Cassandra’s final monologue

Cassandra’s final monologue in Aeschylus’s Agamemnon plays a transformative role in terms of the movement of the plot and, upon close examination, functions as a key for many of the tragedy’s larger themes. She begins by equating prophecy, be it the physical act or the emotional ramifications of foreknowledge of events, with intense pain. ³Oh, flame and pain that sweeps me once again!² she cries, then appeals to Apollo, the god at her prophecies’ origin, for help. Here, she names him ³King of Light² (ln 1256, ln 1257). This is an interesting paradox: Apollo, the source of the prophecy, is equated with light, which is a result not a source of fire. The metaphors are operating in reverse directions. Perhaps, then, Aeschylus is highlighting not only Apollo’s connection to the prophecy but also to the actual events, in that he observes them, ruler of the reflected light from the fire of Cassandra’s pain. This is illustrative of the role the gods play in the Oresteia in general. While at some level responsible for the events of the human sphere, they are also spectators and, by the conclusion, adjudicators. This tension between the active and passive roles of the gods is fundamental to the development of the tragedy. The actions of the humans are fated to some extent, and their roles are determined by dictation of the gods, for example, Orestes was ³born to slay his mother² (ln 1280-1). The gods at some point become spectators, allowing the mortals enough leeway to resist their fates, and even, in Orestes’s case, participate in their own trials. There is also an implicit dichotomy between the divine and the mortal expressed in Cassandra’s initial exclamation. This is problematized in lines 1258 through 1259, when Cassandra introduces, by way of metaphor, a third classification. She names Clytaemestra a ³woman-lioness, who goes to bed with the wolf, when her proud lion ranges far away² (ln 1258-9). This initial characterization

of Clytaemestra and description of her sins is instrumental in explaining them. When she is relegated to an animal position, below that of humans, her crime is drained of any art, and presented as simple, if vile. Similarly, Aeschylus posits that her relationship with Aegisthus is below her station, making him a wolf to Agamemnon’s ³proud lion² (ln 1259). Since the development of the entire trilogy depends on judging Clytaemestra’s deeds as wrong₰ while simultaneously judging both Agamemnon and Orestes to be right₰ Aeschylus moves her, through metaphor, to a more base level of existence. Portrayed as a lioness, her motives seem less pure, her reasoning clouded, and her urges seem to dictate her actions. This is but one of many ways Aeschylus denigrates Clytaemestra and her deeds; in The Libation Bearers, she is shown to be a trickster only, a crafter of ³sacrilegious handiwork² (LB ln 986). Having thus characterized her murderer, Cassandra goes on to briefly prophesy the coming events. She says that, ³as a wife mixing drugs, [Clytaemestra] wills to shred the virtue of my punishment² (ln 1260-1). The initial metaphor is interesting, since it varies so little from the actual situation. Clytaemestra is, naturally, Agamemnon’s wife, but Aeschylus chooses to invoke the more abstract, and potentially more ideal, image of ³a wife² mixing drugs, rather than to say that it was as if Clytaemestra herself were mixing drugs. Again it seems that Clytaemestra’s position as an ordinary mortal is put into jeopardy; the evil of her deeds appears to prevent herfrom fully representing the abstract notion of a ³wife². Furthermore, she puts into the mixing bowl goes not herbs and wine but ³the virtue of [Cassandra’s] punishment.² This is the first of a number of paradoxes in the passage; the notion of sin₰ not virtue₰ is intrinsic to punishment. The virtue in question, then, is not the virtue of the punishment

itself, but rather the virtue with which Cassandra could undergo the punishment. Here, the center of tragic gravity begins to shift, since Cassandra names as the primary casualty of Clytaemestra’s plot not Agamemnon’s death but her own loss of an opportunity to behave nobly. This is not solely a shift of focus from Agamemnon as victim to Cassandra, but rather a more significant shift that begins to privilege adherence to ethical and virtuous behavior over life itself. It is in this context that a courtroom begins to have relevance; only with this assumption can we begin to allow a forum which determines the ethical legality of an act power over life and death. Cassandra is not entirely free from self-centered rationale, however, saying that the cause of Agamemnon’s murder is ³that he brought a mistress home² (ln 1263). Unless, of course, the death she references as resulting from this is her own, rendering Agamemnon irrelevant, and completing the gravitation shift in her favor. Cassandra’s attention then turns to the flashy prophet’s attire she is clothed in, and she begins to rip it from her body. This sort of melodrama is tragically effective, to be sure, but there seem to be two other ideas at work. The first is a seeming quest for purity of existence: if she is miserable, she wants to appear so. ³Make someone else, not me, luxurious in disaster!² she exclaims (ln 1268). This is the second of the paradoxes, since it is as unlikely to be luxurious in disaster as it is to be virtuous in punishment. Here, rather than subtly reconstructing the relationship between two concepts, Aeschylus seems to be vilifying the concept of ³luxuriousdisaster² as a whole. Later, in The Libation Bearers, the Chorus describes one properly attired for grief or disaster: clothed ³in my grief, with splitting weft of ragtorn linen across my heart’s brave show of robes² (LB ln 27-9). The text also names many luxurious disasters;

Agamemnon took the fatal step onto the red tapestry he thought too rich, and the tapestry itself came to symbolize this notion, reappearing, in the hands of Orestes’s attendants, after the murders of Clytaemestra and Aegisthus. The irony in the presence of elegant indulgences on the scene only compounds the tragedic impact of a great disaster. The second of the notions at play is an apparent disappointment or anger with the gift of prophecy itself: Cassandra calls her staff and flowers ³mockeries² and throws them to the ground, saying, ³this for all that you have done to me² (ln 1264, ln 1267). She suffers at the hands of her own gift. Cassandra continues to harp on this through line 1276, recording her loved ones’ hatred of her and her status as a ³beggar, corrupt, [and] half-starved,² and yet, she says, ³I endured it all² (ln 1274). She seems to harbor a grudge against Apollo, saying that it was he who removed her ³prophetic robes² when in fact she tore them off with her own hands (ln 1270). ³And now,³ she says, ³the seer has done with me, his prophetess² (ln 1275). What begins to emerge from this muddle of resentment is a dualism between the god as the seer and the prophet (or mortal) as the ³endurer² as such, that is, the individual who experiences the ramifications of the knowledge the gods possess. This dualism begins to suggest a slightly new way to conceptualize fate. The sight and the judgment rests in the heavens, and the mortals below are left to passively experience or suffer through that which is seen. Here as elsewhere, the relationship between the human and the divine seems to foreshadow the emergence of a judicial system. The text then jumps to an entirely different issue: that of the impacts of intergenerational conflict and of fighting amidst family members. A classic element of the tragic form, these idea figures prominently in the Oresteia. ³Lost are my father’s altars,²

mourns Cassandra, and, in the next play, she is echoed by Electra (ln 1277). Electra has lost not the physicality of her father’s tomb, but the meaning of it, and the words to access his spirit and her respect for her ancestry. ³How shall I say the good word,² she asks, ³how make my prayer to my father?² (LB ln 88-89). Interfamilial conflict destroys ancestral history, and the religious sensibility it appears to connect with, along with the family itself. This creates a vacuum that fate wishes to fill. If the altar of Cassandra’s father is gone, well, ³the block is there to reek with sacrificial blood, [her] own² (ln 1277-8). Aeschylus is engaging in a symbolic explanation of the way conflicts are reproduced between generations; when one can no longer access the tomb or altar of one’s father due to conflict and tragedy, new altars must be created by those who yet require vengeance. Cassandra explicates this readily, saying, ³we . . . die not vengeless by the gods. For there comes one to avenge us also² (ln 1278-80). She means, of course, Orestes. She then prophecies his homecoming and the other events of the Libation Bearers, including both the escalation of the interfamilial conflict and its resolution. It is fated that Orestes will return to ³cast men headlong for his father felled,² which implies that he will make the punishment more severe than the crime (ln 1285). At the same time, ³he will come back to cope these stones of inward hate,² which suggests that Orestes will simultaneously move the entire self-replicating disaster toward some sort of resolution (ln 1283). Aeschylus is employing this device to heighten the dramatic irony of the entire trilogy by giving his audience a vague and seemingly self-contradictory vision of things to come. Having dealt with both the near and distant future, Cassandra moves to her present. She begins to think about her own death, in the context of her prophetic abilities and her

various experiences. She knows the sum of the events to come and asks, ³why am I then so pitiful? Why must I weep?² (ln 1286). Here there is some movement between the passive, objective state of being ³pitiful² and the action of ³weeping² that recalls the seeing/experiencing dichotomy of the divine and the mortal. The knowledge that accompanies Cassandra’s position as a prophet complicates the matter of death for her, and her movement toward a realization in lines 1287 through 1290 is slow. Initially, her foreknowledge leads to a confusion of tenses: she saw Ilium ³die as it died² and ³those who broke the city . . . fare as they have fared² (ln 1288-9). These juxtapositions of tense seem analogous to the more direct paradoxes posed by the phrases the ³virtue of punishment² and ³luxury in disaster.² Each of these paradoxical instances seem to hinge on some greater knowledge of the events taking place: a prophet can watch something ³die as it dies² and can also find the irony in luxury despite impending disaster. It is this prophetic distance— a slight privilege over ordinary mortals— that constitutes the perspective from which the paradoxes become visible. Cassandra’s prophetic uncertainty in terms of her temporal location in relation to certain events begins to clear in a series of declarative statements: ³I will go through with it. I too will take my fate² (ln 1290). With these, she abandons prophecy and pulls herself into her own present. Now thinking of the future with only hope and no certainty, she begins to pray that her death will be ³painless² and, later, that ³the avengers² will avenge her death as well (ln 1294, ln 1324). ³Painless death² is, potentially, among the many paradoxes that fill the passage, but now, in the context of a prayer, it comes into being through Cassandra’s desire for its truth, rather than through an ironic foreknowledge. Earlier, Apollo was named theseer,

and sight became analogous with the divine. When Cassandra says ³I may close up these eyes, and rest² she is not only describing what she will do at the time of her death, but what she is doing at present. She is closing not only her literal but also her prophetic eyes, divorcing herself from the foreknowledge giver her by the gods, and resting at last. Cassandra’s monologue posits some belated answers to the question that the herald asks on line 566, ³why live such grief over again?² Because, it suggests, mortals have no choice in the matter; they inevitably experience that which the gods see. Because, in order to adjudicate the issues at hand, we must relieve the grief we feel over them. Because it is better to endure punishment than to escape it, if one can endure it with virtue. Because it is only in revisiting our grief that we attain the perspective of the gods and the prophets and are able to see the small paradoxes we create. Because interfamilial conflict inescapably revisits each generation, and we live and relive our grief until the conflict is resolved. Because, Aeschylus suggests, we, with Cassandra, will go through with it, will take our fates.