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COMMENTS ON NOVA, *MORTIFERA VESTIS*

Abstract: In her article *Mortifera vestis*, Nova succeeds in showing that Aeschylus innovates in making Agamemnon's fatal robe an overgarment rather than a chiton. His objective was probably to associate Agamemnon strongly with the ideas of great wealth and luxury. Nova is also right to argue that Seneca's version of Agamemnon's murder is based, directly or indirectly, on a pre-Aeschylean account. Her other propositions are not persuasive.

It is certain that the Boston krater (MFA 63. 1246) presents a version of the murder of Agamemnon distinct from that of Aeschylus – as indeed we might have expected, seeing that it is almost certainly of earlier date than the *Oresteia*. The crucial difference is not the nature of the garment in which Agamemnon is trapped, but the involvement of Aegisthus in the murder. As in the great majority of sources from Homer to Roman times, both he and Clytaemestra are involved in the actual commission of the crime, and Nova is right to note the close resemblances between what we see on the krater and the account given of the murder in Seneca's *Agamemnon*: Agamemnon is trapped by Clytaemestra in a garment that completely covers his head, body and arms, ready to become the helpless prey of Aegisthus' sword; but Aegisthus' stroke is not fatal, and Clytaemestra comes back with an axe to finish the job. In Aeschylus, by contrast, both the trapping and the killing are done by Clytaemestra alone, with Aegisthus not even present in the palace.

The main theses of Nova's article are as follows.

1. *It is wrong to speak of the entrapping garment, either on the Boston vase or in Aeschylus, as a 'net', and references to it as such in Aeschylus' script are metaphorical.* I cannot imagine that anyone who has studied either the vase or the *Oresteia* would ever have seriously disputed this, though some scholars may have talked loosely on occasion. Nova, however, goes further and claims (p. 22) that these metaphorical descriptions have nothing to do with the fact that the garment was a trap; it is, apparently, purely coincidental that an object which performs the same function for Clytaemestra as a net does for a hunter

or a fisherman should be described metaphorically as a net. It is unlikely that many will be found to agree with this.

2. *The garment shown on the Boston vase is a thin, transparent chiton (as in Sophocles fr. 526 Radt and some later sources), whereas in Aeschylus it is richly woven and is referred to in terms that suggest it was an overgarment (what Athenians in ordinary language would call a ἱμάτιον). This is probably true, and helps to show that the Dokimasia Painter was not following Aeschylus (which no one now thinks he was). Most likely Aeschylus was innovating with the object of associating Agamemnon strongly with the ideas of great wealth and luxury (note the description of the robe as πλοῦτον εἴματος κακόν, Ag. 1383). He is the sort of person who could be tempted to trample a precious fabric underfoot by the argument that the house is so rich that the loss would be insignificant (Ag. 958-962); he is also the sort of person who would consider it no more than his due to be given a bath in a silver tub (Ag. 1539-1540) and then to be clothed in a robe of exceptional magnificence.*

3. *The garment on the Boston vase has no openings for head or arms, a feature also found in several later sources, whereas in Aeschylus no mention is made of this.* Nova never explains how otherwise the garment could have functioned as a trap; and in any case it is twice compared to a tent (*Cho.* 999 κατασκηνώμα, *Eum.* 634 περεσκήνωσεν) which implies that it covered the wearer completely from head to foot. Moreover, if (as the Boston vase shows) there already existed a well-known version of the story involving the use of an entrapping garment, expressions relating to it, which otherwise might have been too vague to interpret, would be understood as referring to the type of enveloping garment described in that version, especially after the garment itself had been seen by the audience, as it is during nearly three hundred lines of *Agamemnon* (from 1372) and again in *Choephoroi* (983-1015). The trilogy contains at least six such expressions, in addition to the two already mentioned: ἄπειρον ἀμφίβληστρον (*Ag.* 1382), ἀμφίβληστρον (*Cho.* 492), καλύμμασιν (*Cho.* 494), στέγαστρον ἀνδρός (*Cho.* 984), ποικίλοις ἀγρεύμασιν κρύψασ' (*Eum.* 460-461), ἀτέρμονι... πέπλωι (*Eum.* 634-635).

4. *On the Boston vase, there is not sufficient evidence to conclude that Agamemnon is represented as having just had a bath.* The only argument offered on this point (p. 7 n. 14) is that the state of Agamemnon's hair resembles that sometimes used to indicate that a man is old and balding; this is irrelevant, since Agamemnon was not, and is not represented as, an old man.

I do not think that this article leaves us any further forward than we were before, except in the following respects:

(a) We should take care not to speak of the entrapping garment (on the Boston vase, in the *Oresteia*, or indeed anywhere else) as a net or even as net-like; rather, it is a device that serves the same *purpose* as a net.

(b) The account of the murder in Seneca's *Agamemnon* is based, directly or indirectly, on a pre-Aeschylean version of the story. We cannot tell for certain whether this version omitted the bath, or whether Seneca himself replaced the bath by the banquet known from *Odyssey* IV 532-535, XI 409-420.