us something both about the dietary regimen for mother and child, and about female sexuality. The traces of Clytemnestra's blood in maternal milk might be a sign of her perverse sexual intercourse (she is the adulterous woman *par excellence*); the milk mixed with blood cannot nourish the baby Orestes.

I am not pushing too far my interpretation of the Aeschylean image of blood in maternal milk, as it could seem *prima facie*. Indeed, it is worth commenting that in Greek medical tradition milk and blood are supposed to share the same nature and that the maternal womb was imagined to be connected with the breast.⁶ For it seems suitable to suppose that the image of blood in maternal milk confronts us with a situation similar to the case of the Samo's beliefs studied by Hérítier: the trace of blood in Clytemnestra's milk might be thought of as the traces of her menstrual blood rather than the generic blood of a wound. Furthermore, Dumortier seems to hint at something similar. He writes:

“Plus curieuse est l'expression *θρόμβος αἵματος*, grumeau ou caillot de sang [...] Elle se retrouve souvent dans le *Corpus hippocraticum*. On signalera en particulier au livre II des *Maladies des Femmes*, *thromboi pepēgotes* (12), où il s'agit de caillots de sang durcis qui tombent dans la matrice. Au même livre (165) l'auteur parle de caillots contenus dans la matrice”.⁷

Lines 532-533 support the idea that the blood in Clytemnestra's milk might be her menstrual blood. The son-serpent bites the maternal breast as a monster would do:

Cho. 532: *καὶ πῶς ἄτρωτον οἴθηα ἦν ὑπὸ στύγους;*

Yet, according to the chorus, the blood in Clytemnestra's milk seems to spurt out of her breast with the feed of milk, not from a wound caused by the bite of her serpent-son:

6. Cf. on this matter Demont (1978) 364-75. On the Hippocratic conception of the relation between womb and breast, cf. Hanson (1992) 40 with further bibliography.

7. Cf. Dumortier (1975) 23.

Cho. 533: ὥστ' ἐν γάλακτι θρόμβον αἵματος σπάσαι.

We could, of course, make it easier, as the scholiast does: *en galakti* = *anti galaktos*. Yet, in classical Greek *en* with instrumental function (with the milk) is not interchangeable with *anti* (instead of milk).⁸ Moreover, there is no reason why *en galakti* should not be understood simply as an indication of place. Accordingly, the following translation seems to render the Greek of lines 532-533:

Or. And how was the udder not harmed by the abominable thing?

Ch. Of course it was! He drew from the udder a clot of blood *in the milk*.

Now, if the blood in Clytemnestra's milk is hardly coming from the serpent's bite, where then is it coming from, if not from Clytemnestra's womb?

There is more to say. In fact, the expression *θρόμβον αἵματος* tends to confirm the fact that the blood flows into the milk with the feed and not necessarily from a wound. According to Verrall (*ad loc.*), the clotting of blood would be caused by the venom in the serpent's bite. Devereux follows Verrall and suggests the assimilation of Orestes to an Erinys: like the spit of an Erinys, the bite of Orestes is venomous too and causes blood to coagulate.⁹ However, although it is clear in the text that the serpent bites the breast, no venom, as Garvie (*ad loc.*) observes, is mentioned. Therefore, it is hard to assume that blood clots because of venom from the serpent's bite, rather than, having already been clotted in Clytemnestra's womb, flowing into milk with the feed. To sum up, I conclude that the dream episode faces us with the following uncertain situation: the serpent bites Clytemnestra's breast, but blood seems to come from Clytemnestra's womb and to spurt out of the nipple with the milk of the feed, not from the wound caused by the bite of the serpent.

Further pieces of evidence in the text seem to support these remarks. When the dream develops into Clytemnestra's memories, according to her the baby Orestes does not have his little teeth yet, but leans on the mother's breast with his gums:

8. Cf. Tucker and Untersteiner (*ad loc.*).

9. Cf. Devereux (1976) 197-98.

Cho. 897-898: *μαστόν, πρὸς ᾧ σὺ πολλὰ δὴ βρίζων ἄμα
οὔλοισιν ἐξήμελξας εὐτραφῆς γάλα*

So how could the blood in Clytemnestra's milk come from the wound of a bite? Is it not rather coming from her womb after sexual intercourse, mirroring the Samo's beliefs studied by Héritier (i.e. the flood of semen during copulation may move menstrual blood up to the breast)? It can be said that in line 545 the expression *μαστόν ἀμφέχασκ[ε]* makes clear that the son-serpent bites the maternal breast (cf. Garvie *ad loc.*) and that the blood of a wound in the breast spots milk in red. Both the reference to Clytemnestra's pain (*Cho.* 547: *ἐπώιμωξεν πάθει*) and the definition of the serpent as a monster with teeth (*Cho.* 530: *δάκος*) may support this conjecture. Yet, in Greek the verb *amphichaskein*, related to feeding, denotes as well the act of the baby sticking with his lips and gums on the maternal nipple (cf. Tucker *ad loc.*). This is not all. When Orestes repeats the words of the chorus, it is still unclear if blood spurts out of a wound or if, instead, it flows into milk with the feed:

Cho. 546: *θρόμβωι τ' ἔμειξεν αἶμα τος φίλον γάλα*

This moment of uncertainty in the presentation of the events (a: does the blood in the milk come from the serpent's bite and/or from Clytemnestra's womb, and, accordingly, b: does the blood in the milk leak from a wound and/or does it flow into the milk with the feed?) does not allow us to apply a clear and sharp explanation for the violence of the son against his mother, and for the mother's pain. Finally, in opposition to what Devereux suggests, *plēgas* in line 103 of *Eumenides* can hardly be read as a reference to the wound in Clytemnestra's breast. In Greek, *plēgas* is a generic word, hence it can recall as well the wound on Clytemnestra's throat:¹⁰

Cho. 884: *ἀνχὴν πεσεῖσθαι πρὸς δίκης πεπληγμένος*

It is important to maintain that the blood in Clytemnestra's milk is not due to the bite of her serpent-son but rather to his suckling during

10. Cf. Devereux (1976) 199.

the feed. As a proof of the corrupted alimentary relation between mother and son, and of Clytemnestra's deviant sexuality, the image of maternal blood in maternal milk is meant to deny Clytemnestra's motherhood. Yet, if in this image milk is to *trephein* as blood is to *tiktein*, the disgusting mixture of maternal blood and maternal milk in Orestes' feed marks visually a failed attempt to separate the maternal functions of *tiktein* and *trephein*, asking us to reconsider Clytemnestra's role as mother-*tropheus* and *tokeus*. In conclusion, the image of clotted blood in the milk can be read in two opposite directions: it denies and affirms at the same time Clytemnestra's maternal power of nurturing life. Following this interpretation, we might have found a plausible explanation for the use of the expression *θρόμβον αἵματος*: it both authorizes and destabilizes the characters' repudiation of Clytemnestra's motherhood (i.e. her reproductive properties of giving and nurturing life), and therefore, the construction of blood ties and power relations as based merely on the law of the Father. In what follows, I will dwell further on the image of milk mingled with blood in Clytemnestra's dream.

Passage 1388-1392 of *Agamemnon* has to be read in close relation to the image of Orestes' feed of blood and milk in *Choephoroi*. These lines in *Agamemnon* describe the perversion of the process of impregnation. Just as the ground needs rain in order to produce crops (*Aga.* 1391-1392), the female needs the semen of the male in order to give life to the embryo. Yet, in the case of Clytemnestra, her self-representation as a woman made wet by male blood suggests corrupted coitus, and an upset in the natural order of fecundity. In *Choephoroi*, the presence of a clot of blood in the mother's milk attests that Clytemnestra is not able to feed and bring up her own child. Thus, in her case, the biological stages of the creation and preservation of life are turned upside down from the very beginning right to the end: corrupted conception is followed by corrupted breast-feeding. Yet, the image of blood and milk in Clytemnestra's dream suggests to us something more than a continuity between *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi*. In fact, it indicates that between mother and daughter things are not the same as between mother and son. Devereux in his analysis of the dream scene notes on this topic:

“I know of no Greek mention of baby girls who nursed violently and painfully — but admit that girl babies are seldom mentioned. This may

perhaps mean that girls owe a *lesser* debt than boys to their mothers”.¹¹

I don't agree with Devereux's remark. According to Clytemnestra's rhetoric of motherhood in *Aga.* 1417-1418, between mother and daughter there is a bond of *philia* (φιλατίην) and a biological symbiosis that runs through the same female blood (ὠδῶν):

ἔθυσεν αὐτοῦ παιῖδα, φιλατίην ἐμοὶ
ὠδῶν, ἐπωιδὸν Θρηκίων ἀημάτων

Indeed, as Loraux has observed, the word ὠδῶν[α] in Greek implies the idea that only the daughter, by virtue of the same menstrual blood and through pregnancy and labour, can become — as her mother did — a mother herself:

“*ōdis*, par un redoublement du féminin, caractérise la fille”¹²

Now, in the case of Clytemnestra and Orestes, the female blood that gives life does not tie mother and son in a bond of *philia*. Rather, the trace of maternal blood in Clytemnestra's milk is the visual evidence that Clytemnestra cannot nurture her own child. Seen this way, the corrupted act of breast-feeding in the dream episode confirms the representation of Clytemnestra as a mother non-*tropheus* which we have seen at work in the nurse's speech. This depiction of Clytemnestra as mother non-*tropheus* corresponds to a representation of the mother-son relationship as a bond of death. If the trace of blood in milk is the evidence of Orestes' frustrated desire to be nourished by his mother,

11. Cf. Devereux (1976) 206.

12. Cf. Loraux (1981) 49 n. 67: “*ōdis*, par un redoublement du féminin, caractérise la fille”. The idea of the maternal continuum between a mother and her daughter seems to be well implied in *ōdis* if we consider as well that *ōdis* means the child in the precise moment of birth-giving, hence before the separation of mother and daughter. Cf. on this point Loraux (1990) 79-80: “la fille, on s'en souvient, pouvait être désignée comme *ōdis*, d'un nom qui renvoie au vécu même de l'accouchement, dans sa durée et sa douleur, mais avant que la séparation de la mère et de l'enfant ne soit accomplie”. On *ōdis* here as referring to the maternal continuum between mother and daughter cf. also Winnington-Ingram (1983) 110: “Clytemnestra describes her daughter as *philtatē ōdis* (1417); later as *ernos*, a shoot or branch (1525). The terms insist upon the intimate physical connection between mother and child.”

then the shedding of Clytemnestra's blood becomes a surrogate for this desire: as the scholium suggests on line 548, Orestes' hunger for milk turns to a hunger for blood and death.¹³

In the light of these remarks, I shall stress more clearly the differences that pertain to the relationship between mother and daughter, and between mother and son. According to Clytemnestra's rhetoric of motherhood in *Aga.* 1417-1418, her relation to Iphigeneia represents a bond of *philia*, marked by biological identity. Clytemnestra's relation with Orestes, by contrast, is marked by *philia* and violence: a "legame fisico e misterioso del sangue e del latte" (Setti in Untersteiner, p. 443). The text supports this reading. According to Orestes' rhetoric of appropriation of the words *philos* and *gala*, the milk of Clytemnestra does not really feed her son; for Clytemnestra as mother and for Orestes as child, maternal milk seems to be a warranty of life:

Clytemnestra — *Cho.* 898: ... εὐτραφὲς γάλα

Orestes — *Cho.* 545: μαστὸν ἀμφέχασκ' ἐμὸν θρεπτήριον

Orestes — *Cho.* 546: ... φίλον γάλα

According to Orestes' rhetoric of appropriation of the verb *trephein*, Clytemnestra's blood gives birth to a monster; perhaps her maternal blood gives birth to this child:

Cho. 543: εἰ γὰρ τὸν αὐτὸν χῶρον ἐκλιπὼν ἐμοὶ

Cho. 548: ὡς ἔθρεψεν ἔκπαγλον τέρας

Accordingly, as we consider the familiar triangle of Clytemnestra (mother), Orestes (son) and Iphigeneia (daughter), as well as the violence of/against children (killing of Iphigeneia, matricide), we have to bear in mind the maternal continuum and Clytemnestra's maternal body

13. Cf. Orestes' characterisation as a lion cub which loves the maternal breast (*Aga.* 719: *φιλόμαστον*), but has not been raised by maternal milk (*Aga.* 718: *ἀγάλακτον*) in the second stasimon of *Agamemnon*. For *ἀγάλακτον* as referring to Orestes, see Knox (1952) 23. For the representation of cubs as dependent of maternal milk cf. *Aga.* 141-142 (*πάντων τ' ἀγρονόμων φιλομάστοις/θηρῶν*). On food and blood in ancient Greek culture, cf. King (1995).

as the condition of life. This can help us to understand why the play's search for an authoritative discourse about Agamemnon in his role as Father (i.e. as husband, *genitor* and origin of life, and therefore as head of the family, warrior, king and origin of power) is always exposing the anxiety and the vulnerability of suppressing a matter of fact, namely that the mother's body gives and nurtures life.¹⁴

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14. Cf. for Agamemnon in his role as Father: *Cho.* 1, 76-77, 126, 235, 237, 246-251, 302-305, 345-349, 363-364, 430-435, 479-480, 487, 505, 556, 572, 627, 688-690, 808, 864-865, 919, 921, 1070, 1072.

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