

Agamemnon – Actors’ Preparation – Questions of Character

Director’s notes to the company concerning Clytaemnestra

Written to the company before rehearsals began

Thoughts and questions about the character of Clytaemnestra

1. What ‘facts’, and clues, about Clytaemnestra are contained in the text? And what are the questions that arise from those clues?

For example:

In the Prologue

- i) To what extent does the fact that we are interpreting the Watchgirl as the ghost of Iphigeneia affect our understanding of her relationship with Clytaemnestra?
- ii) The Watchgirl speaks of Clytaemnestra’s mind as being ‘expectant, determined like a man’s’ (11). Later, in Episode 1, the Chorus say that Clytaemnestra speaks thoughtfully ‘like a man of sense’ (357).
- iii) The Watchgirl grieves for the difficulties at home and says things are not managed as well as they once were (19). Is she referring here to Clytaemnestra, or to Aegisthus, or to their combined management?
- iv) The Watchgirl is afraid of speaking openly (36-39). Is it because she is afraid of Clytaemnestra, or Aegisthus, or both of them?

In the Parodos

- i) What is Clytaemnestra’s relationship with the Chorus in the Parodos?
- ii) She does not answer the Chorus when they beg her to tell them whether she has heard any news (83-103).
- iii) Does she ignore them because she is busy in prayer - or because she feels she can snub them with impunity – or because she does not yet feel ready - or because she feels that she will not be believed? (In relation to the fourth possibility, she says, in Episode 2, that she ‘kept making the sacrifices’ despite knowing that people disbelieved her (575).) Any other thoughts?

In Episode 1

- i) Does Clytaemnestra’s relationship with the Chorus genuinely shift during this episode, and if so, why do you think this is?
- ii) At the beginning of this episode, she seems ready to make a public announcement concerning the fall of Troy (252,53). Does she feel ready now because she has just been preparing the household altar for the sacrifices that are to take place inside the palace (1008)? Any other thoughts?
- i) Clytaemnestra’s system for relaying the news of the end of the war seems very well managed (267-302).
- ii) She imagines the defeat of Troy with empathy for the conquered (312-315). She speaks later of the reports of the war that have been pouring in over the years (841). Has she been living and breathing and dreaming the war for years now?

In Episode 2

- i) When Clytaemnestra speaks of her faithfulness to Agamemnon, her hypocrisy seems clear (585-595). It is also clear from the Chorus's response that some of them at least, are not taken in by her.

In Episode 3

- i) How does Clytaemnestra feel towards Agamemnon?
- ii) Clytaemnestra makes a very public declaration of her 'love' for Agamemnon (829ff.).
- iii) For most of her opening speech in this episode, she speaks of him in the third person (876).
- iv) When she finally addresses him directly it is to invite him to walk on the cloth that will lead to his death. At this point she calls him her 'dear love' (878).
- v) We understand Clytaemnestra's terms of endearment as being hypocritical, but does she, in a way still love, or desire, Agamemnon? It is clear from the depth of her bitterness expressed in Episode 5, that she is hugely jealous of Agamemnon's sexual relationship with Cassandra. Perhaps, in her jealous imagination she exaggerates it, but does this excess of hurt suggest a feeling closely akin to 'love'? (1413-1420). Might this 'love' also be discernible in Episode 3?
- vi) Clytaemnestra's insight into Agamemnon's motives and vulnerability are apparent when she asks him if it is *fear* that prevents him from walking on the cloth that has been laid out for him (905).
- vii) Her sense that she is an instrument of the god of justice is implicit in lines 946 and 947.

In Episode 4

- i) When does Clytaemnestra decide to kill Cassandra?
- ii) Perhaps when she first sees her in Episode 3? Perhaps it is not until Episode 4 when Cassandra does not obey her order and, ambiguously, Clytaemnestra says that Cassandra 'will froth away her strength In *blood* [my italics] before she learns how to bear the bridle' (1036,37)?

In Episode 5

- i) What state of being is Clytaemnestra in during this episode?
- ii) It is clear that she has finally accomplished the murder of Agamemnon, and that it was long premeditated (1348,49).
- iii) When she tells the story of the murder of Agamemnon, the tense changes from present - to past - to present. Compare for example line 1350, with line 1356, with line 1359.
- iv) Again and again, Clytaemnestra claims that her murder of Agamemnon is just: because of the misery he has caused - because of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia (1367, 1377, 1405, 1504) - and also because of the children murdered by his father (1470-77).
- v) Clytaemnestra speaks of her own '*fearless* heart' [my italics] (1373). Later, she betrays her own vulnerability when she acknowledges that Aegisthus is a 'shield of courage' to her in the 'halls of *fear*' (1410,07).
- vi) The Chorus say that Clytaemnestra is arrogant and her mind 'unhinged' (1399, 1400). Do we want our audiences to agree with them?
- vii) The Chorus also say that there are 'streaks of blood' standing out in her eyes (1401). Does this suggest that the murders were committed in rage and passion rather than in cold blood?
- viii) What impression do we have of Clytaemnestra's feeling for her daughter from this episode? For example, she speaks of Iphigeneia as the 'most precious pain of my

labour' (1389,90). She says that she was much 'wept-for' and speaks of her as 'My child by him [Agamemnon] and raised by me, He did something she did not deserve' (1500,01). She is speaking here as a mother – and she is speaking of Agamemnon as father to her child.

- ix) Clearly, Clytaemnestra loved Iphigeneia enough to kill Agamemnon, in vengeance for her death. This mother's love is the key underlying motive for the murder of Agamemnon - as well as a key driving force for the whole play.
- x) Do you think that ultimately Clytaemnestra accepts responsibility for what she has done (1539-1548)? For example, she speaks of agreeing to retain only a small part of the family's wealth in exchange for driving away murder from the 'house'.

2. *What are the key questions in relation to Clytaemnestra that the text leaves open for us to decide?*

For example:

- i) Is it possible to trace Clytaemnestra's inner emotional journey? Are there conflicts inside her? To what extent does she try to hide them? To what extent do we want to make her inner journey clear to an audience?
- ii) Perhaps her true feelings are most clearly expressed in Episode 5 beginning with her words 'In the past I have said many things to suit The moment; now I shall not be ashamed to say the opposite;' (1343ff.)?
- iii) What responsibility does Clytaemnestra bear for what happened? Is she justified in avenging the sacrifice of her own daughter in a society that stood by and did nothing?

2. Movement, Voice and Image in relation to Clytaemnestra

Some of the important areas to think about are:

1. Eye focus and direct address

If the Chorus are sometimes amongst the audience can Clytaemnestra address the audience directly, as if they too are members of the Chorus?

2. Individual character movements

Clytaemnestra is a queen and ruler of the people of Argos in her husband's absence. With Agamemnon, she is also the holder of long established wealth. She is someone who is capable of murdering two people with a knife, one of them her husband, a warrior. How do you think these factors might affect her movements?

3. Individual vocal characteristics

It seems imperative that Clytaemnestra's voice has authority and strength, as well as the ability, at times, to convey other sides to her character, including her vulnerability.

4. Telling her individual story

What is the story of Clytaemnestra in the play? What are her intentions/objectives/motivations within each episode and when do the significant changes occur?

5. Relationships and 'emotional subtext', Clytaemnestra in relation to each of the other characters

A sense of the 'inner emotional journey' of Clytaemnestra can perhaps be guided by her relationships with each of the other characters. What are the defining features of each relationship? How does each character feel about her, as well as how does she feel about each of them? Select three possibilities for each relationship.

For example:

Clytaemnestra – ‘I hate you as a father, I despise you as a king, I desire you as a man,’

Agamemnon - ‘I desire you as a woman, I am amused by you, I am flattered by you,’

These possibilities (or any other selected ones) may be used as points of inner focus for these two characters in relation to each other (within a naturalistic style of acting); and/or they may be used as a springboard for physicalisation in terms of body posture, distance from each other and etc. This idea of ‘emotional subtext’ is distinct from the Stanislavsky’s idea of subtext - which encompasses both thoughts, as much as feelings, and is normally understood to run counter to the text. ‘Emotional subtext’ may run counter to, or in parallel with, the text.

9. Physicalising ideas and themes within the play In relation to acting style (as well as naturalism), we want to experiment with ways of physicalising ideas and themes within the play, including feelings between characters. Ideas for motifs/emoles/images that could be physicalised - through repetition, freeze frame or whatever - by Clytaemnestra would be exciting. What are the key moments that we might want to experiment with in this way? What are the key lines of text? We may, in the end, cut back to a careful selection of movements, but, as with all the characters, certainly to begin with we need to brainstorm.