Light and Darkness Imagery in the Oresteia of Aeschylus

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LIGHT AND DARKNESS IMAGERY IN THE ORESTEIA OF AESCHYLUS

by

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of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Aeschylus, like so many other ancient poets, is a man known to us almost solely through his works. But his seven extant tragedies tell us in a most eloquent way that Aeschylus was a great dramatist and a man of deep insight and creative imagination. Despite our all but complete loss of the peripheral elements of music and dance in these tragedies, they still strike us today as brilliant and hopeful human expressions.

Aeschylus may correctly be called a "prophet of progress." He had an unlimited faith in his country and its future. He seems to believe in a divine law gradually purified of misunderstandings, and in man's growing perception of that law. He expressed this faith and hope through one of the most integral and comprehensive forms of art discovered by man, Attic tragedy, which combined drama (plot, character, and visual representation) with fine poetry, music, and the dance.

One author has pointed out that the tragedies of Aeschylus provide a kind of mid-point between the concrete symbolism of the epics of Homer and the abstractions of the philosophers.¹ Finley

characterizes the Iliad and the Odyssey as a kind of awed contemplation of the outer world, with the self borne in the hands of natural forces, in union with all of nature. Aeschylus played a great part in paving the way for ethical investigations by bringing the conscious self and its responsibility to the fore. (A case in point will be the moral dilemma of Orestes, faced with a choice between avenging his father and obeying the command of Apollo or sparing Clytemnestra and yielding to ordinary natural feeling.) While Homer rarely deals in abstractions, the later Greek philosophers will write entire treatises on the theoretical level, and

the path is straight which leads from Aeschylus to Aristotle, and thence to the analytical conquests of the West. The tone of these future conquests is already visible in Aeschylus: political justice, rational inquiry, moral obligation.

Though we shall have ample opportunity to see and appreciate Aeschylus' skill as a dramatist and the wonderful expanse of his thought, it is his talent as a poet that specifically interests us here. One modern critic refers to Aeschylus as "one with whom Pindar alone among ancient writers can compare as a master of expressive metaphor." It is his mastery of the forms of poetic expression that we will take up at greater length in this thesis.

Aeschylus composed his tragedies in trilogy form, that is, in groups of three interconnected plays, somewhat analogous to a

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2Ibid. 3Ibid.
modern three-act play. The three plays of each trilogy made a
more or less organically unified work of art. Of all Greek tri-
logies, only the Oresteia of Aeschylus remains for our appreci-
ation and study. This is also the only example of the full scope
of Aeschylus' art and a magnificent summation of his profoundest
insights.

All the great Aeschylean themes culminate in the Oresteia,
partly as the only extant trilogy, hence the only example of
his themes in full sweep, partly as a work of his last years
and highest powers.5

The three plays of the Oresteia—the Agamemnon, the Choephoroi, and
the Eumenides—are each in themselves a great drama, but they form
a single work of art, like some vast triptych. Such a production
may be expected to reach a depth of meaning and impact usually
unattainable by any single tragedy and the Oresteia, in fact, has
been praised as one of the greatest products of the human spirit.
In E.T. Owen's words, it is a great "symphony of heaven and hell."6

It is good to emphasize that the trilogy, not the individual trag-
edy, is the art-form which Aeschylus used. The Oresteia, once
again, is the only example we have of this art-form; only in it
can we see the art of the tragedian as he fashions three separate
entities into an organic unity. It is easy to see, then, why so
much of the work of scholars and critics of the Oresteia has been
concerned with pointing out various recurring themes and contin-
uity in the action of the trilogy. These are what make it a good

5Finley, op. cit., p. 246.

work of art as a trilogy.

We might show, and others have shown, that the Oresteia is a unified drama on any one of several levels: the specifically dramatic level of plot and character, the moral or philosophical level, the theological level, and the poetic level (i.e., the specific poetic language and imagery used by the author.) It must be noted, of course, that these elements cannot be abstracted from one another in any complete way. We attempt the separation only for clarity in the analysis of the trilogy.

First, let us examine briefly the basic, dramatic level of the trilogy: its events and its characters. Some tragedies of Aeschylus are noted for their comparative lack of action. Murray comments that in the other plays there is usually one great situation, like Prometheus being nailed to the rock, or the women in the Suppliants being pursued by lustful men, broken only by "sudden flashes of action."  

The Oresteia is much more eventful, but it is still rather simple in action, with most of the vast dimensions of the trilogy reflected in the choral lyrics. In the Agamemnon, a king returns from an unjust and bloody war and is treacherously murdered by his wife and her lover. The murderers are in turn also slain by the avenging heir to the throne, Orestes, in the Choephoroi. The avenger is thereafter driven off by the Furies, who hunt down and punish matricides. He, however, is finally saved by the intervention of the Olympian gods in the final play of the trilogy, the

Humenides. There is little complex characterization, as is always the case with Aeschylus.

We have, then, three tragic events in the history of a single family, linked as cause and effect. This is the basic plot which runs through the three plays of the Oresteia, making it one dramatic unity.

On another level, there is concretized or symbolised in the Oresteia the working out of a great moral problem. J. Finley has pointed out that every drama of Aeschylus is concerned with an evolution of some kind: his thought is essentially progress-oriented. In the Oresteia an evolution in understanding is dramatised on all the levels we mentioned: the dramatic, the moral, the theological, and the poetic. On the moral level, the evolution has been described as a passage from "a morality of vendetta to a morality of law."9 We have already seen briefly the predicament of the characters of the trilogy: Clytemnestra and Aegisthus kill Agamemnon in vengeance, and are themselves killed in vengeance by Orestes; Orestes is then pursued by the avenging Furies. To use Murray's words again, the characters of the trilogy are "tied down to a wheel of revolving retribution, unending, mechanical."10 The old principle enunciated several times in the trilogy, παθεὶν τον ἐπούλων αὐτῆς (“as a man does, so must he suffer”), the principle of re-

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8 Finley, op. cit., pp. 6-7.
9 Wheelwright, op. cit., p. 254.
10 Murray, op. cit., p. 199.
11 Aeschylus Agamemnon 1564.
venge or retribution, is behind all the bloodshed in the Oresteia. Agamemnon had a duty to avenge the long-past murder of his brothers on Agamemnon, the living heir of their killer; Clytemnestra had her own motives for vengeance: the bloody sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia, Agamemnon's infidelity, etc. Orestes was obliged by Apollo and by his own honor to avenge his father's death by slaying his murderers. The Furies set out to hound Orestes to death in their turn because he has committed the objectively horrible crime of matricide. Is this blind repetition of bloodshed to continue forever?

With the intervention of Apollo and Athena, and through them, of Zeus, the tide of blood is stopped. Athena, to whom Orestes was sent by Apollo, calls for a trial by jury for Orestes, to the consternation of the Furies. Instead of Orestes being blindly punished for a crime, the circumstances of the act are carefully weighed and the young man is acquitted, with the deciding vote being cast by Athena herself. The blind, unreasoning axe of retribution is cast aside; reason and civilization have won a victory.

It is most interesting to note that this development in the Oresteia parallels the actual development of Athenian law. In the earliest times, as is common in primitive civilizations, the punishment of murder devolved upon the relatives and friends of the victim as a very serious duty. Little or no distinction was made between homicide and manslaughter, nor were other extenuating circumstances taken into account. The physical fact of one man's
killing another was enough to set the inexorable wheels of vendetta into motion. This situation lasted well through the age of Hesiod, 750-650 B.C. But in 681 B.C., the statesman Draco was given full legislative powers in Athens, and introduced, among other innovations, a new code of homicide laws. This "code of Draco" was aimed at doing away with blood-feuds (which often became minor civil wars) by putting the punishment of murder into the hands of the state. The code also recognised the importance of the killer's intent and of circumstances surrounding the killing. It was a great stride forward for punitive law and for civilisation. This victory of human reason in Athens we see dramatised in the Oresteia, in which the three plays are united by their search for an ultimate answer to the problem of retribution and the blood-feud.

A third level on which the Oresteia is unified is the theological level. Aeschylus is noted for his lengthy speculations, direct and indirect, about the gods. The Oresteia is a case in point. When we look into the theology of the trilogy, however, we may first be impressed only with its disunity and inconsistency.

The Zeus of the Agamemnon seems to differ substantially from the Zeus of the two later plays. In the beginning of the trilogy, Agamemnon, even though he has followed the command of Zeus


in waging war on Troy, is killed for his 

hybris. Zeus seems rem-
mote, careless of the fate of his servant. Yet, at the end of the 

trilogy, the chief of all the gods saves the slayer, Orestes, from 

the Furies through his oracle, Apollo, and Athena, his faithful 
daughter. Did Aeschylus purposely make Zeus a more kindly god in 
the last play of the trilogy than in the first, or was it mere in-
consistency?

H.D.F. Kitto sees only one satisfactory answer to apparent 
inconsistency on the part of Zeus, and in this answer he finds a 

unification of the whole trilogy: "I hope to show that the idea of 
a 'progressive' Zeus, properly understood . . . explains perfectly 
the structure and treatment of the trilogy . . . ."14 The notion 
of an improving Zeus, one who becomes progressively more and more 
just and wise, recurs in the tragedies of Aeschylus. It is most 
striking in the Prometheia.

Apollo, too, is differently portrayed in the Agamemnon

than in the Choephoroi and the Eumenides. In the first play, he 
himself is in the position of exacting revenge--on Cassandra, his 
prophetess, for refusing his advances. Cassandra knows clearly 
that her cruel death is due to the curse of the "god of light." 
Yet, in the second and third plays Apollo champions the slain Aga-
memnon and his avenging son, Orestes, and proves his right to the 
title "healer." Apollo, the oracle of Zeus, thus grows in stature 
(we might say, becomes more what Aeschylus thinks a god should be) 

14H.D.F. Kitto, Form and Meaning in Drama (London: Methuen 
during the course of the trilogy. According to this theory concerning Zeus and Apollo (the former most particularly), what at first seemed to be inconsistency turns out to be a source of unity. A unifying evolution takes place dramatically from the beginning of the first play to the triumphant end of the third. At the great conclusion of the trilogy, Zeus, by saving Orestes, makes good the confidence that the chorus placed in him when they sang in the first ode of the *Agamemnon* that Zeus was the only one who could "cast off the burden of futility." We called Aeschylus a poet of progress. His basic attitude of looking forward to better things is here applied to the theological realm.

But in the *Oresteia* the great, pivotal theological problem is one concerning the division of the government of the universe. It is a struggle between the Olympian and chthonic deities. The former are represented by Zeus, Apollo, and Athena, the latter by the Furies, age-old forces of fate and retribution, the "daughters of Night."

The Furies refer to the Olympians as the "younger gods" and to themselves as keepers of the "ancient laws." The conflict underlies all the action of the first two plays, and breaks directly into the dramatic action of the third. With his brother, Menelaus, Agamemnon led an expedition to Troy under the aegis of

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15. Aeschylus *Agamemnon* 165. (Note: translations, unless otherwise noted, will follow R. Lattimore, *Aeschylus: Oresteia* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953]).

16. Aeschylus *Eumenides* 778. 17. Ibid.
Zeus Xenios. Yet, Agamemnon falls victim, because of that war and his **hybris**, to the terrible forces of darkness and Ate embodied in Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.

No matter how much the characters and the chorus in the *Agamemnon* protest their confidence in Zeus, we are conscious throughout that it is not the celestial, but the infernal powers, the terrors that walk in darkness, who have the nearer hold on the strings of the puppet show.\(^{18}\)

In the *Choephoroi* Orestes comes as a divinely sent avenger to the house of the Atreidae. Apollo, the oracle of Zeus, has threatened him with a painful death if he does not wipe out his father's murderers. When he is about to slay his mother, Orestes hesitates. But his friend, Pylades, gives him the last impetus he needs with the words: "Count all men your enemies rather than the gods."\(^{19}\) Orestes carries out the god's orders; yet, when he has done so, the knife of retribution begins almost immediately to move toward him. He runs in terror from the stage at the sight of the black-robed Furies, avengers of mothers slain by their children. The chorus is left to muse dejectedly about where it will all end.

The stage is set for the struggle which breaks dramatically into the open in the *Eumenides* with the on-stage appearance of the shining Olympians, Apollo and Athena, and the disgusting, horrible Furies, with their whining, hateful manner. We know the solution of the struggle: Orestes is acquitted, having been protected from the immediate attack of the Furies and tried according to Athena's


\(^{19}\)Aeschylus *Choephoroi* 902.
plan. The Furies are full of dire threats, but Athena gradually shows them the wisdom of a rational inquiry instead of blind vengeance, and convinces them that there was no offense meant to them personally in Orestes' acquittal. She persuades them to accept a place in the divine government of Athens, a place of honor and respect; and they are transformed into the Eumenides: friendly, protective gods who will shower blessings upon the young city-state. As Kitto puts it, Athena shows that "the daughters of Night have something to contribute as well as the god of light."\(^{20}\) We must remember that Athena is totally "of the Father," sprung from Zeus' brow, and she does what Zeus wills, like a faithful daughter; and Apollo is the oracle or voice of Zeus. Thus, it is not only Athena and Apollo who are reconciled with the underworld gods, but Zeus and all the Olympians. In the final words of the glorious song of thanksgiving at the end of the trilogy,

\[
\text{Zeus Ὁ πανόπτες}
\]
\[
\text{ἄνω μεῖρα τε πυκνάτερα.}\]  

We prefer the sense of Thomson's translation: "Zeus, who beheldeth all, with the Fates is at last reconciled."\(^{22}\) The forces of light and reason are reconciled with the powers of darkness, the "old gods"--the mysterious ones.

In summing up the whole trilogy, Owen says: "The end is present from the beginning in the mind of the unknown god whom men

\(^{20}\)Kitto, op. cit., p. 64.

\(^{21}\)Aeschylus Eumenides 1045-1046.

reach for imperfectly under the name of Zeus. At the end we have found Zeus, and Zeus has found himself.23 What is this "end?"

Orestes is acquitted of murder, and the House of Atreus stands free of guilt; this result is achieved because a crime has been tried according to principles of reasoned justice. In the working out of this solution the new Olympian gods are united peacefully with the old gods of earth and darkness. Thus we see three levels of the trilogy, the dramatic, the moral, and the theological, united in a progression from pain and disorder to a successful and happy solution.

We have now traced a certain unity through the trilogy on three levels. All of these have been given much fruitful discussion, as is hinted by our references. But the one level that we have not yet discussed is the poetic level; and this is the aspect with which we are most concerned. We must not forget that the Oresteia is poetry as well as drama and dance. In looking for an artistic unification of the three plays we must examine the poetic element. How are these three great dramatic poems drawn together into a poetic unity?

Although the nature and characteristics of poetic expression are much too vast a subject to be taken up in detail here, we may be helped by considering a few relevant points. If we try to characterise poetry, we must always include the element of concrete imagery. True poetry by its nature appeals to the whole man: mind, heart, imagination, senses. Such an appeal can never be
achieved merely by abstract, general language. Concrete particulars are used to clothe more universal notions. One critic maintains simply that poetry is creative metaphor, that is: the tracing of new connections between things or ideas; the use of one "world" to explain another—usually the "sense-world" to explain the "idea-world." The point we would make is this: sense-imagery (largely the use of metaphor) is an integral part of poetry. Imagery can in no sense be looked upon as merely "frosting on the cake." It is an essential ingredient of the cake. A poet speaks in images.

This viewpoint on imagery, common among modern critics, has found its way into classical studies in recent years with such widely separated works as Goheen's The Imagery of Sophocles' Antigone and Musurillo's Symbol and Myth in Ancient Poetry. Goheen's book was a pioneering one, in which the author presented a unified interpretation of the Antigone on the basis of its image-patterns. Musurillo, in a more general study, mentions five qualities found in ancient (and modern) poetic drama: (1) dramatic rhythm, or ritual; (2) prosody: metre, rhyme, etc.; (3) compression and intensity in the expression of ideas; (4) special choice of words; and (5) "the use of organic images by a kind of image-

24 O. Barfield, Poetic Diction (London: Faber and Faber, 1928).


logic based on the laws of analogy and associations."\textsuperscript{27}

While perhaps too much attention has been given to the first four of these categories, says Musurillo, not enough has been given to the fifth. Study given to a poet's imagery can aid us greatly in our appreciation and understanding of his work. We are warned, however, that we must not make the mistake of mere "image-counting," as some have done. Analyses of the number of times certain images are used, the areas of life from which they are drawn, etc., do not directly influence our appreciation of the work of art. "We are not interested in the question whether Aeschylus liked to hunt, or whether Sophocles made many sea-voyages. The truth is that the most important quality of an image is its functional effectiveness."\textsuperscript{28} And Further: "We must explore . . . . the organic relevance which the symbol has for the play as a whole."\textsuperscript{29}

Musurillo goes on to show how patterns of such organically relevant images unify poems and poetic dramas. Since it is Aeschylus and his dramas which presently interest us, we look to what Musurillo has to say on this subject. It is not particularly encouraging. The imagery in the works of Aeschylus, he remarks, is "for the most part decorative . . . . It is a more difficult task to demonstrate his use of the organic image or symbol, which is more integrally connected with the plot and dramatic theme."\textsuperscript{30}

Other critics would disagree pointedly. There are, for instance, these words of T.B.L. Webster: "Aeschylus thinks in pic-

\textsuperscript{27}Ibid., p. 61.  \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{28}Ibid., p. 62.  
\textsuperscript{29}Ibid.  \hspace{1cm} \textsuperscript{30}Ibid., p. 63.
tures, and the pictures are startling, often frightening symbols of themes which run through his plays and trilogies.\textsuperscript{31} Aeschylus was a true poet. Despite the words of Finley regarding the direct line from Aeschylus to the abstractions of the philosophers,\textsuperscript{32} Aeschylus himself did not often deal in such abstractions. Lattimore, in the introduction to his translation of the Oresteia, presents a brief discussion of how the images of the trilogy are connected with, or symbolic of its theme ideas.\textsuperscript{33} The same subject has been treated at greater length in a doctoral dissertation by B. Hughes.\textsuperscript{34} Philip Wheelwright has gone so far as to berate students of literature for their neglect of the works of Aeschylus, so rich in image-patterns.

Aeschylus, whose metaphoric patterns in the Oresteia are the more telling because of the scope and grandeur of that masterpiece, has received little critical attention in this respect, despite the endless books and articles and footnotes that deal with other aspects of him.\textsuperscript{35}

Despite Wheelwright's lament, there has been some good criticism in this area, supporting the findings of Lattimore and Hughes. The late E.T. Owen, in \textit{The Harmony of Aeschylus}, speaks of recurring themes and mentions that the prologue of the Agamem-

\textsuperscript{31}B.L. Webster, "Greek Tragedy," \textit{Fifty Years of Classical Scholarship}, ed. Maurice Platnauer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 84.

\textsuperscript{32}\textit{Supra}, p. 2.


\textsuperscript{34}B. Hughes, \textit{The Dramatic Use of Imagery in Aeschylus} (Bryn Mawr College: unpublished dissertation, 1955).

\textsuperscript{35}Wheelwright, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 232.
non, with the watchman waiting in the dark for the beacon-signal, strikes the keynote of the entire trilogy. W.B. Stanford, in a small but detailed work on Aeschylus, includes a chapter on imagery. He speaks of "overlapping and interweaving imagery between the three plays of the only trilogy now extant." Stanford finds in the Oresteia recurring hunting, snare, and serpent imagery.

F.R. Earp's book, The Style of Aeschylus, has a chapter on metaphor. Aeschylus, according to Earp, falls naturally into metaphor when expressing his images. Earp has drawn up a list of all the metaphors occurring in the seven extant tragedies of Aeschylus. This list is valuable to anyone looking for "organic" patterns of images, since Earp was careful to include only live metaphors, i.e. metaphors that would really act as imagery, not old ones that have become absorbed into the language, stock-in-trade. An even more helpful study is J. Dumortier's Les images dans la poésie d'Eschyle, which is entirely concerned with Aeschylus' metaphors. Dumortier finds a "principal metaphor" in each play, and a number of secondary metaphors throughout. He also is concerned with live, functional metaphors. Finally, Musurillo, despite his opinion that functionally effective metaphors are hard to find in the plays of Aeschylus, does demonstrate a few patterns of such images himself.

36 Owen, op. cit., p. 64.
In the Oresteia he points out image-themes of blood, hunting and snares, and animals.\textsuperscript{40}

One pattern of images, however, has been relatively neglected by the above critics: the definite pattern of light and darkness imagery. Owen mentions it in the comment already mentioned.\textsuperscript{41} Stanford, looking for hidden or symbolic meanings, indicates the recurrence of light-to-darkness, darkness-to-light images:

Suddenly the beacon piercing the night's gloom dispels the watcher's mental gloom for a moment. But at once the shadow falls on his heart again. Such alternations of gladness and sadness, triumph and defeat, not merely permeate all the emotional phases of the play, but also recur in its metaphor and allegory.\textsuperscript{42}

This, however, is as far as Stanford goes in indicating such imagery. Light and darkness metaphors are, or course, included in the surveys of Earp and Dumortier, though in the former only very briefly. Dumortier treats these metaphors in four pages of text, selecting some excellent examples.\textsuperscript{43} The image-theme of light and darkness is not mentioned by Lattimore, Hughes, or Musurillo.

However, the two works most important to this thesis, both already mentioned, are: Wheelwright's The Burning Fountain\textsuperscript{44} and Finley's Pindar and Aeschylus,\textsuperscript{45} both of which treat the recur-

\textsuperscript{40}Musurillo, op. cit., pp. 68-70.
\textsuperscript{41}Owen, op. cit., p. 64.
\textsuperscript{42}Stanford, Ambiguity in Greek Literature, p. 140.
\textsuperscript{43}Dumortier, op. cit., pp. 114-118.  \textsuperscript{44}Supra, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{45}Supra, p. 2.
ring light and darkness images as a major imagistic theme in the 
Oresteia.

Wheelwright's work is a general study of literary symbolism. In a chapter entitled "Thematic Patterns in the Oresteia," he 
deals with several image-themes, one of which he calls "the coming of light." This chapter is quite interesting, but, because of 
the book's general nature, it can offer hardly more than an indi-
cation of the light-darkness theme. The author introduces some 
basic insights: e.g., light-coming-out-of-darkness as symbolic of 
the "passage from a morality of vendetta to a morality of law." He states that the subject of the Oresteia is the creation of a 
new moral order, and that this is shown forth in several ways at 
once:

... through the story, both as dramatically presented and as 
narrated, through the dark brooding reflections of the chor-
uses, and, most subtly and richly of all, through the meta-
phoric and archetypal associations evoked by the imagery ... the overtones of meaning which are thrown off by the main 
images and image-patterns of the play ... .

He mentions also the importance of the light-darkness imagery as 
the most powerful of many consummative images in the trilogy.

Finley is also largely concerned with what might be called 
literary symbolism. He saw in Pindar and Aeschylus minds "for 
whom reality was chiefly comprehensible through heroic figures and 
situations, not ideas." In his chapter on the Oresteia he
makes the claim that light is one of the chief unifying images of the trilogy, and is also its chief symbol. Light is associated with creativity, reason, the male sex, and the Olympian gods.

The opposite side of the coin, according to Finley, is the image of earth, with its associations of darkness, the traditional, the female sex, and the ancient ethnoic powers. Finley remarks that "thrilling interplay of action with this symbolism gives the Oresteia its force." Although imagery can become somewhat over-weighted with associations, Finley's suggestions may be fruitful in producing an appreciation of the Oresteia as a unified work of art. They can provide a framework, moreover, for most of what will be said in the present study.

We see, then, that several image-themes are suggested as unifying the Oresteia on the poetic level. One of these, the light-darkness theme, has been found by at least two critics to be productive of a unified interpretation of the trilogy.

We might recall at this point that the use of light and darkness in symbol or metaphor is common in literature, from the Greeks to Biblical writings (especially the books of Job, Isaiah, Psalms, and the Gospel according to St. John), and in the literature of Christian times up to our own day. Far from vitiating

53Ibid., p. 249.
54E.g., see Chapter II of this thesis, pp. 21-25.
this study, the common nature of the imagery seems to provide an excellent means of comparing Aeschylus with others in his own tradition, and with writers either wholly or in part outside the Greek tradition.

The present thesis does not differ substantially from the attempts of Wheelwright and Finley except in scope. We hope to show, by a complete analysis of the light and darkness imagery in the trilogy, how these images, by their type, patterns, and associations, help make the three-part tragedy an organic, poetic whole. A detailed investigation of only one image-theme was not feasible for either of the above-mentioned critics in the context of their larger work. But we believe it will be rewarding in terms of an increased appreciation of Aeschylus' artistry.

The procedure to be followed, briefly, is as follows: chapter II examines some of the common associations that images of light and darkness had for the Greeks; chapters III through V examine and evaluate each light or darkness metaphor in the trilogy, noting recurrence, significant patterns, and associations. In Chapter VI, the conclusion, we trace the pattern of light and darkness imagery and its associations through the trilogy as a whole, indicating the artistry with which it is used to unify the Oresteia and to reinforce the unity of plot and idea.
CHAPTER II
LIGHT AND DARKNESS

Before we begin our analysis of Aeschylus' use of light and darkness imagery in the Oresteia, it is essential to set down some of the general background: meanings and associations that these images carried in the minds of Greeks contemporary with and prior to Aeschylus.

As one would expect, the image of light had good, positive connotations for the Greeks. For the Greeks, as for other ancients, the light of the sun was "both the cause of life on earth and at the same time the medium by which we become aware of phenomena." Because the sun's light nurtured life and enabled men to see, it became a symbol of life and safety. "The Greek heard in φῶς an undertone of rescue from danger." Fraenkel, in discussing this connotation of φῶς, cites two texts from the Iliad: τώ ἐν χερσί φῶς ("safety lies in the hands," i.e., it is safer to fight than to flee), and διέκε (σο. πόλις) πετασ θείαι τεῦγαν

3Fraenkel, loc. cit. 4Homer Iliad xv 741.
φῶς⁵ ("the gates, drawn shut, brought about safety"). The metaphorical use of the word φῶς seems almost a commonplace, even this early in Greek literature.

Light, of course, is also connected in various ways with the gods of the upper air, the Olympians. Zeus is god of the sky, and he punishes with the flashing thunderbolt. Apollo is the god of light, called Phoebus, the Bright One. We will have much more to say concerning these associations later.

Night, personified as a goddess, held an important place in Greek mythology. Hesiod, in his Theogony, places her near the head of the list.⁶ First, there is Chaos, and from Chaos are born Earth, Eros, Erebus, and Night. Erebus is "the subterranean darkness, as opposed to night which shrouds the upper world."⁷ By the union of Erebus and Night, the Bright Air (αἰθήρ) and Day are born.⁸ These lines from Homer may illustrate somewhat the hal- lowed position of Night:

''καὶ κεὶ μὴ φῶςτον ἂπτ᾽ αἰθήρος ἐμᾶλε πόντῳ εἰ μὴ Νόσ δύσηερος Θεῶν ἐκάσω ἐκαὶ ἄνδρων Γὰν ἦκαλαν φεῦγων, ὥστε παῦσαι λογίσμοι περ ἀἱρέω γάρ μὴ Ποκτὶ θοῦ̣ ἀποθώμα ἐποι. ⁹

("and he [Zeus] would have thrown me from the upper air into the sea, out of sight, had not Night, subduer of gods and men, saved me; I came to her in flight, and Zeus ceased, although he was

⁵ Homer Iliad xx 539. ⁶ Hesiod Theogony 123.
⁸ Hesiod Theogony 134. ⁹ Homer Iliad xiv 258-261.
angry; for he feared to do what was displeasing to swift Night.

Besides being powerful, Night also took on sinister and evil characteristics through her children, listed later in the Theogony. 10 Night, according to Hesiod, brought into the world hateful Destiny, black Fate, Death, Sleep, Dreams, Momus or Sarcasm, Care full-of-woes, the Hesperides, the Destinies, the Fates, Nemesis, Fraud, Wanton love, troublesome old age, and stubborn-hearted Strife. In the second generation, Strife bore: Trouble, Oblivion, Famine, Pains, Contests and Slaughters, Fights and Homicides, Contentions, Falsehoods, Words, Disputes, Lawlessness, and Ruin ("Atη), and the Oath. In this catalogue we see that Hesiod has attempted to ascribe nearly every human ill to the offspring of the goddess Night. It is necessary to keep in mind, when we speak of darkness imagery, the heavily negative and evil connotations such imagery was capable of evoking. We must remember that all the sufferings and evils of human life were considered, literally, as creatures of the darkness, of "dark Night."

There is no doubt that Aeschylus was somewhat influenced by Hesiod's catalogue, which was, of course, common property in the playwright's day. Aside from a good many references connecting evil with darkness in the Oresteia, it has been proven rather conclusively that Aeschylus, in the Choephori, wove all the children of Night and Strife (Death, Sleep, etc.) into either the dramatic action or the choral lyrics of the play, one by one, in the order in which they are listed in the Theogony. This very interesting

10 Hesiod Theogony 211-232.
It illustrates, however, that Aeschylus was aware of the "family tree" of Night when he wanted to work evil, sinister overtones into his plot.

Besides the fact that Night and Day, darkness and light, had such different connotations and associations in the minds of the Greeks, we have a further complication. The pre-Socratic philosophers were fond of thinking in terms of opposites which are balanced out against one another, e.g., hot and cold, health and sickness, life and death, etc. According to Heraclitus, change and motion in the world are brought about by struggle or "strife" between these opposites.\textsuperscript{12} Ramnoux has noticed an interesting thing about these lists of opposites or contraries, which occur in the writings (directly or quoted by others) of all the important pre-Socratics: "La pensée antésocratique a pour armature des couples contrariées. Il est apparu que plusieurs pôles négatifs derivaient du catalogue hésiodique des Enfants de la Nuit."\textsuperscript{13} Heraclitus, for instance, opposes Day and Night,\textsuperscript{14} the living and the dead, the waking and the sleeping.\textsuperscript{15} Pythagoras, or the Pythagorean school, quoted in Aristotle's \textit{Metaphysics},\textsuperscript{16} oppose, among

\textsuperscript{13}Ramnoux, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 7.
\textsuperscript{14}Heraclitus, fr. 67.
\textsuperscript{15}Heraclitus, fr. 88.
\textsuperscript{16}Aristotle \textit{Metaphysics} 986a 35-46.
other things, light and darkness, masculine and feminine, good and evil. Parmenides has as an elemental principle the opposition of light and darkness or fire and earth. Opposed to the aetherial flame of fire is "just the opposite, dark night, dense in appearance and heavy." 17 Finally, the philosopher Empedocles also opposed light and darkness, peace and war, beauty and ugliness. 18 

It will be noted that, as Ramboux indicated, almost all the negative sides of the above pairs are from Hesiod's "children of Night": death, sleep, evil, war or strife, ugliness (which would certainly be included as one of the characteristics of Night's daughters, the Fates or Furies.) While the grouping of the negative, painful things in life with darkness and the opposite things with light is certainly natural, these examples still serve to show us how widespread these associations were with the Greeks. Note also that the Pythagoreans contrasted along with light and darkness, good and evil, masculine and feminine. This last opposition will be important in the trilogy both in its recurrence and in its connections with light and darkness imagery.

With the wide range of possible connotations in mind, then, let us examine the light and darkness imagery of the trilogy.

17 Parmenides, fr. 8, 58-59.
18 Empedocles, fr. 122-123.
CHAPTER III

THE AGAMEMNON

The Agamemnon begins with the scene of a watchman waiting in darkness, waiting for a light which will signal victory and the return of the king from Troy. He tells us of his misery for the past year, waiting in the dark, forced to stay awake (he uses the word νυκτίπλαγκτον, which Fraenkel translates "of such a kind that therein . . . a man wanders in the night-season"). In his year of sleepless nights, the watchman has "come to know the stars of night, . . . the shining potentates . . . these stars shining in the heavens."

Besides providing a contrast for his miserable darkness, this also puts us into the context of the Olympian gods, the gods of the sky and the upper air, to whom the watchman is praying in this prologue (indeed, his first words, the first words of the trilogy, are quite significant: "Of the gods I beg relief from this toil . . . ."

Going on, the watchman tells us what he has been watching for: "the signal of the beacon, the bright gleam of flame bringing news from Troy." The lone watcher mentions his

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1Aeschylus Agamemnon 12.  
2Fraenkel, op. cit., p. 12.  
3Aeschylus Agamemnon 4-6.  
4Aeschylus Agamemnon 1.  
5Aeschylus Agamemnon 8-10.
sadness at "the misfortune of this house, no longer well managed, as it once was." Again, "may relief from trouble come" in the form of "a fire of good news shining in the darkness." Whereupon, in immediate answer to his prayer, a bright light shines in the distance and we have the climax of this prologue: ὅ χαίρε λαμπτήρος, νυκτὸς ημερήσιον/ φῶς Πυθαίσκων . . . 8 ("Hail, beacon, that gives us light of day by night . . . "). The watchman exults before the light so long awaited. In the line last quoted we have followed the punctuation of Fraenkel rather than that of Murray, who would place the comma between νυκτὸς and ημερήσιον, because, as Fraenkel puts it: "The forcefulness of the Aeschylean expression, which illustrates the magnitude of the deliverance by the contrast between the light and the darkness which preceded it, is sadly weakened by the punctuation commonly accepted."9

Wheelwright sees elaborate artistry in the light-imagery of the prologue:

Observe that in the Watchman’s speech the light-imagery has three phases: the stars, the expectation of the beacon-flame, and finally, (as consummation of his hopes) the visible appearance of the flame itself . . . . The contextualization of the light imagery in the Watchman’s speech leaves no doubt that it has a symbolic meaning as well as a literal one.10 Having seen the beacon, the watchman reminds himself that he must inform the queen, Clytemnestra, that she may "raise up her joyful shout of thanksgiving to this light."11 The watchman ends on a strangely somber note: now that the master will be returning home,

he says, he will be silent about what has been going on in his absence.\footnote{Agamemnon 34-37.} His remark is filled with apprehension, and indicates that the darkness surrounding the house of Agamemnon is more than physical. J.T. Sheppard, while also noting the intricate pattern of light imagery in the prologue,\footnote{J.T. Sheppard, "The Prologue of the Agamemnon", Classical Review, XXXVI (1922), p. 7.} points out that it sets a theme for the whole trilogy:

Again and again, with more and more intense emotion, we shall hear the prayer for deliverance from trouble, and shall hail the light that seems to bring deliverance, but brings only fresh calamity.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 6-7.}

W.B. Stanford, in the comment quoted earlier,\footnote{Supra, pp. 16-17.} expresses exactly the same idea, adding that the trilogy's metaphor and allegory are expressive of this alternation between calamity and deliverance.

The beacon-signal itself, light in the darkness, bringing hope of happy days again to the house of Atreus, is the central fast around which the first half of the Agamemnon, up to the arrival of the king himself, is constructed.

With the Parodos,\footnote{Agamemnon 40-263.} we begin a series of long, brooding reflections by the elders of the chorus. These considerations and reflections, harmless and moralizing enough at first, grow more and more ominous until, with Cassandra later in the play, they are screaming of danger and death to Agamemnon. The chorus' first song is one of sadness, for the most part. Far from setting a
mood of victorious homecoming, it hints at a terrible disorder that must somehow be put aright. Ostensibly speaking of Paris, the man whose crime was the initial reason for the Trojan War, the chorus sings that there is no possible way for him to "put aside the relentless wrath"\(^1\) that pursues him. It speaks of a "late-avenging Fury,"\(^2\) which punishes wrong-doers, no matter how long vengeance may take. One who knows the story of Agamemnon, cannot help but ask the obvious question when he hears the name Ερυθρώς: how soon will the Fury fall upon the victorious Agamemnon himself? The punishing, avenging deities, hateful in robes of black and horrible features, will play a great part in the trilogy and will never be far from our sight.

Following their initial remarks about the expedition to Troy and their own misery in old age, the elders of the chorus notice Queen Clytemnestra, who is lighting fires and sacrificing to the gods for a completely hypocritical reason. Agamemnon is returning, but the real basis of her exultation is her long-awaited revenge. "The altars flame with gift-offerings; here and there the light reaches up heavenwards . . . ."\(^3\) It is a sinister light, blasphemous in its hypocrisy.

Though the watchman's cry rouses fires of celebration, neither these nor the beacon dispel the surrounding darkness, and the light of rejoicing at Mycenae is not that of dawn.\(^4\)

Again and again in the course of the trilogy we are impressed with the idea of light, either physical or metaphorical or both, which

\(^1\)Agamemnon 71.  
\(^2\)Agamemnon 59.  
\(^3\)Agamemnon 91-93.  
\(^4\)Finley, op. cit., p. 251.
does not dispel the darkness.

The chorus again strikes a somewhat ominous, if hopeful note in its prayer to Zeus, who brings knowledge through suffering. More ominous is the recollection in great detail of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, Agamemnon's daughter, and of the brooding hate it has caused within the household: "unforgetting, child-avenging Wrath." A gloomy prediction about the future follows the shocked and apprehensive recital of Iphigeneia's killing: "let it (the future) be greeted in advance--but that is the same as being lamented in advance . . . ." Finally, the elders ask the queen why the sacrificial fires are being lighted.

The first words of Clytemnestra are: "As the proverb goes, may a blessed dawn be born from this Mother Night." After these years of bitterness and plotting, the dawn of light is finally coming. There is "light out of darkness" for Clytemnestra. The image is repeated a few lines later. The elders ask when the great event of Troy's overthrow has taken place. The queen replies: "It is this night, the mother of the dawn I hailed." Sheppard finds the twice-repeated use of this image quite menacing. In referring to motherhood, Clytemnestra recalls that she is a mother too--which is the very reason for her sinister design. Motherhood also vaguely aligns Clytemnestra, we might add,

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with Night. This alignment is more clearly implied at the end of the play, where Clytemnestra tells the chorus that she has sacrificed her husband to "Ate and Erinys,"28 the children of Night.

There follows Clytemnestra's strange and vivid beacon-speech, in which she traces the path of the signal from mountain to mountain, across the sea from Troy to Argos. It is a veritable poem of light, in which the "harbinger of joy," the fire-signal, is compared to the sun29 (ὦς τίς ἐλιος) and to the moon30 (δίκην φαῖδρας σελήνης). Always the light is being passed on, from Ida the mountain of Zeus, from peak to peak, and finally to the house of Agamemnon. Here J.T. Sheppard finds another ominous meaning: "The flame that was lit at Troy shall be lit again in Argos. That is her (Clytemnestra's) thought."31 Instead of joyful news coming to Argos, the queen has in mind the bright flames of revenge.

Finley questions Clytemnestra's whole attitude toward the victory:

... The flame which she welcomes carries also the hectic light of her own maturing plans. Her vision of the sack of Troy more expressly casts shadow on the victory, which she sees, almost with the eyes of the women of the Septem, as an act of horror.32

Clytemnestra continues the threatening tone of this part of the play by naming the necessary conditions for the Greeks' safe return. Even if they are not careless and show respect for the shrines of the gods in Troy, the curse of the Trojan dead may remain "Wakeful."33

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28Agamemnon 1433. 29Agamemnon 288.
30Agamemnon 298. 31Sheppard, loc. cit., p. 10.
32Finley, op. cit., pp. 254-255. 33Agamemnon 348.
At the beginning of their second ode, the chorus connects Zeus and Night as the ultimate causes of Troy's downfall (Ὤ Ζεὺς βασιλεῦ καὶ Νύξ φλικ). 34 Paris has offended Zeus by breaking the sacred laws of hospitality, and has thus brought doom ("Αίτη) on his city. For this reason the implacable laws of retribution have gone into effect, and Night has "cast a net ... of all-catching doom" 35 on the city. "Night covers the city from above, but not with the kindly veil which brings rest every night to mortals, but with the net of doom." 36 Again Night is associated with her offspring, "Αίτη.

Further in the same ode, speaking of the sin of Paris, the elders remark how the lust of Paris finally broke out into the open and shone forth, a maliciously flaring light, a "terrible bright light." 37 Again we have a light which is wrong, which does not cause joy or relief. This is followed, however, by a more appropriate image of evil coming out into the open: the image of bad bronze turning black at the touchstone. "Like bad bronze, when rubbed and struck, so he (the guilty man) becomes indelibly black when brought to justice." 38 Fraenkel remarks that the word for "indelibly black," μελαμποκης, refers properly to the bronze, "but may have direct reference to the evil-doer." 39 He cites several examples of evil connected with dark or black, among them an interesting quote from the Pythagorean ritual: " ... that which

34 Agamemnon 355. 35 Agamemnon 357-361.
36 Fraenkel, op. cit., p. 199. 37 Agamemnon 389.
38 Agamemnon 390-393. 39 Fraenkel, op. cit., p. 205.
is white is of good nature, but that which is black is of bad nature.”

A few strophes later, the chorus becomes more foreboding of disaster than ever. Its members sing of the terrible cost of the war in Troy to the Argive people, and of the anger of the people. Indeed, they mention the people’s curse, ostensibly on Paris, still becoming more and more obviously connected with Agamemnon, who has led this expedition with his brother Menelaus for the sake of one unfaithful woman. The old men of the chorus say that they are possessed by a terror or anxiety that lurks in the night (μέριμνα νυκτηθὲρεσ) — terror of what they may hear and see in the near future. For, as they say, the gods are not unheeding of men “who have killed many.” For such a man “the black Furies . . . reversing the fortunes of his life, drop him into darkness . . . .” (The last phrase, θείος ἀμαυρών, literally means “making him dim or dark.”) Here we see for the first time the explicit connection of darkness with the avenging Furies. “Dark,” “black,” and their compounds are epithets which will be applied to the Furies throughout the trilogy. Here also is the metaphor of darkness and obscurity for wretchedness (cf. the watchman’s speech) or destruction. We must not forget that the chorus is predicting the destruction of King Agamemnon, who is

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41 Agamemnon 460.
42 Agamemnon 461.
43 Agamemnon 462-466.
soon to make his triumphal entrance. As the play progresses, the feeling grows that he, as Paris, has gone too far: his excesses in sacrificing his own daughter, in causing the death of so many Trojans and Greeks, call for retribution.

The beacon which began the action now comes into prominence again. Having finished their dark musings, the elders question its veracity. They mention "the bright message of the beacon," and "the flame's announcement." They have a sudden hope of discovering the truth once and for all when they see the herald approaching. He is from the army; he has been sent by Agamemnon to announce his arrival.

Now we shall understand these torches and their shining,
The beacons, and the interchanging of flame and flame,
They may be real; or, like a dream,
This pleasing light may have beguiled our minds.

The signal light is still a center of attention, even this far into the drama.

With the speech of the herald, the note of doom connected with happenings at Troy and with Agamemnon's arrival grows more and more noticeable. He salutes Argos and the sun shining upon it, saying that "many hopes have broken, but one has turned out for me . . . ." Among his prayers to Zeus and the other gods, he addresses the "divinities that face the sun" (most likely the

\[\text{References:}\]
\[44\text{Agamemnon 475-480.}\]
\[45\text{Agamemnon 489-492.}\]
\[46\text{Agamemnon 508.}\]
\[47\text{Agamemnon 505.}\]
\[48\text{Agamemnon 519.}\]
statues of gods outside the palace) and beseeches them to look "with glowing eyes"49 (φαίδροισι τοισι δύμασιν) on the return of the king, who has been so long away from home.

"He comes, Lord Agamemnon, bringing light in the darkness to you and all these present." This is the central image of the play. Here Agamemnon is hopefully identified as one who brings light to those in darkness, who will relieve the misery of the people and of his house, so long without its master. It remains to be seen, however, whether Agamemnon will live up to the confidence placed in him as the bearer of light. The pointed conflict between this hope and the dismal hints of the chorus must somehow be resolved.

The herald's account of the war at Troy includes several shocking omens. Troy has been completely destroyed, he tells Clytemnestra and the elders. "Even the altars and the temples of the gods have been obliterated."51 This is the very destruction Clytemnestra has mentioned52 as something to be avoided by a conquering army. The queen again uses the light in darkness image when the elders relate the herald's words. Long since, she says, "when first the message of flame came by night"53 she has raised her cry of joy.

Clytemnestra exults over Agamemnon's return:

51Agamemnon 527.
52Agamemnon 538-340.
53Agamemnon 588.
What light is sweeter than this for
a woman to behold,
To open the gates for her husband, preserved
by the gods from war.\textsuperscript{54}

We cannot help but feel the cold hypocrisy in these words. Clytemnestra's day of light is here, but it is a most unusual light that she sees. It does not really imply the happiness of a wife whose husband has been restored to her; instead, it reveals the satisfaction of an avenger whose prey has finally come.

After his account of the terrible sufferings of the war is finished, the herald is questioned about the fate of Menelaus by the chorus.\textsuperscript{55} He tells, in response, of the terrible storm that overtook the Argives and separated Menelaus' ship from the rest. It was a storm that arose in the night and smashed the fleet, so that "when the bright light of the sun came up,"\textsuperscript{56} the sea could be seen strewn with bodies and debris. This night's destruction recalls the Furies to our minds, the "black Furies," who would be avenging the sacrilege and wantonness of the Greeks in this storm. Indeed, the herald is hesitant about mentioning the storm, because he considers it ill-omened to speak of an occurrence "which did not lack the wrath of the gods."\textsuperscript{57} The story of the storm, he says, being a "song of the Furies,"\textsuperscript{58} is not fit for a happy occasion. Twice more in his account of the storm, the herald connects light or day with safety. It is only in the "bright day-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{54}Agamemnon 601-604.
\item \textsuperscript{55}Agamemnon 617.
\item \textsuperscript{56}Agamemnon 658.
\item \textsuperscript{57}Agamemnon 649.
\item \textsuperscript{58}Agamemnon 645.
\end{itemize}
light"\(^{59}\) (\中新网 kατ' ἅμαρ\) that the herald and his shipmates begin to feel that they are safe. And, when exploring the possibilities of Menelaus' still being alive and safe, the herald says: "If any beam of the sun looks down on him, still alive and well . . . ."\(^{60}\) We have here obvious echoes of the theme threading through the play--light: safety and life; darkness: wretchedness and destruction.

After the account of the herald, which clouds the picture of the victorious Agamemnon, the chorus again takes up the theme of the sin of Paris and Helen. The woe caused by this woman is delineated and she is compared to a lion cub, taken into a home and raised. The cub's true nature must eventually be manifest as it causes bloody havoc in the house. It is one who "sacrifices in the name of Ate."\(^{61}\) Helen, causing the ruin of the Trojans who received her into their city, was pursued and punished by a Fury--the Fury that makes brides weep (\希腊语νυμφόκλαυτος Ἐρινύς\)\(^{62}\)

Speaking of sinful daring, (\希腊语Θράσος\)\(^{63}\) the elders tell us that it descends directly from \Upsilon \upsilon. (It has become painfully clear by now that Agamemnon is also guilty of \Upsilon \upsilon in his carelessness and sacrilege.) At first, says the chorus, \Upsilon \upsilon can be concealed, but inevitably it comes out into the open, and it spells "black disaster for the house"\(^{64}\) (\希腊语μελαθροῖσιν Ἀταν\) of those involved. Only two lines later, we have the con-

\(^{59}\)Agamemnon 668.  
\(^{60}\)Agamemnon 676-677.  
\(^{61}\)Agamemnon 735-736.  
\(^{62}\)Agamemnon 749.  
\(^{63}\)Agamemnon 770.  
\(^{64}\)Agamemnon 770.
trasting image. While "black disaster" strikes the houses of the proud, "Justice shines like a beacon in the sooty dwellings, and honors the righteous life" (Δίκα δέ κάμπτει . . . .)65 Ramnoux here points out that, although the task of bringing men to justice pertained to the Furies, Justice personified in Greek mythology was considered as one of the "powers of Light," i.e., pertained to the upper, Olympian realm rather than to the lower, chthonic world of the Furies.66

Agamemnon makes his entrance, and the chorus greets him somewhat coldly, though in a spirit of fairness. The king has with him Cassandra, the Trojan princess and prophetess, whom he has brought along as a war-prize. In his opening speech, Agamemnon refers to the complete destruction of Troy, accomplished after the "setting of the Pleiades."67 This is considered to mean, more or less, the middle of the night.68 We recall the opening lines of the second chorus, Ὁ Ζέας βασιλέως καὶ Νῦς φιλία . . . .69 The night, as Fraenkel says, is an appropriate time for the bloody meal of the lion of Argos.70

Clytemnestra, exulting over Agamemnon's long-awaited return, heaps gorgeous and flattering epithets on him. She compares him to a beautiful fair day after a storm (κάλλιστον ἡμέρα εἰς-}

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67 Agamemnon 826.
69 Agamemnon 335. 70 Fraenkel, op. cit., p. 381.
Agamemnon, she says, is the light and safety, the hope for those in distress. Once more, Clytemnestra speaks hypocritically.

The queen, with no great difficulty, persuades Agamemnon to perform the outward act of overweening pride which will put the seal on his doom. He agrees to walk upon the carpet of red or purple tapestries which she has spread for him to the door of the palace, even though he admits that "it is the gods whom we should honor with such things." A theory of Ramnoux is of interest at this point, even though its basis in the text is rather tenuous. If Agamemnon is thought of as a light, similar to the sun, then the image of his treading the red carpet to his death in a pool of water is that of the sun, setting in the sea at the end of a crimson path. In defense of this theory, it may be said that the chorus later sings of death as "the sunset of life." Although it seems a bit studied, the image of a setting sun would certainly be well-placed and ingenious here. Once the king has entered the palace, Clytemnestra makes a final prayer to Zeus the Accomplisher and begs him to bring her plan to fulfillment.

The chorus begins another ode, now explicitly full of foreboding and fear. They have seen Agamemnon return safely, but their hearts "sing . . . the discordant song of the Fury." In

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<td>75 Agamemnon 1123.</td>
<td>76 Agamemnon 973-974.</td>
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<td>77 Agamemnon 990-992.</td>
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the two stanzas here which, as Fraenkel remarks, unify the whole trilogy the elders are murmuring "in the dark, deeply painsed" (ὑπὸ σκότου βρέμει θύμανης.) The coming of Agamemnon, obviously, is not having the effect of a saving, joyous light.

As we have mentioned, with Agamemnon a new character has appeared on the stage: Cassandra, royal princess and prophetess of Apollo, the god of light. In her inspired utterances before the house of the Atreidae, she calls upon Apollo as the cause of her ruin (because of his rejected advances, the god is now taking revenge.) Cassandra makes gradually clearer prophecies about what is going to happen inside the palace within a few minutes. She sees a net of death before her in a vision: "... or is the trap the woman there, the murderess?" Cassandra is aware of the curse on the house of Atreus; she speaks of "babies crying" and "roasted flesh." These are, of course, references to the horrible crime of Atreus when he served his brother, Thyestes, the roasted flesh of his own children. The prophetess says that there is a "band of Furies, drunk on human blood, inbred in the family, not to be turned away." In the midst of Cassandra's feverish visions, the chorus is convinced that "ruin is approaching fast." In reply, Cassandra rises to a passionate clairvoyance:

Ah! Ah! Look, look! Keep the bull

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78Agamemnon 1018-1033. 79Fraenkel, op. cit., p. 459.
80Agamemnon 1030-1031. 81Agamemnon 1080-1082.
82Agamemnon 1116-1117. 83Agamemnon 1096-1097.
84Agamemnon 1189-1190. 85Agamemnon 1124.
From the cow; catching him in the robes
She strikes with the black-horned contrivance. 86

Fraenkel would paraphrase the last two words, "black-horned contrivance" (μελαγ κεφώι . . . μηχανήματι) in this way: "with the contrivance which secretly works black mischief . . . ." 87 This meaning would of course fit quite well into the context of the murder of Agamemnon, the extinguishing of the promised light.

Cassandra goes on and says that Clytemnestra is "like treacherous Ruin . . . a woman, killer of a man." 88 After predicting that she will also be a victim of the Queen's treachery, the prophetess says that her death and Agamemnon's will be avenged by "the off-spring that kills his mother." 89 Almost at the end of her speech, Cassandra prays to the Sun and, re-emphasizing the obvious connection between life and light, "turning toward the last light [for her]" 90 she prays that she may be avenged as well as the King.

At this point the murder of Agamemnon takes place within the palace, and the chorus is thrown into consternation. Clytemnestra emerges, and her boldness in exulting over the murder is shocking. It is in this section of the play that the Queen claims to have sacrificed Agamemnon to Erinys and Ate. 91

In their dirge for Agamemnon, the chorus ask only to die

86 Agamemnon 1125-1128. 87 Fraenkel, op. cit., p. 515.
88 Agamemnon 1229-1230. 89 Agamemnon 1281.
90 Agamemnon 1324. 91 Agamemnon 1433.
as soon as possible now that their "kindest protector" is dead, killed "at the hands of a woman." They speak, significantly, of "black Ares," god of strife, here pitting members of one family against each other. (We recall how much was been said in the Agamemnon by the chorus and by the herald about the misery and horrors of war, and also that Strife was listed by Hesiod as one of the prominent children of Night.) At any rate, the man who was to have brought light into darkness is dead, extinguished.

We recall the mood and language of the opening scenes of the play when Aegisthus, Clytemnestra's paramour and, by legend, the one surviving son of Thyestes, finally makes entrance. He cries: "O happy light of the day that brings vengeance!" How ironic that he should use the light-metaphor to express his joy at the destruction of Agamemnon, the same metaphor that was used honestly by the herald and hypocritically (or at least ambiguously) by Clytemnestra to express joy at the King's return. This is the daybreak, the real coming of light, as far as Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are concerned. Agamemnon himself lies crushed, έν Ερινύων, tangled in the black robes of the Furies.

Thus the Agamemnon comes to an end, with the victorious King murdered and the forces of vengeance triumphant; but not before the impassioned chorus cries out its hope that the missing heir, Orestes, will return to pay his father's slayers in full.

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92_Agamemnon_1452. 93_Agamemnon_1454. 94_Agamemnon_1511. 95_Agamemnon_1577. 96_Agamemnon_1580. 97_Agamemnon_1646-1648.
Already the power of the lurid light of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, a light which is really darkness, is being threatened. "This springtime and this light, which will come with Orestes' healing, are no more for them than they were for Agamemnon."98

In the play we see a tension between the light imagery and the darkness imagery which closely parallels the tension between the dramatic action and the choral lyrics. In the action of the first half of the play, light imagery predominates. Hope dawns with the word of the Greek victory and Agamemnon's impending return. Agamemnon himself is several times referred to as "bearer of light," "bright day," etc. But, as we saw, the chorus hinted from the beginning that something was radically wrong, that the King's return might not bring deliverance. The choruses are "salted" with images of darkness, e.g., "the black Furies," "black Ate," "black Ares," etc. The element of foreboding doom increases until it breaks into the dramatic action with Cassandra's prophecies and the killing itself. The ironic use of the light-metaphor by Aegisthus serves only to emphasize the complete failure of the light we were led to expect in Agamemnon. The play ends in the darkness of an unnatural, treacherous murder.

98 Finley, op. cit., p. 264.
CHAPTER IV

THE CHOEPHORI

The Choephorí begins with the mournful figure of Orestes standing alone at his father’s grave. We recognize him at once as the avenger promised by Cassandra and prayed for by the chorus of elder Argives. Orestes prays to Hermes under his title as a god of the underworld.¹ It is truly a loss that most of the prologue is corrupt, but the desolate figure beside the grave is perhaps eloquent enough. Almost at once, as though to support the mood of mourning, we see the chorus of servant-women come out in procession from the palace, dressed in black. Orestes sees them and wonders about the purpose of their mission.

As they come, the women are singing a song of mourning and apprehension. They bewail “the destruction of a fallen house.”² “Sunless darkness, loathsome to men, covers this house in the deaths of its rulers.”³ As we well know, darkness is indeed upon the house of Atreus. “The turning of justice strikes some in full light, some in the shadow of darkness, and others, whom desperate night holds.”⁴ Of these three types, there is little doubt which

¹Aeschylus Choephorí 1-2. ²Choephorí 50.
³Choephorí 51-53. ⁴Choephorí 61-65.
applies to the household of the slain Agamemnon. The aptness and organic propriety of the images of darkness at this point is obvious.

The chorus definitely links Clytemnestra with the darkness under which the household suffers. Its members call her "the godless woman," and reveal a nightmare which tormented the queen and sent them from the palace in mourning.

Electra, Orestes' sister, departed with the women of the household to pour a libation to try to appease the wrath of the dead Agamemnon, which Clytemnestra fears was the cause of her nightmare. Far from wishing to appease her father's wrath, however, Electra, advised by the serving-women, prays for an avenger, a killer-in-return. Addressing the same god to whom Orestes has prayed, Hermes of the underworld, Guide of the Dead, she asks that her brother may be the longed-for avenger:

"Kindle Orestes as a light in the house," she prays. The light of deliverance and safety that was personified in Agamemnon had proven to be false, or at least inadequate; now the metaphor is applied to Orestes, the avenger, the rightful heir to the throne. He is the new hope of the fallen house, the "wept-for hope of the seed of salvation," as Electra calls him when finally she realizes that it is really her brother who has returned. After the recog-

5Choephori 46. 6Choephori 33-41.
7Choephori 130-131. 8Choephori 236.
nition scene, Orestes and Electra, called παιδες...ἀντιπέσα by
the chorus, pray to the gods for the success of the mission for
which Orestes has come—vengeance.

Orestes makes it known that his mission is not wholly self-
motivated. Apollo has imposed it on him as a sacred duty, threat-
kening the most dire punishments if he should fail. Apollo has
told him, he says, that for one who fails to avenge the blood of
his father, there are "the attacks of the Furies,"10 and

The dark arrow of the dead below,
Of those of my family who have fallen,
Madness and vain fear in the night11
will hound him out of his city.

Later, praying to his father's spirit, Orestes asks him
how he can reach the dead and his father: "What can I say or do to
reach you, ... a light equal to your darkness?"12 The simple
image again connects light with the living (and particularly
Orestes) and darkness with the dead.

In the long ritual which follows,13 which is intended to
evoke the wrath of Agamemnon's spirit and to beg success from the
gods in wreaking vengeance on Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, Electra
several times mentions impending Ate14 and calls upon "Earth and
the grandeur of Darkness."15 Because of this, and in general,
because of the high pitch of her hatred for her mother and Aegis-

9Choephoroi 264.  
10Choephoroi 283.  
11Choephoroi 286-288.  
12Choephoroi 315-319.  
13Choephoroi 306-509.  
14Choephoroi 394, 421, 462.  
15Choephoroi 399.
thus, we agree that Electra is "close to Clytemnestra, for she shares the passionate intensity of women, and, like her mother, is ready to use the darker powers of the chthonioi." The chorus, a few lines after Electra's invocation of the powers of darkness, says that "the murder calls upon the Fury . . . to pile ruin on ruin," i.e., to repay in the same coin. Orestes himself calls upon "the lords of the underworld" to behold the sorry plight of the house of Atreus; and along with these, he invokes the "curses of the dead." We see, then, that Orestes, Electra, and the chorus all call upon and unite themselves with the powers of the underworld and the Furies, asking their aid. This, of course, is appropriate, since the act planned is one of blood-vengeance, which comes within the patronage of the Furies and the nether powers. Yet, we must keep in mind that the act itself is inspired by Apollo, an Olympian, god of light and healing.

The chorus, sympathetic with the plan of Orestes and his sister, say that they are saddened by the anguished prayer of the two children. "My heart inside darkened to hear you . . . ." (οὐλάιναν δὲ μοι κελαινοῦται.) But when they saw the strength in Orestes, hope returned: "hope banished sorrow, and things seemed better." Orestes has obliterated both the sorrow and the darkness.

17Chosphori 402-404. 18Chosphori 405.
19Chosphori 406. 20Chosphori 413-414.
21Chosphori 416-417.
The chorus petitions Agamemnon’s spirit to “come into the light” (εἰς φῶς μολὼν) from the darkness below. Orestes calls upon earth to raise up his father. The realm of darkness must give up the spirit of Agamemnon if he is to preside over vengeance on his murderers. Again, the chorus mentions the underworld gods: “This is a song for the gods under the earth.”

Later, Orestes inquires of the serving-women and Electra what Clytemnestra’s exact purpose was in sending them out. The chorus tells him:

... by dreams
And visions bothersome in the night
The godless woman was shaken
And sent out these libations.

The word for “bothersome in the night,” νυκτιπλάδυκτων, appropriately, seems to have been coined by Aeschylus for this trilogy. Fraenkel notes that it occurs twice in the Agamemnon and twice in the Choephoroi.

In further recalling the night of Clytemnestra’s bad dream, the Chorus brings back in a curious way the light-in-darkness theme. They tell how

Many torches, extinguished in the darkness
Were lit in the house to please the Queen.

Clytemnestra had roused the whole household with her terror in the darkness and cries for light. A light is kindled against the

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22 Choephoroi 459. 23 Choephoroi 489.
24 Choephoroi 475. 25 Choephoroi 525-525.
28 Choephoroi 524, 751. 29 Choephoroi 536-537.
darkness once again, but a very feeble and temporary light. As Finley puts it: "Her cry for light rises from the blackest darkness, and the dawn which the watchman deludedly greeted in the beacon and which Aegisthus thought to have found is far removed."30 There is no help in physical light for Clytemnestra, who is feeling the weight of her unnatural act.

Once more, a few lines later, Orestes makes explicit his pact with the Fury and the dark powers. He says that he will give the Fury a "third drink of blood,"31 the blood of Aegisthus and the Queen. (The first two were those of Thyestes' children and of Agamemnon.) The chorus repeats the notion:

The deep-thinking, renowned
Fury brings home at last a child
To avenge the defilement
Of ancient bloodshed.32

The plan is completed. Orestes and his friend Pylades seek entrance to the palace by posing as travellers. In his greeting to the servant at the gate, Orestes uses a grim and suggestive metaphor: "Hurry, for the dark chariot of night is at hand."33 Night is surely coming for Clytemnestra and Aegisthus; and the powers of darkness are in command of the entire situation. "The chariot of night is coming . . . let someone in charge of the house come out; the lady, or more appropriately, the lord."34 The grim juxtaposition of these phrases cannot be merely coincidental.

30Finley, op. cit., p. 267. 31Choephori 578.
32Choephori 648-651. 33Choephori 660-661.
34Choephori 660-664.
The members of the chorus begin a long series of prayers for Orestes' success by praying to "lady Earth" (ΠΩΤΩΙΔΑ ΧΘΩΝ) and to Hermes under two separate titles: Hermes of the Underworld (as we have mentioned) and Hermes "of the night" (ΥΧΙΟΣ.) According to the latter title, Hermes was the god of deceit and double-dealing, of stealth in the night. He is the appropriate patron for the returning heir and his friend, trying by trickery to gain entrance at the palace gate, disguising their voices to sound like those of foreigners. In another sense, however, Hermes "of the night" is in contrast with his protégé, the second "bearer of light."

When Orestes' old nurse exchanges some words with the chorus at this point, she tells them how she cared for him as an infant, and how his crying often "woke her in the night." Again we have the word ΨΥΧΤΙΠΛΑΤΚΤΩΝ, and since it is a newly-coined word, it is hard to avoid being reminded of its other contexts: the watchman waiting for relief and Clytemnestra screaming in the dark.

The chorus, in its continued fervent prayer for victory, cries out:

Kindly grant that this man's house rise up And see the bright light of freedom With happy eyes, Coming out of the covering darkness.

This explicit prayer for light seems to address Apollo. Paradoxi-
cally, the words immediately following are directed to the son of
Maia, Hermes, who

Speaking the inscrutable word,
At night puts darkness before the eyes,
And in day is no more clearly visible. 39

As the jaws of the trap are closing around Aegisthus, the chorus
continues its prayer. The alternatives are clear:

Either Orestes will make complete
The destruction of Agamemnon's house,
Or, lighting the fire and light of freedom,
. . . he will have the great wealth
of his fathers. 40

A cry is heard within the palace, and Aegisthus is dead.
Clytemnestra is soon to follow, but not without hesitation on the
part of Orestes. His nature rebels at the thought of killing his
mother, who appeals to his sympathy. But the warning of Pylades,
"Regard all as your enemies except the gods," 41 gives Orestes the
final motivation necessary to slay his mother.

After the intense scene of the killing of Clytemnestra,
the chorus sings its song of joy and thanksgiving, in which the
image of a saving light recurs antiphonally, as a lyric climax to
the whole play. "Justice has finally come . . . to the house of
Agamemnon." 42 In Murray's restoration of the text, 43 the chorus
sings out three times "the light is here to behold!" 44 (Τὸ αὖ θέλειν}

39Choephoré 816-818. 40Choephoré 861-865.
41Choephoré 902. 42Choephoré 935-938.
43Gilbert Murray, Aeschyli Septem Quae Supersunt Tragoed-}
44Choephoré 961, 962, 971.
Light, it seems, has finally and truly broken upon the house of Agamemnon. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, the "lion’s mat" and the "wolf," lie slain in defeat. The treacherous murder of a king and a husband, Agamemnon, is avenged. "Light is here to behold!" "The great fetter (μεγάλα... ψάλλων) that held our house is taken away."45

We find it hard to agree with Wheelwright when he says: "With admirable art Aeschylus withdraws light imagery almost entirely in the Choephoroi and through the early part of the Eumenides, and stresses instead the darkness imagery appropriate to both the invocation of Agamemnon’s ghost and the appearance of the Furies."46

True, there is a good bit of darkness imagery in this play and in the first part of the next; but the images of light in the prayers of Electra and the chorus, and in the victory song of the latter, are too notable to warrant saying that light imagery has been withdrawn.

In a flourishing gesture, Orestes flings down the bloody robe that had been used to ensnare Agamemnon so that "the father who sees all, the Sun"47 might behold the evidence of a horrible deed and "bear witness... that I killed justly."48

As Orestes seems rather unsure of himself after committing the act which he had dreaded, so the chorus abruptly changes its mood. Just revenge has been taken, but at what a cost: the murder

45Choephoroi 982-983. 46Wheelwright, op. cit., p. 263.
47Choephoroi 984-986. 48Choephoroi 987-988.
of a mother by her own son. We must keep in mind that the chorus itself is composed of women, the serving-women of Clytemnestra.

"You have died a terrible death," they say, looking upon the fallen Queen. And as for Orestes, "suffering blossoms for the one who is left." "There is trouble here; more is coming." The victorious heir himself feels far from triumphant:

I grieve over the things done, the suffering, and all the family; Mine is the foul stain of this victory.

Feeling increased foreboding, Orestes says that he does not see "where this thing will end." He feels his mind giving way under the pressure of his guilt. There is one last glimpse of hope before the horrifying end of the play, and with it, the last metaphor of light. Orestes tells the chorus that he will go to seek Apollo’s aid; he will go to "Apollo’s land, and the famous light of fire that never dies" (Δοξίου πέδων, πυρός τε φέγγος ἄφθοτον κεκλημένον.) Perhaps here Orestes, and with him his unhappy people, will find relief and salvation.

We have reached another turning-point in the trilogy, and a turning-point in its imagery. Suddenly the Furies, hateful and ugly, burst upon the scene and, if only in Orestes’ fearful imagination, with them come darkness and sheer terror.

... they come like Gorgons,
Dressed in black, with serpents woven in their hair ... 55

The Furies are μνημόσ εύκοτοι κύνες — "the bloodhounds of my mother's wrath." 56 Orestes runs from the stage, terrified.

After this horrible encounter, the chorus is left alone to muse dejectedly about the turn of affairs: "A third storm has broken on this royal house ... ." 57 First, there was the terrible slaughter of the children of Thyestes; then the murder of Agamemnon;

Now, third, from somewhere came this savior—
Or shall I call it death? 58

Orestes is the light, the σωτηρ. But, "shall I call it that or death?" Within the space of a few minutes there is herein another complete emotional reversal. Again, the light that men hoped for, hoped in, and rejoiced over has been overcome.

Perhaps this reversal should not have been unexpected. If we agree with the findings of Clemence Ramnoux, 59 the forces of night can be said to be in control all through the Choephoroi. As she puts it, if we go through the play carefully, "on découvre tous ou presque tous les noms du catalogue des Nocturnes, nommés avec un commentaire lyrique dans la trilogie, et même nommés en ordre dans la journée des Choephores." 60 Miss Ramnoux points out that the children of Night, specifically, are named in the lyric parts of the Choephoroi, and the children of Strife (one generation

55Choephoroi 1048-1049.
56Choephoroi 1054.
57Choephoroi 1065-1067.
58Choephoroi 1073-1074.
59Ramnoux, op. cit., p. 121.
60Ibid., p. 192.
removed from Night) are named in the dramatic parts. 61

When we review the Choephoroi with this pattern in mind, we find that Miss Ramnoux is basically correct. The main groups of the children of Night and the children of Strife are either named or vividly evoked in the order, for the most part, in which Hesiod names them.

We find death mentioned several times at the very beginning of the play, 62 in the initial speech of Orestes. This corresponds to the Hesiodic triad, considered to be three aspects of the same thing: "hateful Destiny, black Fate, and Death." 63

"Sleep and the family of dreams," 64 next in Hesiod's list, are found named in the first chorus of the Choephoroi, 65 in the first account of Clytemnestra's nightmare. "Care-full-of-woes" (Ωίζος), 66 is evoked by the phrase "sorrowful hearth" (πάνοιξος ἔστα) 67 of the play. Ramnoux finds the Hesiodic groups of the Hesperides, the Destinies, and the Fates invoked under the names Moira, 68 Ἁτρή, 69 Ερινύς, 70 Hesiod's Nemesis (or Vengeance), Wanton-love, and Fraud are certainly called to mind: the first, Nemesis, when Orestes and the others definitely decide on murder, 71 the second and third in the chorus' song about feminine treachery

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61 Ibid., p. 122. 62 Choephoroi 8-9, 13.
63 Hesiod Theogony 211-212 (vide supra, p. 23, for list.)
64 Ibid., 212. 65 Choephoroi 32-41. 66 Hesiod Theogony 214.
67 Choephoroi 49 68 Choephoroi 306. 69 Choephoroi 383.
70 Choephoroi 402. 71 Choephoroi 435-437.
and wantonness. Finally, Strife herself is mentioned several times by name or by association in the Choepori.

Of the children of Strife, three main groups present themselves in the Choepori. Oblivion, Famine (or Hunger), and Sufferings are generally referred to in the account of the atrocities to Agamemnon and to Electra after his death. Slaughters, Homicides, and other forms of killing are not mentioned but dramatized in the killing of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Similarly, Falsehoods and Double-meanings are used, in the trickery of Orestes' and Pylades' gaining entrance to the palace, without being named as such. The chorus in its invocation of Hermes of the Night requests his aid in such trickery and equivocation.

The last of the children of Strife named by Hesiod is the Oath, which is listed among the powers of evil because, as Paley says, "... an oath presupposes some kind of contention. Oaths would be wholly needless if men lived in perfect amity." The Oath finds mention near the end of the Choepori in a grim passage where Orestes recalls that Clytemnestra and Aegisthus have sworn to die together, and "now the oath is kept."

So we see that in the course of the play these powers, the children and grandchildren of Night, are virtually all named or alluded to in almost the order in which Hesiod listed them; and the word almost, we believe, does not detract from the conclusion

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72 Choepori 585-652. 73 Choepori 456-478.
74 Choepori 439-450. 75 Choepori 812-818.
76 Paley, op. cit., p. 199. 77 Choepori 979.
which we would like to draw from this striking collocation. Aeschylus, in placing these fearsome names throughout the Choephori, like "stones along a path,"78 was producing a general impression that the powers of darkness, the chthonic powers, are in predominance throughout the play. The impression is admirably and dramatically conveyed by Night's children, spaced at regular intervals through the piece. The Choephori, Rammouix points out, runs its length between the invocation of Hermes of the Underworld in the first line and the despairing cry of doom, Ate, in the last.79

Ultimately, it seems to us that this very predominance of the powers of darkness is the reason why Orestes' light fails in the Choephori. The trilogy will teach us, finally, that a true solution cannot be reached by mere vengeance. Alignment with the forces of vengeance, which are forces of darkness, and to whom Agamemnon's children certainly espoused themselves in this play, cannot bring a permanent peace.

The light and darkness imagery in the Choephori forms a pattern basically quite similar to that in the Agamemnon. We have seen that the former play began with the mournful scene of the serving-women and Electra, clad in black, singing of the misery and darkness covering the house of Agamemnon. This darkness theme is supported throughout by the frequent invocations of and allusions to the chthonic powers. By contrast, there was Electra praying that Orestes come and kindle a light in the household, echoed several times by the chorus; and finally, the joyous ode of

78 Rammouix, op. cit., p. 121. 79 Ibid., p. 122.
thanksgiving for the light which seemed to have come. Finally, there was the reversal and the onslaught of the black-robed Furies, the failure, for the present, of Orestes' light. The sequence is clear: darkness, hope for light, joy at light arrived, failure of light, darkness. Thus the pattern of the Agamemnon is repeated, and still there is no solution, no lasting "light."

Yet there was a ray of hope: "the famous light of fire that never dies" at the shrine of Apollo. There is hope that the god who directed Orestes to matricide will not forget him now. Finley says this of Orestes:

He himself becomes an atonement for the family's violation of natural sanctities, and being afflicted by spirits of earth and night, he enters their darkness. Apollo has threatened him with corrupting diseases, mark of nature out of joint, if he failed to avenge his father, and now his entrance into darkness is the promise of reborn health.

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80 Choephoroi 1036-1037.
81 Finley, op. cit., p. 249.
CHAPTER V

THE EUũNIDES

We begin the third play of the Oresteia at the holy shrine of Apollo at Delphi. Its initial lines are a long prayer of the Delphian priestess\(^1\) in which she traces possession of the oracle from Earth through Themis and Phoebe to Phoebus Apollo. When the prophetess goes into the shrine she sees a dreadful sight: the Furies are there in all their loathsome manner, having pursued Orestes all the way. Orestes, too, is within; his hands are befouled with blood. The Furies, says the prophetess, are "black and utterly loathsome" (μελαίναι, δ' ἔστο Πᾶν Ἀθηνώτοι.)\(^2\) The terrified woman, impressing the strangeness and horror of these deities on the minds of the audience by her reaction, turns over the affair to Apollo: "the master of the house must take his own measures."\(^3\)

Apollo, inside the shrine, speaks reassuring words to his suppliant, Orestes. Of the Furies he says:

Because of evil they were born, since
They rule the evil darkness and Tartarus
below the earth,
Hateful to men and the Olympian gods.\(^4\)

\(^1\) Aeschylus Eumenides 1-31.

\(^2\) Eumenides 52.

\(^3\) Eumenides 60-61.

\(^4\) Eumenides 71-73.
Apollo puts the old Furies into a trance-like sleep, and, despite the urgings of Clytemnestra's ghost, they lose their present chance to apprehend and execute Orestes. They lament this loss bitterly, blaming Apollo. Apollo drives them out of his shrine, speaking to them contemptuously. He will strike them with a "flying serpent" (an arrow from his silver bow) if they do not leave, so that in their pain, they will spew out "the black and foaming blood of men." The god goes on to paint a horrible picture of the vengeful tortures of young men by the furies, and of their general loathsomeness.

Orestes safely reaches the sanctuary of Athena at Athens, as directed by Apollo. Hardly has he a chance to speak a few words of introduction when his pursuers have caught up with him. Surrounding the suppliant, they threaten him:

Hades is the great chastiser of men
Below the ground . . . .

They would send him to the darkness below (as Apollo has just referred to the underworld) to pay for his matricide. After Orestes prays for help to Athena, the Furies begin a long ritual chant in preparation for the exacting of revenge on Orestes. Declaring their divine rights as agents of justice, they invoke by name for the first time their divine Mother:

Mother who bore me, O Mother Night,
To be a vengeance on those who are blind
and those who see, hear me . . . .

5 Eumenides 181. 6 Eumenides 183. 7 Eumenides 273-274. 8 Eumenides 321-398. 9 Eumenides 321-324.
Vengeance is theirs by birthright, say the Furies; they pursue their victim until he "goes down under the earth."\(^{10}\) The Furies are quite separate from the Olympians and have no dealings with them. Their image to express this situation is appropriate: "For sheer white robes I am unsuited and have no right."\(^{11}\) And, a few lines later, the opposite image: "Men's illusions . . . are wasted away before our black-robed attacks" (αμετέραις ἐφόδοις μελανείμοσιν.)\(^{12}\) The kindly ones, or Eumenides, as they were euphemistically named by the Greeks,\(^{13}\) tell how terrible is the fall of the man who calls down their wrath:

He falls, and does not know it in his unthinking madness;
In such darkness does pollution hang over the man,
And woeful rumor tells of the dark cloud over his house.\(^{14}\)

It is natural that the darkness of which the Furies speak should correspond closely to the darkness over Agamemnon's house described in the Choephoroi.\(^{15}\) It is the same darkness of the Furies' wrath which Cassandra saw coming before her death and which Orestes was to dispel.

The Furies pursue their inexorable task "despised . . . separated from the gods by a light not of the sun."\(^{16}\) The light of the Furies, if it can be spoken of as such, is one of very dif-

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10 Eumenides 339. 11 Eumenides 352. 12 Eumenides 368-379.
13 This play is supposed to portray the transformation of these vengeful deities from Ερυθρόες, or Furies, into Ευμενίδες.
14 Eumenides 377-380. 15 Choephoroi 50-53.
16 Eumenides 385-387.
ferent quality from that of man and of the Olympians. It is really a striking and contradictory euphemism for darkness. In the same way, Clytemnestra's sacrificial fires, in the Agamemnon, cast off light—but a light quite different from the joyous light that the watchman saw in the beacon.

The ancient goddesses have their age-old privileges and their proper place, "even though underground . . . and in darkness foreign to the sun."17 We note the heavy use of darkness imagery in this ritual song of the Furies, from their invocation of their Mother Night18 to the terminal phrase just quoted.

In introducing themselves to Athena, who has asked about the identity of the stranger at her shrine and the strange company around him, the Furies say:

We are the dark children of Night; Curses we are called, in our home beneath the ground.19

The Furies are becoming almost concrete embodiments, personifications of darkness. They give Athena their reasons for pursuing Orestes, and they ask that she turn this killer over to them in order that they may send him to a place "where it is never allowed to be happy,"20 i.e., as they have said previously, to the darkness below the earth. We have been carefully introduced to the Furies, and their picture is a grim one. Wheelwright says with good reason that "the Furies are the children of Mother Night, and until their transformation they must exhibit only sombre as-

17Eumenides 395–396. 18Eumenides 321.
Orestes presents his side of the case to Athena, telling her how his "dark-hearted" (Κελανόφρων)22 mother killed Agamemnon, her husband, in cold blood. The one word (Κελανόφρων) again links Clytemnestra to the Furies and the other powers of darkness.

The heir to Agamemnon's house adduces the argument, strong in his favor, that Apollo himself was a "co-cause" (Μεταίτιος)23 or accomplice in the slaying of Clytemnestra, having imposed the duty of performing the act on Orestes with dire threats.

Athena decides that the case must be decided by a vote of the citizens. The Furies sing on one full of threats and warnings of what will happen if they are not given their rightful prey, the young heir. Apollo himself testifies on behalf of Orestes, and admits responsibility: "I bear responsibility for his mother's murder."24 As the debate grows more and more heated, the Furies and Apollo produce various arguments for and against Orestes. As the vote is finally being cast an interesting exchange takes place between Orestes and the Furies:

Orestes: "Phoebus Apollo, how will this case be decided?"
Chorus: "O Mother, black Night, are you watching?"
Orestes: "Now for me either the end of the rope or the light."25

Orestes calls on Apollo, still the god of light and the healer, for assurance in this crucial moment. The Furies call on

21 Wheelwright, op. cit., p. 263. 22 Eumenides 459.
25 Eumenides 744-746.
black night, asking her to witness the outcome of the trial. This invocation is, perhaps, more a dark threat than a prayer. Finally, Orestes expresses the dread possibility that faces him on one side, while happiness waits on the other. In Lattimore's translation: "This is the end for me. The noose, or else the light."26

By a vote in which Athena herself casts the deciding ballot, Orestes is acquitted of his mother's murder. Reason has triumphed over mere passion and vendetta. Orestes thanks Athena and Apollo, and above all, Zeus as his savior.

The Furies immediately set up a loud cry of lamentation, saying that the younger gods, the Olympians, are trampling the "ancient laws."27 Great are the sorrows and wrongs done to "the dishonored and sorrowful daughters of Night."28 They repeat this stanza, but not before Athena attempts to comfort them. She tells them they have no real cause for grief: "clear evidence (λαμπρά μαρτυρία) from Zeus was there."29 She offers them hospitality, a place of honor in Athens "under the ground . . . on shining thrones at the hearth."30

When the Furies are implacable, Athena begs them to be reasonable and not to curse her fair land. She again proposes that they share her home and place of honor, and asks that they "put to sleep the bitter strength of the black wave."31 The "black wave" of the Furies' curse must be kept from rolling over

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26 Lattimore, op. cit., p. 162.  
27 Eumenides 773.  
28 Eumenides 792.  
29 Eumenides 797.  
30 Eumenides 805-806.  
31 Eumenides 833.
Athens, leaving blight and death in its wake. In the lines following this plea from Athena, the Furies continue their self-pitying lament; they are indignant that they should have it proposed to live under the ground (a strange reason for hurt pride, since they have claimed their true home is ὕπ' ἄναξ Ὀδοντός). Again they invoke their mother Night: οἵε, ἀντερ Ὀνυ, and, this time, also earth itself: οἵοι, σα, φεῦ. The stanza is repeated once, but again Athena makes a plea for the Furies’ friendship. It is a tense moment; the power of the Olympians faces the power of the Chthonic gods. Can they in any way be reconciled?

After Athena’s second offer, the old goddesses begin to soften rapidly. “I think you are persuading me. My anger is going away.” Won over at last, the ancient avengers ask Athena what kind of a spell they should cast upon this, their newly adopted land. Athena asks for the natural prosperity of her land:

From the sky make the breath of the winds  
Blow across the land in sunlight.

The Furies, now transformed into the kindly ones, the Eumenides, comply. Accepting Athens as their home, they bless it, asking that “the bright beam of the sun” (φανερῶν ἀναίρετος) may bring the land bounty and happiness.

This “bright beam of the sun,” besides being the promise of the Eumenides for Athens, can be looked upon as the final
breaking of light on the trilogy. The powers of darkness are reconciled, and the basic problem that could not be solved by Cre-tes alone has finally been solved.

The Eumenides, and with it the whole Oresteia, is coming to its final climax. In a complete reversal, the Furies go on to say:

*May the dust not drink the black blood of the citizens Working vengeance through passion.*

The old goddesses are now to be led to their place of honor beneath the ground; they make a solemn farewell. A procession of women and girls is formed to escort them to their home. Athena says that she herself will guide them down and show them their chambers "by a holy light" *(πρὸς φῶς ἱερὸν).* Athena reminds the Furies that they are to be a protective force for her land. After another gracious expression of farewell by the ancient goddesses, Athena goes on:

*I agree with the words of these prayers And by the light of flaring torches I accompany you To the place deep beneath the ground.*

A solemn procession having been formed, with the women all in crimson robes, Athena repeats:

... let the torchlight go before them So that this kindly company under the ground May forever shine forth with blessings for men.

In the final processional chant, the women leading the
Eumenides sing: "Join the procession, aged children of Night"
(Nuktos paides xtaides.) The Eumenides are being escorted to
the "ancient underground caverns of the earth" (yas upp keúthesin
yugidoun.) In a last repetition of the light imagery, they
are to go down "rejoicing in the light of the torches" (purisaptn
lamptai therpoineai.)

Thus the light imagery is reintroduced at the end, and with
great expressive power . . . . the awful goddesses, who were
formerly alien to man's purposes, shall henceforth enjoy the
highest honors among the citizenry. The light and song that
mark the procession symbolize the new wisdom and the new har-
mony which the great transformation has brought into the
world.45

The heavy darkness imagery, concerned mainly with the Eu-
menides and their ancestry, at the beginning and through the first
half of the play, has given way to exultant light imagery at the
end. The bright light of the sun has finally broken through the
gloom, for Orestes, for Argos, for Athens. And this time it is no
temporary, false light. The Furies are still in power, but no
longer as dark and fearsome curses; they are friendly deities now,
"rejoicing in the light."46 It is a new covenant among the gods,
a grand alliance which will put an end to the darkness of irration-
al punishment forever.

. . . Zeus who sees all
Thus with Fate is reconciled.47

42Eumenides 1032-1033. 43Eumenides 1036.
44Eumenides 1041-1042. 45Wheelwright, op. cit., p. 263.
46Eumenides 1042. 47Eumenides 1045-1046.
CHAPTER VI

LIGHT AND DARKNESS AND THEMES IN THE TRILOGY

In our introduction we spoke of several "levels" in the Oresteia which were considered separately for the sake of a better analysis and understanding: the dramatic, the moral, the theological, and the poetic levels. We have been speaking, in Chapters II-V, of this last-mentioned poetic level, following one of the poet's image-themes through the trilogy. Our purpose in this conclusion will be to point out briefly how light and darkness imagery, a poetic element, serves to unify the trilogy by aptly symbolizing all the other elements within it. Also, we shall examine some other recurrent themes of the trilogy and their connections with light and darkness imagery.

We have just seen at length how images of light and darkness symbolize the basic dramatic progression of the trilogy (i.e., the story of the house of Agamemnon from the King's return to the final exoneration of Orestes.) We had the return of Agamemnon, and light; the downfall of Agamemnon, and darkness. There followed the return of Orestes, and light; but then the inevitable appearance of the Furies and darkness once again. Finally, there was the equitable solution of Athena and her powers of persuasion, and a peaceful coexistence of light and darkness. If any symbol
could be said to unify the whole story of the Orestesia, that symbol is certainly light coming out of darkness.

On another level, light coming out of darkness is also a quite appropriate symbol for the moral evolution which is itself concretized or symbolized in the trilogy. Thus, all through the Orestesia darkness is made to symbolize the forces of passion and blind vengeance, while light stands for the rational weighing of circumstances which is finally reached in the Eumenides. True light is never reached by Agamemnon or by Clytemnestra, as Richard Kuhns puts it, because:

... in Clytemnestra, and in Agamemnon, who desecrated the altars of Troy, deep savage passions have dictated action. This kind of behavior is associated with the demonic forces of the underworld ... 1

The same commentator remarks that Orestes' saving feature, that which distinguished him from his parents, was his conscience: the conscience which told him that murder for revenge, especially of his own mother, was wrong. 2 It is only with Orestes and the intercession of the Olympians that a true "light" was attained and the seemingly endless chain of retribution was broken.

Of the levels mentioned in the introduction, there remains the theological level, which consists mainly of the struggle between the θεοὶ νεώτεροι, 3 the Olympians, and the παλαιοὶ νόμοι, 4 the older powers of destiny and retribution. Once again, darkness was consistently used as a symbol of the powers defending the "an-

1R.F. Kuhns, op. cit., p. 54. 2Ibid. 3Eumenides 778. 4Ibid.
cient laws" (e.g., the "black Furies," "daughters of Night," etc.),
while the opposite was true of the Olympians (e.g., "bright
Apollo," "the light of the undying flame," etc.) The conflict be­
tween these two groups is well expressed by Kuhns:

Apollo would control men through the power of the new order
of gods, i.e., by way of Delphic morality, which possesses
more enlightened rules of conduct, but is completely lacking
in the necessary element of persuasion.5

The Furies, on the other hand, "... if they were allowed their
way, would instill an animal-like, congenital fear, a brutish fear
of inherited guilt and capricious fate."6 It is Athena who sees
that there is room for both elements: that even in the most en­
lightened state, there must be a sanction connected with the laws.

The Furies, then, who represent the retributive force in human
relationships, must still be retained under the new conception
of justice by law. They are to be the "teeth in the law." They
will still pursue evil-doers, but now as agents of le­
gally constituted authority.7

The view that both elements are necessary (the Olympian
and the Chthonic, the rational and the passionate) is symbolized
in the friendly union of darkness and light in the procession at
the end of the Eumenides.

From another aspect, the conflict of passion versus rea­
son, Chthonic versus Olympian, is a conflict of male versus female.
This element of conflict is visible from the very beginning of the
trilogy, when the watchman spoke of things being amiss in the
house of Agamemnon and hinted that this was due, in part, to the

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5Kuhns, op. cit., p. 70. 6Ibid., p. 73.
7Wheelwright, op. cit., p. 265.
Yet, Clytemnestra makes it clear in the *Agamemnon* that she is acting as an outraged mother when she takes Agamemnon's life. The choral odes of the *Agamemnon* and the *Choephori* have many references to Helen and other examples of feminine treachery. Orestes is sent by Apollo, a male god, to avenge the death of his father. When he has done so, he is pursued by the female Furies, whose particular task is to hunt down those who have the temerity to kill their own mothers. Finley notes that in the final exchange between Orestes and Clytemnestra, as the Queen protests her innocence,

... when she recalls her ancient loneliness and isolation, he counters with the labors of men away from home. The male principle, guilty in *Agamemnon*, begins its exonerations in these words.

The same exonerations are continued in the *Eumenides*, in the strange scene in which Apollo, testifying for Orestes, "proves" that the father is the true parent, the mother only the τρόφος of the seed sown by the father.

It becomes increasingly clear at this point that there is considerable overlapping of our different themes. Thus, we have already shown in different contexts that light has been a symbol for the male principle, embodied in *Agamemnon*, Orestes, and the Olympians, and darkness has been connected consistently with the

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9 *Agamemnon* 1432, 1525, 1555.  
11 Finley, *op. cit.*, p. 272.  
12 *Eumenides* 659.
female principle: Clytemnestra, the Furies, their mother Night. Athena, a goddess born from Zeus with no feminine intermediary, "combines the best of both male and female, namely courage and moderation."\(^{13}\) Athena saw, as we have said, that there was room, and need, for both reason and passion, male and female.

Involved in the male-female, reason-passion conflict is one other opposition that can be isolated in the trilogy. It would best be stated as an opposition between tradition and progress or creativity. The traditional would of course be represented by the ancient powers of fate and retribution operative in the Oresteia. Ramnoux, in a comment on the subject, shows how darkness may sometimes be a symbol for the traditional or historical side of human life. "L'homme commence à se fonder avec une histoire derrière lui, et même une histoire avec des racines qui vont se perdant dans la Nuit."\(^{14}\) The past, with its traditions, reaches back into the darkness of unknown beginnings. And the traditional is opposed, in this trilogy, to the innovations of the "newer gods," the divine "enlightenment" brought about in the Oresteia. To put it another way:

... the issue between Apollo and the Furies comes down to trust in the creative will. The Furies conceive men as bound to their inherited past; Apollo asserts the free light of mind and choice.\(^{15}\)

In conclusion, we see the regularly recurring pattern of light and darkness imagery in the Oresteia as symbolic of a whole

\(^{13}\)Kuhns, op. cit., p. 71. \(^{14}\)Ramnoux, op. cit., p. 127. \(^{15}\)Pinley, op. cit., p. 273.
series of inter-related and overlapping conflicts within the trilogy: male and female, Olympian and Chthonic, passionate and rational, traditional and creative. The image-theme of light and darkness provides and appropriate series of symbols to portray or concretize all these conflicts and their solution. This is why we believe that the study of this image-theme has been worthwhile.
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