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6. The Curse as a Garment in Greek Tragedy

Judith Fletcher

Textiles and garments generate some of the most common yet complex image systems in Greek tragedy. More than any other symbol they unite the world of metaphor with the physical realities of the theatre. Among its semiotic cargo, clothing in tragedy bears the meaning of death and disfigurement, a distortion of its normative function of protecting and adorning the human body. The swaddling robe that Clytemnestra uses to bind Agamemnon, pictured on the famous Boston krater, is the first surviving example of destructive clothing in tragedy (fig. 6.1).¹ Euripides' *Medea* and Sophocles' *Trachiniae* subsequently feature more magical flesh eating garments. In her study of the *peplos* in tragedy, Lee suggests that Aeschylus "invented the motif of the deadly *peploi*."² She argues that the senior tragedian manipulated and inverted epic and lyric connotations of the *peplos*, which include marriage, femininity and luxury, when he featured the deadly garment, and that Sophocles and Euripides appropriated this new symbol to signify distorted marriage and troubled gender dynamics.

Lee is certainly correct to see a similarity between the three deadly *peploi* wielded by Clytemnestra, Medea and Deianeira, and she offers important insights into the history and semantics of the tragic *peplos*, but I would like to suggest that these dramatic works also exploit a deeply ancient connotation of toxic textiles that predates Clytemnestra's deadly robe. I submit that the tragedians adapted the idea of the deadly robe from a long-established analogy that dates back to Hittite, Babylonian, Assyrian, and Old Testament magic and ritual. I categorize these different examples under the generalized rubric 'Near Eastern,' with the cautionary proviso that this term covers a range of different cultures over a period of several millennia in Western Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean Basin. The 'Ancient Near East' is by no means a cultural monolith, but it is the very diversity of the different versions of the curse as a garment image that leads me to suggest that the concept was diffused over a cultural area that included ancient Greece. My hypothesis is based on a group of ancient texts and inscriptions that employ the analogy of clothing for curses, oaths and spells. For instance a Hittite text from around 1200 BCE known as the 'Ritual for Infernal

¹ The Kalyx-krater by the Dokimasia Painter (c. 460 BCE, Boston 63.1246).

² Lee 2004, 262. While the first mention of a poisoned robe in Greek literature (a *chiton*) actually occurs in a Hesiodic fragment describing Deianeira's murder of Heracles (fr. 25.17–25) discussed below, Lee's focus is on the term *peplos*, which only occurs in tragedy in 5th century literature. All three of the deadly garments are called *peplos*, at some point, although other terms such as *phāros* and *chitōn* are also used.



Fig. 6.1 The Boston krater shows the swaddling robe that Clytemnestra uses to bind Agamemnon – the first surviving example of destructive clothing in tragedy.

Deities’ reveals that spells can be cast by throwing a cloak over a person, or that one can get out of an oath or break a spell by removing their cloak.³

Garments and curses in ancient Near Eastern cultures

The analogy of the curse as a garment or as a skin disease that covers the body like a garment was widespread in the ancient world.⁴ One good example occurs in Psalm 109, the so-called curse psalm.

He clothed himself with curses as his cloak,
And so it entered his inward parts like water,
Like oil into his bones.

³ See Bachvarova 2007, 260 n. 42, who cites KUB VII 41 obv. 13, ‘A Ritual for the Infernal Deities.’ The idea of a garment with supernatural powers, as Lee demonstrates, is evident in Homer. Aphrodite uses her peplos (5.311–17) to shield her son Aeneas in battle.

⁴ See Kitz 2004, 315–321; Bachvarova 2007, 183.

May it be like a garment that he wraps around himself,
Like a belt that he wears everyday.

Psalm 109. 16–17⁵

The garment simile of this psalm is typical of a range of Semitic curses, oaths and contracts: the curse is represented as a type of poisoned cloak that can inflict a skin disease on its victim. The idea may originate in the use of cloth to apply poultices to infected areas: by reverse analogy the medicinal properties of the poultice become poisonous in the curse as a garment simile. An early example of this curse simile appears in a Hittite oath ritual that compares the act of coating a person with oil to smearing oath-curses onto the body:

[Just as] you rub yourself down with oil, [thus also] let these oath-curses be rubbed down onto [you]. Just as you put on a garment, so also put on these oath curses.⁶

In this case the oath is guaranteed with a self-curse that would be activated by perjury. Further examples and amplifications can be found in curses, many of them guaranteeing oaths, from Akkadian and Babylonian inscriptions, and a Neo-Assyrian loyalty oath. An Akkadian treaty from the 7th century BCE contains this curse against whoever breaks the treaty:

May Sin-Nanna, the god (...) cover them with leprosy like a cloak.⁷

Why is the imagery of the curse as a garment so effective and wide spread, especially as conditional curses attached to oaths? One pragmatic explanation might be that clothing can actually transmit diseases. The Old Testament makes reference to leprous garments (e.g. *Leviticus* 13. 47–59): *Kings* 2.5 tells the brief tale of Gehazi who, along with his descendants, was cursed with leprosy after deceiving his master Elisha and accepting two cloaks and bags of silver as forbidden gifts from the former leper Namaan. But there are deeper sociological explanations for the curse as a garment simile as well. In her discussion of the oath curse, Bachvarova observes that clothing is a symbol of its wearer “and marks [the oath taker’s] socially defined role (...) the state of his body (...) and the social structure which makes the oath powerful and is assisted by the oath.”⁸ I would add that the oath and its conditional curse are so deeply inscribed on the body of the oath taker that they cannot be shaken off. The idea of wearing an oath might explain why Pylades tells Iphigenia that she has “thrown an oath” around him in Euripides’ *Iphigenia among the Taurians* (ὃ ῥαδίσις ὄρκοισι περιβαλοῦσά με, “having encircled me with an easy oath [to keep]” *I.T.* 788) as if she has cast a cloak over him – indeed the verb is used exactly that way in other authors.⁹ By offering an oath curse at Iphigenia’s request Pylades is now wearing his words.

The curse as a garment in Ancient Greek thought

Is it possible that the pervasive analogy of the curse as a garment in ancient Semitic oath contracts might be the predecessor of the deadly robes of Greek tragedy? There is no doubt that the language of Near Eastern oath-curses influenced the form of self-imprecations that guaranteed ancient Greek oaths. For example the use of wax images (*kolosoi*) as surrogates for perjurers in the Foundation Oath of Cyrene, as Faraone explains, has its antecedent in Near Eastern practices,

⁵ See Wright’s discussion (1994, 385–404) of the use of analogy and symbolism in Psalm 109 in the context of ritual.

⁶ Hittite text KUB 26.25 dated c. 1200 to 1180 BCE (discussed in Kitz 2004, 316).

⁷ The inscription is edited and translated by Grayson 1987, 183.

⁸ Bachvarova 2007, 183.

⁹ See, for example, φᾶρος περιβάλλεσθαι, *Hdt.* 1.152.

and so do the conditional curses on the descendants of an oath taker, as Priest and Katz have recognized.¹⁰ Scholars think in terms of a Near Eastern/Aegean *koinē*, a cultural community that encompassed the Eastern Mediterranean Basin and that shared a common vocabulary of myth and ritual. Cultural exchange occurring from the Bronze Age to the Hellenistic period accounts for the many similarities between Mesopotamian (*i.e.* the Sumerian, Babylonian and Assyrian societies of southwest Asia), Anatolian (*e.g.* Hittite), Biblical and what we call ‘Greek’ religion and literature.¹¹ West’s magisterial study of this east/west diffusion acknowledges the influences of Near Eastern ideas about the daemonic power of oath-curses, which includes the persecution of perjurers, ideas which would have been diffused by treaty language between different cultures.¹²

Examples of garment similes in formal Greek oaths and curses are hard to find, but they do exist. The abundant lead *defixiones* and curse tablets from ancient Greece offer other formulae for binding their victims, but their impetus is more an effort to put one individual under the control of another for judicial, commercial or amatory purposes.¹³ The Near Eastern garment curses are generally publically oriented, as part of treaty oaths, and their language does not seem to have been transferred to the more personal curse tablets of the Greeks. There is possibly a hint of the curse/garment analogy in Alcaeus (129.17–18 Voigt), which has the format of a curse, and, according to Bachvarova, features other elements of Semitic curses.¹⁴

Alcaeus remembers ‘stern oaths’ of alliance (sworn by himself and Pittacus) that included a self-imprecation to ‘lie in cloaks of earth’ (γᾶν ἐπιέμμενοι κείσεσθαι). There are more explicit examples of garments being used in public oath and curse rituals, however. Pseudo-Lysias describes how priests and priestesses cursed Andocides for defiling the mysteries by shaking purple cloaks, *phoinikida*, towards the west (*Andoc.* 51):

καὶ ἐπὶ τούτοις ἱέρεια καὶ ἱερεῖς στάντες κατηράσαντο πρὸς ἑσπέραν
καὶ φοινικίδας ἀνέσεισαν, κατὰ τὸ νόμιμον τὸ παλαιὸν καὶ ἀρχαῖον.

And for these transgressions, priestesses and priests stood up and cursed him, facing the west, and shook their purple garments according to the ancient and time-honored custom.

The phrase “according to the ancient and time-honored custom” suggests that this gesture was a relatively familiar one to the Athenians.

As we know from other sources, these purple robes, *phoinikida*, named after the Phoenicians who produced the purple dye, were part of the priestly garments of some priestesses and priests of Demeter.¹⁵ Having a cloak shaken to curse a man for his sins is not the same thing as wearing a curse cloak, but it does seem to be conceptually related, and I shall return to it. We find a significant use of purple robes in Plutarch’s description of a Syracusan oath ritual taken in the sanctuary of Demeter. Recounting the perjury of Callippus, the murderer of Dion, tyrant of Syracuse, in 354

¹⁰ Faraone 1993, 60–80; Priest 1964, 48–56; Katz 1998, 183–217. See also Karavites’ discussion (1992, 109–16) of the Near Eastern elements in Homeric oath curses.

¹¹ See Noegel 2007, 25 for bibliography and theories of how this cultural exchange occurred.

¹² West 1997, 19–23.

¹³ Scholars working in this area now categorize the curse tablets under categories based on Audollent’s 1904 collection (*Defixionum tabellae*). These include judicial, commercial, theatrical, love and ‘prayers for justice.’ Eidinow 2007, 154 explains the motives for cursing among the ancient Greeks as “a way for people to gain the initiative in a situation of essential powerlessness.”

¹⁴ See Bachvarova 2007, 179–88 for a discussion of the Near Eastern elements in the fragment. For a general discussion of the fragment as a curse see Watson 1991, 63–65.

¹⁵ See Connelly 2007, 92 on the purple cloaks worn by religious official at Eleusis.

BCE, Plutarch says that he put on the purple robe of the goddess and held a blazing torch to swear his oath (περιβάλλεται τὴν πορφύριδα τῆς θεοῦ καὶ λαβῶν δᾶδα καιομένην ἀπόμυσι, *Dio.* 56.5).¹⁶ Notice that Plutarch uses the verb *periballetai* (“he put on”) here, a word that we have seen used of the binding power of the oath as if the oath itself were a garment.

Curses and garments in the *Oresteia*

Surviving Greek historical texts hint at the association between garments and curses but the metaphor is, I contend, quite pronounced in Greek tragedy. The purple fabric that Clytemnestra lays at Agamemnon’s feet for his homecoming will be our first example. These textiles are part of a rich system of cloth imagery sustained throughout the trilogy, and they have multiple significance: they are like a river of blood from all Agamemnon’s many victims, including his own daughter, Iphigenia; they symbolize his hubris, his excesses, and his all too willing acceptance that he deserves the kind of triumphal homecoming that Priam would expect. According to Goheen, their colour may have been similar to dried blood, and they contribute to the recurring motif of blood on the ground, a symbol of the irreversible nature of death.¹⁷ The fabrics are polysemous and one of their meanings, I would suggest, is that of a curse.

At least one curse is among the interlocking forces that contribute to the death of Agamemnon. He is the victim of his own folly and he makes his own choices, yet the play exemplifies the tragic concept of multiple determination.¹⁸ He has inherited the curse on his household from his father Atreus, and has also incurred the “civic curse” of the Argive citizens (δημοκράντου δ’ ἄρᾶς, *Ag.* 459) who, according to the Chorus, blame him for the loss of their husbands and sons at Troy. Would the audience read the purple cloth as a symbol of a curse or of a magical spell? After she has succeeded in getting her husband to walk on the cloth Clytemnestra uses language with elements of magical incantations (*Ag.* 958–73), as McClure has shown.¹⁹ So there is some sense of the supernatural in the air as the king steps onto the purple cloth that leads to the house of death. The exact nature of these textiles is a matter of contention, but Agamemnon refers to them as garments (εἴμασι 921), and Morrell has revived the idea that the king is walking on clothing.²⁰ If shaking purple robes was an ancient curse ritual, as pseudo-Lysias says it was, then the very act of putting the garments on the ground would have some significance to the audience. In any case, for the ancient Greeks

¹⁶ “Parallels to the use of a burning torch in oath ceremonies in the Near East suggest that this Sicilian oath might have involved a similar self-curse, in which those swearing the oath likened themselves to the burning torch in a conditional execration.” Faraone 1993, 64.

¹⁷ The textile imagery begins with the saffron robes of Iphigenia pouring onto the ground as if they were blood (we can imagine the festive colour drenched in sacrificial gore) (*Ag.* 328 ff.). See Goheen 1955, 115–126 for the relationships between the recurring motif of blood on the ground (*Ag.* 1018–21; *Cho.* 48; *Cho.* 66–7; *Eum.* 261–3; *Eum.* 652–4) and the fabrics, and Morrell 1997, 141–42, n.4 for the bibliography on the meaning and nature of the textiles.

¹⁸ Scholars debate how much influence the curse exerts. Lloyd-Jones 1962, 199 suggests that it is because of the curse that Agamemnon finds himself in the dilemma at Aulis. West 1999, 37, on the other hand, objects to putting excessive importance on the curse, and Sewell-Rutter 2007, 75–76 explains the curse as one aspect of the multiple determination that befalls the descendants of Atreus. Mardikes’ 1994 dissertation on curses in the *Oresteia* provides a cogent overview of the topic. See Bakola, this volume, for an interpretation of the ‘tapestry scene’.

¹⁹ McClure 1999, 81–90 notes that the use of assonance, repetition and metaphor in the context of weaving and cloth production (*cf.* the Homeric Circe), and the appeal to Zeus Teleos at the end of the speech have a particularly incantatory quality. See also Neustadt 1929, 243–65 who discusses language as a form of magic throughout the play.

²⁰ Morrell 1997, 147 suggests that the garments function as a public display of Clytemnestra’s “authority and position within the traditionally intimate confines of the *oikos*”.

clothing was just textile shaped, draped and wrapped. Since garments were not tailored, clothes and textiles looked very much alike.

A more obvious example of the curse as a robe, as I have already suggested, is the garment in which Agamemnon is captured. He dies wrapped in what Clytemnestra describes as “an inescapable net (...) an evil wealth of clothing” (ἄπειρον ἀμφίβληστρον (...) πλοῦτον εἵματος κακόν 1382–83). Net imagery runs throughout the *Oresteia* as a signifier of the ineluctable doom that ensnares the family of Agamemnon, but it is most concretely manifested as the robe that captures Agamemnon. Cassandra envisions the robe as a “net of Hades” (ἧ δίκτυόν τι γ’ Ἄιδου, 1115), Aegisthus refers to the “net of Justice” (τῆς Δίκης ἐν ἔρκεσιν, 1611) in which Agamemnon now lies, and Orestes, searching for the right word, will describe the robe as a “hunting net” (δίκτυον, *Ch.* 999–1000).²¹ Aeschylus uses the image of the net throughout the trilogy with his characteristic allusiveness, but also with particular reference to the robe in which Agamemnon dies. The net is an image, among other things, of the curse which grips the son of Atreus, and it is significant that the net motif is one of the oldest types of maledictions in Sumerian oath curses from the beginning of the 3rd millennium and showing up in the Old Testament.²²

The binding robe becomes more explicitly associated with curses when Aegisthus refers to it as “the woven robes of the Erinyes” (ὕφαντοῖς ἐν πέπλοις Ἐρινύων 1580) just before he narrates his father Thyestes’ curse against Atreus. The Erinyes, especially in this trilogy, are more than just curse goddesses,²³ but this function is well supported both by pre-Aeschylean literature,²⁴ and by the Erinyes themselves in the *Eumenides*: “we are called curses in our home beneath the earth,” (*Eum.* 417) they tell Athena. The menacing quality of their own clothing is obvious in the *Eumenides* when they sing their binding song as they encircle Orestes and threaten him with “black-robed assaults” (ἐφόδοις μελανείμοσιν, *Eum.* 370). Thus when Aegisthus calls the deadly garment a “robe of the Erinyes” especially in the context of his father’s curse against Agamemnon’s family, there is a good reason to think of the robe as the material manifestation of the curse.

This curse is not the conditional malediction of an oath, but the Near Eastern prototypes are not necessarily always oath curses (*e.g.* Psalm 109). At any rate, Aeschylus seems to have inherited ancient curse language and has adapted it in a spectacularly brilliant way for his dramatic purposes. It is worth noting, however, that the curse of Thyestes is linked to an oath sworn by Clytemnestra to kill Agamemnon for sacrificing Iphigenia. As she stands over the corpses of her husband and Cassandra, she announces to the Chorus:

καὶ τήνδ’ ἀκούεις ὀρκίων ἐμῶν θέμιν:

²¹ The image of the net is also used of the conquest of Troy (*Ag.* 357–61) in the first stasimon, but in the meditations of the Chorus it becomes the net in which Agamemnon is caught.

²² The earliest example of the net as an oath curse dates to the Sumerian king E-an-na-tum of Lagash (c. 2900 BCE) who invokes the ‘net’ of a host of gods, to punish the perjurer (Mercer 1913, 48). At *Exekiel* 17.19–20 God says that because Zedekiah broke his oath, “I will spread My net over him, and he shall be taken in My snare.”

²³ On the nature of the Erinyes see Parker (1983, 107) who notes that the distinction between the Erinyes as “spontaneous products of transgression” or of a spoken curse is unnecessary. As Faraone (1983) shows, their binding song or *hymnos desmios* (i.e. the first stasimon of *Eumenides*) bears many similarities to *defixiones* employed to tongue tie litigants and prosecutors in court. They are also among the powers invoked on curse tablets of the fifth and fourth century. For further discussion of their role as curses in the *Oresteia* see Fletcher 2012, 62–66.

²⁴ In pre-Aeschylean literature the Erinyes are associated with curses: Althea curses her son Meleager by striking the earth so that the Erinyes below can hear (*Il.* 9.453–56). In two virtually identical passages (*Il.* 3.276–80 and 19.258–60), Agamemnon invokes them as “those who avenge the dead who have been forsworn” to guarantee oaths in their role as curse goddesses.

μὰ τὴν τέλειον τῆς ἐμῆς παιδὸς Δίκην,
Ἄτην Ἐρινὺν θ', αἴσι τὸνδ' ἔσφαξ' ἐγὼ (...)

(*Ag.* 1431–1433)²⁵

And you hear the rightness of my oath-sacrifices: by Justice accomplished for my daughter, and Ate and the Erinys, to whom I sacrificed this man (...)

The lines not only suggest that Clytemnestra swore an oath to avenge her daughter's death – this is made more explicit by Orestes in the following play (*Ch.* 977–80) – but also that Agamemnon is somehow the sacrifice that guarantees this oath. Clytemnestra has perverted the ritual of sacrifice and distorted the formulae of oath swearing.²⁶ If indeed the tableau of the dead king wrapped in a garment refers to the curse on the house of Atreus, her reference to an oath has a particularly unsettling implication. Agamemnon does not suffer the consequences of perjury, but rather Clytemnestra's oath of vengeance helps to accomplish Thyestes' curse that is now physically present as the deadly garment.

The Poisoned Robe of Sophocles' *Trachiniae*

Let us turn now to the fatal robe that Deianeira sends to her husband Heracles in *Trachiniae*. Sophocles did not invent this part of the story, which dates back to Hesiod (fr. 25.17–25 MW from the *Catalogue of Women*).

(...). καὶ δειν' ἔρξ['], ἐπεὶ ἀάσατ]ο μέγα θυμῶι
ὄπποτε φάρμακον .[ἐπιχρί]σασα χιτῶνα
δῶκε Λίχηι κήρυ[κι] φ[έρειν· ὁ δὲ δῶ]κεν ἄνακτι
Ἀμφιτρωνιά[δ]ηι Ἡ[ρακλῆ]ϊ πτολιπό]ρθωι.
δ[εξ]αμένωι δὲ ο[ἱ] αἴψα τέλος θανάτοι]ο παρέστη·
καὶ] θάνε καὶ ῥ' Αἰδ[αο] πολύστονον ἕνε]το δῶμα.

(fr. 25.19–25)

(...) and she did terrible deeds, greatly deluded in mind, when she sprinkled the destructive poison on the robe and gave it to the herald Lichas to convey. He took it to his master Heracles, sacker of cities, son of Amphitryon. And when Heracles received it, death's end came quickly to him, and he died and went to the grievous house of Hades. (tr. March)

Sophocles had several versions of the death of Heracles upon which to draw, and it is clear that he adapted a pre-existing story of a poisoned robe dating back to Hesiod or perhaps even earlier.²⁷ March argues that Sophocles transformed the malevolent, man-killing Deianeira into the innocent dupe of the centaur, a revision that would come as a surprise to the audience.²⁸ Whatever traditions Sophocles might have been referencing and manipulating, it is also clear that he wants his audience to remember the robe that Clytemnestra used to kill Agamemnon.²⁹ Heracles describes that robe

²⁵ This text is Page's 1972 OCT edition.

²⁶ Both Zeitlin (1965, 474) and Lebeck (1971, 83) note how Clytemnestra perverts the ritual of sacrifice in this scene. See Fletcher 2012, 47–51 for a discussion of her distorted oath ritual.

²⁷ Davies (1991, xxii–xxxiv) discusses other sources from which Sophocles might have drawn including the lost epic *The Sack of Oechalia*.

²⁸ March 1987.

²⁹ As Lee 2004, 264 points out, both garments are called *peploi*, a term that in the context of tragedy signifies a perversion

as a “woven net of the Erinyes” (Ἐρινύων ὕφαντὸν ἀμφίβληστρον 1051–1052). The language is pointedly similar to that of the *Agamemnon*, and conflates both Clytemnestra’s description of the deadly robe (ἄπειρον ἀμφίβληστρον (...) πλοῦτον εἴματος κακόν, “an endless net (...) an evil wealth of garment,” 1382–1383) and that of Aegisthus (ὕφαντοῖς ἐν πέπλοις Ἐρινύων, “in the woven robes of the Erinyes,” 1580). Sophocles has animated the robe, so that it consumes Heracles “like a deadly viper” (ἐχθρᾶς ἐχίδνης), another allusion to the *Oresteia* (used by Orestes of his mother at *Ch.* 929). Garner appropriately describes the garment as a “vampire-robe, which has taken on a parasitic life of its own, drinking his blood and robbing his lungs of breath (1054–56).”³⁰ Essentially the robe has taken on the properties of the Erinyes, and its action evokes the ancient curse that would seep into the skin of its victim. The “garment clung to his sides close-glued at every joint, as if by a sculptor” (προσπτύσσετο πλευραῖσιν ἀρτίκολλος, ὥστε τέκτονος, χιτῶν ἅπαν κατ’ ἄρθρον, 768–769) according to Hyllus. Heracles groans that it is “plastered to my sides, and has devoured my inmost flesh” (πλευραῖσι γὰρ προσμαχθὲν ἐκ μὲν ἐσχάτας βέβρωκε σάρκας, 1052–53). The latter description calls to mind the Psalmist’s curse-cloak that “entered his inward parts like water.”

While Sophocles has joined together the Hesiodic tale of the poisoned robe and the vocabulary and dramatic situation of Aeschylus, he also seems to be drawing on and exploiting motifs that predate both these Greek works. The robe as a fatal gift that inflicts skin disease has a long history extending from the Old Testament, for example the leprous garment in the Book of Kings, and showing up in the early modern folklore of India as deadly khilats (ceremonial robes).³¹ Sophocles also seems to have been aware of the anointing curses that are found in the Near Eastern contracts (e.g. Assyrian treaties), or at least of some descendant of them.

Certainly the corrosive effects of the robe bring to mind Near Eastern garment curses, which are also constructed as “anointing rituals.” Deianeira has rubbed the fatal garment with a potion that she thinks is a love charm; it is really a deadly poison given to her by the centaur Nessus. Ancient love magic bears a significant similarity to binding spells or curses – as Faraone puts it, “If eros is a disease, then erotic magic is a curse – thus the blurring of categories here is comprehensible.”³² When Heracles puts it on to make a sacrifice the fire activates the poison and eats into his flesh: “my entire body is wasted” (διέφθαρμαι δέμας τὸ πᾶν, 1055–1056). The robe effectively melts away the flesh of Heracles’ body, an outcome that sounds strikingly similar to the melted wax images that represent the workings of the oath curse, a form of sympathetic magic used in some Near Eastern cultures, which I discuss below.

Unlike the *Agamemnon*, however, we are not dealing with an explicit curse here. While we might be inclined to think that Nessus cursed Heracles as he was dying, there is nothing in the text to substantiate this. As we have seen, the robe can be used in different kinds of spells, not just curses, in Hittite magical rituals; and Nessus had persuaded Deianeira to use the garment to cast a spell on her husband. The robe acts like a curse garment, and the language of physical disintegration

of marriage, although other vestimentary terms are used as well.

³⁰ Garner 1990, 108.

³¹ Maskiell and Mayor, 2001a and 2001b catalogue and discuss these legends which were influenced by ancient Iranian customs of presenting robes of honour (khilats) to friends and enemies. As they demonstrate, the Indian legends (dating from around 1600 CE) have similarities with the poisoned robes of Deianeira and Medea.

³² Faraone 1999, 43. As he further states “On a strictly forma basis, the, the techniques of many forms of erotic magic are quite indistinguishable from those of hostile curses used against enemies or of self-curses used in especially fearful oaths.” (55)

suggests that Sophocles has been influenced by the ancient vocabulary of curses transmitted over many centuries. But why are the Erinyes mentioned here? The best answer to this question comes from Garner who writes:

“Heracles’ Clytemnestra is not Deianeira, after all; if anything, it is himself. He has produced his own Furies. He has captured women and beasts, tamed and killed beasts and men, and the poison of one of his monstrous conquests [Nessus] has blended with the blood of another [the Hydra] so that one captured woman could use it to try and regain him from the latest female prize.”³³

Medea’s fatal robe

Since the dating of the *Trachiniae* is unknown – although the style suggests an early production – it is impossible to tell if it came before or after Euripides’ *Medea* (produced in 431 BCE). Like *Agamemnon* and *Trachiniae*, *Medea* features a woman who must confront the fact that her husband has selected a younger female for his bed. The disturbed households that result from the husbands’ alienation are symbolized by a perversion of the normative use of cloth, a domestic product, and therefore a fitting symbol of the *oikos*. Sophocles clearly wants his audience to think of Clytemnestra and her robe, but he makes no textual reference to *Medea*, nor does Euripides make reference to *Trachiniae*. Certainly one poet could have borrowed the idea of the flesh eating robe from the other, and the situational similarity with the jilted wife and the poisoned gift makes this a strong possibility. Lee is undoubtedly justified in suggesting that Aeschylus was the first to make the deadly peplos a signifier of the dysfunctional household, but there is no way to determine whether Sophocles or Euripides was the next poet to pick up the motif.

My interests lie more in how each tragedian used the enduring motif of the toxic garment that was part of an ongoing process of cultural transmission in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin. Aeschylus exploited the connotation of the curse as a garment, and worked in an even more ancient idea of the curse as a net. Sophocles developed the robe’s related association with magic spells, and went further than Aeschylus by expropriating and dramatizing the corrosive qualities of the robe. Euripides combines both these attributes of the poisoned robe; of the three toxic garments, his is the most closely aligned with the Near Eastern prototype of the garment curse appended to oaths.

It is significant that Euripides’ version of the poisoned robe actually does occur in the context of a perjured oath. The fate of Jason – the loss of his sons and the woman who would bear him more sons – is most certainly a penalty for breaking an oath to Medea, sworn before the play begins.³⁴ She accuses him of precisely this at several points (161–163, 492, 1392), and the Chorus concurs (409–445). The destruction of a man’s family is a typical malediction in Greek oaths, and Jason’s failure to take his oath (and Medea’s power) seriously leads to the catastrophe. But why must the Corinthian princess pay the penalty as well? Burnett suggests that both she and her father, Creon, are guilty by association; they are accessories to perjury, as it were.³⁵

Perhaps, however, we can go further than this. In a recent study Holland suggests that both Jason and Creon were targeted by a curse on the house of Aeolus, passed down through Sisyphus

³³ Garner 1990, 109.

³⁴ The importance of the perjury of Jason was first noted by Burnett 1973, 1–24. Kovacs (1994, 45–70) notes that the oath of Aegeus allows Medea to act as the retributive agent for this perjury.

³⁵ Burnett 1973, 14–15.

whose family was “linked in tragedy to an inherited curse” involving maternal infanticide, *e.g.* Melanippe.³⁶ Medea makes reference to Sisyphus at strategic points in the drama (404–407 and 1382), and thus, argues Holland, signals Jason’s implication in this inherited curse. The curse is therefore also the unfortunate legacy of the princess. Innocent herself of any wrongdoing, she nonetheless exemplifies how a curse can visit the descendants of its original target. On the other hand, we need to heed West’s caution about attaching too much significance to ancestral curses in the interpretations of tragedy. We cannot assume that the audience would automatically expect Euripides to be dramatizing this ancient curse. As West notes, Greek myth is a very flexible and dynamic tradition that provides basic outlines of a plot, but any myth can be manipulated and changed according to the agenda of the individual poets.³⁷ Holland’s thesis is intriguing, and it adds nuance to the death of Creon’s daughter, but we do not need to construct a hypothetical curse, since the curse of Jason’s perjured oath is operating quite manifestly.

The curse garment that Medea anoints with poison (789, along with the crown), recalls the anointing ritual associated with Near Eastern curses (for example the Hittite oath curse mentioned above which required the oath taker to “rub yourself down with oil” and put on the oath curses as a garment.) The effects of Medea’s poisoned gifts upon the princess bear some resemblances to the curses of Near Eastern oaths. The crown bursts into flames on the young woman’s head, and the poisoned cloak causes the skin of the princess to melt from her body like “like tears of sap oozing from pinewood” (1186–1200); the flesh of her father is pulled from his bones when he touches his daughter’s corpse. The fiery quality of the gifts is akin to the Near Eastern oaths and treaties that threaten the oath breaker with fire and disintegration. The image of the disintegration or melting of the target of curse occurs in a Hittite oath (1450–1350), “Just as this wax melts, and just as this mutton fat dissolves, whoever breaks these oaths (...) let him melt lik[e wax], let him dissolve like [mutton fat].” An Aramaic text known as the “Sefire Inscription” sworn in the 8th century BCE is typical of a group of curses that probably used wax images as surrogates for the perjurers. “As this wax is consumed by fire, thus Ma[tti’el] shall be consumed b[y fi]re.”³⁸ The action of the cloak on Creon and his daughter is remarkably like these vivid curses.

This physical manifestation of the curse is a variant of the skin ailment that would be imposed on perjurers and targets of curses in Near Eastern treaties. The destruction of the family of Creon set in motion by the ancient curse, or by their association with Jason’s perjury, is now complete, and it sets the stage for the contingent punishment of Jason, violator of oaths and possible co-inheritor of a curse. While Medea kills her sons the Chorus name her as an Erinyes (1260); she is the embodiment of a curse that has visited Creon, his daughter, and Jason, and perhaps it is significant that this Asian woman has activated a curse formula that has its origins in the East.³⁹ We do not have the terms of the oath that Jason swore to Medea, but the oath that Medea extracts from Aegeus (746–53) suggests what its format might have been. “Swear by the plain of Earth and the Sun,” she demands. These guarantor gods, Earth and Sun, are only used in loyalty or treaty

³⁶ Holland 2003, 263.

³⁷ West 1999.

³⁸ See Faraone 1993, 62 who explores the similarities between these types of oath curses and the oath of the Thera colonists in Cyrene in late 7th century BCE (SEG ix 4).

³⁹ Holland (2003, 269) notes, however that “in one sense Medea does embody the Erinyes as its agent of destruction, but the demonic spirit should also be seen as its own entity.” Luschnig makes similar observations (2006, 2), but also notes (156) that Medea functions as an Erinyes who punishes Jason for transgressions against “the rules of family life.”

oaths, whose terminology can be traced back to Near Eastern treaty oaths.⁴⁰

In conclusion: the tragic poets seem to have been aware of the ceremonial language that represented spells and curses as skin diseases coating the body like a cloak, or with anointing rituals that were metaphoric cloaks. The curse as a garment simile was widely used in oaths and treaties from Hittite and Kassite contracts from c.1400 BCE to Akkadian and Neo-Assyrian documents 900 years later. Although this form of malediction did not seem to be used in the treaty oaths of the Greeks, who apparently preferred the standard imprecation on a man's progeny, it does seem to have seeped into the cultural imagination of 5th century Athens. The tragic poets are not interested in replicating an ancient treaty, but they have mined the language of curses for the cause of poetry. Note that it is female characters who wield the toxic textiles: the poets have exploited a long standing association of women and cloth production and have married that convention to an ancient curse or spell formula that conceives of the garment as an instrument of pain and death.

⁴⁰ The earliest Greek example would be the temporary truce between the Greeks and Trojans at Iliad 3.85–301. Bachvarova 2007, 180 usefully summarizes the scholarship on the similarities between the Iliadic treaty oath and its Near Eastern precedents which include invocations of Earth and Sun.

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