

## WN 100 The *Agamemnon* Notebook

We are delighted to be able to include Woolf's *Agamemnon* Notebook, held at the Berg Collection at NYPL, in WoolfNotes. These new high-specification colour scans provide us with an authentic representation of this unique notebook, and one that is eminently readable. Woolf scholars have known about this intriguing notebook for many years, sometimes referring to it as Woolf's "translation" of the Aeschylus play, (part of his Oresteia trilogy, dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE). In my research for the WoolfNotes project, I made a point of examining the original reading notebooks included in Brenda Silver's 1983 guide (published by Princeton and later digitized by the University Press of New England), as well as the additions that we have now included in the WoolfNotes website. I thought that it was essential for me to understand them as material objects and to engage with the many challenges of reading these notes. It was, of course, a great privilege to see and handle them. The experience of having Woolf's *Agamemnon* Notebook on my desk at the NYPL was the high point of that exercise.

The *Agamemnon* Notebook was described by Woolf herself as an "edition" of the play. On December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1922 she wrote in her diary that "I should be at Aeschylus, for I am making a complete edition, text, translation, & notes of my own – mostly copied from Verrall; but carefully gone into by me." On January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1923, she recorded a list of works that she needed to read for the "Greek chapter" [of *The Common Reader*], adding that "I must master the *Agamemnon* (this refers to the immediate moment)". Earlier in 1922 she had acknowledged the difficulty: "though *how* to read Aeschylus, I don't quite know: quickly, is my desire, but that, I see, is an illusion." (*Diary* 14 October). In November 1922 she refers to Aeschylus, "reading furiously the while", and saying "It is terribly easy to let the reading slip; so I must make an effort to get 2 hours either before dinner or after" (7<sup>th</sup> November). On an ostensibly lighter note, Woolf records in a letter to Saxon Sydney-Turner in

2017, that Aeschylus (who she was reading in French, “which is better than English”) had been invading her nights as well as her reading hours: “Aeschylus.. excited my spirits to such an extent that, hearing my husband snore in the night, I woke him to light his torch and look for zeppelins. He then applied the Freud system to my mind, and analysed it down to Clytemnestra and the watch fires, which so pleased him that he forgave me.” (3<sup>rd</sup> feb 1917, *Letters* Vol 2). For context of this anecdote: Leonard Woolf had studied classics at Cambridge and was subsequently to bring Freud’s work to publication in the UK; zeppelins were German airships that could cut their engines and drift in order to make surprise attacks, causing public outcry. Patently the Woolfs were familiar with some of Freud’s ideas by 1917.

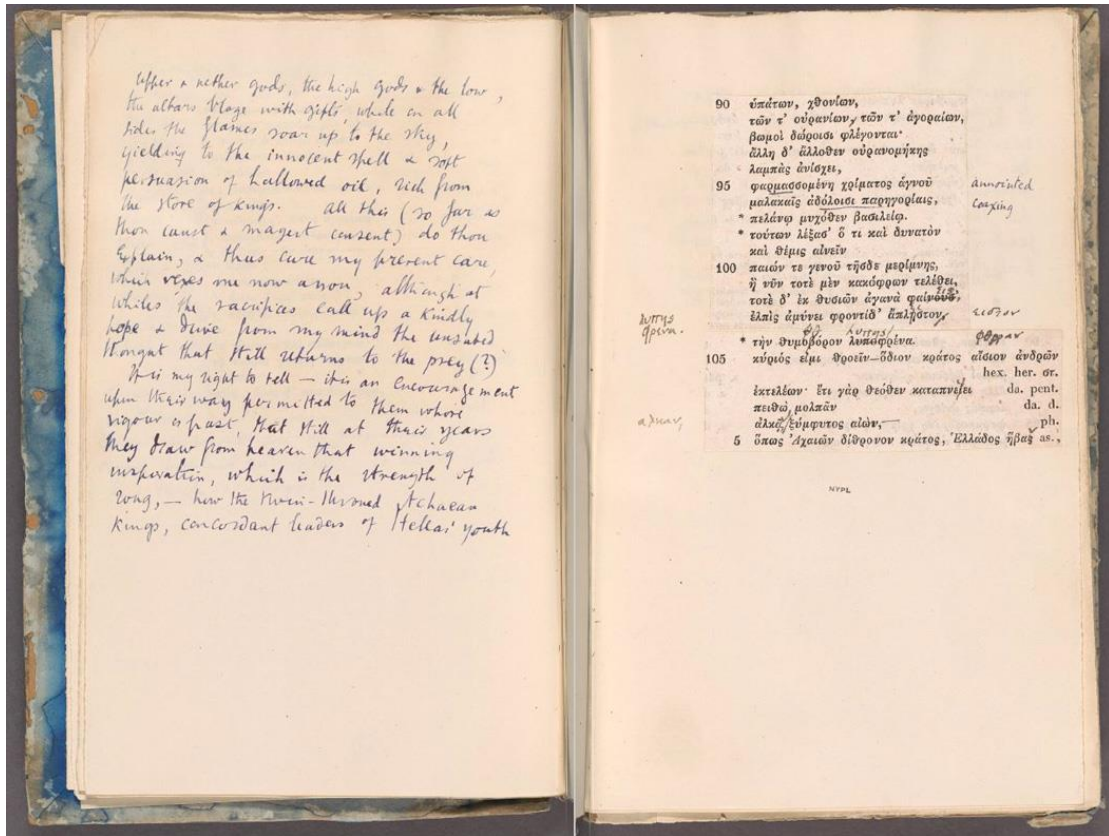
By late 1923, Woolf felt that she had made a lot of progress in her reading of Greek: “After 20 years, I now know how to read Greek quick (with a crib in one hand) & with pleasure.” (Diary 3<sup>rd</sup> Nov 1923) The *Agamemnon* Notebook can be understood, at least partially, as part of her efforts to read Greek at reasonable speed and with pleasure and interest.

This notebook “edition” of *Agamemnon* is a striking, but also complicated object. Woolf has cut up copies of the Greek text and pasted them on the right hand page (recto) of the book, while on the left (verso) she has added, in her own handwriting, a translation based largely on that of A W Verrall. She has bound the book herself, adding unusual stubby inserts of Greek material. These elements all need further explication.

Let us start with the Greek text, as there has been some scholarly debate about exactly which edition Woolf used and how it was done. Fowler (1999) and Prins (2017) both suggest that the edition Woolf used was that of C J Blomfield (1831). Fowler provides as reference for this a quotation from Woolf’s diary which does not identify the specific Greek edition (1999, p 226). However, Mireille Duchêne, in the introductory material for a 2019 transcription of Woolf’s Greek and Latin Studies notebook (RN 34 in

WoolfNotes.com) states that for her *Agamemnon* notebook she used the text “established by F H Bothe in 1831 (Leipzig , Librariae Haniana)”. Duchêne writes that “in order to obtain the text as a continuum, she had to cut out the rectos and versos of two copies of this edition.” (*Virginia Woolf: An Unpublished Notebook, 1907-1909*, Dijon, p36). The Bothe edition was printed on both sides of the page, so Woolf needed to acquire and cut up two copies in order to have the Greek text run continuously on her recto page.

Cristina Testa, in her 2023 wide-ranging doctoral thesis on Woolf and Greek provides additional evidence that it was indeed the Bothe edition that Woolf used for the *Agamemnon* notebook, one obvious indication being that the Bothe page numbers are on the left (as in Woolf’s notebook), whereas Blomfield has them on the right. Testa points to the fact that Woolf, having two copies of the Greek on her desk, as it were, has actually duplicated one section by mistake. Testa also points out that the Blomfield edition (of the same date as the Bothe) was owned and annotated by Woolf’s father, Leslie Stephen, and further suggests that some of his annotations found their way into Woolf’s comments in her *Agamemnon* notebook (see the attached PDF). His copy of the Blomfield can be found in the Woolf library at Pullman. A short extract from Testa’s doctoral thesis, going into more detail about this is available below, translated from the Italian by Cristina Testa. (*“For ever making up some notion of the meaning of Greek”: the spirit of the classics and the suggestions of myth in the works by Virginia Woolf* PhD thesis, *Tesi Dottorato* (in Italian) 2023. Testa’s conclusions have been confirmed by online research undertaken by the WoolfNotes technical director, Gilly Furse.



offer aether gods, the high gods & the low,  
 the altars blaze with gifts, while on all  
 sides the flames soar up to the sky,  
 yielding to the innocent shell & soft  
 persuasion of hallowed oil, rich from  
 the store of kingly. All this (so far as  
 thou canst & magest consent) do thou  
 explain, & thus ease my present care,  
 which vexes me now apon, although at  
 while the sacrifices call up a kindly  
 hope & drive from my mind the uneasy  
 thought that still returns to the pray (?)  
 It is my right to tell — it is an encouragement  
 when their way permitted to them whose  
 power is vast, that still at their years  
 they draw from heaven that winning  
 inspiration, which is the strength of  
 song, — how the twin-broved Atchaeus  
 king, concordant leaders of Hella's youth

90 ἑπείτων, χθονίων,  
 τῶν τ' οὐρανίων, τῶν τ' ἀγοραίων,  
 βωμοὶ δῶροισι φλέγονται·  
 ἄλλη δ' ἄλλοθεν οὐρανομήκης  
 λαμπὰς ἀνίσχει,  
 95 φαρμασσομένη χρίματος ἄγνου  
 μαλακαῖς ἀδόλοισι παρηγοραῖς,  
 \* πελάνῳ μυχόθεν βασιλείῳ.  
 \* τούτων λέξασ' ὅ τι καὶ δυνατὸν  
 καὶ θέμις ἀνεῖν  
 100 παιῶν τε γενοῦ τῆσδε μερίμνης,  
 ἢ νῦν τοτὲ μὲν κακόφρων τελέθει,  
 τοτὲ δ' ἐκ θυσιῶν ἀγανά φαινόσθ',  
 ἔλπις ἀμύνει φροντιδ' ἀπλήστον,  
 \* τὴν θυμβόρον λυπεφρένα.  
 105 κύριός εἰμι θεοῖν—ᾧδιον κράτος αἴσιον ἀνδρῶν  
 ἑκτελέων· ἔτι γὰρ θεοῖδεν καταπνεύει  
 πειθῶ, μολπᾶν  
 ἀλλὰ ξύμφυτος αἰὼν,  
 5 ὅπως Ἀχαιῶν δίδρονον κράτος, Ἑλλάδος ἦβας as.

λυτῆς φρένα.

ἀχαιῶν,

annotated  
 Coaxing

ειδοῖν

φθγγαν

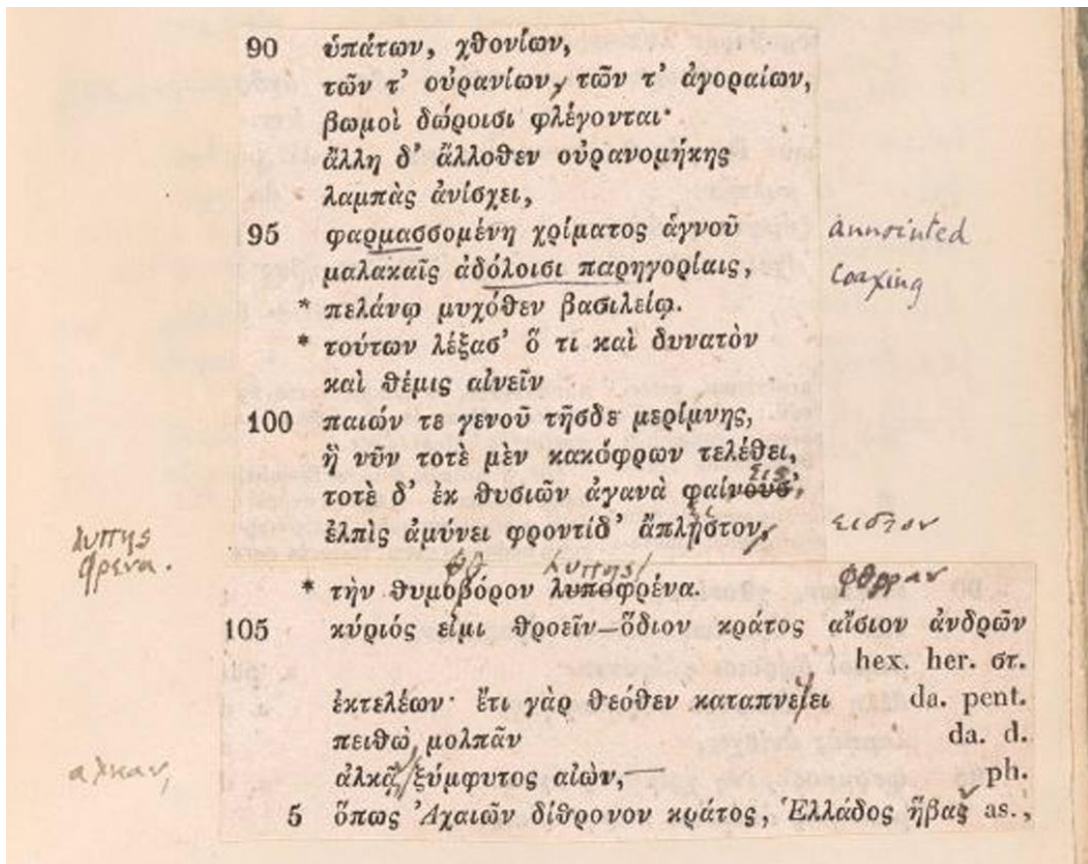
hex. her. st.

da. pent.

da. d.

ph.

MPLE



90 ἑπείτων, χθονίων,  
 τῶν τ' οὐρανίων, τῶν τ' ἀγοραίων,  
 βωμοὶ δῶροισι φλέγονται·  
 ἄλλη δ' ἄλλοθεν οὐρανομήκης  
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 τοτὲ δ' ἐκ θυσιῶν ἀγανά φαινόσθ',  
 ἔλπις ἀμύνει φροντιδ' ἀπλήστον,  
 \* τὴν θυμβόρον λυπεφρένα.  
 105 κύριός εἰμι θεοῖν—ᾧδιον κράτος αἴσιον ἀνδρῶν  
 ἑκτελέων· ἔτι γὰρ θεοῖδεν καταπνεύει  
 πειθῶ, μολπᾶν  
 ἀλλὰ ξύμφυτος αἰὼν,  
 5 ὅπως Ἀχαιῶν δίδρονον κράτος, Ἑλλάδος ἦβας as.

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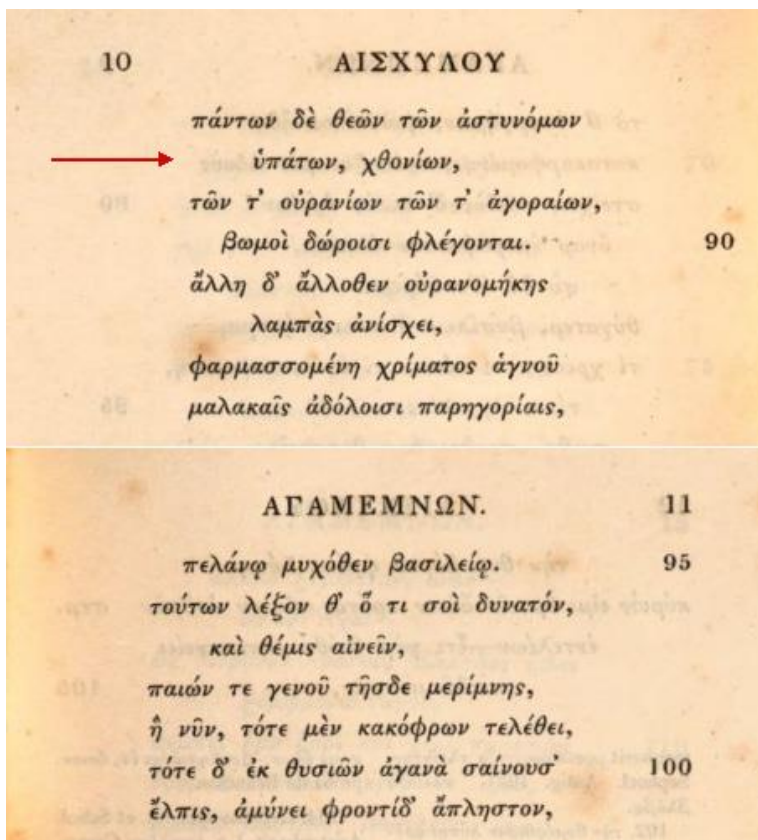
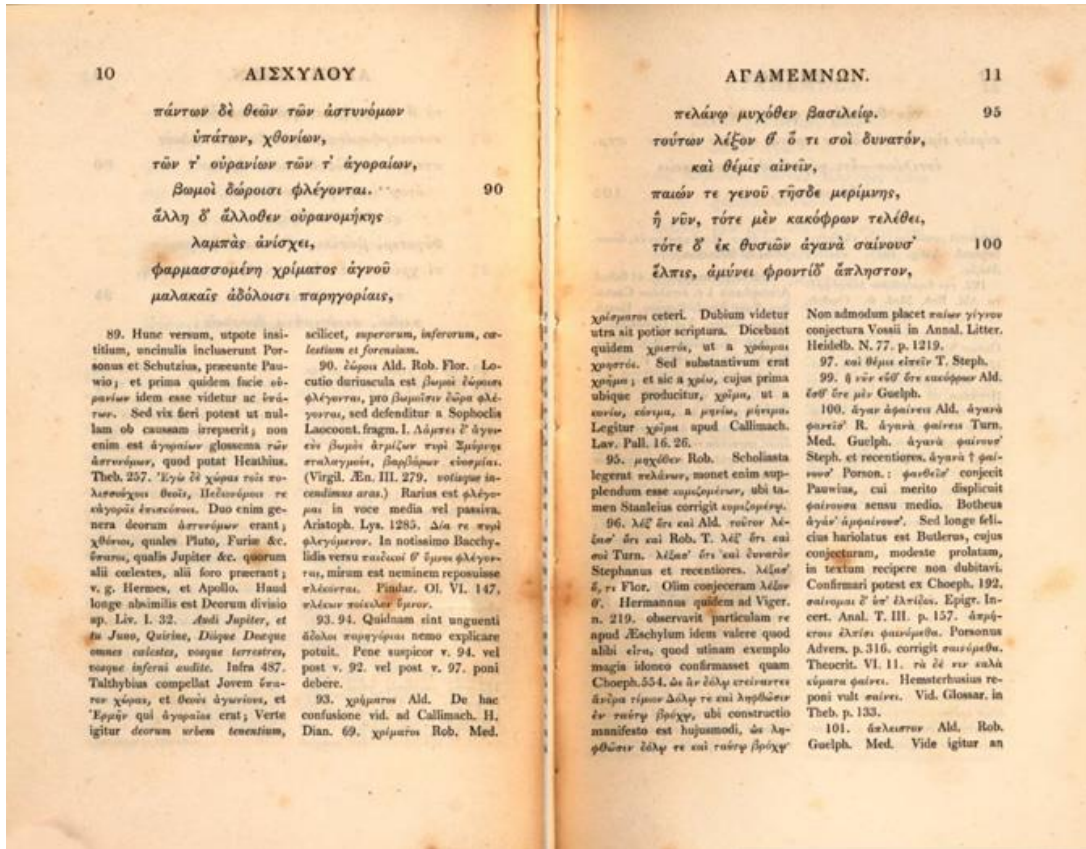
caption: Woolf's notebook page 25 showing lines 90 to 109 of Agamemnon text. Differences in line numbering and position on-page between Bothe and Blomfield versions become more marked as the text progresses.



- 90 ὑπάτων, χθονίων, a.  
 τῶν τ' οὐρανίων, τῶν τ' ἀγοραίων, a. d.  
 βωμοὶ δώροισι φλέγονται a. par.  
 ἄλλη δ' ἄλλοθεν οὐρανομήκης a. d.  
 λαμπὰς ἀνίσχει, a.
- 95 φαρμασσομένη χρίματος ἄγνου a. d.  
 μαλακαῖς ἀδόλοισι παρηγορίαις,  
 \* πειλάνῳ μυχόθεν βασιλείῳ. a. par.  
 \* τούτων λέξασ' ὅ τι καὶ δυνατὸν a. d.  
 καὶ θέμις αἰνεῖν a.
- 100 παιῶν τε γενοῦ τῆσδε μερίμνης, a. d.  
 ἢ νῦν τοτὲ μὲν κακόφρων τελέθει,  
 τοτὲ δ' ἐκ θυβίων ἀγανά φάινουσ'  
 ἐλπὶς ἀμύνει φροντίδ' ἄπληστον,

- \* τὴν θυμοβόρον λυποφρένα.
- 105 κύριός εἰμι θεοεῖν ὄδιον κράτος αἴσιον ἀνδρῶν hex. her. στ.  
 ἐκτελείων· ἔτι γὰρ θεόθεν καταπνείει da. pent.  
 πειθῶ μολπᾶν da. d.  
 ἀλκᾶ ξύμφυτος αἰών, ph.
- 5 ὅπως Ἀχαιῶν δίθρονον κράτος, Ἑλλάδος ἦβας as.,  
 i. h. et a. par.

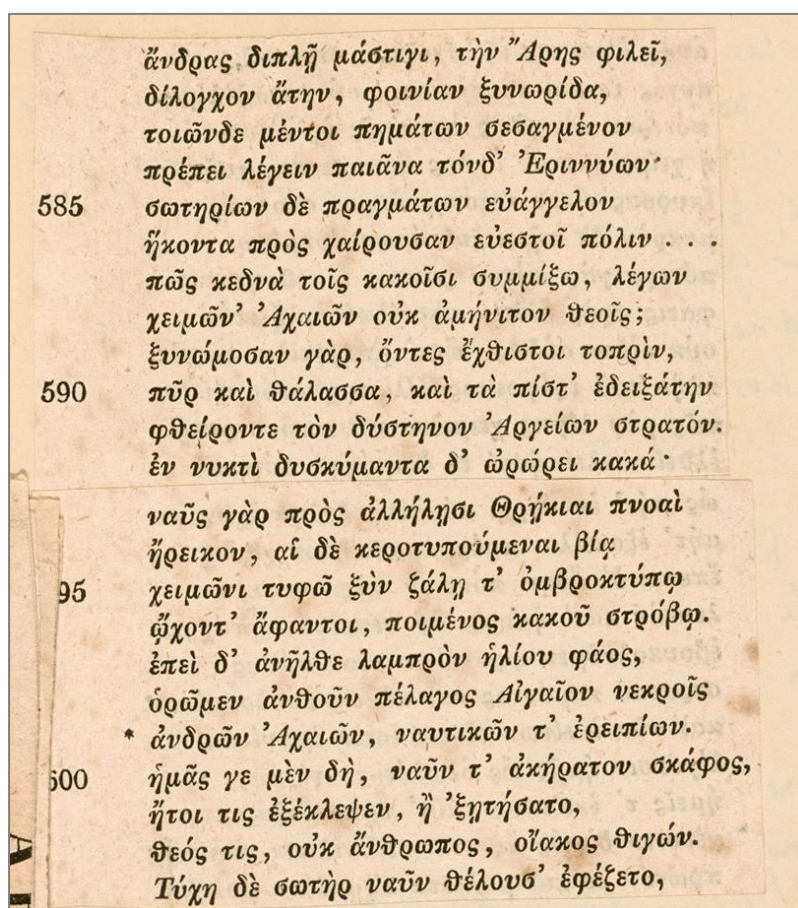
caption: Bothe page 19 & 20 together correspond exactly to Woolf's pasted text (she cuts off the annotations on page 19 but included them for p20)



caption: There are multiple Blomfield editions from the 1820s and 30s but the text arrangement does not change much. This is the 1826 Leipzig edition. Blomfield's page numbers are on the right. Here the first line of Woolf's page, line 90, is the second line (red arrow), line 88 in Blomfield. Line 90 in Bothe and Woolf exactly match. Blomfield has no text annotations on these pages.

That clarifies, in outline, the Greek text on the recto page. Yopie Prins, in her fascinating discussion of Woolf's *Agamemnon* notebook, draws attention to the placing of the text and the translation. It was usual in books such as the Loeb Classical Library to print the original text on the left and the translation on the right, but Woolf has reversed this order. Prins believes that this is connected to the format of the acting editions of the Cambridge Greek play, with which Woolf was familiar, thus enabling her to move from the Greek to the English and back to the Greek, and also from text to theatre and back. (Yopie Prins *Ladies' Greek Ch 1: The Spell of Greek, 2017, p51*).

One small point on Woolf's pasting in of the Greek. If we take the section on page 83 (Part 1) of our scanned notebook, a faint line can be seen between lines 592 and 593. This is where Woolf has abutted two blocks of text, cut from the verso and recto of the double page spread in Bothe.



She has done this on several pages of the *Agamemnon* notebook, with great precision, suggesting that her craft skills were acceptable when needed. This casts some light on her decisions about what level of precision to use in her bookbinding.

Turning now to the translation on the verso pages, Woolf has chosen the translation of A W Verrall, although, as Testa comments, it did not exactly fit the Greek text by Bothe that she had chosen to use. Testa argues, in the PDF extract attached) that Woolf modifies the Greek to reduce the disparity of the line numbers. These changes “pursue the aim of adapting the Greek version to the one proposed by Verrall so that the translation transcribed next to it makes sense”.

Woolf chose to use the Verrall translation, but there was another candidate for this project, and Woolf was very familiar with the translator: Walter Headlam. It appears that Headlam had been quite close to Virginia Stephen when he was working on translations of Aeschylus; he died in 1908, long before Virginia Woolf embarked on her *Agamemnon* edition. Yopie Prins describes the context for Woolf’s choice of translation in the following terms: “Choosing Verrall over Headlam to transcribe as the crib for her *Agamemnon* notebook, Woolf seems to have taken sides in a notorious debate between the two scholars about editing Aeschylus, in which Headlam claimed philological expertise and Verrall literary sensibility.” (p43)

Here, it’s pertinent to return to the question of why in 1922 Woolf was undertaking so much work on her Greek studies in preparation for her essay entitled ‘On Not Knowing Greek’. This was published in 1925 in *The Common Reader*. If, knowing the complaints about women’s lack of education to be found in *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas* the reader assumes this essay will reprise them specifically in relation to the classics, they will be surprised. It is clear from the first sentence – pointedly invoking schoolboys – that Woolf has a far more complicated argument to make. The first

paragraph of the essay poses the question of Greek in two exceptionally eloquent and evocative sentences:

“For it is vain and foolish to talk of knowing Greek, since in our ignorance we should be at the bottom of any class of schoolboys, since we do not know how the words sounded, or where precisely we ought to laugh, or how the actors acted, and between this foreign people and ourselves there is not only difference of race and tongue but a tremendous breach of tradition. All the more strange, then, is it that we should wish to know Greek, try to know Greek, feel for ever drawn back to Greek, and be for ever making up some notion of the meaning of Greek, though from what incongruous odds and ends, with what slight resemblance to the real meaning of Greek, who shall say?”

(‘On Not Knowing Greek’ *The Common Reader, First Series, 1925*, p 39)

Like the famous “But” that opens *A Room of One’s Own*, this “For” is a deliberately unconventional way to open an essay, and is followed by the “who shall say?” that equally unconventionally ends this opening paragraph. The author is presenting herself as merely speculating, rather than as an authority. The heart of Woolf’s essay is her identification of a quality she sees in Aeschylus, as in Shakespeare, of creating meaning that is “just on the far side of language”:

“To understand him it is not so necessary to understand Greek as to understand poetry. It is necessary to take that dangerous leap through the air without the support of words which Shakespeare also asks of us. For words, when opposed to such a blast of meaning, must give out, must be blown astray, and only by collecting in companies convey the meaning which each one separately is too weak to express. Connecting them in a rapid flight of the mind we know instantly and instinctively what they mean, but could not decant that meaning afresh into any other words. There is an ambiguity which is the mark of the highest

poetry; we cannot know exactly what it means. Take this from the *Agamemnon* for instance –

ὀμμάτων δ' ἐν ἀχηνίαις ἔρρει πᾶσ' Ἀφροδίτα.

*caption: Greek phrase reproduced from The Common Reader original printing*

The meaning is just on the far side of language. It is the meaning which in moments of astonishing excitement and stress we perceive in our minds without words..." (pp48-49)

Woolf elects, in her essay, not to translate this important example for her argument, but of course from her own *Agamemnon* notebook we can identify her preferred translation of the ambiguous line. (See WN100 Part 1, p61, line 379.) It is taken directly from Verrall and reads "with the want of the eyes all the passion is gone". This particular line contains more than one word whose meaning is variable, according to classical reference works. Verrall himself introduces Woolf's emphasis on ambiguity, in a commentary supplied with another edition of the play, saying "*in the want of the eyes*. The question is raised whether the 'eyes' are those of the husband, or of the lost wife, or of the blankly-gazing statues, a question which cannot and must not be answered. The eyes of the husband seek, but no longer find, the eyes that were wont to answer, and, for lack of this response, love is for him no more. It is the advantage of the language here that it is ambiguous between 'absence of eyes' and 'hunger of eyes'." (Verrall, 1899 translation)

Woolf pushes her argument beyond the charms of poetic ambiguity, insisting that "truth is various; truth comes to us in different disguises; it is not with the intellect alone that we perceive it"; truth she says "is to be pursued with all our faculties" (*Common Reader*, 51-52).

Woolf's argument about meaning and the "far side of language" has been taken up by the classical scholar Yopie Prins in her essay on the *Agamemnon* notebook: "The momentary alienation of

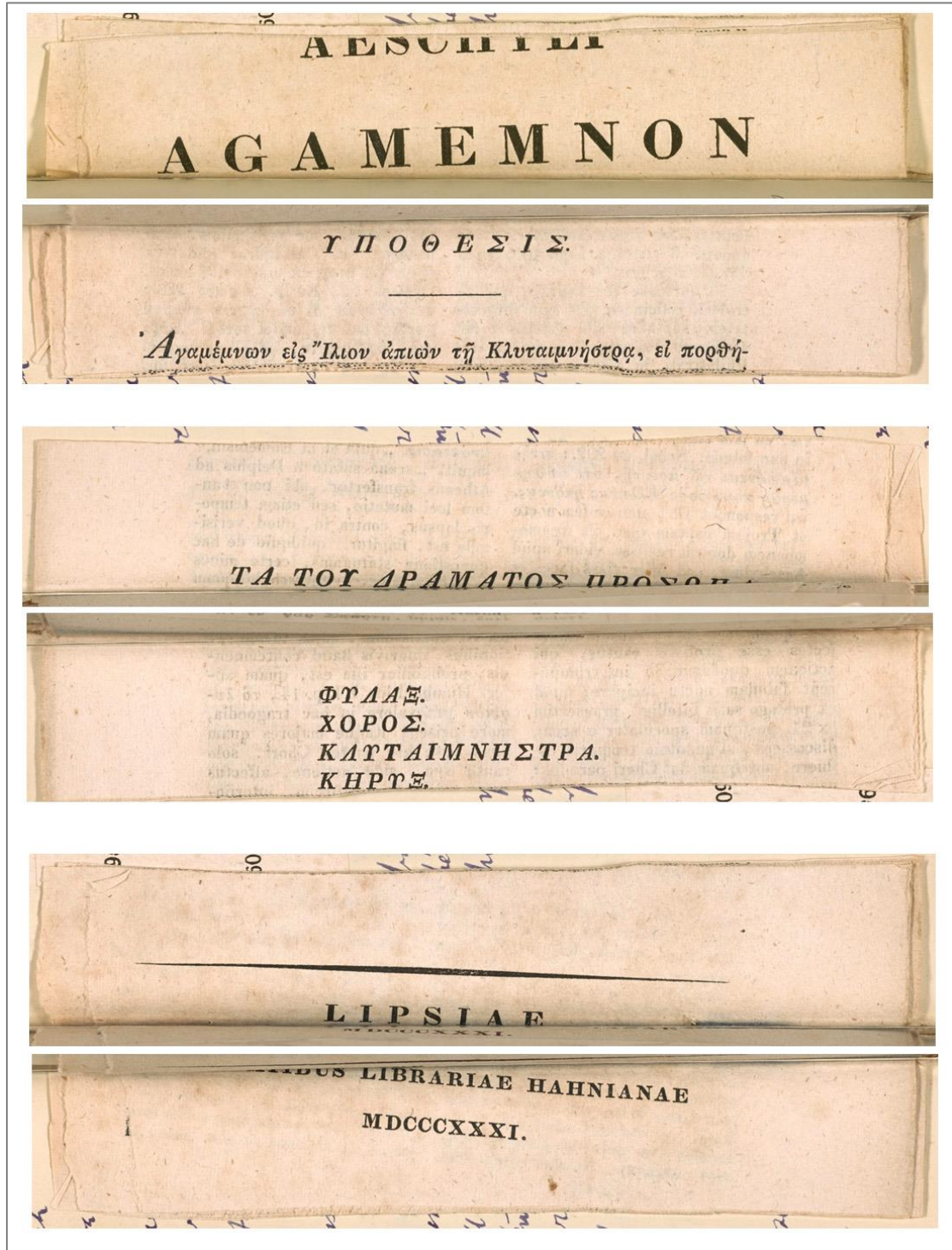
words from meaning is an effect that Woolf admired in Aeschylean tragedy." Prins discusses in particular the lines of Cassandra, which Woolf refers to as the "naked cry" of Cassandra. The sounds (otototoi), are untranslatable and described by Prins as a series of stuttering syllables, which are "radically unintelligible", both "barbaric" and "prophetic" . (Prins 37) Prins points out that one of Woolf's emendations of the Verrall translation occurs on precisely this point: she changes Verrall's translation of "uncouth" to "unintelligible". (54). Prins elaborates on the "naked cry" of Cassandra, and how Woolf represented it in her *Agamemnon* transcription (see page 35 of WN 100, Part 2, WoolfNotes), linking this to a significant feature of Woolf's own writing, namely her use of ellipses:

" 'Ah!... O God!...Apollo, O Apollo' The dots between the exclamation 'Ah!' and the vocative 'O' indicate something that is silenced in the very act of invocation, turning Cassandra's cry into an elliptical utterance: a staccato sound reduced to a series of punctuation marks. Pointing to the untranslatability of this cry, the deployment of ellipses (as so often in Woolf's own prose) signals something that remains inaudible, and can only be visualized graphically on the page."

I have provided here simply a brief sketch of some of the ideas and interpretations relative to the *Agamemnon* notebook that have been suggested recently. Clearly there is a considerable history of scholarly work on Woolf's interest in Greek; we hope that in future bibliographies of relevant material will be added to the website.

Finally, the curious inserts Woolf has made into the binding. NYPL have scanned the notebook so that every inch of these inserts are reproduced. The WoolfNotes technical director, Gilly Furse, has investigated these, and they are made up of parts of the Bothe text, those parts not used on Woolf's recto pages. They are made up of the title page, which is prominently shown, the *dramatis personae*, and other material. It is noticeable that the first several pages of the notebook are blank, and possibly Woolf intended to use them for these items that are not part of her double text as

such. The inserts do not appear to have any obvious meaning, as their positioning is dictated by breaks in the quires being bound rather than being inserted with regard to particular moments in the play.



*Caption: Woolf's inserts are all from the Bothe version of the text, including publication information Leipzig, Hahn Library, 1831.*

It seems that Woolf has chosen a cover whose spine was too wide for the contents of the notebooks, and this was an attempt to improve that. Or perhaps she wanted to include the title page and other material in this, admittedly inaccessible, way in her edition. It is tempting to ask "who shall say?".

Michèle Barrett