



## The Point of the Simile in Aeschylus Agamemnon 241

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## NOTES AND DISCUSSIONS

### THE POINT OF THE SIMILE IN AESCHYLUS *AGAMEMNON* 241

ἔβαλλ' ἕκαστον θυτή-  
ρων ἀπ' ὀφθαλμοῦ βέλει φιλοίκτω  
πρέπουσα τὼς ἐν γραφαῖς, προσεννέπειν  
θέλουσ' . . .

[*Ag.* 239–42]

In general, commentators have explained, and translators have rendered, the force of the simile in line 241 by reference to the immediately succeeding words: “like a picture she would but could not speak” (G. Thomson), “she looked as in a picture, striving to speak” (D. Young). Iphigeneia appears to witnesses of the sacrifice as an image in a picture, (all too) lifelike but silent.<sup>1</sup> Eduard Fraenkel, however, maintains that “it was not her silence that prompted the comparison with a figure in a painting”<sup>2</sup>—this was only “a fresh effect” following up the principal point of the analogy, Iphigeneia’s conspicuousness: “at this moment the great complex group of men, chieftains and ministrants at the sacrifice, is in the foreground; away behind them the mass of the army; both alike appear as a mere foil against which stands out the central figure of Iphigeneia.”<sup>3</sup> Thus he translates: “standing out as in a picture, wishing to speak to them by name.”<sup>4</sup> Fraenkel also claims that “this passage of the *Agamemnon* is our earliest evidence for the clear definition of the individual figures being regarded as an essential quality in painting.”<sup>5</sup>

We may be more precise than this. The emphasis of lines 239–40 is on the missile-like effect (ἔβαλλ' . . . βέλει) of Iphigeneia’s piteous gaze:<sup>6</sup> not her form as a whole, but specifically her eyes are most conspicuous in the tableau envisaged by the chorus. The sacrificers have taken the precaution of binding her mouth to prevent words of reproach, but the channel of visual communication

1. H. Lloyd-Jones, in a note to his translation of the *Agamemnon* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1970), p. 29: “the point of comparison with a figure in a picture is that both seem as if they would speak, but no speech comes.” Cf. W. G. Headlam and G. Thomson, eds., *The “Oresteia” of Aeschylus*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 1938), p. 31.

2. *Aeschylus: “Agamemnon,”* vol. 2 (Oxford, 1950), p. 140.

3. *Aeschylus* 2:139; so, too, J. D. Denniston and D. Page, eds., *Aeschylus: “Agamemnon”* (Oxford, 1957), p. 91: “She is the central figure (πρέπουσα) in a painting, but like the figure in the painting she cannot *speak*, though she looks as though she were trying to (θέλουσα).”

4. *Aeschylus* 1:105; cf. R. Fagles, trans., *Aeschylus: The “Oresteia”* (Harmondsworth, 1977), p. 111: “clear as a picture, live, / she strains to call their names.”

5. *Aeschylus* 2:139.

6. Relevant here, of course, is the Greek notion of the eye as casting an active ray or shaft: see, e.g., L. Malten, *Die Sprache des menschlichen Antlitzes im frühen Griechentum* (Berlin, 1961), pp. 64–65; cf. H. Fränkel, *Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, trans. M. Hadas and J. Willis (New York, 1975), p. 480, n. 22.

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has not been closed off. It would be easier for those in attendance if the victim were to avert her eyes,<sup>7</sup> an almost universally recognized sign of submission,<sup>8</sup> but she does not. This is most unnerving (and no doubt unforgettable—"those eyes"), because she glares at her executioners. She is like a figure in a painting not only because she is central and mute, but also because *she does not break gaze*. This striking prolongation of eye contact is suggestive of a painting, which has the property of extending an instant indefinitely. We need not imagine that she looks for minutes at each man—a gaze held even for seconds longer than an accepted norm has the effect of arousing tension or anxiety. This anxiety will be especially acute if the recipient of the gaze has caused to feel embarrassed or guilty about his behavior toward the sender.<sup>9</sup> (The man facing a firing squad is offered a blindfold not for his own benefit alone.)

One further point: mutual gaze in human social interactions has been shown to be, among other things, a means of ascertaining and ensuring that one person is attending to (usually the words of) another.<sup>10</sup> Since Iphigeneia cannot call out with her voice to those around her, she does so with her transfixing eyes. She thus makes herself conspicuous (πρέπουσα) by this alternative method of concentrating attention on her plight.

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7. Cf. the nuance captured in T. Harrison's rather free translation in *Aeschylus: The "Oresteia"* (London, 1981), p. 10:

"a painting a sculpture that seems to be speaking  
seeking to say things but locked in its stone  
*they know what her eyes say* [my emphasis] that gang round the godstone."

8. See, e.g., S. Thayer, "The Effect of Interpersonal Looking Duration on Dominance Judgements," *Journal of Social Psychology* 79 (1969): 285–86, and M. Argyle, *Bodily Communication* (London, 1975), pp. 232–42.

9. See M. Argyle and M. Cook, *Gaze and Mutual Gaze* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 66–67, 78–79, 95–97, and S. S. Tomkins, "Affect Theory," in *Emotion in the Human Face*<sup>2</sup>, ed. P. Ekman (Cambridge, 1982), p. 385.

10. See, e.g., Argyle and Cook, *Gaze*, p. 108.

#### PLUTARCH *DEMOSTHENES* 25 AND DEMOSTHENES' CUP

Plutarch tells the story,<sup>1</sup> in connection with Demosthenes' bribe in the Harpalus affair, of a golden cup which Demosthenes so admired that Harpalus arranged to send it to him together with twenty talents, the amount which Demosthenes was accused later of accepting as a bribe.<sup>2</sup> As a result of this, Demosthenes conveniently lost his voice the next day in the assembly where a debate on Harpalus was in progress.

I should like to thank the anonymous referees of *CP* for several interesting comments on this article.

1. *Dem.* 25. 2–6.

2. *Din.* 1 *Dem.* 6, 45, 53, 69, 89; *Hyp.* 5 *Dem.* 2, 10; *Plut. Dem.* 25. 3; contra [Plut.] *X Orat.* 846C (thirty talents).