

## INTRODUCTION

The *Agamemnon* is perhaps the greatest of all Greek tragedies, and the most read. An introduction to it should therefore say something about tragedy in general; and since the *Agamemnon* serves as an introduction to the *Oresteia*, the trilogy of which it is the first play, an introduction to the *Agamemnon* must be to some degree an introduction to the *Oresteia* as a whole.

534 B.C. is the traditional date at which the festival of the god Dionysus observed annually in Athens at the end of March came to include a performance which later developed into what we know as tragedy. We are painfully ignorant of the early stages of its development; the earliest complete tragedy that survives is the *Persians* of Aeschylus, produced in 472 B.C., and of the tragedies earlier than that we have only a few small fragments. But fortunately it is less important to know the origins of tragedy than to understand the extant specimens. Tragedy was a solemn performance, enacted in the precinct of the god and forming part of his annual festival. In a certain sense it was a religious ritual; but it was a ritual of a religion very unlike modern Christianity, and since the expression carries Christian associations for most modern readers, its use has led to serious misunderstandings. A tragedy enacted a story from heroic myth; but since the early Greeks recognised no fixed boundaries between myth and history, a comparatively recent event might occasionally be the subject of a tragedy, if like the defeat of the Persian expedition against Greece in 480/79 B.C. it seemed to possess heroic magnitude.

The mythic subject was presented against the background furnished by Greek religion, which is not easy for a modern man to understand. Most moderns tend to assume unconsciously either that since the Greeks

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had a religion it must have resembled the religion they know or that since Greek religion did not resemble the religion they know the Greeks cannot really have had a religion. The main outlines of their religion may be set out without much difficulty; but the imaginative sympathy which is necessary for proper understanding does not come so easily. An understanding of the nature of Greek religion is the main requirement for an understanding of Greek tragedy.

That religion contrasted the weakness and mortality of men with the power and immortality of the gods, to whom all that was splendid in the world was due. The gods granted men only limited favours; they governed the universe not in men's interest but in their own. The gods differed from one another in character; thus Aphrodite the love-goddess was far apart from the virgin goddesses Artemis and Athena, and though Athena and Ares were both gods of war, Ares with his brutal violence was far apart from Athena, the personification of intelligence. The gods took pleasure in receiving honour from men; they had certain special favourites among them, particularly among those descended from themselves, as the great heroes of myth were thought to have been. A man could hardly honour all gods equally; Hippolytus, who paid great honour to Artemis but none at all to Aphrodite, angered Aphrodite; when Aphrodite decided to destroy him, Artemis could not save him, though she could avenge him.

But the general course of events was determined by one god, Zeus. He maintained the order of the universe. It was Zeus who imparted to kings the principles by which they gave justice to their subjects; clearly it was from human kings that Zeus derived his attributes. Zeus was the protector of suppliants and strangers, and would punish any offence against them; it was socially desirable that those who found themselves in the midst of communities to which they did not belong should be able to claim the protection of the highest god. Zeus had granted to mortals the favour of ensuring that their crimes against each other should not go unpunished. Belief in the justice of Zeus, like belief in that of Jehovah, had to reckon with the observable fact that the wicked often flourish like green bay trees; so it was recognised that Zeus often moved slowly, and that punishment often fell not upon the actual transgressor but upon his descendants. In time the chain of crimes and punishments inevitably became complicated, so that for humans the justice of Zeus was proverbially difficult to understand. To men, said the fifth-century philosopher Heraclitus, some things seem just and some things unjust, but to the gods all things seem just. The justice of Zeus maintained the order of the universe; men were not always in a position to understand its working.

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In legend men were not the creation of Zeus, nor of the gods in general; their special protector among the gods was the Titan Prometheus, a minor divinity belonging to the earlier generation that lost power when Zeus took the lordship of the universe from his father Kronos. Men knew that if they had been as powerful as the gods, they would have governed the world in their own interest and not in that of others, so that the Greeks seldom ventured to blame their gods for having accorded them only a modest amount of consideration. They knew that the gods sent them more pain than pleasure; but they were grateful to the gods for the benefits they received from them. Under Zeus they led a harder life than they had under his father Kronos; yet they were grateful to Zeus for ensuring that their crimes against each other would not in the last resort escape punishment. Greece is a poor country, whose inhabitants have to struggle to extract a living from the rough and mountainous land; early Greek religion is correspondingly a hard religion, whose believers were able to endure far more reality than those who have put their faith in oriental cults have usually been disposed to bear.

When the age of innocent belief is passed, a religion of this kind has certain advantages over religions which depend upon supernatural claims made on behalf of historical individuals. From the fifth century before Christ onwards, allegorical interpretation became popular among philosophers and soon spread to wider circles. But even before the prevalence of allegory, scepticism about the truth of stories about the gods was perfectly compatible with the acceptance of what those stories signified; the gods, after all, stood in the last resort for elements in the universe whose reality could not be denied. In Greek legend from Homer's time on the gods work for the most part through human passions; they derive their attributes from qualities observable in the world as we know it. So when a modern producer of a Greek tragedy explains to us, with insufferable condescension, that he has made the action more plausible by eliminating the gods, we have no reason to be grateful. When Wagner's *Ring* was first produced in England, people like this producer took it for granted that a drama about gods, giants, dwarfs and heroes must be tiresomely unrealistic; it was left to Bernard Shaw to point out that Wagner's work had a direct relevance to the central problems of modern industrial society lacking in most of the naturalistic drama of the time. If we are to learn anything from the modern preoccupation with the study of myth, we must cure ourselves of the kind of childishness exemplified by this producer's attitude.

We must also be on our guard against the kind of writer who tries desperately to show that many Greek tragedies were really tracts

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for the times, designed to advocate particular causes, policies or philosophies. The absence of any tangible evidence has forced such people to assume that the advocacy in question was cryptic; if so, the disguise was so successful that we have to had wait till modern times before it could be penetrated. The tragedians liked to allude to cults and institutions, particularly those of Athens; we shall find a notable instance of such an allusion in the third play of the *Oresteia*, the *Eumenides*. But tragedy was concerned not with the local and ephemeral, but with the permanent and unchanging features of the human situation; that is why it has retained its power to move us. Above all it is concerned with the predicament of men, able to some degree to understand the thoughts and values of the immortals, but themselves restricted by the limitations imposed by their mortality. Great men, thought to be descended from divine ancestors, were held to be dangerously prone to overstep the limits to human action laid down by the gods. This was the religion whose general truths were illustrated by the myths which the tragedians presented.

At each tragic festival, each of three chosen poets produced three tragedies and one example of a lighter kind of entertainment called a satyr-play. A satyr-play dealt with heroic legend, but in semi-comic fashion; it had a chorus consisting of satyrs, the snub-nosed, horse-tailed, drunken and lascivious companions of the god Dionysus. Often, at least in the first half of the fifth century, a poet gave the plays of his tetralogy a continuous theme. The only such tetralogy of which more than one play survives is the *Oresteia*, the story of Agamemnon's son Orestes. We possess its three tragedies, *Agamemnon*, *Choephoroe* (=The Libation-Bearers) and *Eumenides* (=The Kindly Ones); the satyr-play *Proteus*, which dealt with the wanderings of Agamemnon's brother Menelaus on the voyage home after the siege of Troy, is lost. The *Oresteia* was produced in 458 B.C., two years before its author's death at nearly seventy.

The theatre of ancient Athens was most unlike a modern theatre, and the technique of its tragedians was naturally conditioned by its character. The plays were acted in the open air, on the south-eastern slope of the Athenian Acropolis; a great auditorium with ascending rows of seats was cut into the side of the hill, and the actors occupied a raised wooden stage with a building at its back having a large double-leaved door. Broad ramps on either side led up to a wide space between stage and audience which was occupied by the Chorus; this was known as the *orchestra*, a word meaning 'dancing floor' from which the modern term *orchestra* derives.

Until not long before the *Oresteia*, all the parts in a tragedy had been divided between two male actors; they were now divided between three.

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The actors wore long robes, very unlike everyday clothing, and calf-length boots, and their faces were hidden by masks appropriate to the characters they represented; their solemn manner of delivery and the poetic language which they spoke further emphasised their remoteness from ordinary life. For the most part they spoke in the metres (iambic, or occasionally trochaic) thought appropriate to dialogue; but occasionally an actor might sing lyric verses, as Cassandra does in her first utterances in *Agamemnon*. Sometimes an actor conversed with another, or with the leader of the chorus, in a formal kind of dialogue (stichomythia) in which each of the speakers spoke one (or two) lines at a time, using a brief and pregnant but stiff and archaic mode of speech. Actors often delivered long speeches; many plays contained one or more characters called 'messengers', though 'reporter' would be a more accurate term, whose function was to describe actions not easily represented on the stage. Messengers no doubt used a declamatory style like that adopted by those who have the same office in seventeenth-century French tragedies.

In Aeschylus' time the Chorus probably consisted of twelve members; later the number was increased to fifteen. They represented a group of persons concerned with the action, and were normally present on the stage throughout the play. Their normal medium of utterance was lyric verse; but they (and sometimes an actor) might chant a kind of recitative in anapaestic metre that was thought of as intermediate between lyric verse and the verse of dialogue, and the leader of the Chorus (the Coryphaeus) might briefly speak in dialogue verse. An Aeschylean tragedy normally contains some four long lyric utterances by the Chorus, serving to mark off the different sections of the play; these were accompanied by music and dances which the poet himself composed. As a rule the same metrical and musical pattern was repeated in two successive stanzas; the first was then called the strophe and the second the antistrophe; sometimes, usually at the end of the ode, an isolated stanza (called the epode) might be found. With the music and dances we have lost an integral part of the performances; but the music depended on the pipe, being like modern oriental music but utterly unlike that of a modern polyphonic orchestra, and it was kept in strict subordination to the words. The Chorus might narrate past events relevant to the present situation, try to interpret that situation, or speculate about the future. It usually has in mind the gods, who in the end will decide what is to happen; often it gives expression to religious truths, but since it is hard for men to know the purposes of the gods, the application of these often turns out to be different from what the Chorus itself supposes. The chorus does not enjoy a status or authority superior to those of the actors,

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nor is it spokesman for the gods, or for the poet himself; everything it says must be interpreted in the light of its dramatic context.

Not only the Chorus but the actors also spoke a language altogether removed from that of everyday life. Aeschylus' diction abounds with words borrowed from epic or lyric poetry, and he himself freely coined high-sounding compound nouns and adjectives. The language of tragedy was powerfully influenced by that of religious ritual; its influence can be seen especially in hymns, prayers and laments, but also even in the spoken portions of early tragedy. Such language will have seemed archaic even to its original hearers, so that it cannot be faithfully rendered without some degree of archaism.

The style of Aeschylus is above all a grand style, designed, like his manner of production, to carry the audience far from the world of ordinary reality. Nouns are regularly adorned with resounding poetic adjectives; metaphors, often of startling boldness, are abundant; lofty periphrases are substituted for the ordinary names of things; descriptive passages are made rich with vivid imagery.

Yet this grandeur is combined with an archaic simplicity. Long, tenuous sentences, consisting of a row of clauses loosely juxtaposed, are common; but the clauses tend to be less closely knit together by subordination than they are in later tragedy. On occasion Aeschylus shows a striking power of brief and concise expression; the strength of his writing is not diminished but is actually increased by an element of archaic roughness, akin to that which so much distressed the 'classicists' when they first saw the pediment sculptures of Zeus' temple at Olympia, works more or less contemporary with the *Oresteia*.

Aeschylean syntax is often jagged and irregular; sometimes a sentence is begun and left hanging; often the construction changes midway through a sentence. These features of his style help to account for the marked preference shown by the ancients after his own time for the later tragic poets. The comparative neglect of Aeschylus continued after the Renaissance, at first chiefly because of the difficulty of understanding his difficult and corrupt text, but later because he displeased a classicistic taste. Only with the start of the Romantic period, coinciding with a marked improvement in the appreciation and understanding of Greek, did he receive just appreciation. But to modern taste the style of Aeschylus may well seem more effective as a vehicle of poetry than that of smoother and more published writers. The strong tendency to antithetical expression inherent in the Greek language gives the discourse unity. But in Aeschylus this never becomes so marked—as it did in later tragedy under the influence of

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rhetoric—as to make the audience feel that balance and neatness are being carried too far. Like most poets writing in an inflected language (in which case-endings can indicate grammatical relations between words, which an uninflected language must convey by means of a fixed word-order) Aeschylus often varies the order of his words so as to secure effects of emphasis or contrast. To give some notion of these effects, the translator sometimes has to strain the rules of word-order of his own language.

Aeschylus' style varies widely according to the subject-matter, or the character or mood of the speaker or singer. Heroic characters constantly speak high poetry, but high poetry may also be found on the lips of humble persons, like the Watchman or the Herald. Their speech has some distinctive characteristics of its own—the broken, sometimes almost incoherent, syntax of the Herald, the breathless chatter, mentioning even the humblest domestic task, of the Nurse in the *Choephoroe*, the repeated use by Aegisthus of trite proverbial expressions, marking him off from a true hero like Agamemnon.

The effect of ancient Greek metre based on quantity cannot adequately be reproduced in modern languages. Our metres depend on rhyme and on stress accent; ancient Greek metre made no use of rhyme, and depended on not stress accent but on quantity—long or short—belonging to each syllable. Modern verse in ancient metres has to use stress accent in place of quantity, and therefore gives only a very rough notion of the effect of the original.

The spoken portions of Greek tragedies are said by Aristotle to have been composed to begin with in the catalectic trochaic tetrameter, the metre imitated by Tennyson when he wrote:

Dreary gleams athwart the moorland, flying over Locksley Hall.

But before any tragedy now extant had been written, the trochaic tetrameter had been replaced as the normal metre of spoken verse by the iambic trimeter, which may be exemplified by the opening line of *Agamemnon*:

*thēōūs | mēn aī | tō tōnd' | āpāl | āgēn | pōnōn.*

Tetrameters were reserved for animated episodes like the debate of the Elders after Agamemnon's murder, or the final stages of the altercation between the Chorus and Aegisthus at the end of the play. The chanted recitative which served as an intermediate between spoken and sung verse is in anapaestic dimeters; e.g., the prelude to the Parodos (1.40) begins:

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*dēkātōn mēn ētōs | tōd' ēpei Priāmōū.*

At intervals, especially before a full stop, the last syllable is omitted (e.g. 1.59 *pēmpēi pārābāsīn Erīnŷn*). Lyric verse appears in a wide variety of metres, used for the most part in responsion (see above, p. v). Different kinds of metre may be combined to form the pattern of a stanza; and no such pattern is reproduced exactly in any other lyric passage.

The English style most akin to Aeschylus' is that of Elizabethan tragedy; but unfortunately no one translated Aeschylus into English before the last quarter of the eighteenth century. In our own time Louis MacNeice made a fine translation of the *Agamemnon*, notably faithful to the original; Richmond Lattimore and Robert Fagles have rendered the entire *Oresteia* with success. The present version makes no attempt to be poetic, or even literary; it tries to render the sense faithfully and to reproduce the impact made by the idiom of the original more faithfully than a translation with any literary ambitions could afford to do.

This version is not based on any published text of Aeschylus, though the text I have translated has more in common with the Oxford text of Sir Denys Page than any other. The text of all three plays (particularly the *Choephoroe*, which is preserved in a single very corrupt manuscript) rests on a most uncertain basis. Conjectural emendation is often necessary; gaps in the text occur; and many passages are the subject of dispute. The present work is not meant for professional scholars, and in the notes I have confined myself to what seemed essential for the readers for whom it is intended.\*

By using such knowledge as we have of how earlier poets had treated the same story, we may hope to throw some light on Aeschylus' aims and methods. Agamemnon, king of Mycenae and leader of the great expedition of the Greeks to recover his brother Menelaus' wife Helen from Troy, where she had been carried off by Paris, is a central character in Homer's *Iliad*. There he appears as a brave fighter and, on the whole, a competent commander; but his pride and arrogance cause him to quarrel disastrously with his principal subordinate, Achilles. In open council he declares that

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\* The reasons for some of my disagreements with the Oxford text are given in my review of that work (*Classical Review*, n.s., 26, 1976, 6-8) and in my collections of notes at *Rheinisches Museum*, 103, 1960, 76-80, at *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology*, 73, 1968, 96-104 and at *Dionysiaca (Nine Studies in Greek Poetry by Former Pupils, Presented to Sir Denys Page on his Seventieth Birthday)*, 1978, 45-59.



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he prefers to his legitimate wife, Helen's sister Clytemnestra, Chryseis, a female prisoner who has been allotted to him as a prize.

In Homer's *Odyssey* the contrast between the fate of Agamemnon, his wife Clytemnestra and their son Orestes and that of Odysseus, his wife Penelope and their son Telemachus is a recurring theme of some importance. On leaving Troy Agamemnon commits his wife to the care of a trusted minstrel. But Agamemnon's cousin and deadly enemy Aegisthus sets out to captivate her; he decoys the minstrel to a desert island and there maroons him, and persuades Clytemnestra to accompany him to his own house. He posts a watchman to look out for the return of Agamemnon; and when Agamemnon does return, a storm drives him ashore near where Aegisthus lives. Aegisthus entertains his cousin to a feast, and there slaughters him 'like an ox at a manger'; Cassandra, daughter of Priam, king of Troy, whom Agamemnon has brought home as a concubine allotted to him out of the spoils of Troy, is killed by Clytemnestra. Zeus has already sent his messenger Hermes to warn Aegisthus of what will happen if he kills Agamemnon; and after seven years Agamemnon's son Orestes returns from exile in Athens and kills Aegisthus. Clytemnestra dies at the same time, we are not told how, and Orestes holds a funeral feast for both of them.

The story of how Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to still the winds sent by Artemis to detain the Greek fleet off Aulis, on the coast of Boeotia, where it had assembled before sailing across the Aegean Sea to Troy was first told in the post-Homeric epic called the *Cypria*, probably a work of the seventh century B.C. According to this, Artemis was angry with Agamemnon because he had boasted that his skill in archery surpassed even hers, and the prophet Calchas warned him that the winds would not drop and allow his fleet to sail before he had sacrificed his daughter. The story is also told in the *Catalogue of Women*, a poem attributed to Hesiod, but perhaps written as late as the sixth century; in this Artemis at the last minute substituted a deer for Iphigenia, who was then turned into the goddess Hecate.

Another post-Homeric epic called the *Nostoi* (= The Returns of the Heroes) mentioned Orestes' great friend Pylades; since Pylades was the son of Strophius, king of Phocis, this seems to indicate that in that poem Orestes spent his exile not at Athens, as in the *Odyssey*, but in Phocis, near to Delphi and its famous oracle of Apollo. Aeschylus may have been influenced in important ways by the *Oresteia* of the sixth-century Sicilian poet Stesichorus, who wrote long poems in dactylic metres which although they counted as lyric verse resembled the epic in being recited to the accompaniment of the lyre. Unfortunately only a few fragments of this

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poem survive; it seems to have had a great influence upon the representations of the subject in Athenian painted pottery.

The death of Agamemnon supplied a particularly poignant subject for a tragedy. The greatest king of the heroic age, the successful commander in the greatest war of legend, seemed at the moment of his triumph to have attained the very peak of human felicity. Yet at that very moment, after having eluded all the dangers of the war and of the hazardous journey back that followed, he was struck down by a domestic conspiracy. Instead of having Clytemnestra move to the house of Aegisthus, Aeschylus allows her to remain at home. Stesichorus and Aeschylus' older contemporary, the Theban lyric poet Pindar, had transferred Agamemnon's capital from Mycenae to a city in Laconia, perhaps to please the Spartans, now the most powerful people of the Peloponnese; Aeschylus located it at Argos, the chief rival of Sparta in her own neighbourhood and an ally of Athens at the time in question. He reduced Aegisthus to the rank of a subordinate, and made Clytemnestra kill not only Cassandra, but Agamemnon himself, heightening the pathos by having the murder take place during the ritual bath, given to a man by his own wife or daughter, which traditionally marked the moment when after a long absence he resumed the enjoyment of his home and his possessions. Such a death was well designed to illustrate a central truth of Greek religion that was stressed over and over again by the tragedians, the infinite fragility of all human happiness, even that which seemed the most securely founded.

But the justice of Zeus had to be shown to be at work; and since the murder of Agamemnon was finally avenged, the theme of justice at work in successive generations lay ready to the poet's hand. First, how could Zeus have allowed the murder of Agamemnon to happen? Even before Aeschylus, revenge for Iphigenia had probably been thought to have been one of Clytemnestra's motives, though it was inextricably intertwined, as in Aeschylus, with guilty passion for Aegisthus. But could the sacrifice of Iphigenia alone account for Agamemnon's guilt? If he had refused to kill her, the great expedition against Troy could not have started, and clearly it was the will of Zeus that Paris and the Trojans should be punished for their offence against the laws of hospitality. Why, then, should Agamemnon have been confronted with the awful dilemma of having to choose between killing his daughter and giving up the expedition? We have seen that in the *Cypria* Artemis sent the winds to punish Agamemnon for an idle boast; Aeschylus says nothing of her motive, obviously because it does not seem to him important. What mattered to him was the question of why Zeus allowed him to be faced with his dilemma.

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Legend supplied more than one point at which a poet might begin the history of the guilt that weighed upon the house of Agamemnon. He might start with a remote ancestor, the great Phrygian ruler Tantalus. Or he might start with Tantalus' son Pelops, who came from Asia to kill the tyrant Oenomaus, marry his daughter and occupy his throne; to him also a sinister legend was attached. Aeschylus chose to begin the chain of crimes and punishments with the brothers Atreus and Thyestes, either sons or grandsons of Pelops; Atreus was the father of Agamemnon. There are different versions of the quarrel between the brothers, some of which mention a dispute over the throne. Aeschylus says nothing of this, but mentions the seduction by Thyestes of his brother's wife. Atreus pretended to forgive him and entertained him to a feast; after he had eaten, he told him that he had been eating the flesh of his own children. That story is of capital importance in the *Oresteia*; for apart from supplying Thyestes' son Aegisthus with a motive for revenge upon his family, it constitutes the dark secret in the past history of the royal family which in the *Agamemnon* is many times hinted at but never revealed till it is exposed with devastating impact by the captive prophetess Cassandra.

In the *Oresteia* of Stesichorus, Orestes killed Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, and was pursued by the Erinyes for his murder of his mother (see the introduction to the *Choephoroe*): to keep them off, Apollo gave him a bow. Apollo and the Delphic oracle play an important part in Aeschylus, for Orestes consults Apollo as to how he shall avenge his father, and Apollo promises and gives advice and help. Orestes spends his exile in Phocis, near Delphi, as already in the *Nostoi*, and on the only occasion on which his friend Pylades, son of the king of Phocis, speaks (see *Cho.* 900ff.) it is to insist that Apollo's command must be obeyed. By making Clytemnestra personally kill Agamemnon, Aeschylus makes Orestes seem more sympathetic than he would have been if Aegisthus had been his father's killer, as he is in Homer. Athens, the scene of Orestes' exile in the *Odyssey*, in Aeschylus becomes the place where he takes refuge from the pursuing Erinyes. Before Aeschylus, poets had given their accounts of the foundation of the court of Areopagus. He seems to have been the first to claim that it was founded by Athena in order to judge the issue between Orestes and the Erinyes; and this story enables him to relate his theme of the working of divine justice to the fate and future prospects of his own city (see the introduction and appendix to the *Eumenides*).

The play begins with the actual moment of the fall of Troy. Agamemnon has arranged to have piles of brushwood heaped upon the summits of a series of mountains in places lying between Troy and Argos; once Troy

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has fallen, the first such pile, upon Mount Ida behind Troy, is to be ignited, and then the others in succession until the news reaches Argos. Upon the roof of his own palace waits a watchman, not, as in the *Odyssey*, a creature of Aegisthus, but a loyal servant of Agamemnon, for ten years he has watched nightly for the beacon in the sky. It is he who speaks the prologue of the play; and while he is speaking it he sees the beacon. So we learn rapidly that this is the palace of the sons of Atreus; that the Trojan war is in its tenth year; that the watchman's task is set him by a woman with the will of a man; and that all is not well inside the house. When the watchman sees the beacon, he rejoices, looking forward to a reunion with his master that will not take place.

The Chorus consists of leading citizens of Argos, who form a council to assist the queen in government during the king's absence. They are men of advanced age, for they were too old to accompany the army when it left ten years earlier, and the stress laid on their infirmity prepares the audience for their inaction later. In the prologue to the Parodos, the first great choral ode, they tell of the launching of the expedition to inflict just punishment upon the Trojans for their offence against the laws of Zeus, and express their complete confidence in its final triumph. Then in the Parodos itself they sing of how the fleet was mustered ten years before at Aulis, and how a portent revealed to the prophet of the army that it was destined to triumph, but at grievous cost. Interpreting the portent in his riddling language, the prophet explained that Artemis was angry and might cause the fleet to be delayed, with far-reaching consequences.

At the moment when the Chorus sings of those events, ten years later, those consequences are still far from being exhausted; and so the elders think of the only power great enough to grant relief in such a situation, and celebrate the might of Zeus. Zeus has accorded to men a 'grace that comes by violence'; men, if they are wise, will show themselves aware that in the end Zeus is bound to punish crime. From here the Chorus goes straight on to tell of Agamemnon's struggle with his fearful dilemma, of his reluctant decision to sacrifice his daughter, and of the sacrifice itself.

The elders have assembled to inquire the reason for the sacrifice which Clytemnestra has ordered to be made after hearing the Watchman's announcement; and now Clytemnestra emerges from the palace to answer their inquiry. When she declares that Troy has fallen, they are reluctant to believe her; it is evident that their politeness masks distrust, based partly on a conviction of the unreliability of the female sex. The theme of antagonism between male and female is one of the motives that run through the *Oresteia*; although the early Greeks firmly maintained the supremacy

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of the male, their civilisation seems to have been the first in which doubts about the subjection of women found expression, and their poetry contains many instances of this. Clytemnestra explains 'how the beacons have conveyed the news from Troy to Argos, speaking as though the messenger had been a single fire that had travelled through the sky from Mount Ida till it swooped down upon the palace of the sons of Atreus. When she calls this 'a fire lineally descended from the fire of Ida', we see that in her mind it is a fire of vengeance, which has consumed Troy and will now fall upon its conqueror. Next she paints an imaginative picture of the scene inside the captured city; when she prays that the conquerors may respect the shrines of the city's gods, so that they may not be conquered in their turn, the audience senses that her pretended fears are her real hopes. Though she has offered no proof beyond the Watchman's word, the Chorus become infected by her moods and agree that Troy has fallen. In the prelude to the First Stasimon, the second great choral ode of the play, they give thanks for the victory to Zeus.

The Chorus declares that the punishment of the Trojans is an obvious instance of the working of Zeus' justice, and a signal refutation of those impious persons who believe that the gods take no thought of the crimes of men. It was provoked by the act of Paris in abducting Helen; and they go on to describe her fateful journey, and the desolation of the deserted Menelaus. The sorrow in the palace of the princes finds its counterpart in the sorrow in many houses throughout Greece, where in place of the men who have departed to the war urns carrying their ashes have come back. They speak of murmurs in the city against the sons of Atreus, who have sacrificed men's lives to recover Helen; the gods are resentful against those who have caused many deaths, and great triumphs may lead to great reverses. Finally the elders declare that they would not wish to have applied to them a term used in Homer and later to denote the chief glory of Odysseus and others, the term 'sacker of cities'. What began as an ode of thanksgiving for victory has ended in anxious apprehension. So distressed are the elders that they revoke the assent which they have earlier given to Clytemnestra's claim that Troy has fallen and revert to their earlier scepticism, reinforcing it with a fresh expression of their low regard for women.

With no indication of a lapse of time, we are warned of the approach of the Herald whom Agamemnon after landing has sent ahead to announce his imminent arrival. In performance the thought that the king's landing would not have followed immediately upon the sighting of the beacon will not disturb the audience; the conventions of Greek tragedy allowed the poet full license in such matters. Like the Watchman, the Herald is a

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loyal retainer of the king; he expresses the feelings natural in such circumstances, profound relief at the conclusion of the war and great satisfaction at the punishment inflicted on the conquered enemy. The leader of the Chorus salutes him, laying significant emphasis on his own relief at the army's return. He means to convey a veiled warning that all is not well at home; but the Herald finds his gladness at the event entirely natural and embarks on a vivid description of the horrors of the campaign true to life in laying more stress on the discomforts than on the dangers of the soldier's lot.

At this point Clytemnestra enters the conversation. She has no need, she says, to give thanks for victory, for she has already done so at a time when the elders were unwilling to believe her news; as for the story of all that has happened, she will hear it from the king's own lips when he returns. She gives the Herald an effusive message of welcome for the king that is charged with sinister ambiguity. Now the Chorus question the Herald about the whereabouts of the king's brother, Menelaus. So far his pathetic eagerness to preserve his status as the bearer of good news has led him to avoid this subject; but now he is forced to admit that Menelaus is missing, and to describe the terrible storm which has fallen upon the returning fleet, separating the brothers. This together with the dangerous complacency with which the Herald has spoken of the fate of Troy will lead an audience familiar with tragedy to realise that Clytemnestra's pretended fear but real hope that the Greeks may offend the gods by their conduct in the moment of victory has been fulfilled. According to the traditional story the Greeks by their behaviour during the sack of Troy, particularly the slaughter of the aged Priam and the rape of the prophetess Cassandra in the temple of Athena, so offended Athena, their most powerful helper among the gods, that she joined forces with their enemy Poseidon to cause a great storm to strike them on the way home. The absence of Menelaus is important in the play, for it makes it easier for Clytemnestra to carry out her plan; his adventures in Egypt and elsewhere were depicted in the satyr-play that accompanied the trilogy, the lost *Proteus*.

The news that Menelaus is missing reminds the Chorus of the unfaithful wife who has been the cause of all his troubles; although she is not a character in the play, Helen is presented in the *Agamemnon* in a way scarcely excelled even by her depiction in the *Iliad*. Playing on her name, the Chorus at the beginning of the Second Stasimon find her to have been fated from the first to bring destruction. He who welcomes such a woman to his house is like a man who takes in a lion-cub, at first a delightful pet for young and old alike, but finally revealing its true nature by a bloody massacre of cattle.

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With Helen there came at first a feeling of miraculous tranquillity as the love-god took possession of men's minds; later her marriage was brought to a grim conclusion by the deity that punishes crime, the Erinyes. Helen is conceived as a being specially sent into the world by Zeus as an instrument of his destructive power; later in the play it will become clear that Helen's sister Clytemnestra is destined to fulfil the same punitive purpose.

From the thought of Helen as an instrument of divine punishment the Chorus pass to reflections on the working of divine justice. They reject the ancient superstition that the gods are jealous of human happiness, and therefore eager to destroy it; they insist that when disaster comes upon men, it comes as the punishment of crime. Justice shines out beneath the smoky rafters of humble dwellings, but leaves the palaces of the great but guilty; and it is she who guides all things to their appointed end. On that sombre note the Chorus ends the ode, immediately before the entry of Agamemnon.

The king enters in his chariot, accompanied by his retinue; with him is his prisoner Cassandra, who at first remains silent and immobile. In their speech of welcome the Elders admit that in the past they have been among his critics; but now that the war has been satisfactorily concluded, they are sincere in their rejoicing; others, they seem to imply, are less so.

Agamemnon in his answer shows his satisfaction at the ruthless extirpation of his Trojan enemies in a way that must remind the audience of the saying of the Chorus that 'the gods are not unmindful of the killers of many'. Taking the Elders' words of warning as an allusion to the quarrels between the Greek chiefs during the wars, he quite mistakes its drift; he promises, indeed, to hold an inquiry into the conduct of those who have remained at home, but cannot guess how little time he has. Now Clytemnestra appears, and greets him with an effusiveness that seems at times to teeter on the borders of hysteria. She urges him to make a triumphal entry into the palace, walking over tapestries meant for consecration to the gods, tapestries of a fabric so delicate that if once trodden on they will be unfit for any further use.

At first Agamemnon rejects her suggestion with an almost brutal firmness. Eulogy should come from outside a man's own family; and by laying the tapestries in his path his wife may bring the power of envy into action against him. Such honours are suitable only to a god; a man can be pronounced fortunate only after he is safely dead. Then by a series of penetrating questions Clytemnestra overcomes his resistance and forces him to do her will. At first he reacts correctly to the temptation; but instead of saying that he fears divine anger he says he is afraid of what

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people will think, and then is led into minimising the importance of the issue and so giving way. His action in doing so should not be listed among the factors in his guilt; the value of the scene is symbolic; yet during performance the audience feels that if he succumbs to her persuasion he is in her power. After removing his boots in a futile gesture of appeasement he enters the palace, stepping upon the tapestries. His final protest at the extravagance of the proceeding provokes Clytemnestra to a superbly contemptuous reminder that they own a whole sea of purple dyes; for his life she would have sacrificed any quantity of the precious stuff. She ends with a prayer to Zeus to accomplish her design whose real meaning cannot be lost upon the audience. Now Agamemnon vanishes into the palace, and Clytemnestra follows; but Cassandra remains silent on the stage, perhaps hardly noticed by the audience.

The Chorus now sings the Third Stasimon, expressing an unaccountable sense of the imminence of trouble. They have witnessed Agamemnon's safe return, yet cannot rid themselves of an uncanny premonition of disaster. They recall the ancient superstition that a prosperous man may buy off envy provoked in the powers that control human affairs by his success by sacrificing a portion of his belongings. Wealth, they say, may be sacrificed and may always be renewed, but a man's life's blood, once spilt, can never be recalled. The thought of blood that may call for the shedding of more blood recalls knowledge which they possess but may not utter; were it not that respect forbade it, they would be pouring out a secret which as things are they must hold back. The respect is that which they owe to their royal house, and the secret is the dark secret lurking in its past.

The accumulated tension has now reached a point at which the audience will at any minute expect to hear the king's death-cry from inside the palace. Instead, Clytemnestra comes out once more; she has come to call in Cassandra, and does so with an icy cruelty that reveals what she has been hiding behind the carefully maintained facade. The Elders, speaking gently, second her demand that Cassandra shall go in; but Cassandra remains silent, and in the end Clytemnestra loses her patience and returns into the palace.

Noticing the statue of Apollo that stands before the palace door, Cassandra calls upon the god, mystifying the Elders; then they see that she is about to prophesy. First she alludes to a vision of the murdered children of Thyestes; then in the riddling mode of utterance peculiar to prophets she describes a vision of the murder which is about to happen. The Elders recognise the meaning of her vision of the past, but are perplexed by what she says about the future: her words deeply disturb them, but they



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conjure away their fears by telling themselves that no good comes to men from prophecy. Then Cassandra describes a vision of her own death; thinking back in time, she perceives the whole tenor of the sad destiny of Troy, from start to finish.

At the beginning of the scene Cassandra sings lyric verses and the Chorus replies in the verse of dialogue, reversing the usual relation between the utterance of an actor and that of the Chorus; gradually the Elders become infected by Cassandra's mood, so that they burst into song. But now after a pause Cassandra speaks in dialogue metre; by a supreme effort she attains a new clarity, and tells the Elders directly that the house of Agamemnon is never quitted by the Erinyes, the punishers of crime. By proving her knowledge of past events she might be expected not to know of, she hopes to force the Elders to believe her prophecies about the future; and she challenges them to deny the truth of what she has said about the children of Thyestes. Encouraged by their admission that it is true, she goes on to tell how Apollo endowed her with prophetic power as the price of her virginity, but she failed to fulfil her part of the bargain, and the god punished her by causing all to disbelieve her prophecies. The Elders assure her that they at least believe her; but though they can understand what she says about the past, they are and continue to be altogether baffled by what she says to them about the future.

A new access of prophetic vision now comes upon Cassandra; she sees a clear vision of the dead children, and senses the plotting of Clytemnestra and the complicity of Aegisthus, even though she does not name them. Once again the Elders fail to follow her, even when she tells them directly that they are about to witness Agamemnon's death. A vision of her own death follows, clearer than before; she tries to cast off the insignia of her prophetic office, and becomes aware of the presence of Apollo, seen by her alone, tearing them off before she herself can do so. Finally she prophesies the coming of Agamemnon's and her own avenger. Why, she asks, should she waste time in lamentation, she who has seen first the fate of Troy and now the fate of Troy's conquerors? The Elders ask why she makes no effort to escape, but she replies that it is useless. On the point of going through the door she hesitates, nauseated by what seems to be the smell of death and corruption. Then, summoning up her resolution, she calls upon the Elders to testify later to her courage, appeals to the all-seeing Sun to witness the guilt of her murderers, and speaks sadly of the evanescence of the life of men. Her final melancholy reflection upon human life is echoed by the Chorus as she leaves the stage.

The use he makes of Cassandra is the poet's master-stroke. The

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secret of the guilt from the past weighing upon the house of Atreus is finally revealed by the foreign prisoner, who has long remained silent, so that she has been supposed ignorant of Greek. A member of the Trojan royal family, who has witnessed the destruction of her own city and the massacre of her relations, is especially well qualified to deliver the comment upon human destiny which concludes the scene, bringing to a climax the principal theme which is proper to the *Agamemnon* among the plays making up the trilogy. These dramatic objectives are attained in a scene of unsurpassed poignancy, heightened by the poet's peculiar power to evoke a sense of the presence of supernatural beings and the workings of supernatural agencies.

Now at last Agamemnon's death-cry is heard from inside, and the Elders vainly debate whether they are to attempt to act. The scene is exposed to the ridicule of those who choose to view it from the standpoint of a naturalism foreign to the conventions of the Aeschylean stage; but the Elders themselves have prepared the audience for their helplessness by speaking of their great age and decrepitude, and realism in such matters is an irrelevant criterion here. Their futile discussion is interrupted by the appearance of Clytemnestra, standing over the bodies of her two victims.

With utter shamelessness she describes the murder of Agamemnon in his bath, gloating over her dead enemy in a fashion reprobated by Greek religion. The Elders wonder if she has partaken of some drug that has driven her mad, and proclaim that she is liable to death by stoning for her crime. They offered no resistance, Clytemnestra complains, when Agamemnon sacrificed her daughter; they employ a double standard, and in any case they are in no position to execute their judgment. Again the Elders declare that she is mad, but she replies that she is not afraid of them while she has the protection of her loyal friend Aegisthus, uttering a name not previously mentioned in the play. She finishes with further mockery of her dead enemies.

From this point on Clytemnestra replies in anapaestic recitative to the lyrics of the Chorus. The Elders lament for Agamemnon; once again they remember Helen and say that her evil work has now reached its climax. Clytemnestra will not allow Helen to be blamed; but when the Elders invoke the daemon of the house of Atreus, meaning the personified curse, she listens with more sympathy. When they lament once more and denounce her for her deed, she denies that the deed is hers; the avenging daemon, making himself manifest to her, has slain a mature man to atone for youthful victims. The Elders deny that Clytemnestra can cast off responsibility; and they are right; according to Greek religion a supernatural

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being may inspire a human action, but the human actor can never shuffle off responsibility by saying so. Clytemnestra meets the lamentations and reproaches of the Chorus by repeating the charge against Agamemnon of murdering her daughter. Who, the Elders ask, shall render the king his due mourning and his due funeral laudation? This has nothing to do with them, Clytemnestra replies, and indeed these duties fell upon a dead man's family; she has killed him and she will bury him, without lamentation. For those funeral honours whose refusal was an act almost as heinous as the act of murder, Agamemnon will have to wait until the coming of his son Orestes.

The Elders admit that justice is difficult to attain; one death follows another to avenge it; but they remind Clytemnestra that so long as Zeus sits upon his throne the divine law demands that the doer shall suffer. That doctrine was first enunciated in the Parodos, and mention of it recurs again and again during the trilogy. The Elders declare that the family seems inextricably linked to its inheritance of ruin. Clytemnestra proclaims her willingness to strike a bargain with the daemon; she is willing to give up part of her possessions, if he will depart and plague another family. But the audience knows that no such bargain is possible. In the Third Stasimon the Chorus has said that wealth renounced to appease divine anger can always be replaced, but that blood once spilt can never be called back.

With the end of the great scene between Clytemnestra and the Chorus the real action of the play is over; but it is the custom of the Greek tragedians to bring the audience slowly down from the highest pitch of emotional intensity. Aegisthus enters with his bodyguard and with him the action loses several degrees of tragic grandeur. He sees the working of divine justice in his triumph, telling of the Thyestean feast in tones of matter-of-fact realism, and glorying in having plotted the destruction of his enemy in what by heroic standards must be thought a cowardly fashion. The Elders reproach him for his words and for his conduct, and pronounce against him, as they have done against Clytemnestra, the sentence of death by stoning. But like her, Aegisthus can point out to the Elders that they are in no position to execute their judgment, and he does this with brutal insolence. An undignified altercation follows; finally the Elders exasperate Aegisthus by threatening him with the vengeance of the young Orestes, and he calls upon his followers to draw their swords. In the end Clytemnestra intervenes to put an end to the unseemly wrangle.

Aristotle in his *Poetics* says that the characters in a tragedy are there for the sake of the plot and not their own, and his attitude reflects that of the tragedians. The ancients held that the characters in a drama should be

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depicted as being the sort of people to perform the actions with which the story credited them; and ancient dramatists endowed their characters with individuality just so far as was necessary for this purpose and no further. The critics of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century imputed to Aeschylus, as they did to Shakespeare, their own excessive pre-occupation with character-study; in consequence a reaction arose which in some quarters went so far as to deny him any interest in character. The truth lies between the extremes, as the characters of the *Agamemnon* help to show.

The two humble characters, the Watchman and the Herald, vivid as their utterances are, need only to show loyalty and simplicity. Aegisthus must be unfavourably presented, if Agamemnon is to seem relatively sympathetic; he is therefore made mean, cowardly and boastful, as the part he plays in the murder plot suggests that he is. The Argive Elders are given a consistent character, like all Aeschylean choruses. Old and decrepit as they are, they are lucid in speech and thought but incapable of action. Though critical of Agamemnon for having sacrificed men's lives to recover Helen, they are still his loyal subjects; and despite their helplessness at the crisis of the murder, they afterwards stand up courageously to Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, reminding them that divine justice will finally ensure that they are punished.

The Watchman in his prologue credits Clytemnestra with a 'man's mind in counsel'; so great are the cunning and ruthlessness with which Aeschylus' innovation in making her the actual killer requires him to invest her that she seems at times to acquire an almost Shakespearian degree of individuality. In the face of the barely concealed mistrust of the Elders she remains coolly and contemptuously polite. The effusiveness of the words of welcome which she speaks to the Herald and to the king himself serves to make it easier for an audience acquainted with the story to perceive the delicate ambiguity present in so much of her language. When she comes out to call in Cassandra, we see her for the first time with the vizard down; after the murder she casts aside all pretences, and openly proclaims her satisfaction in what she has accomplished. She insists upon the justice of her revenge for Iphigenia, and it is impossible for the Elders entirely to refute her claim. Yet the manner in which Agamemnon's dilemma at Aulis has been presented suggests that he deserves more sympathy than she is willing to accord him, and it is clear that a passion for Aegisthus is an important element among her motives, as Orestes in the second play certainly believes. The belief of some modern critics that she loses her resolution and self-confidence after the murder is utter non-

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sense; she firmly states her case against the Chorus, and when in the Choephoroe she realises her danger she calls at once for her 'man-slaying axe'.

The story requires that Agamemnon's character should be comparatively complicated. On the one hand he is the noble king, victorious in a just war, loved by his loyal subjects; on the other he is the son of the accursed Atreus, doomed from birth by the decree of Zeus' justice. At Aulis he has a choice between two crimes, and in choosing to kill his daughter adds to the guilt inherited from his father. More guilt accrues from the merciless revenge upon the Trojans of which he boasts with such complacency. In the First Stasimon it is suggested that the killers of many are in any case exposed to danger; that the sons of Atreus have right on their side in seeking to recover Helen, as the Chorus seems to imply in the prologue to the Parodos and at the beginning of the First Stasimon itself, seems at the end of the First Stasimon to be questioned. Aeschylus is not a philosopher but a poet, and we are in danger of oversimplifying and misrepresenting him if we try to work out with too great precision the apportionment of guilt and the operation of divine justice in his work. It is the essence of tragedy that two claims, propositions or principles, each of them just, should clash with one another. It is clear that Agamemnon is a predestined victim of Atê, the power sent by Zeus to blind men so that they commit disastrous errors. Yet neither the grimness of his responses to his wife's insinuating words of welcome nor the satisfaction with which he speaks of his revenge prevents us from feeling that he is far more favourably presented than are his murderers. Aeschylus has fully exploited the motive of the clash between man and woman; on the face of it the woman's claim seems, to be rejected; but the tragedy is concerned to present rather than to solve the permanent problems of human existence, and the assertion of male superiority by Apollo and Orestes matters less than the uncertain feelings which the treatment of the question in the trilogy leaves in the reader's mind.

A similar vagueness attaches to the poet's treatment of human guilt and of divine justice. Plato was unjust to Aeschylus in taking the statement of a character in his lost *Niobe* that 'the god manufactures guilt for men, when he has decided utterly to destroy a house' to mean that Zeus punishes the innocent. Now that a papyrus discovery has placed that statement in its context, we know that Aeschylus meant no such thing; and in the Second Stasimon of *Agamemnon* the Chorus declares that Zeus punishes only the guilty and their descendants. How, then, a philosopher would ask, does the chain of crimes and punishments begin? What was the origin

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of the guilt of Atreus? In Homer a human action is very often prompted by a god; but though the human actor may try to save face by pleading that the god overruled him, he cannot escape responsibility for an action which belongs to him. At the beginning of the *Odyssey*, Zeus claims that men blame the gods for wrong actions for which they alone are responsible. Are we to take his word for it? In general the archaic Greek poets did not do so. There is an uncertainty here which none of them quite resolves; if pressed for an answer, they might have said, as a character in Euripides infuriated Socrates by saying, 'It is best to leave these matters on one side'. They had a right to say this, because they were poets and not systematic theologians or philosophers.