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ORESTES AS FULFILLMENT, *TERASKOPOS*, AND *TERAS* IN THE *ORESTEIA**

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is filled with the portentous: prophecy and prophetic vision, dream, omen, ominous speech and action.¹ All these have in common a need for interpretation and a prophetic significance that expects fulfillment, and thus exemplify vividly two central and related motifs of the trilogy: the persistent ambiguity of word and action and the search for a final fulfillment that will solve and settle every problem.² At the very start of the *Agamemnon*, in the watchman's opening speech, we are presented with language that is obscure save to those somehow initiated in its meaning (36–39), and in the *parodos* we already find an uncertain wait for the final fulfillment and outcome of predictions long past.

Although the *Oresteia* contains no single prophecy as much discussed as those, for example, in the *Oedipus Tyrannus* and the *Prometheus Bound*, it is a trilogy (to adapt Frank Kermode's phrase) preoccupied with prophecy and portent.³ And the trilogy's central character plays a threefold prophetic role, for Orestes is the fulfillment of a series

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¹On prophecy and portents in the *Oresteia*, see R. Staehlin's "Das Motiv der Mantik im antiken Drama," *Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten* 12 (1912), and, more recently, E. Bächli, *Die künstlerische Funktion von Orakelsprüchen, Weissagungen, Träumen usw. in der griechischen Tragödie* (Zurich 1954); P. Vicaire, "Présentiments, présages, prophéties dans le théâtre d'Eschyle," *REG* 76 (1963) 337–57; J. J. Peradotto, "Cledonancy in the *Oresteia*," *AJP* 90 (1969) 1–21; and D. H. Roberts, *Apollo and his Oracle in the Oresteia, Hypomnemata* 78 (Göttingen 1983). On the oracular quality of language in the *Oresteia*, see especially A. Lebeck, *The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure* (Washington, DC 1971), and M. D.-S. Dobson's dissertation, "Oracular Language: its Style and Intent in the Delphic Oracles and Aeschylus' *Oresteia*" (Harvard 1976).

²On fulfillment as a motif in the *Oresteia*, see K. Burke, "Form and Persecution in the *Oresteia*," *Sewanee Review* 60 (1952) 377–96; D. Clay, "Aeschylus' Trigeron Mythos," *Hermes* 97 (1969) 1–9; U. Fischer, *Der Telosgedanke in den Dramen des Aischylos* (Hildesheim 1965); Roberts (note 1 above) chs. 2 and 3; and J. de Romilly, *Time in Greek Tragedy* (Ithaca 1968) 66.

³The phrase is adapted from Kermode's comment that *Macbeth* is a play "obsessed by prophecies" (*The Sense of an Ending* [Oxford 1966] 84).

of portents, he is an interpreter of portents, and he is himself a portent that must be interpreted. All three roles are present in the *Choephoroi* and are brought together in the account of Clytemnestra's dream at 526–50; in the *Eumenides*, the first two roles are virtually lost, and Orestes emerges as a problem others must solve.⁴

I

The vengeance of Orestes fulfills a sequence of predictions, portents, and prayers that begins in the last part of the *Agamemnon*. At 1279–85, Cassandra predicts the arrival and vengeance of a μητροκτόνον φίτυμα, ποινάτωρ πατρός. At the end of the play, Aegisthus, quarreling with the chorus, says that he will not refuse death, and the chorus eagerly accepts his words as an omen (1652–53).⁵ Near the beginning of the *Choephoroi*, Electra, on the chorus' advice, prays for Orestes' safe return and for an unnamed avenger who will kill the killers (138–39, 142–46); this last prayer (κακὴν ἄράν) amounts to a curse, a form of ill-omened speech. Shortly afterward, Orestes, heralded by signs of his presence, appears to her and relates the oracular command that he avenge his father (269 ff.). After the kommos, he is told of Clytemnestra's dream, which has already been mentioned in the parodos of the *Choephoroi* (32–41) but is here recounted in full and understood as predicting the matricide (526–50).

In Cassandra's and Aegisthus' speeches and in Clytemnestra's dream, Orestes' name, though easily supplied from the context,⁶ is not explicitly mentioned but only suggested in the manner characteristic of

⁴References cited are from the Oxford Classical Text of Aeschylus, edited by D. Page (Oxford 1972), unless otherwise noted.

⁵Χο. εἰα δὴ, ξίφος πρόκωπον πᾶς τις εὐτρεπιζέτω. 1651

Αἰ. ἀλλὰ κἀγὼ μὴν πρόκωπος κούκ ἀναινομαι θανεῖν.

Χο. δεχομένοις λέγεις θανεῖν σε· τὴν τύχην δ' αἰρούμεθα.

The distribution of lines here is much debated; for a detailed discussion of the problem see E. Fraenkel's edition with commentary of the *Agamemnon* (Oxford 1950) ad loc. I here use his text. The mss. disagree on 1651 but give 1652 to Aegisthus and 1653 to the chorus, and I am essentially in agreement with Fraenkel's argument for retaining this attribution.

⁶When Cassandra makes her prediction, Orestes' name has already been mentioned (at 879) in Clytemnestra's excuse for his absence. Aegisthus' words follow closely on the chorus' observation that Orestes is alive and will return to kill the murderers.

prediction. Electra's prayer is both for an avenger and for Orestes' safe return, but she does not explicitly identify the two; indeed, she seems to avoid doing so. Here the omission is part of a general hesitancy about whether what she asks (and what Orestes will do) is εὐσεβῆ (122).⁷ By their omission these passages resemble riddles, to all of which Orestes is the answer, and they are followed by an explicit riddle about Orestes. At *Choephoroi* 886, the servant tells Clytemnestra that the dead are killing the living, and she replies: οἱ γὰρ, ξυνῆκα τοῦπος ἐξ αἰνιγμάτων (887).

Riddling or indirect references are common in Aeschylus and play a variety of roles; such references to Orestes are important in two ways. First, the ways in which Orestes is described often point to aspects of his role that are problematic or significant. He is to be both his mother's killer and his father's avenger, he is avenger and bringer of justice, and he represents both his dead father and himself. Second, the very omission of Orestes' name where he is obviously meant serves as a form of emphasis.⁸

There are more direct forms of emphasis in the text as well. Orestes stresses his role as fulfiller at two points, using the word τελεσφόρος. His first words to Electra tell her to announce to the gods that her prayers have been fulfilled:

εὐχου τὰ λοιπά, τοῖς θεοῖς τελεσφόρους
εὐχὰς ἐπαγγέλλουσα, τυγχάνειν καλῶς.

(*Cho.* 212-13)

After he hears his mother's dream, he prays that it be fulfilled in him:

ἀλλ' εὐχομαι γῆ τῆδε καὶ πατρὸς τάφω
τοῦνειρον εἶναι τοῦτ' ἐμοὶ τελεσφόρον.

(*Cho.* 540-41)

⁷For a discussion of a similar and related avoidance of the word *mother* by Orestes, see Lebeck (note 1 above) 23-30, and Roberts (note 1 above) 51-52.

⁸Cf. Lebeck (note 1 above) 123, on "Orestes' inability to use a word conspicuous in its absence." J.-L. Borges remarks that in a riddle whose answer is chess, the only prohibited word is *chess*, and further that "to omit a word always, to resort to inept metaphors and obvious periphrases, is perhaps the most emphatic way of stressing it" ("The Garden of Forking Paths," tr. D. A. Yates, in D. A. Yates and J. E. Kirby, eds., *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings* [New York 1964] 27).

Pylades may be said to emphasize Orestes' responsibility for fulfillment at *Choephoroi* 900–2 when he asks what will become of Apollo's oracles if Orestes does not kill his mother. Finally, the last exchange between Orestes and his mother emphasizes the fact that what he is doing was foretold in the dream: he is the snake she nursed, and the fright inspired by the dream was indeed a true prophet.

Κλ. οἱ ἴγώ, τεκοῦσα τόνδ' ὄφιν ἐθρεψάμην·
 Ορ. ἦ κάρτα μάντις οὐξ ὄνειράτων φόβος.

(*Cho.* 928–29)⁹

II

Other characters in the *Oresteia* fulfill prophecies, but no other character fulfills so many, and all by one act. Orestes, moreover, combines the role of fulfiller of portents with that of their interpreter. He takes this role upon himself when he hears Clytemnestra's dream (κρίνω δέ τοί νιν ὥστε συγκόλλωξ ἔχειν, *Cho.* 542), and is identified as interpreter by the chorus when it accepts his interpretation and chooses him as τερασκόπος:

τερασκόπον δὴ τῶνδε σ' αἰροῦμαι πέρι·
 γένοιτο δ' οὕτως.

(*Cho.* 551–52)

The word τερασκόπον links Orestes with other figures in the trilogy who possess divinatory power: Calchas, who in the parodos of the *Agamemnon* is said to have spoken τεράζων when he interpreted the omen of the eagles and the hare (*Ag.* 125); the foreboding chorus at *Agamemnon* 975 ff., with its καρδίας τερασκόπου (977); Cassandra, who after her death is scornfully described by Clytemnestra as τερασκόπος (*Ag.* 1440); and Apollo himself, who is called τερασκόπος by the Pythia at *Eumenides* 62 as she turns to him for help against the Erinyes. It is not only by virtue of his dream interpretation, however, that Orestes belongs with this group. As the recipient and bearer of an oracle he is, like Calchas and Cassandra, associated with the god Apollo and

⁹Here I would accept (against Page) the manuscript attribution of 929 to Orestes, but the attribution is not crucial to my point.

given special knowledge by him. And at the end of the *Choephoroi* he, like Cassandra, sees in a frenzy horrible visions which no one else can see and which will soon be proved true.

III

As fulfillment, Orestes acts to fulfill portents, and as interpreter he knows them and explains their meaning. Even as he acts and speaks, however, he reveals himself to *be* a portent. His role as portent is suggested by two passages in the *Choephoroi* that are also linked by their imagery, Orestes' prayer to Zeus at 246-63 and his interpretation of Clytemnestra's dream at 542-50.¹⁰

Ορ. Ζεῦ Ζεῦ, θεωρὸς τῶνδε πραγμάτων γενοῦ,
 ἰδοῦ δὲ γένναν εὖνιν αἰετοῦ πατρὸς
 θανόντος ἐν πλεκταῖσι καὶ σπειράμασι
 δεϊνῆς ἐχίδνης· τοὺς δ' ἀπωρφανισμένους
 νῆστις πιέζει λιμός· οὐ γὰρ ἐντελεῖς
 θήραν πατρῶαν προσφέρειν σκηνήμασι.
 οὕτω δὲ κάμῃ τήνδε τ', Ἡλέκτραν λέγω,
 ἰδεῖν πάρεστί σοι, πατροστερῆ γόνον,
 ἄμφω φυγὴν ἔχοντε τὴν αὐτὴν δόμων.
 καίτοι θυτῆρος καὶ σε τιμῶντος μέγα
 πατρὸς νεοσσοῦς τοῦσδ' ἀποφθείρας πόθεν
 ἔξεις ὁμοίας χειρὸς εὐθοῖνον γέρας;
 οὐτ' αἰετοῦ γένεθλ' ἀποφθείρας πάλιν
 πέμπειν ἔχοις ἂν σήματ' εὐπιθῆ βροτοῖς,
 οὐτ' ἀρχικός σοι πᾶς ὄδ' αὐανθεῖς πυθμὴν
 βωμοῖς ἀρήξει βουθύτοις ἐν ἡμασιν.

(*Cho.* 246-61)

Orestes calls on Zeus in 246-53 to look upon him and Electra, described as young eagles orphaned by a viper, and in 255-57 asks the god how he can expect sacrifices such as their father gave him if he destroys them. The lines that follow speak again of both eagles and sacrifice:

¹⁰This pair provides a counterpart to the paired vulture simile and eagle omen in the parodos of the *Agamemnon*; see on this J. Dumortier, *Les images dans la poésie d'Eschyle* (Paris 1935) 97, and Lebeck (note 1 above) 13.

If you destroyed the offspring of the eagle,
 you could not again send convincing signs to mortals
 and if this kingly stock withers completely
 it cannot serve your altars on days of sacrifice.

(*Cho.* 258–61)

Lines 258–59 seem at first to be extending the metaphor beyond what makes sense; what is the significance here for Orestes' and Electra's situation? Editors and translators generally handle these lines by reading them not as an independent possibility but as an analogy, a comparison expressed paratactically; just as the destruction of eagles would prevent the sending of signs, so the destruction of the royal house will prevent sacrifices.¹¹ But this interpretation makes lines 258–61 little more than a recapitulation of what precedes.¹² Moreover, both the use of the eagle metaphor for Orestes at the beginning of this prayer and the earlier association of omen-bearing eagles with the house of Atreus (*Ag.* 104 ff.) suggest that there is more than mere analogy in this identification of Orestes with the eagles.¹³

We need to understand the identification in the following way. If the eagles are destroyed, Zeus can send no signs mortals will trust. Orestes has himself been sent by Apollo and so by Zeus, and mortal trust in the gods' sendings is dependent on Orestes' success and survival. Orestes raises the issue of trust in speaking of Apollo's oracle:

τοιῖσδε χρησμοῖς ἄρα χρή πεποιθένα;
 κεί μὴ πέποιθα, τοῦργόν' ἔστ' ἐργαστέον·

(*Cho.* 297–98)

¹¹ Versions of this view may be found in the commentaries of P. Groeneboom (Groningen 1949); H. J. Rose, *A Commentary on the Surviving Plays of Aeschylus*, v.2, (Amsterdam 1958); A. Sidgwick (2nd ed., Oxford 1902); A. W. Verrall (London, New York 1893), and U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorf, *Orestie* v.2, *Das Opfer am Grabe* (Berlin 1896); and in R. Lattimore's translation (Chicago 1953). E. Fraenkel's term "paratactic comparison" (used in his commentary on the *Agamemnon*, ad 1.76) is applied to this passage by O. Smith, "Some Observations on the Structure of Imagery in Aeschylus," *C&M* 26 (1965) 44, and by H. Friis Johansen, "Sentence Structure in Aeschylus' *Suppliants*," *C&M* 15 (1954) 21–22.

¹² Sidgwick comments ad loc.: "The accumulation of images is characteristic; but the thought is the same in all: 'If you let us perish, you will lose our service.'"

¹³ As E. Petrounias observes in his *Funktion und Thematik der Bilder bei Aischylos, Hypomnemata* 48 (Göttingen 1976) 163 and 388, n. 629.

The same issue is perhaps suggested by Pylades' warning to Orestes (*Cho.* 900–2) and by Apollo's words when he cautions the jurors not to render his and Zeus' oracles fruitless by condemning Orestes (*Eum.* 713–14). E. Petrounias has observed that Orestes is here identifying himself with Zeus' party and threatening mortal disbelief if help is not forthcoming.¹⁴ More crucial is the fact that the continuation of the metaphor makes Orestes the eagle in this new and important sense: he is a σῆμα, a sign from Zeus.

The prayer shows Orestes to be a σῆμα; the dream interpretation makes him a τέρας.

Ορ. ἦ καὶ πέπυσθε τοῦναρ ὥστ' ὀρθῶς φράσαι;
 Χο. τεκεῖν δράκοντ' ἔδοξεν, ὡς αὐτὴ λέγει.
 Ορ. καὶ ποῖ τελευτᾶ καὶ καρανοῦται λόγος;
 Χο. ἐν σπαργάνοισι παιδὸς ὀρμίσαι δίκην.
 Ορ. τίνος βορᾶς χρῆζοντα, νεογενὲς δάκος;
 Χο. αὐτὴ προσέσχε μαστὸν ἐν τῶνείρατι.
 Ορ. καὶ πῶς ἄτρωτον οὐθαρ ἦν ὑπὸ στύγουσ;
 Χο. ὥστ' ἐν γάλακτι θρόμβον αἵματος σπάσαι.
 Ορ. οὔτοι μάταιον ἂν τόδ' ὄψανον πέλοι.
 Χο. ἡ δ' ἐξ ὕπνου κέκλαγγεν ἐπτοημένη,
 πολλοὶ δ' ἀνήθοντ' ἐκτυφλωθέντες σκότῳ
 λαμπτήρες ἐν δόμοισι δεσποίνης χάριν.
 πέμπει δ' ἐπειτα τάσδε κηδείους χοάς,
 ἄκος τομαῖον ἐλπίσασα πημάτων.
 Ορ. ἀλλ' εὐχομαι γῆ τῆδε καὶ πατρὸς τάφῳ
 τοῦναιρον εἶναι τοῦτ' ἐμοὶ τελεσφόρον.
 κρίνω δέ τοί νιν ὥστε συγκόλλως ἔχειν
 εἰ γὰρ τὸν αὐτὸν χώρον ἐκλιπὼν ἐμοὶ
 οὐφίς † ἐπᾶσα σπαργανηπλεῖζετο †
 καὶ μαστὸν ἀμφέχασκ' ἐμὸν θρεπτήριον
 θρόμβῳ τ' ἔμειξεν αἵματος φίλον γάλα,
 ἡ δ' ἀμφὶ τάρβει τῷδ' ἐπώμωξεν πάθει,
 δεῖ τοί νιν, ὡς ἔθρεψεν ἔκπαγλον τέρας,
 θανεῖν βιαίως ἔκδρακοντωθεῖς δ' ἐγὼ
 κτείνω νιν, ὡς τοῦναιρον ἐννέπει τόδε.

(*Cho.* 526–50)

Orestes here begins his interpretation by pointing out the likeness between the snake and himself—they were born from the same place

¹⁴Ibid., 388, n. 629.

and nursed at the same breast—and by telling how it bit and frightened his mother. But instead of concluding, “The snake is myself, and as it drew blood from my mother I will kill her,” Orestes continues:

Then she must, since she has nourished a terrible τέρας,
die by violence, and I, turned snake,
kill her, as this dream says.

(*Cho.* 548–50)

This may be taken simply as an elliptical expression of the expected conclusion,¹⁵ but the meaning of the dream would have been fairly clear even without these lines, and this fact makes their inclusion and wording the more interesting.¹⁶ Here, as in Orestes’ prayer to Zeus, an apparent redundancy signals a new level of meaning. It is not just that Clytemnestra *dreamed* she nourished a τέρας; she *has* nourished a τέρας, and that τέρας is Orestes, the son who will kill her. The identification of Orestes with the τέρας is further emphasized by the word ἐκδρακοντωθείς, “turned snake,” a type of compound that, as H. J. Rose observes in his commentary, is used elsewhere of actual metamorphosis.¹⁷

¹⁵ W. Whallon, for example (“The Serpent at the Breast,” *TAPA* 89 [1958] 271–75), describes Orestes’ interpretation as follows (271): “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.”

¹⁶ G. Devereux, *Dreams in Greek Tragedy* (Berkeley, Los Angeles 1976) 203, comments: “Orestes’ *Interpretation of the Dream* (540 ff.) seems, from the literary point of view, heavy-handed and unnecessary: Athenian audiences were not slow-witted.” In Devereux’s view, “Orestes interprets the dream, out loud, in a particular way, so as to *make* it come true in *that* particular way.” This last comment is certainly in keeping with the way portents and their interpretation work in Greek literature—see, for example, Peradotto (note 1 above) and H. D. Cameron, “The Power of Words in the *Seven Against Thebes*,” *TAPA* 101 (1970) 95–118—but Orestes’ interpretation is hardly otiose in any case, as I argue here.

The chief question commentators raise about Orestes’ interpretation concerns the precise sense of δεῖ τοί νιν, ὡς ἔθρεψεν ἔκπαγλον τέρας, θανεῖν βιαιῶς (548–49). Groeneboom and others, following a comment of the scholiast, understand βιαιῶς with ἔθρεψεν; Sidgwick, followed by Verrall, dismisses this argument in favor of the view that “to dream of giving suck to a monster means violent death.” This debate is largely irrelevant to the question raised here.

¹⁷ The closest parallels I have found included by Paley in a list in his commentary (*The Tragedies of Aeschylus*, 2nd ed. [London 1861] ad loc.) are ἐκθηριοῦσθαι, which is used of actual transformation at Euripides’ *Bacchae* 1331, though in later authors it has a metaphorical meaning, and ἐξανδροῦσθαι, which can mean “grow to manhood” but is used of the growth of dragon’s teeth to men at Euripides’ *Suppliants* 703.

Like the metaphor in Orestes' prayer, the symbol here, which originally seems a limited likeness establishing only that Orestes by analogy to the snake will draw his mother's blood, comes to impose itself in its full nature on what it stands for.¹⁸

Orestes is the snake, as he is the eagle, and by these identifications he is made both τέρας and σῆμα. A τέρας is monstrous or portentous or both.¹⁹ As matricide Orestes is monstrous; as the matricide who is also the just avenger of his father he is a portent that demands interpretation.

IV

It is in the *Choephoroi*, then, that Orestes' triple role emerges, and it is in the interpretation of Clytemnestra's dream (centrally placed, and central also to important patterns of imagery in the trilogy) that the three roles are set side by side. Orestes prays for the dream's fulfillment in himself, is confirmed as interpreter, and is shown to be a portent. Only the last of these roles persists in the final play of the trilogy. At the end of the *Choephoroi*, the baffled chorus asks whether it should call

¹⁸A close relationship between symbol and symbolized is in several respects characteristic of Aeschylus. As many have noted, his similes often show what O. Smith (note 11 above) calls fusion of *illustrans* and *illustrandum*; terms appropriate to one are applied to the other. Aeschylean images move easily from metaphor or simile to verbal description of the object in question and to its actual representation on stage. Finally, one view of language that is prominent in Aeschylean tragedies is that words do not merely represent but act to bring into being that of which they speak. On imagery, in addition to the words cited above in notes 1, 10, 11, and 13 by Dumortier, Lebeck, Petrounias, and Smith, see R. F. Goheen, "Aspects of Dramatic Symbolism: Three Studies in the *Oresteia*," *AJP* 76 (1955) 113-37; B. Knox, "The Lion in the House," *CP* 47 (1952) 17-25; J. J. Peradotto, "Some Patterns of Nature Imagery in the *Oresteia*," *AJP* 85 (1964) 378-93; and F. Zeitlin, "The Motif of the Corrupted Sacrifice in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*," *TAPA* 96 (1965) 463-508. On efficacious language in Aeschylus, see especially H. Bacon, "The Shield of Eteocles," *Arion* 3 (1964) 27-36; Cameron (note 17 above); Peradotto (note 1 above); and F. Zeitlin, *Under the Sign of the Shield: Semiotics and Aeschylus' Seven Against Thebes* (Rome 1982) 42-49.

¹⁹The etymology of τέρας is obscure; for discussion of the possibilities see P. Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique* (Paris 1968-77), and H. Frisk, *Griechisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, vol. 2 (Heidelberg 1961). LSJ give as meaning both "sign, wonder, marvel, portent," exemplified first in several passages in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and "monster," which becomes more common in later texts but occurs in the *Iliad* in reference to the Gorgon on Athena's shield. The word is also common in the specific sense of a monstrous birth; cf. Plato's *Cratylus*, 393b and 394a.

Orestes σωτήρ or μόρος (1073-74). In the *Eumenides*, Orestes can no longer fulfill or interpret; he is only the object of an interpretation through which the final fulfillment is attained.

There is one prophecy yet to be fulfilled as the last play opens, the part of Apollo's oracle which promised that Orestes would be free of blame if he did as he was told:

Ορ. καὶ φίλτρα τόλμης τῆσδε πλειστηρίζομαι
τὴν πυθόμαντιν Λοξίαν, χρήσαντ' ἔμοι
πράξαντα μὲν ταῦτ' ἔκτος αἰτίας κακῆς
εἶναι, παρέντι δ' οὐκ ἔρῳ τὴν ζημίαν.

(*Cho.* 1029-32)

But it is Athena and the jurors who are responsible for fulfilling this prophecy. Their responsibility is made explicit in Apollo's charge to the jurors at *Eumenides* 713-14.

κἄγωγε χρησμούς τοὺς ἔμούς τε καὶ Διὸς
ταρβεῖν κελεύω μῆδ' ἀκαρπώτους κτίσαι.

The final part of the oracle will be fulfilled by means of the court's judgment. This judgment is also an interpretation of the τέρας Orestes represents and the σῆμα Zeus and Apollo have made of him, as indeed the two central arguments of the trial suggest.

The first of these is that in killing his mother Orestes was doing what Zeus (through Apollo) ordered, and that his act was therefore just and his acquittal necessary. It is Zeus' role that is stressed by Apollo both in his opening words at the trial (*Eum.* 614-21) and in his final charge to the jurors (*Eum.* 713-14, cited above), and by Athena in her efforts to win over the Erinyes (*Eum.* 797-99). By his acquittal, then, Orestes is accepted and confirmed as a sign of Zeus' will.

The second argument is the notorious claim that only the father is the child's parent (*Eum.* 657-66). This argument seeks to make the matricide unmonstrous and unproblematical by the revelation that Orestes is not in fact his mother's blood kin. It does not follow, however, that he is no τέρας at all.²⁰ He is a τέρας that must be differently inter-

²⁰ Whallon argues something of the sort (though with different emphasis) when he observes: "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

preted, and we have already been given the means for this interpretation. Both the theory of conception proposed in the *Eumenides* and the dream image of birth in the *Choephoroi* are foreshadowed by the image at *Agamemnon* 1388–92, suggestive of both conception and birth, in which Clytemnestra tells the chorus that she rejoiced in her husband's blood as the earth rejoices in the rain:

οὕτω τὸν αὐτοῦ θυμὸν ὄρμαίνει πεσῶν
 κάκφυσίων ὀξεῖαν αἵματος σφαγῆν
 βάλλει μ' ἔρεμνῃ ψακάδι φοινίας δρόσου,
 χαίρουσαν οὐδὲν ἦσσον ἢ διοσδότῳ
 γάνει σπορητὸς κάλυκος ἐν λοχεύμασιν.

The avenging and snaky-locked Erinyes are linked with the father's blood at *Choephoroi* 283–84, and in Hesiod's account of their origin at *Theogony* 183–85 the Earth bears them from the blood shed by the castrated Ouranos. Orestes, born as a snake, is the offspring of the murdered Agamemnon's blood, as his vengeance is the product of the murder.²¹ Apollo's theory of conception is therefore in part a confirmation of Orestes' special case; Orestes, in a double sense the child of his father's blood alone, is a τέρας, a monstrous birth, but his act (properly understood) was vengeance and not matricide.

as a child this most tender office of a mother (breast-feeding). 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.* 658–59).” (“The Serpent at the Breast” [note 15 above] 204; cf. his recent *Problem and Spectacle* [Heidelberg 1980] 135–37.) Whalton is concerned not with Orestes as τέρας but with whether the serpent image correctly represents him. (The larger question here is whether an image once established can be denied and undone or only reinterpreted.)

²¹ The dream is more often seen as stressing the kinship of Orestes and Clytemnestra; Lebeck observes (*The Oresteia* [note 1 above] 130): “This is the portent of Clytemnestra's dream: herself a serpent she has borne a serpent . . . Orestes truly is his mother's son, his act of vengeance offspring of her own.” This is so, but it is only part of the story, and Orestes' act of vengeance is ultimately differentiated from his mother's. Devereux (note 16 above, 191) stresses the ways in which the dream associates Orestes with Agamemnon. R. Fagles and W. B. Stanford, in the introductory essay to Fagles' translation of the *Oresteia* (New York 1975) 31, suggest a link between the image of fertilization in the *Agamemnon* and Orestes' later arrival and vengeance, described as a new birth: “Even now she labors with the spear at spring, the son who will destroy her.” I have found no one who makes the connection between image and dream explicit.

It might be objected that there are in fact no references to Orestes as portent in the *Eumenides*, and that mention of prophecy of any kind is very scarce in this play; we have shifted to the world of the polis and of law-courts.²² But the world of the *Eumenides* is also a world in which many things once only spoken of appear on stage,²³ and this is true of the portentous as well: a dream (Clytemnestra's ghost) urges vengeance; curses (the Erinyes) and the representative of an oracle (Apollo) vie for supremacy.²⁴ In similar fashion, the portents earlier spoken of now appear in the person of Orestes; the law-court decides the meaning and fate of a portent. In the outcome, just as Apollo's oracle is fulfilled, Zeus' sign in the person of Orestes is confirmed. The threatening curses that are the Erinyes and the τέραος of the matricide Orestes are more problematic, but both are in effect reinterpreted (their ambiguities taken in a positive sense) and lose their monstrous aspect.

V

The significance of the pattern I have described here is that Orestes' threefold relation to the important theme of prophecy in the *Oresteia* further emphasizes and delineates his special role in the unfolding of the trilogy and reveals something as well about how we are to understand the trilogy.

In the *Agamemnon*, a variety of predictions and portents find their fulfillments in a series of events brought about by different people at different times.²⁵ The omen of the eagles and the hare is fulfilled in the taking of Troy, while Calchas' prediction of Artemis' anger and her demand for sacrifice have already been fulfilled in Iphigenia's death. The murder of Agamemnon fulfills Calchas' last dark hints, together

²² Peradotto (note 1 above, 9) sees a shift from magically efficacious language to language with a "secular, civilizing efficacy" in the last play of the trilogy.

²³ As Lebeck puts it (note 1 above, 131) "... images developed on a verbal level in the other two plays are dramatized and acted out in the last."

²⁴ The Erinyes identify themselves as curses at *Eum.* 417; the binding song (*Eum.* 307-96) further suggests this role, and the change to *Eumenides* at the end can be read as a reinterpretation or transformation of curses into blessings. (See especially *Eum.* 902, 978, 1021.)

²⁵ For a somewhat more detailed discussion of the arrangement of prophecies in the *Oresteia*, see Roberts (note 1 above) ch. 2, esp. pp. 28, 35-37.

with Cassandra's prophecies and Thyestes' ancient curses. By contrast, all portents and predictions from the end of the *Agamemnon* until the climax of the *Choephoroi* point to Orestes' matricide.

Again, in the *Agamemnon* a variety of interpreters and prophets are at work. Calchas reads the omen of the eagle and the hare; the chorus, uncertain what exactly it forebodes, has premonitions of disaster;²⁶ and Cassandra sees visions of past and future. But after the partial interpretation of Clytemnestra's dream by the household interpreters at the start of the *Choephoroi*, Orestes becomes the *τερασκόπος*.

In the *Agamemnon*, moreover, the roles of fulfiller and interpreter are separated. Those who actively fulfill have at best partial understanding, and those who interpret are observers and victims. In the *Choephoroi*, Orestes is both fulfiller and interpreter—the most effectively active, and the one who knows most.

That Orestes is fulfiller points not only to the centrality of his actions in the trilogy but to the fact that it is with him that the troubles of the house of Atreus come to an end. That he is interpreter points not only to the knowledge on which his revenge is based but to his subsequent consciousness of the horror and complexity of his act. That he is portent as well suggests that an interpretation of the problem he represents must be looked for and can be found.²⁷

This interpretation, as I have argued, takes the form of the judgment in the *Eumenides*. Orestes here relinquishes all claims to action and to interpretation; he becomes a suppliant subject to the decisions of others, and can only state what he has done, not judge it.²⁸ In order that a satisfactory fulfillment be reached, the gods and the court must interpret Orestes' action.

And so must we. As many recent critics have shown, the *Oresteia* is characterized by a pervasive ambiguity: word, action, and character require interpretation both within the trilogy's story and by the reader. The trilogy, like Heraclitus' lord at Delphi, does not speak its meaning to us transparently, nor does it decoratively and decorously conceal the truth; it gives us signs. Orestes is the trilogy's central sign.

²⁶ Although not gifted with true prophecy, the chorus at *Ag.* 975 ff. uses prophetic terms expressing its premonitions.

²⁷ Mere rejection of portents, oracles, and the like is a notoriously unsuccessful strategy; witness in this trilogy Clytemnestra's effort to avert the household curse (*Ag.* 1568–76).

²⁸ *Eum.* 463–68, 611–13.

VI

It should be obvious that the triple role I have here ascribed to Orestes is shared by (and more frequently ascribed to) Sophocles' Oedipus, who has been described as reader of riddles, answer to riddles, and himself a riddle.²⁹ It is also shared by Eteocles, who interprets the omens on the attackers' shields in the *Seven Against Thebes*, and whose death fulfills dreams, a curse, and an oracle; as F. Zeitlin has observed, he is himself a riddle he cannot read.³⁰ What are we to make of such parallels? In the first place, in narratives where the oracular is prominent, this triple role seems in part a function of a character's centrality in the plot. It is because the story is about him that he fulfills prophecies, and because his is the consciousness we are most aware of that he interprets them; it is because he poses the story's problem that he must be interpreted, by us as by the other characters.³¹ But it is also the case that each of the three plays mentioned here turns to some extent on incomplete fulfillment and inadequate interpretation, and the central character may in his triple role be said to exemplify the fact that apparent fulfillments or solutions turn out to be problematic and interpreters do not have the knowledge to solve the problems they themselves constitute. Orestes is more fortunate than Oedipus and Eteocles in that he is given a solution.

A final parallel may be found in Plato's Socrates. Socrates is the frequent recipient of a divine sign, his δαιμόνιον.³² He is also the subject of an oracle in the *Apology* and receives a dream command in the *Phaedo*;³³ he reads (and carries out) both oracle and dream, and is concerned throughout the dialogues with inquiry and examination. He is

²⁹ On Oedipus as enigma, see especially J. P. Vernant, "Ambigüité et renversement. Sur la structure énigmatique d'Oedipe-roi," in J. P. Vernant and P. Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et tragédie en grèce ancienne* (Paris 1973) 99–131.

³⁰ On Eteocles in the *Seven Against Thebes*, see Bacon (note 18 above), Cameron (note 16 above), and Zeitlin (note 18 above) part I, 15–51, "Language, Structure, and the Son of Oedipus in Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes*." Zeitlin calls Eteocles (48) "the best interpreter with regard to the defense of the city and the worst in regard to himself."

³¹ This last aspect may be most prominent in figures like the three noted here who are particularly problematic by virtue of their position in a family. For an extended discussion of the relationship between Eteocles' place in his family and his roles as interpreter and enigma, see Zeitlin (note 18 above) part I, 15–51.

³² *Apol.* 31d, 40c, 41d, *Euthyd.* 272e, *Euthyph.* 3b, *Phaedr.* 242c, *Rep.* 6.49c.

³³ *Apol.* 21a–23b, 30a, 33c; *Phaed.* 60d–61c.

himself a riddle as well: Alcibiades in the *Symposium* (215a4–b3) tells us that Socrates' outer form conceals secrets, and at the beginning of the *Phaedrus* (229d2–230a6) Socrates refuses to turn his attention to the interpretation of myth and mythical beings when he has not yet adequately understood what sort of enigmatic creature he himself may be.³⁴ As so often, however, Plato here both uses and revises an earlier literary motif, for Socrates is an interpreter who understands the limits of interpretation and understands that he is himself the problem he must interpret. He thus plays self-consciously the roles that Orestes, like other tragic heroes, plays with a consciousness that is late and partial.

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³⁴ *Symp.* 215a–b, *Phaedr.* 229d–230a. Socrates in fact refers to the mythological creatures in question as τερατολόγων τινῶν φύσεων (*Phaedr.* 229e). (Citations from Plato are taken from the Oxford Classical Text v. 1, 2 [Oxford 1900, 1901] ed. J. Burnet.)