

A STUDY GUIDE TO AESCHYLUS' AGAMEMNON
BY
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I THE BACKGROUNDS

A. AESCHYLUS

"Aeschylus in 458 BCE, the date of the *Agamemnon*, was about sixty-six years old and had been prominent in Athenian life for forty years. He belonged to a family of the old patrician Eupatridae from Eleusis. As a lad of fifteen he had witnessed the expulsion of the last Athenian tyrant, a type of mob-supported dictator, and the institution of the moderate democracy masterminded by Cleisthenes. In the democratic army he had fought at Marathon against the Persians in 490 BCE, and in 480 BCE, he had participated in the naval victory at Salamis over a more serious Persian invasion. In his solemn tragedies and burlesque satyrplays, Aeschylus had won many successes and great fame for his spectacular effects, exalted phrasemaking, exciting music, and versatile dramatic vitality."

Douglas Young

"Aeschylus won his first victory in 484, and over eighty titles of his plays are recorded. He was famous both in Athens and without... and wrote for the theatre when it was first assuming an organized form and so is credited with introducing many of its typical features. The rich costumes and buskins are said to have been designed by him, and he may have commissioned the architectural design of the wooden *skene*. He took the leading part in his own plays, using first one, and then, imitating Sophocles, two actors to assist him, and also designed his own choral dances. He is also suggested as the first to have used elaborate stage machinery."

Peter D. Arnott

B. THE MYTHIC BACKGROUND

"Aeschylus referred to his work as 'slices from the banquet of Homer,' but his powers of assimilation were impressive. His trilogy sweeps from first the *Iliad* to the *Odyssey*, from war to peace. Yet it is the darker events of the *Odyssey* - the murder of Agamemnon by his wife and the vengeance of his son Orestes - that inspired Aeschylus to produce a great tale of the tribe. He deepened Homer with even older, darker legends and lifted him to a later, more enlightened state of culture. The house of Atreus is the embodiment of savagery. No other Greek family can rival it for accumulated atrocities: the sin and punishment of Tantalus, the murderous chariot race of Pelops, the seduction of Atreus' wife, the horrific feast served to brother Thyestes etc. What Aeschylus builds upon the house of Atreus is 'a grand parable of progress,' that celebrates our emergence from the dark to the light, from the tribe to the aristocracy to the democratic state."

W.E.B. Stanford

C. THE POLITICAL BACKGROUND

"For its author and his original audience the *Oresteia* was a piece of politically engaged literature, with strong relevance in more than one aspect to current public affairs. The Supreme Court of the Areopagus had been the subject of keen party infighting in the years before 458 BCE, during which a prominent radical reformer had been murdered.... In addition, Athens was engaged in war on several fronts, and Aeschylus repeatedly gives prominence to the importance of the Athens-Argos alliance."

Douglas Young

II THE FORMAL DESIGN OF THE AGAMEMNON

PROLOGUE (1-38): The Watchman

- exposition and background but also new voice with real emotions
- introduces key themes (gods, gender, pain) and images (animals, light, disease)

PARODOS (39-257): Entrance Song of the Chorus

- chorus both as narrative device and character (weak old men and past)
- key refrain “sing sorrow but let the good prevail” and theme of justice

EPISODE I (258-350): Clytemnestra & the Chorus

- Clytemnestra in action: manipulative & ambiguous language, lies and irony
- long speech on the beacon and fall of Troy & stichomythia with chorus

STASIMON I (351-502): Choral Hymn to Zeus

- Greek revenge taken on Paris but also allusion to Agamemnon’s destiny
- proverbial Greek morality: the gods punish violence and wrongdoing

EPISODE II: (503-6800): Herald returns from Troy

- Realistic herald both retarding action and anticipating Agamemnon’s return
- story of war at Troy optimistic on surface but with dark underside

STASIMON II (681-810): Choral Ode to Helen

- story of Helen and meditation on divine retribution and justice
- parable of lion cub moralizing on hybris as personal outrage, assault, rape

EPISODE III (811-974): Homecoming of Agamemnon

- marital conflict over a carpet (position, color, texture, richness)
- Agamemnon finally agrees, steps on the tapestries and exits into the house

STASIMON III (975-1033): Choral Ode of Foreboding

- Chorus poised between hope and fear and sing with great ambiguity
- Prayer for balance using the example of health/disease and allusion to Asclepius

EPISODE IV (1034-1371): Cassandra’s Aria and Meeting with Clytemnestra

- Cassandra as barbarian, innocent victim, medium, singer, prophet, priestess
- Her silence, aria of pain, confrontation with Clytemnestra, prophecy and exit

STASIMON IV (1331-1371): Choral Debate, Breakdown and Inaction after Murder

- twelve individual couplets indicate lack of choral unity, harmony and action

EPISODE V (1372-1708): Triumph of Clytemnestra & Appearance of Aegisthus

- Clytemnestra returns with the bodies and a legalistic defense of her actions and motivations: revenge, neglect, anger, love, justice, order, fate, power, etc
- shift in sympathies with Aegisthus’ bluster and threats and mention of Orestes
- No exit song and the play ends abruptly with hostility and silence

APPROACHES TO THE MAIN CHARACTERS

“Agamemnon has been described as everything from a true gentleman to a pompous, besotted murderer. No doubt we should look to his Homeric characterization, if only because the audience’s expectations would certainly be conditioned by that familiar face of the *Iliad*. In our play he is full of himself, satisfied that he, as an agent of justice, has taken care of one city and can now handle matters at home. A little pompous, complacent, circumspect, but with a yielding vanity, he is dominated by the real ruler of the house. If his reasoning is none too good, it is still intelligible, his error human, perhaps too human.”

James C. Hogan

“Clytemnestra has created a theatrical triumph that is also a solemn moral judgment. Through her words and tapestries and assassination of her husband becomes an execution, a sacrifice. She is the great artist of ritual. And this ritual not only incriminates her victim; it exhilarates the priestess with sacramental power.”

W.B.Stanford

“Aeschylus has introduced one touch of humanity into his portrait. For most of the play she is the instrument of vengeance, the channel through which divine wrath is to inflict itself on Agamemnon. In one respect she wins our sympathies -her love for her children. Aeschylus emphasizes this aspect of her character in the language she uses; from her first entrance her speeches are full of mother-imagery.”

P.D. Arnott

IV THEMES AND DRAMATIC STRATEGIES

“I have already mentioned *dike*’s range of meaning from the abstract ‘**Justice**’, ‘right’, through ‘retribution’, ‘punishment’, to the particular legal senses of ‘lawcourt’ and ‘law case’.... Moreover, as one might expect, the rhetoric of the lawcourt relies heavily on appeals to what is *dike*, ‘right’, ‘proper’, ‘legal’, ‘fair’, and on the opposition of *dike* to *hybris* which means both ‘excess’, ‘transgression’, ‘insolence’, and also, in legal terminology, ‘assault’.”

Simon Goldhill

“In the Oresteia, **justice** cannot be achieved without the help of the **gods** in founding a new civic institution at the Areopagus and a new cult of the Erinyes. Greek religion is above all a matter of cult performance: sacrifices, libations, festivals and prayers to the gods. The Oresteia presents a struggle to understand the justice of Zeus. Yet by the celebratory conclusion of the last play, the ways of the gods and their justice remain mysterious and not entirely satisfactory.”

Helene Foley

“The use, power and dangers of **language** are essential to the narrative of revenge through the repeated acts of deceitful persuasion. The workings of language are traced and discussed through the different scenes of message-sending, sign-reading, interpretation and manipulation. The search for the right word, the desire for accurate prediction and prophecy, the effects of blessing, curse and invocation are all linked to the understanding of the workings of language.”

Simon Goldhill

“Froma Zeitlin has characterized the Oresteia with its **male/female conflict** as a ‘myth of matriarchy,’ a cross-cultural category of myth that affirms male dominance by imagining that women once held power, but rightly lost it by abusing their authority. Although Clytemnestra has just claims against her husband, she also kills the rightful ruler of the country, establishes an unjust tyranny, and turns in fear of revenge against her own children. The Furies and Clytemnestra act in the interests of kin, regardless of the effects of their actions on marriage and civic order.”

Helene Foley

Aeschylus' Dramatic Strategies:

Dramatic use of **stage design**: roof, chariot, carpet & ekkyklema (portable stage used to display dead bodies). Dense use of **metaphor** (light & dark, animals, disease, nets & hunting). Use of silent figures such as Cassandra and silence itself for power/mystery. The several choral odes, arias and allusions to music for variation & emotion. The use of **stichomythia** (line by line repartee) for speed & interrogations. **The messenger speeches** by Herald, Clytemnestra & Cassandra narrating off-stage action (note scene of murder occurs offstage). Creative use of three male actors with **doubling, masks & costumes**.

V INTERPRETATIONS OF AESCHYLUS' AGAMEMNON

"In the Agamemnon, the first play of the Oresteia, Aeschylus has devised a version of the legend which carries the suspense to the highest level. Again he sees his theme as the story of an afflicted family, in which one crime calls forth another.... As Sir John Beazley wrote, 'long and conflicting suspense, a knife-flash of action and that unseen, and then the strange revulsion and unease, is the very formula, the very soul of Aeschylean tragedy.'"

H.C. Baldry

"There is nothing like the Oresteia. No other drama, not even the Book of Job, presents us with such concentrated yet sustained magnificence of thought and language. The insoluble problems of divine justice in the fortunes of human beings is taken up and treated in a complicated form with great originality. The process of transgression leading to punishment, which involves pollution and fresh punishment, until the only possible end is reached in the annihilation of the guilty race, is recorded again, but this time, by divine grace, a solution is found."

D.W. Lucas

"Superficially, the Oresteia is a violent story of a primitive family feud. So, at its lowest level, is Hamlet. But Aeschylus' work, like Shakespeare's, is much more than a tale of revenge. One deeper aspect, the theological, is now perhaps impossible for us to appreciate fully. Christian beliefs are so far removed from the Greek conception of deity as a jealous power bending men to a preordained fate. There must inevitably remain something strange and barbarous about the gods of the Agamemnon. But the great dramatic power of the play is its simplicity. With a minimum of characters and a bare economy of situation Aeschylus establishes a tension which does not relax until the final word has been spoken, and even then leaves us awaiting the sequel."

Arnott

"Aeschylus Oresteia is the only trilogy that has come down to us in its entirety. We are able to see how the poet treated, within the frame of three thematically connected plays, the destiny of two heroic generations (Agamemnon & Orestes); the past, both recent and remote, of the house of Atreus; and difficult theological problems -the relationship between gods and mortals and that between human guilt and divine causality. The structure of the Agamemnon is marked by the tension between the stage action, the events of the past, and Agamemnon's anticipated return, which is the culmination of increasingly excited scenes."

B. Zimmermann

"Perhaps the plotlessness of the Agamemnon and so much Aeschylean drama has something to do with the genius of mythology. The Greek convention of using the past, especially the legendary past, to supply the materials of drama was in many ways a fortunate thing. Because the dramatic present is invested with the perfectiveness of the past, the temptation toward verisimilitude which much later killed high tragedy was staved off. Where the pathos is that of Troy, or of Argos of the line of Tantalus, where the main players are gods and heroes, the genre is not easily adjusted to the realities of suburbia or of the ghetto."

T.G. Rosenmeyer



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