

### *Choephoroi*: a Nostos Play

On 7<sup>th</sup> January in the year 1451 a Bull of Pope Nicholas V established in Glasgow a *studium generale*, that is a university, which was to have ‘all the privileges, honours, and immunities’ given by the Holy See to the *studium* in the Pope’s own city of Bologna. I feel therefore that in a sense I am coming home to the the Mother University of my own University, and I thank you for inviting me.

The very common verb *εἰσέρχομαι* is frequently used in tragedy, especially Aeschylean tragedy, by or about a new arrival on the stage, as he/she explains where he/she has come from or why he/she has come. It is the very first word of two Euripidean prologues (*Hecuba* and *Troades*), used by minor characters, and it is employed by Orestes as early as line 3 of *Choephoroi*, as he introduces himself to the audience with the words ἤκω γὰρ εἰς γῆν τήνδε καὶ κατέρχομαι. Of course the word may occur at any point in a play when someone arrives, especially when a homecoming is mentioned or presented (e.g. at *Pers.* 510, *Ag.* 522, 531, 605, 1280, *Cho.* 659), but the only parallel that I can think of for its use by the protagonist so early in a play is in line 1 of Euripides’ *Bacchae*, where it is spoken by the god Dionysus, when he has arrived home at Thebes, his birthplace, after his journey from Asia. Here in *Choephoroi* the emphatic tautology of the two verbs draws the audience’s attention to the significance of this moment in the life of Orestes. It will be marked also at the beginning of Sophocles’ *Electra*, where, however, he is not the first speaker. *ἔρχομαι* is a technical term for the return home of an exile, and so it was used by the Chorus of *Agamemnon* at 1647, in its hope that one day Orestes would return. That hope is now fulfilled.

More important, despite the unusual opening of the play, it is immediately clear to the audience that it will belong to a group of tragedies which Oliver Taplin in 1977 classified as *nostos* plays, namely Aeschylus’ *Persae* and *Agamemnon*, Sophocles’ *Trachiniae*, and Euripides’ *Heracles*, in all of which the return home of a hero is central to the plot. In a few other plays, including *Choephoroi* and the *Electra* plays of Sophocles and Euripides, Taplin judged the theme to be present but less central. That description seems to me to be appropriate perhaps also to Euripides’ *Andromache*, in which the hero returns uniquely only as a corpse, and perhaps to *Bacchae*, but I would argue that *Choephoroi*, balancing the first play of its trilogy, fully deserves the label of *nostos* play without any qualification. Just as the Watchman in

the prologue of *Agamemnon* reminds the audience of the similar character in Homer's *Odyssey*, so in *Choephoroi* it will remember that Homer more than once stresses the similarity in the traditional story between the role of Telemachus, Odysseus' son, and that of Orestes, the son of Agamemnon. At the end of the *Odyssey* the father/son relationship will again become important, this time between Odysseus and *his* father Laertes.

The tradition is certainly older than Homer, in whose poem the bard Phemius sings of the return of the heroes from the Trojan War, and it was certainly maintained after Homer, with the *Nostoi* of the epic poet Agias and the lyric poet Stesichorus. Homer himself, through the mouths of Nestor and Menelaus, gives us tantalisingly brief accounts of the journeys home of the major heroes from Troy. They cover almost every possible variation of the theme, from the Lesser Ajax, who dies on the journey, to Odysseus who arrives home safely after ten years of adventures, largely in an exotic world, to Menelaus, whose adventures are in the real world, and to Agamemnon who arrives after a largely, but not quite, uneventful journey, only to be murdered on his arrival. With the exception of Nestor and Diomedes, the common factor that links the *nostoi* of all the heroes is that the return is always different from what the hero expects. He himself has changed, and so too is the home to which he returns. Traces of the theme are still to be found in modern Greek poetry.

Such is the tradition which Aeschylus adapts to fit the very different requirements of a performance before an audience in the theatre. Perhaps he was the first to do so. We can be sure that the original audience of *Choephoroi* was thoroughly familiar with the traditional themes and their conventions, and that it would be alert to the way in which Aeschylus uses, manipulates, and departs from those conventions to suit his own dramatic purposes. In *Choephoroi*, for example, as in the *Odyssey*, but not in *Persae* or *Agamemnon*, the hero arrives home in disguise, and a recognition is a crucial part of the plot. In the *Odyssey* the old nurse Eurycleia plays a vital part, as does the old nurse Cilissa in *Choephoroi*. Failure to recognise the nature and importance of such conventions in tragedy has, I believe, contributed to much misinterpretation of *Persae*. Given the nature of tragedy, we should expect its homecomings to be generally unhappy. But the most obvious difference between epic and tragedy is that while half of the *Odyssey* is devoted to the hero's adventures on the homeward journey, there is no way in which they could be presented at all on the Greek stage. Instead in *Persae* and *Agamemnon* Aeschylus uses messenger speeches

to inform us of what we need to know. In *Persae*, indeed, long messenger speeches, one of them devoted to Xerxes' homeward journey back to the Hellespont, form the whole of the central section of the play. In *Choephoroi* there is no problem, as Orestes' journey from Phocis has been uneventful.

One of the most persistent features of the theme of *nostos*, in both epic and tragedy, is that the hero arrives home alone, or almost alone. The aim may be to stress his bravery on the journey itself, or to highlight either his vulnerability or his heroism when, in his isolation, he confronts the dangers that await him on his return; or the emphasis may be on any combination of these. The whole of the first half of the *Odyssey* may be seen as a narrative of how Odysseus gradually lost all the ships and the crews with which he set sail from Troy, until he arrived entirely alone, first on the Phaeacian island of Scheria, and finally on Ithaca itself. His son Telemachus, whose journey to visit Nestor and Menelaus in a sense parallels his father's journey, sends his companion Theoclymenus on ahead, before he himself returns alone to his father's house. To ensure that Xerxes appears all alone at the end of *Persae* Aeschylus invents the disaster at the River Strymon, which, quite unhistorically, destroys the last remnants of the army with which he set out from Greece. Helios and Poseidon are Xerxes' principal divine enemies, as they were of Odysseus in the *Odyssey*. In *Agamemnon* the Herald recounts how on the homeward voyage a storm has wrecked all of Agamemnon's ships except his own.

So *Choephoroi* begins with the arrival on stage of Orestes, almost alone. As Telemachus is accompanied in the *Odyssey* by Theoclymenus, so Orestes has with him Pylades, his constant companion in the post-Homeric tradition. He will be allowed to speak three memorable lines later in the play to stir Orestes, but he himself will play no part in the actual killings. Just before we hear the offstage death-cry of Aegisthus, the Chorus stress the vulnerability of Orestes who is about to face 'alone' (μὲν) the 'two' usurpers (866-8). His position would have been even more perilous if the Nurse had not taken the Chorus's advice to tell Aegisthus not to bring his bodyguard, the same bodyguard which he had needed to protect him against the elderly and feeble Chorus at the end of *Agamemnon*. But the death of Aegisthus is of little consequence in this play. The real enemy is Clytaemestra, the woman who in the previous play needed no bodyguard to help her win the victory over the male, her husband. If he is to recover his proper place in his father's house and kingdom,

Orestes must first gain entry to the palace by entering the door which is still controlled by her.

It is certain that no one else is present in the prologue; for Electra declares that she can see *two* sets of footprints. When he returns to the stage with Pylades at 653, to be greeted by his mother, Orestes declares that he has been carrying his own luggage ( 675) on the journey, thus confirming and emphasising that he has no other companion. It is unlikely that we saw the luggage on his first entrance in the prologue or even, I think, during the recognition-scene; we are probably to suppose that he has left it offstage. Line 713, in which Clytaemestra according to the reading of the only medieval manuscript M, invites Orestes and, in the plural, ‘these his attendants and fellow-travellers’ ( μ ) to enter the palace to enjoy her hospitality, is, I believe, certainly corrupt, and one should read, with many scholars, μ . The original spectators could, of course, see with their own eyes how many people were on the stage, but it presents a problem for modern editors. The most recent defence of the transmitted text is that of Jacques Jouanna, in *Lexis* 17 (1999) 137-46, who takes to mean ‘together with all my luggage’. This is in itself quite possible; for - compounds are notoriously difficult to interpret. So Jouanna finds a metaphorical reference to a traveller on a merchant-ship with a full cargo, which is now, but not in the prologue, being carried by one or more servants. The objection to this is its pointlessness in the context. If the audience can now see these servants with the luggage, what makes their introduction at this stage so important that they need to be pointed out to the audience? In any *nostos* play it is the absence, not the presence, of servants which is meaningful and needs to be stressed.

Similar questions arise with *Agamemnon*. Probably nobody would now favour the idea of a spectacular entry of the hero, accompanied by a large retinue, but it seems to be generally taken for granted that he is attended by a few followers, presumably on foot. That they are not mentioned in the text certainly does not prove that they are not there. It is theoretically possible that Agamemnon drove his own carriage, with Cassandra as his passenger, in which case one of Clytaemestra’s servants would drive it away along one of the *eisodoi* after Cassandra had left it, but it seems more probable that he had a coachman to do it for him. If, as some believe, Cassandra arrived in a separate carriage, it is hard to believe that she herself was its driver. Either way, then, one or two supernumeraries seem to be required to drive

away the carriage(s). At least they have something useful to do, which is not the case in *Choephoroi*. As Taplin says in *The stagecraft of Aeschylus* (p. 304 n.1) ‘Any attendants are easily discarded when they are not wanted’. But *do* we want any more in *Agamemnon*? It can be argued that a victorious king would expect to have some kind of retinue on his return home. He has arrived with only one ship, but that would surely be enough to provide that retinue. The trouble is that on the Greek stage it was impossible to distinguish between a small group of soldiers which represented a much larger army, and a group that was small because they were the only soldiers to survive. In a *nostos* play, therefore, the tragedian would want to keep the number of attendants as small as possible. If there were more than two, which I doubt, they can hardly have followed Agamemnon over the crimson ‘carpet’ into the palace. Equally improbable in *Choephoroi* is the idea that the supposed servants *are* invited into the palace to share in the hospitality offered by Clytaemestra.

A regular character in *nostos* stories is the woman left at home who anxiously waits for the arrival of the hero – Penelope, the wife of Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, Atossa, Xerxes’ mother in *Persae*, Deianeira, the wife of Heracles in *Trachiniae*, Electra, the sister of Orestes in *Choephoroi* and the Electra plays of Sophocles and Euripides. In *Agamemnon* Clytaemestra claims, like Penelope in the *Odyssey* but for different reasons, to have dreamt about her husband in his absence. Her nightmare in *Choephoroi*, as she waits for the return of Orestes, is based on that in Stesichorus, while Sophocles devises a different dream for her. In all three Electra plays the reactions of two women to the *nostos* of the hero contrast with each other. In Euripides’ *Andromache* the two women are wife and concubine.

In *Choephoroi*, as far as Electra is concerned, Aeschylus evidently follows fairly closely a tradition which goes back at least to the Hesiodic *Catalogue*, and which has been identified on pre-Aeschylean artistic representations. In that tradition Electra’s role is largely confined to the recognition of her brother, and she probably plays little part in the murders of Aegisthus and Clytaemestra. So in *Choephoroi*, after the recognition-scene has taken place early in the play, and soon after she has contributed to the great central *kommos* in which Orestes at last announces his intention of killing his mother, the first mention of matricide, Electra is despatched inside the palace, to be seen no more. It will be for Sophocles and Euripides to give her a more central role. In the *Odyssey* Penelope and Clytaemestra are strongly contrasted. We cannot tell whether the contrast between Electra and her mother was

equally important in the pre-Aeschylean tradition, or whether this was Aeschylus' own contribution to the story. Electra offers her brother the joyous welcome which he expects, before Clytaemestra ensures that, as usual in a *nostos* tragedy, that welcome will turn sour. The joy of the recognition-scene with Electra will lead, after the *kommos*, to the very different atmosphere of the encounter between mother and son.

Neither recognition, however, is entirely straightforward. Electra, whose principal role in the play is to provide the contrast with Clytaemestra, and who prays (140-1) that she might be more *sophron* and her hand more pious than her mother, begins to recognise in the *kommos* (421-2) that as a result of her mother's behaviour, and probably as an inheritance from her parent, her own temper is becoming just as savage. Clytaemestra's attitude is still more complex. We have to compare and contrast her not only with Electra but with the Clytaemestra whom we saw in the previous play. It has long been recognised that the scene in which she welcomes her disguised son into the palace mirrors that in which she has welcomed her husband. In *Agamemnon*, both before and immediately after the king's arrival, her attitude seems to be that of a model wife, but her protestation of her loyalty and the language which she uses in praise of her adored husband are so exaggerated as to make it clear to the audience that her welcome is entirely hypocritical. By the end of the scene even the not very bright Agamemnon is uneasy at her invitation to walk into the palace over the red fabrics, but his scruples are easily overcome, and so he, the man, disappears into the house, through the door over which the woman exercises complete control. It would be wrong, however, to suppose that Clytaemestra is a hypocrite in every respect. When later in the play she attempts to justify herself to the Chorus by citing her love for the sacrificed Iphigeneia, her language gives no hint that she is insincere, and when at the end of the play she declares that there has been enough violence in the house she seems to mean it. In *Choephoroi* when Clytaemestra comes out of the palace to welcome Orestes the question of sincerity or insincerity does of course not arise at first. Since she does not realise who he is, she is able to fulfil quite naturally the duties of a good hostess. Anyone who has read the *Odyssey* knows that there are two ways in which to receive a guest, the right way and the wrong way. Unlike Polyphemus or the suitors of Penelope Clytaemestra chooses the right way. So the atmosphere is one of civilised courtesy and politeness. If the audience has some misgivings it is because it knows that in this case it is the guest who has chosen the wrong way to respond to his hostess's hospitality. When, however, at 691-7

Clytaemestra expresses grief at the supposed stranger's report that her son is dead, it is difficult to avoid questioning her sincerity. The nurse, indeed, will tell us that it was all a sham. Ever since the first printed edition of Aeschylus some scholars have thought that the speech in question must have been delivered not by Clytaemestra but by Electra. But Electra's role in the play has finished, and, as we know from *Agamemnon*, Clytaemestra can be sincere when she wants to. Perhaps Aeschylus left it for the audience to decide.

Her opening words, then, may not be hypocritical. She intends them quite literally, but at the same time their ambivalence in the context could not possibly be misunderstood by the audience; she promises her guests hot baths and everything that is appropriate for this household (668-70; for the latter cf. 710-11 and 714). What happened to the last person to take a bath in this palace, and what is appropriate to this dysfunctional household? I want to focus now on this theme of baths, and on the connected theme of clothes, in the traditional *nostos* story.

I would like to think that it was Aeschylus himself who conceived the murder of Agamemnon in his bath, trapped in a net-like robe. The robe seems to appear in one or two artistic representations of the murder, but whether the bath too can be identified in art is more dubious. In a kalyx krater by the Dokimasia Painter a robe envelops Agamemnon, who stands naked as if he has just emerged from a bath. Emily Vermeule thought that this must derive from Aeschylus' play, in which, however, the king dies *in*, and not *after*, his bath. In any case the krater is now dated to c 470 BC, long before the production of the play. Whether or not the setting for the murder is entirely original, there can be no doubt about the powerful use that Aeschylus makes of it. Both bath and clothes seem to be regular elements in a *nostos* story. The arrival on Scheria of the naked shipwrecked Odysseus is one of the lowest moments in his adventures, and the beginning of his restitution to his status as a hero is marked first by his bath in the river and secondly by his putting on the clothes lent to him by Nausicaa. He is not yet home in the real world, but he has returned at last to a civilised, if still semi-fantastic, society. When he does reach Ithaca, he is dressed as a beggar in rags, and it is only when he is bathed and dressed in Book 23 that he is reinstated in his real identity, and can lay claim to his proper place in Penelope's marriage-bed and as head of his household. In *Persae* Xerxes too arrives in rags, and the ghost of Darius instructs Atossa to meet him with clothes appropriate to his status. Her failure to do so means that for Xerxes there is to be no rehabilitation; he will

finally leave the stage still in his rags. Normally, as one would expect, the bath precedes the donning of the ceremonial robe in preparation for the banquet that will follow it. In *Agamemnon*, however, the two stages are combined into one. Clytaemestra traps her husband *in* the bath with the robe, and instead of a symbol of rehabilitation it has become an instrument of murder. In effect Agamemnon is still naked when he dies. The bath has become his coffin, and the robe has become his shroud. In the final scene of *Choephoroi* Orestes orders the same robe to be stretched out for the audience to see, while he agonises over how to describe it appropriately. At *Choephoroi* 999, as at *Agamemnon* 1540, the bath is described as a δροίτη, which can also, at least in later Greek, mean a coffin. At *Choephoroi* 1011 the robe is a (or ) which can also mean a shroud. Both words occur at *Eumenides* 633-4. In *Trachiniae*, when the long-awaited Heracles is on his way home, his wife Deianeira sends him a robe as a token of her love, and thus, unlike Clytaemestra unintentionally, brings about his death.

In *Choephoroi* the theme of clothes appears, not as part of Clytaemestra's welcome to Orestes, but in the early Recognition scene between brother and sister. Stesichorus had arranged this by means of a lock of hair. Sophocles and Euripides would devise their own ways of doing it. Aeschylus' method was perhaps entirely his own: Electra recognises that the garment which he is wearing is one which she herself had embroidered for him before he went into exile as a child. Perhaps Aeschylus modelled this on Book 7 of the *Odyssey*, in which the clothes lent to him by Nausicaa on Scheria are recognised by a suspicious queen Arete as having been made by herself, and this leads indirectly to the revelation of his identity. In *Odyssey* 19 the disguised Odysseus, in a lying tale of how he had once entertained her husband on his way to Troy, gives Penelope a full description of his clothes, which she recognises as her own gift to him. There is no way in which the illogicality of this in the context of *Choephoroi* can be removed, and it is not surprising that Euripides enjoyed making such gentle fun with it. Orestes must be thought of as an adolescent, perhaps eighteen to nineteen years old, when he returned from exile. He was certainly at least ten years old when Agamemnon was murdered, and, according to *Od.* 3.306, Orestes killed Aegisthus in the eighth year after that. He cannot, therefore, still be wearing the clothes of a young child. What mattered, however, for Aeschylus and his audience was surely not such arithmetical calculations, but the way in which he has adapted one of the favourite motifs of *nostos* poetry. Later in the play, when Cilissa introduces



again the theme of Orestes' clothes, it is to an even younger age that she refers; when he was a baby she used to wash his nappies. All the emphasis is on the childhood of Orestes, that is to say on his innocence and vulnerability. But at the same time there is for the audience an undercurrent of anxiety. Pierre Vidal-Naquet showed some years ago that the spectators would recognise in Orestes the figure of an Athenian ephebe, a young man undergoing the transition from adolescence to full adulthood. For Orestes that transition would be from innocent child to the murderer of his mother.

So, as the Chorus is the first to recognise, Orestes' homecoming has turned out to be very different from what he expected. For Odysseus in the *Odyssey* it was the bath and the proper clothes that sealed it for him. For Agamemnon the bath and clothes turned into the instruments of his death. For Xerxes the failure to receive the proper clothes symbolised the failure of his rehabilitation. Aeschylus does not make it explicit in the case of Orestes, but the audience could see with its own eyes that when he rushes from the stage at the end of the play, once more an exile, he is still wearing the adolescent's clothes with which he entered it, and he has certainly, perhaps for him fortunately, not had time to take a bath. One of the curiosities of the *Odyssey* is that even Odysseus learns that he will have to set out one day again on his travels, but not much is made of this, and he is guaranteed thereafter a peaceful old age at home. *Choephoroi*, on the other hand, ends on a note of unrelieved gloom.

*Eumenides* is not a *nostos* play, but it contains elements of one, and indeed the audience at the beginning may think that it *is* going to be a *nostos* play. The journey that brought Orestes from Phocis to Argos before *Choephoroi* began was painless and unremarkable, but longer and more troublesome was that which he would now have to make from Delphi to Athens, this time without Pylades. At the end of the prologue, however, Apollo sends Hermes to escort him on it;  $\mu$  , he says (91). In the account of Odysseus' travels in the *Odyssey* the verb  $\mu$  , the noun  $\mu$  and their cognates play a strikingly large part, as at every stage of his journey he finds an escort or someone to send him on his way. He is fortunate indeed to meet in with the Phaeacians who have much experience in this activity, and who will bring him finally home to Ithaca. His travels are mirrored by those of Telemachus, who also finds escorts or people to send him on his way when he visits Nestor and Menelaus. In *Agamemnon* the Herald who arrives on stage in advance of his master will pray that the heroes who have escorted (  $\mu$  516) the army on its outward journey to Troy will bring the remnant safely home again. Agamemnon himself thanks the gods

who have escorted him on his way and brought him back again (

μ (853). Five of these terms, a veritable cluster, are to be found in the Beacon speech, as Clytaemestra describes the passage of the light from one beacon-fire to the next on the journey that in a sense echoes that of Agamemnon himself from Troy to Greece.

We are given few details, however, of Orestes' journey from Delphi to Athens, and the journey which might seem to be the most important of all, from Athens home to Argos to claim his rightful status in his home and his country, is passed over in complete silence. After the trial scene on the Areopagus he silently disappears, as does Apollo, and we hardly notice him go. We are left, if we wish, to suppose that when he arrives home he will at last have his bath and put on clothes appropriate to his status. But all the dramatic interest now is on the transformation of the Erinyes into the Eumenides, and the trilogy ends with an unexpected homecoming, not a *return* home, but the spectacular departure of the goddesses into their *new* home escorted by Athena (1022 πέμψω) and by a secondary chorus of human attendants (1005 μ ). As a symbol of their new status the Eumenides put on new robes – crimson like the robe of Agamemnon.