

AN ELUSIVE *AGAMEMNON*

P. JUDET DE LA COMBE: *L'Agamemnon d'Eschyle. Commentaire des dialogues*. Première partie. Pp. 385. Seconde partie. Pp. 395–892. Paris: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 2001. Paper, €59.46 per volume. ISBN: 2-85939-627-6; 2-85939-628-4 (Tome 1); 2-85939-629-2 (Tome 2).

These two bulky volumes constitute the second installment, with a third still to come, of a gargantuan edition of, and commentary on, *Agamemnon*. The immense undertaking was initiated a quarter of a century ago by Jean Bollack, in collaboration with Pierre Judet de la Combe, and now is continued by Judet de la Combe on his own. Ongoing seminars of an international flavor at the University of Lille have provided a forum for much of the enterprise.

The ways in which the first two massive installments have been constructed and arranged are extraordinary and must be described in some detail. Since Fraenkel has to be the point of reference for any huge commentary on *Agamemnon*, we need to keep his dimensions in view: 85 pp. of 'Prolegomena' in his Volume I, 850pp. of commentary in Volumes II and III. The first installment of Bollack/Judet de la Combe appeared in 1981–2: two 'volumes' (with the first consisting of two separate book-length parts), totaling 1088 pp. Now there is a further 892 pp., making 1980 pp. in all, more than twice the size of Fraenkel. And these close-to-2000 pages are without the benefit of a full critical text, which will comprise the third installment, together with full translation, history of the text, and metrical analyses. I say 'full' because in fact the 1981–2 installment did contain text, app. crit., and translation whereas the new volumes do not. This fundamental change and omission puts the already hard-working reader under what is surely an unnecessary and highly distracting burden, namely a continual guessing game as to what precisely is J. de la C.'s text. All his deliberations on the text, one assumes, must have been made prior to the completion of the commentary; indeed, quite a large number, though very far from all, of the commentary lemmata do supply a text (often, however, not of the whole verse under discussion). Why not just give it all to us? Nothing is gained, and a lot lost, by J. de la C.'s regrettable decision in this central matter.

A second fundamental, and fundamentally eccentric, decision, taken right from the start by Bollack and J. de la C., concerns the arrangement of the commentary. One might have expected that the first installment would have gone, e.g. up to the entrance of *Agamemnon*, while the second would handle the rest. A radically different structure exists. The first installment treated the prologue, the parodos, the three regular stasima (355–488; 681–781 [plus the anapestic welcome of *Agamemnon*, 782–809]; 975–1034), and what is termed 'le dernier "stasimon"' (1331–42), the brief choral interlude between the exit of Cassandra and the beginning of *Agamemnon's* death cries. The interpretive basis for this decision appears on the inside dust jacket blurb of Part 1 of Volume I: '... l'unité de l'oeuvre résidait moins dans une intrigue culminant avec la mort du héros que dans le lent processus d'interrogation et de réflexion qui amène le Choeur à en prévoir l'imminence et à la comprendre avant qu'elle n'ait lieu.' This rationale—to structure the first installment on the unifying force of the chorus' growing expectation of *Agamemnon's* murder—leaves fuzzy the inclusion of the prologue, but a collateral organizing principle is reflected in the subtitle of the present volumes, 'Commentaire des dialogues'. The first volumes, then, were limited to those

The Classical Review vol. 54 no. 1 © The Classical Association 2004; all rights reserved

portions of the play where characters or chorus are speaking or singing solo; the new volumes handle all the ‘dialogue’.

Do these twin organizing principles offer us a strategic breakthrough in how to approach an understanding of *Agamemnon*? I seriously doubt it, in part because of the still further complexities of presentation that they entail. Granted, Clytemnestra does not literally speak during either the parodos or the first two stasima, Agamemnon does not speak during the anapestic address to him, and Cassandra does not speak during the third stasimon. However, Clytemnestra is certainly on stage during the first stasimon and very possibly on stage during the parodos and/or the second stasimon; Agamemnon and Cassandra are certainly on stage while he is being welcomed by the chorus; and Cassandra is certainly on stage during the third stasimon. And it can hardly be doubted that, for Aeschylus and his audience, a dramatic ‘dialogue’ is, in a real sense, taking place between the chorus and Clytemnestra whenever she is on stage while they are singing, between the chorus and Agamemnon as soon as he enters and they start their anapestic welcome, and between the chorus and Cassandra in the third stasimon. Thus, in fact, only the twelve-verse ‘dernier “stasimon”’ along with the prologue fall clearly outside the province of what might most perceptively be included in a ‘commentaire des dialogues’. The basic distinction between solo and dialogue is, at best, extremely fragile, and even the most sympathetic reader finds himself repeatedly asking, in frustration: why force such a vast enterprise into such a contorted arrangement on the basis of such problematic organizing principles?

With the above said, it can also be stated—and stated with conviction—that the new volumes are full of learning, critical sophistication, and a generous appreciation of the history of scholarship on *Agamemnon* (there are, for example, fifty-five pages of bibliography under thirteen subheadings, three of these with sub-subheadings). Since there is no limit to the space at his disposal, J. de la C. sets out all parts of the commentary with lavish and leisurely thoroughness. Each segment first has a ‘Présentation’, an interpretive essay ranging from five to thirteen pages, and then the commentary proper, ranging from forty-eight pages on the final scene with Aegisthus (1577–1673) to 166 pages on the Cassandra scene (1035–1330). Only the brief scene (1343–71) of Agamemnon’s death cries and choral disarray has no ‘Présentation’, merely nineteen pages of commentary (of course, for the twenty-one pages on the key linking choral interlude, 1331–42, the reader must round up the third volume of the first installment!).

All that can be done here to give some slight indication of the interpretive flow and focus of the commentary is to glance at one fundamental bit, perhaps the most notorious ‘dialogue’ in all dramatic poetry, the Carpet Scene (931–43). Again, Fraenkel inevitably serves as the basic comparison. He gives eight pages to this critical passage; J. de la C. gives twenty, thus lingering over the string of textual and interpretive cruces in even more exquisite detail (though, it must be reiterated, without allowing us to know with certainty his full text and translation). There is, *inter alia*, splendid coverage of the intractable *παρὰ γνώμην* in 931, the function of *ἄν* in 933, the force of *μάχης* in 940 (a particular point of disagreement with Fraenkel), the appropriateness of *τήνδε* in 942. There are sensitive reflections everywhere on the enigmatic complexities of the mental and emotional processes of both Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. There is *not* the sharp bite of Fraenkel’s interpretive conclusions. Fraenkel’s picture of the war-weary, gentlemanly soldier, standing up to Clytemnestra while she is argumentative but succumbing as soon as she seems to turn to wifely entreaties, is a vivid part of the education of all students of tragedy, whatever the picture’s current persuasiveness may be. J. de la C.’s view of the Carpet Scene cannot

possibly be captured in a single sentence or even in several. It is much more accurately, and productively, described as an ongoing deep meditation, constantly questioning itself, never quite content with the progress of the argument. For a text like *Agamemnon*, there is, of course, great attractiveness in such an interpretive mission.

Stanford University

MARSH McCALL

## A NEW ENGLISH *ORESTEIA*

C. COLLARD (trans.): *Aeschylus: Oresteia*. Pp. lxxix + 232, map. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Cased, £45. ISBN: 0-19-814967-0.

This excellent and scholarly translation of the *Oresteia* has an unusually full Introduction and no fewer than 115 pages of Explanatory Notes. After a brief summary of the stage action, the Introduction deals first with the political circumstances of the original production, before turning to the plays themselves. C. deals in turn with the dramatic ideas and their sources, the dramatic design and the characters, issues, and meanings, the plays in Aeschylus' theatre, dramatic form, speech and choral song, language and imagery, modern reception of Aeschylus, and public response. In all of this he displays a sure touch and a sense of balance in his treatment of matters that are often controversial. He brings out well, for example, the complexity of Agamemnon's responsibility and guilt, and he gives a good account of such matters as recurring imagery and themes. The importance of the law of hospitality receives due emphasis (pp. xli–xlii), but he might have pointed out the significance of Orestes' breach of that hospitality after his courteous welcome from Clytemnestra. Both in the Introduction and from time to time in the Commentary I am less certain than C. that Aeschylus uses his chorus to preach sermons to his audience. The Introduction continues with a helpful 'Note on the text, translation, and explanatory notes'. Finally, C. supplies a full, and annotated, bibliography of secondary literature, almost all of it in English or English translation (in view of his target-readership this restriction is justifiable), a chronology of Aeschylus' life and times, family-trees of the principal characters, and a map of Greece and the Aegean. Both in the Introduction and the Explanatory Notes I have noted a few wrong, or doubtfully relevant, references. For example, on p. xlviii we are wrongly told that there is an exit at *Eum.* 730.

The translation renders the dialogue into English prose, with a more heightened style reserved for the lyric passages. With remarkable ingenuity corresponding lines in strophe and antistrophe are regularly printed with the same number of syllables. One wonders how many readers would be aware of this, had he not pointed it out in the Introduction. The translation for the most part reads well, and there are many fine turns of phrase (e.g. at *Ag.* 681–97, 1390–2). But at *Cho.* 939–40 'there drove his absolutely forward the exile' does not make sense, while at *Eum.* 739, 'I will set a higher value', the omission of *οὐ* has led to the reversal of the sense required (perhaps misprints in both cases). C.'s accuracy, however, can rarely be faulted, and he brings out even the subtle nuances conveyed by such particles as *τοι*. Alternative versions are sometimes indicated in the Explanatory Notes. C. uses M. L. West's Teubner text throughout, and readers who reject any of West's readings will naturally reject also C.'s translation at that point. However, he scrupulously notes passages in which the text (or translation) is insecure, and West's departures from the MSS tradition are usually

The Classical Review vol. 54 no. 1 © The Classical Association 2004; all rights reserved