

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* 782-974: The poetics of deixis¹

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I'll try to demonstrate that it is possible, using a deictic approach, to reveal the traits of Agamemnon's character in the third episode of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (782-974). Deixis as a means of understanding Agamemnon's portrayal in his first speech (810-854) refutes the widely held opinion among scholars of the hubris syndrome. Nevertheless from our analysis of the deictic network it follows that despite Agamemnon's concern with political and religious propriety his egocentric inclination smolders in lines 914-930, expressed through the striking abundance of personal and possessive pronouns of the first person often at emphatic position of the verse. In conclusion deixis is proven to be the most reliable way of evaluating Agamemnon's character in the carpet scene.

Keywords: deictic approach, the deictic network, poetics, Agamemnon's portrayal.

RESUMEN

El presente estudio tiene como objetivo examinar los versos 782-974 del *Agamenón* de Esquilo a través de las herramientas metodológicas de deixis y determinar el carácter de Agamenón. En primer lugar el análisis de la deictica red en el primer discurso de Agamenón (810-854) nos permite refutar la opinión común entre los estudiosos asociada al síndrome de hubris. No obstante del análisis de los versos 914-930 se puede extraer como conclusión que a pesar de los esfuerzos de Agamenón para adoptar un comportamiento políticamente y religiosamente correcto su inclinación egocéntrica se detecta en la abundancia de los pronombres personales y posesivos de la primera persona. En conclusión la poética de deixis puede considerarse como el modo adecuado para que evaluemos con exactitud el carácter de Agamenón en el dicho «carpet scene» episodio.

Palabras clave: deixis, la deictica red, la poética, el carácter de Agamenón.

¹ Lyons (1977: 636) provides a useful definition of deixis: «the term deixis ... is now used in linguistics to refer to the function of personal and demonstrative pronouns, of tense and of a variety of other grammatical and lexical features which relate utterances to the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of the act of utterance». Bakker (2010: 152) defines deixis as «the pointing function of language, which involves the strategies by which speakers place themselves in place and in time as well as with respect to each other». On the poetics of deixis see Felson (2004). For a collection of papers on deixis in the field of classics see *Arethusa* 37(2004). Edmunds (2008) offers a very useful historical introduction of deixis in the field of classics. The analysis of the use of deictic devices in the tragedy has not been without good results, see for example Nelli's dissertation in Sophocles' *Trachiniae* (2006) supervised by A.M.Bowie. On the use of personal pronouns-as-subject (PPS) in sentences and clauses in Euripides and Seneca's plays see Perdicoyanni-Paleologou (2005) and Jacobson's dissertation (2011) on deixis in 5th century Athenian Drama. For an overview of previous scholarship on the subject of deixis see Jacobson (2011: 6-30).

In this essay² I'll try to demonstrate that it is possible, by careful consideration of the text using a deictic approach,³ to reveal the traits of Agamemnon's character in the third episode of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (782-974). The dynamics of what Budelmann & Easterling call «reading minds» has much to offer to understanding Agamemnon's «character» because it «allows us to sidestep questions of consistency and development, since mind unlike character, does not come with assumptions of permanence».⁴ The thing to note here is that deixis as a mind-reading process puts the emphasis not on the true character of the *dramatis personae* but on the dynamics of their engagement with other people, as it is formulated by the text itself.

The presentation of Agamemnon in the carpet scene⁵ has been the focus of much of the controversy about character in Aeschylus.⁶ In my opinion, those scholars maintaining that Agamemnon agrees to walk on the purple tapestries because of his *hybris* are mistaken.⁷ Besides the text itself and in particular its deictic features offer no basis for explaining Agamemnon's yielding as due to his inner *hybris*.⁸

² This paper was presented in September 2007 at the 8th International Conference on Greek Linguistics held in Ioannina, Greece (the Greek version of this announcement is available in http://www.linguist-uoi.gr/cd_web/case2.html)

³ For a good discussion of the deictics constructing the dramatic space and action in the carpet scene (theatrical / performative deixis) see Philippides (1984: 46-50).

⁴ Budelmann & Easterling (2010: 291).

⁵ The carpet scene has been much admired and discussed. For a review of the proposed suggestions see recently Seidensticker (2009: 232-235). For a survey of the numerous theories about the nature and significance of the luxurious cloth central to the carpet scene see McNeil (2005:1 n. 2). Bakola (2014) in her reading of the tapestry scene demonstrates that the imagery of textiles plays a crucial role in Aeschylus' symbolic reflection on humanity's place within the natural order and encourages a more profound understanding of the *oikos* interior.

⁶ For a discussion of the scene's importance in the boarder context of Agamemnon's *êthos* see Easterling (1973). For the question of whether Agamemnon's behavior in this scene is an expression of his guilt within the scene itself or in the context of his entire life, see Lloyd-Jones (1962: 199) and (1979: 67), Jones (1962: 82-94), Lebeck (1971: 52-58, 60), Dawe (1963: 50), in his effort to resolve the whole controversy over Agamemnon's character, explains the case in terms of purely dramatic considerations. Cf. the observation made by Raeburn in Raeburn & Thomas (2011: LVII) that each character is discussed in the light of two perspectives: their function within the broad design of the play or the trilogy (namely in thematic terms), and the humanity in which that function is clothed. On discussions of the characterization problem see Pelling (1990), esp. in Greek Drama Easterling (1990:83-99) and Goldhill (1990: 100-127). Cf. also Gould (1978) and Seidensticker (2008). Nyusztay (2002) posed the problem of understanding tragedy through the transition from character to self (chapter V). Thumiger (2007: 18-26) offers a helpful overview of some earlier approaches on character and characterization in Greek tragedy; and she defines the «self» as «mind and consciousness» (2007: 3). In addition see Muich (2010: 19-23) on scholarly approaches to Character in Greek Tragedy. For a recent methodical exposition of the main problems relating to the study of «character» in Greek Tragedy see Lawrence (2013: 1-50).

⁷ Fraenkel (1950.2: 441-442) conceived Agamemnon as a noble man a great gentleman, possessed of moderation and self-control worn out by the unceasing struggle, who gives in to his wife's wishes. Against Fraenkel, Denniston & Page (1957: 15) believe that in spite of his pious façade, Agamemnon actually wished to step on the tapestries and Clytemnestra provokes his poorly concealed desire. On the issue of diametrically opposed «character-studies» of Agamemnon see Goldhill (1986: 170-171).

⁸ Thus we again return to Gundert's argument (1960: 75), that the text itself does not provide information for explaining Agamemnon's yielding as due to his inner *hybris*. Cf. also Simpson (1971: 96).

Let us look at the action from the moment when Agamemnon arrives at Argos (783ff.). In this passage (783-809), the Chorus make a clear distinction between past and present.⁹ Ἀπομούσως and γράφειν (801)¹⁰ suggest that their negative past attitudes as formulated in the previous choral odes reflect Agamemnon's characterization within the mythical and literary tradition.¹¹ Nevertheless their friendly disposition expressed in all possible ways (the notion of εὐφρων has been intensified by two adverbial phrases both in the form of 'litotes' in line 805: οὐκ ἄπ' ἄκρας φρενός and οὐδ' ἀφίλω)¹² is supposed to be shared by the spectators too (a focus of sympathy).¹³ To the extent that the feelings of the audience are regulated by the Chorus' favorable attitude towards Agamemnon the following passage is to be cohered into a favorable character portrait of Agamemnon.

Agamemnon's first speech (810-854) carries no overtone of arrogance.¹⁴ Although justly proud of the Argive victory at Troy¹⁵ he is, nevertheless, conscious of his debt to the gods (in the 45 lines of his speech he refers to the gods six times)¹⁶ and of the legal justification of the Argive expedition (cf. the recurrent legal language: δίκη, δικαίων, δίκας, ψήφους ἔθεντο). Textual deixis¹⁷ [(πρῶτον μὲν ... θεοὺς ἐγχωρίους δίκη προσεπιπεῖν (810-811) – θεοῖς μὲν ἐξέτεινα φροῖμιον τόδε (829)] rounds off the first part of Agamemnon's speech by restating his religious feelings deeply rooted in his piety towards the gods.¹⁸

⁹ For the text of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* I use the edition of Page (1972).

¹⁰ Those terms require imagining an inartistic-unattractive-badly painted figure of Agamemnon, i.e. Agamemnon is inscribed (γεγραμμένος) upon the literary memory in a negative way (ἀπομούσως). For an analysis of these terms see Hall (2006: 134-135).

¹¹ Agamemnon's character is defined quite clearly in the *Iliad* and this literary tradition could be the basis for the characterization of the Aeschylean Agamemnon. See Garton (1957: 252) and Schenker (1999: 648). Since spectators are already familiar with Agamemnon's character and his negative (ἀπομούσως) literary past, they will come to the performance with provisional judgments of his character that they will revise on the basis of the textual evidence. On this dynamic process of character construction see Bednarowski (2009: 9 and 13) where he notes that «in a genre based on familiar figures and their stories, shifts (i.e. in the depiction of dramatic characters) keep spectators off guard». Sedensticker (2008: 342 n. 35) rightly stresses the fact that the intertextual play of the tragedians with the foil of earlier representations of the same character is used as a means of enriching —by parallel and contrast— the complexity of their portraits.

¹² See Fraenkel (1950.2: 363 ad 801).

¹³ For the expression «focus of sympathy» that implies a shift in spectators' sympathies see Heath (1987: 90-95).

¹⁴ On the importance of characterization in Aeschylus not only in the context of decision scenes see Seidensticker (2009).

¹⁵ According to Raeburn in Raeburn & Thomas (2011: LVIII) «the king's grandiloquent language suggests a magnificent conquering hero ... with the arrogance and blood-guilt attendant on being a sacker of cities».

¹⁶ See Simpson (1971: 96).

¹⁷ The expression φροῖμιον τόδε points to πρῶτον μὲν within the text (anaphoric or textual deixis). On this see Fraenkel (1950.2: 382 ad 829) and Felson (2004: 254).

¹⁸ Even the use of μεταίτιος (810-11 θεοὺς ... τοὺς ἐμοὶ μεταίτιος) is deeply rooted in Greek religious feeling, despite the fact that some scholars have taken it as a proof of Agamemnon's arrogance. See Fraenkel (1950.2: 371-374) for an excellent and very thorough survey of the interpretations concerning

Beyond this, one has to pay attention to the use of πολύμνηστον (821) which is a linguistic marker pointing to the enunciation itself,¹⁹ namely to the recurrent (πολυ-) mention (-μνηστον) of the gods as a sign of Agamemnon's gratitude (χάριν).

My second point involves what I shall call «personal/grammatical» deixis. This refers to the function of personal pronouns and to the category of person in general.²⁰ In the 45 lines of his speech Agamemnon is using 4 personal pronouns of the first person and 8 verbal forms of the first singular person. If there seems to be an overtone of arrogance, the first person plurals ἐπραξάμεσθα (823) –βουλευσόμεσθα (846) –πειρασόμεσθα (850) used in a sociative sense emphasize Agamemnon's membership of the city and his constitutional role in democracy.²¹ Decisions are made collectively in the βουλή with the advice of others present (κοινούς ἀγῶνας). Agamemnon as a leader suggests that he is always dependent on the consent of the ruled to some degree.²²

Lines 852-853 suggest that Agamemnon's conduct is based on his faith in the gods that are his first priority (πρῶτον μὲν in 810 is picked up again in 852 ἐλθὼν θεοῖσι πρῶτα δεξιῶσομαι: θεοί are to be greeted first and this is repeatedly stated). Since Agamemnon represents a morally desirable set of traits, the spectators adopt an attitude of sympathy towards him and they are more disposed to become allied with him and to feel pity for his imminent murder. Based on Agamemnon's political and religious viewpoints spectators «construct moral structures» in which character is ranked in a system of preference.²³

While the deictic network of his speech shows Agamemnon's political and religious correctness, the deictic shift introduced by Hughes in his translation²⁴ (in the 49 lines of his translation there are 13 personal pronouns of the first person) emphasizes Agamemnon's egocentric character by making prominent the importance of *hybris*. Agamemnon's status as leader and triumphant victor must be confirmed in the way he speaks and in the way he is addressed by the Chorus. Therefore, Hughes puts emphasis on his royal identity (*King! Crusher of Troy! King!*) by omitting the patronymic Ἀτρῆως γένεθλον (784) which invokes Agamemnon's cursed ancestry and its demands on him. The patronymic by invoking Agamemnon's history is an important feature of how he and others construct his social position. What changes with the omission of the patronymic is not the ontological identity of the person addressed,

μεταίτιος. Lloyd-Jones (1979: 60) also offers a plausible answer: «... a Greek might claim without blasphemy to share the credit for an achievement with the gods who have helped him». Raeburn & Thomas (2011: 152 ad 811) note that the use of μεταίτιος with the emphatic form ἐμοὶ may indicate arrogance.

¹⁹ This suggests a self-reflexive deixis.

²⁰ Greek language as many other languages grammaticalizes the category of person by inflecting the main verb. On this see Lyons (1977: 639).

²¹ Rosenbloom (1995: 114) has pointed out that the figure of Agamemnon «embodies a set of public values, but his story demonstrates the limits of those values» and that he «condenses and presents in analogical form the character of Athenian naval hegemony» (1995: 106) that contains the source of its own subversion.

²² Furthermore, the poet by making use of the expression κοινούς ἀγῶνας (845) emphasizes the constitutional checks to Agamemnon's authority. On this see Fraenkel (1950.2: 388 ad 345).

²³ On this see Smith (1995: 84).

²⁴ Hughes (1999: 39-41). On the translational problems that Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* raises see Walton (2006: 43-61).

but the relationship that the Chorus wish to construct between themselves and that addressee and the audience.²⁵

After Agamemnon's opening speech, Clytemnestra appears and begins her speech by addressing the elders of Argos.²⁶ While the Queen boasts about «her husband-loving ways» (856 τὸν φιλόνορα τρόπον) she actually talks at the King in an oblique form of communication by making him the deictic center of her speech. Nevertheless spatial proximity designated by demonstrative pronouns such as οὗτος and ὅδε (860, 867, 896) implies sentimental alienation between husband and wife.²⁷

The second part of her speech (877-886) where the Queen gives explanation of Orestes' absence at the court of Strophius is addressed to the King himself (879 μηδὲ θαυμάσης τόδε). Through the strong syntactic link of τε καὶ in the ἐμῶν τε καὶ σῶν (878) Clytemnestra makes clear her point: their *παῖς* guarantees the indissoluble conjugal bond and their familiar unity remains stable. Second-person deictics such as σέθεν (882) and ἀμφί σοι (890, 893) engage the attention of the person addressed on the third part of Clytemnestra's speech (895-905) containing a panegyric for her husband. Finally, in the last part of her speech (905-913), the tone becomes more personal (she addresses her husband φίλον κάρα)²⁸ and she is trying to bid the King walk on the tapestries by reminding him of his political and social status (907 ὤναξ). Agamemnon's social entity and political position (ἄναξ) within the Greek army and the Argive city is actually an important factor in how the poet portrays him responding to Clytemnestra's claim. Agamemnon's status as ἄναξ must be confirmed in some substantive way; from Clytemnestra's point of view there appears to be an equation between the symbolic act of walking on the purple tapestries and the realization of Agamemnon's power and position.²⁹

Employment of deixis in Agamemnon's answer (914-930) is relevant. Despite the fact that the King by invoking a religious and political set of standards that prescribe his

²⁵ For the importance of the denomination of a person see de Jong (1993) and Brown (2006: 10 and 21-25).

²⁶ Social factors that reflect the relationship between the speaker and the addressee determine the form of address used by Clytemnestra to the Chorus (855 πρέσβος Ἀργείων). The choice of the abstract word πρέσβος instead of the simple πρέσβεις gives her speech more solemnity and reflects Clytemnestra's recognition of relative social position within some social hierarchy. Thus, Clytemnestra by addressing the Chorus in this way, wishes to define herself in terms of social attributes involving an externally constructed valuation of the self. The positive social value Clytemnestra effectively claims for herself by the expression φιλόνορα τρόπον (856) can be confirmed only in the presence of others, in this case the Chorus. On this see Brown (2006: 10-13). It should be noted that despite Clytemnestra's manipulation of the masculine discursive practices such as direct public address her use of deceptive persuasion in the carpet scene retains feminine qualities on which see McClure (1999: 79-80).

²⁷ Porter (1990: 46) commenting on line 896 notes that «the man is palpably there (τόνδε), for all to see, and yet she (Clyt.) refuses to form a coherent image of him».

²⁸ Clytemnestra by calling her husband φίλον κάρα (905), namely a form of affectionate address, wishes to achieve certain psychological or cognitive effects in her addressee. On these desired psychological / sentimental effects see Conacher (1987: 36) and the comment of Fraenkel (1950.2: 411 ad 905).

²⁹ On Clytemnestra as playing the part of the flatterer of tyrants see Hall (1989: 204-207. Hall (1989: 207) is most likely correct in identifying Clytemnestra's tempting Agamemnon to *hybris* as a powerful visual signifier of despotism.

behaviour (i.e. reverence for the gods³⁰ and rejection of the barbarian προσκύνησις³¹) resists Clytemnestra's invitation, the striking abundance of personal and possessive pronouns (7 pronouns of the first person) emphasizes Agamemnon's egocentric inclination.³² The constant repetition of pronouns, often at emphatic position in the verse, indicates that there is a flaw in Agamemnon's character and deictic strategy explains why Agamemnon let his weakness be exploited by Clytemnestra.³³

Now we come to the final passage of the carpet scene in which after a rapid exchange of stichomythia (931-943)³⁴ Agamemnon yields to Clytemnestra's request and walks into the house on the purple tapestries. Verse 932 is the essential point, as I see it, for our understanding of Agamemnon's decision to yield. Γνώμην μὲν and especially the use of μὲν solitarium suggests that Agamemnon is not always rationally in control of himself; his γνώμη stated quite clearly in lines 914-930 remains unchanged (Agamemnon still knows that what his wife proposes is wrong) but his compulsion not expressed in words³⁵ (this is implied by the omission of the antithesis with the μὲν here) makes him walk on the purple against his better judgment (γνώμη).³⁶

Clytemnestra's flattery aroused the masculine vanity in Agamemnon's mind and by overwhelming completely his γνώμη led him to comply with her request (943 πιθοῦ, ἄκράτος μέντοι πάρες γ' ἢ ἔκων ἔμοι / 944 ἀλλ' εἰ δοκεῖ σοι ταῦθ' ...).³⁷ The clash of wills reflected in the line-ends of 930-932 ends in Clytemnestra's overbearing persua-

³⁰ The recurrence of θεός (3 times at lines 922, 925 and 928) and χρή/χρεών (at lines 917, 922 and 928) suggest Agamemnon's piousness that recognizes the boundaries set by the laws of the gods (in line 928 θεοῦ as the first word of the verse and χρή as the last word of the verse structure the framework of the principles accepted by Agamemnon).

³¹ Agamemnon rejects the effeminate lifestyle of an oriental ruler (918-919) and reproves Clytemnestra for kneeling (χαμαιπετές) in front of him like a barbarian (919-920).

³² Raeburn & Thomas (2011: 164 ad 914-930) call attention to Agamemnon's assertiveness that comes out in the use of the first person pronouns and adjectives.

³³ The striking abundance of pronouns of the first person indicates Agamemnon's weakness. Clytemnestra understands this egocentric inclination and plays upon his weakness. We could agree with Winnington-Ingram (1983: 93): «A final appeal to masculine vanity —a danger of which Agamemnon was unaware, an appeal which turns the scale— and he gives away». Lawrence (2013: 83-87) observes that the carpet scene serves to illustrate Agamemnon's hidden motives and he regards this behavior as falling into the category of ἀκρασία, namely non rational desire obscuring the reasoning that would lead him to correct action.

³⁴ On the significance of the stichomythia at 931-943 in Agamemnon's yielding see Konishi (1989: 215-222).

³⁵ Raeburn & Thomas (2011:168-169) observe that Agamemnon «exemplifies the man whom excessive prosperity has pushed towards Ate (away from his basic character), the man whom overbearing persuasion compels to act even against his better judgment».

³⁶ Real people as Agamemnon depicted here are not always rationally in control of themselves and they don't always act as they know is best for them (γνώμη). Cf. Easterling's view (1973: 14) that «Aeschylus is interested in real people and the compulsions that make them do self-destructive things». For the exact meaning of γνώμη see Snell (1924: 35-36), Huart (1968: 35, 53-54 and 57), Huart (1973) and Karavites (1990).

³⁷ Goldhill (2004: 50) observes that «what is dramatized here is the queen's persuasive language in the pursuit of dominance». For an overview of peitho in tragedy see Buxton (1982). On Clytemnestra's cunning use of language see Betensky (1978), McClure (1999), Foley (2001).

sive manner which Agamemnon himself acknowledges in lines 956-957 with a very strong verb, κατέστραμμαί.

In conclusion 1) deixis is proven to be the most reliable way of evaluating a character's portrayal. 2) Deixis as a methodological tool refutes the widely held opinion among scholars of the «hybris syndrom». ³⁸ 3) From our analysis of the deictic network it follows that despite Agamemnon's concern with political and religious propriety an egocentric inclination smolders in lines 914-930, expressed through the striking abundance of personal and possessive pronouns often at emphatic position in the verse.

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³⁸ I owe this formulation to Raeburn in Raeburn & Thomas (2011: LVII).

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