

THE AGAMEMNON OF AESCHYLUS

First part of "The Serpent Son".

Prologue: The Watchman on the roof of the Palace of Agamemnon at Mycenae presents the facts. He has been watching a year for the fire signal that will announce Troy's capture, and all is not well within the house. He sees the beacon at last and will tell Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife. He rejoices at the news for it means his master will be coming home.

Parodos or Entry of the Choros, who are Elders of Argos, councillors to the Queen Regent. They chant about the expedition against Troy. The sons of Atreus (Agamemnon and Menelaus) are seen as birds whose nest has been robbed by the stealing of Helen. Paris who stole her thereby offended against Zeus, the God of the host and guest. With legal images the old men say that Paris will be punished. They themselves were too old to go to war ten years ago; like the old man in the Sphinx's riddle they lean on staffs. Clytemnestra enters with slaves to make sacrifice at the altars; the chorus ask her why sacrifices are being made but she ignores them and does not answer.

The chorus continue with the first Ode, a song about Aulis and what happened there. The omen of the pregnant hare attacked by the eagles: Calchas the prophet interpreted it to mean that Troy would fall but that the goddess Artemis will try to prevent the destruction of Troy. The sons of Atreus, he said, must not annoy the gods. There will be ominous sacrifice; the refrain to this Ode is "Sing sorrow, sorrow, but may the good prevail!" (Almost a summary of the Oresteia).

Hymn to Zeus: A special appeal to the god who, as the third in succession of father gods triumphed over a more primitive past. The chorus say that man learns by suffering and that is Zeus' rule.

Returning to the Ode about Aulis: the chorus narrate how Agamemnon's expedition against Troy was disastrously held up by contrary winds and Calchas said that a maiden had to be sacrificed to Artemis; Iphigeneia, Agamemnon's daughter, so that he should be forced to give up the expedition - (a maiden for a whore). When Agamemnon decided to sacrifice her the chorus thought him wrong. She did not die willingly but had to be gagged - ominous in a sacrifice, so that it would bring a curse.

Episode 1: Clytemnestra enters; when the chorus leader asks the news she tells them that Troy is taken. They do not at first believe her, thinking that it is a woman's fancies and baseless. This annoys her and in a brilliant speech she details the beacon chain that brought the news to Argos. She then imagines sympathetically what is

now going on in Troy and warns the absent Greeks to be respectful of the gods since they still have to get home safely, and if they have annoyed the gods they will be accursed.

2nd Stasimon (stasimon = choral ode) The chorus thank Zeus for the victory and see its justice upon the transgression of Paris and Troy. They then speak of the ruin Helen brought on Greece: the desolation of Menelaus in his empty house, and the many dead men of Argos whose death may bring a curse to the city. Suddenly the chorus refuse to accept the news of the victory.

2nd Episode: A travel-stained Herald approaches with the first-hand news. His first reaction is joy at being home and thankfulness to the gods. He then confirms that the Greeks have taken Troy and, ominously, have destroyed the temples of the gods there. The chorus welcome the Herald and indicate that all has not been well at home. They mean (as the watchman also meant) that Clytemnestra has been sleeping with Aegisthus, Agamemnon's enemy, while he has been away, but they do not make it clear so the hint is not understood. The Herald speaks of the hardships and discomforts of war and then an epitaph for the dead Greeks.

Clytemnestra appears at the Palace door and tells the chorus "I told you so". She scorns to speak to the herald; she declares she has been totally faithful to her husband and goes in again. The Herald expresses surprise at her attitude. The chorus ask about Menelaus. Reluctantly, because it is bad news, the Herald says that his ship disappeared in a great storm that wrecked many of the Greek ships: the gods already have taken some revenge for the victor's lack of piety.

3rd Stasimon Helen and the mourning she brought to Troy. Her name means "The Spoiler". The disastrous end of her union with Paris. (Helen would have gone down drowned in Menelaus' ship). The parable of the lion-cub. The problem of evil; it is not that prosperity begets evil but that prosperous people behave badly and then evil begets evil. The chorus conclude that Justice is not to be found in palaces but Justice will direct all to the appointed end.

3rd Episode: Agamemnon enters in his chariot; behind him in another chariot piled with war-loot is the enslaved princess of Troy, Cassandra, in priestess' robes (as it were, a handcuffed nun!) The visual effect of this dominates the whole of the subsequent scene; it proves that Agamemnon has offended the gods.

The chorus greet Agamemnon and hint that not everyone will be sincerely glad to see him. They say that they opposed his war policy ten years before and did not like his superstitious sacrifice of Iphigeneia at Aulis but are now glad to see him.

Agamemnon greets Argos and the gods but arrogantly he says that he took Troy - with the god's help. In the image of the law-court he says that the gods found Troy guilty and she has paid. He then thanks the chorus for their advice; he is aware some friends are false - so he had found at Troy. He does not appreciate the chorus' urgency but will set up a commission to enquire into disloyalty at home and punish it.

Clytemnestra enters with slaves carrying a long piece of crimson silk. In a long speech she tells her husband how evil life was while he was away. She is glad he is back (in fact, because she wanted the chance to murder him). Her murderous intention peeps through her words in more than one place. She says she sent Orestes away lest uncertainty lead to a coup in Argos. She flatters her husband and wants him to enter the palace walking not on the ground but on the silk, like a god.

Agamemnon answers her insultingly as "daughter of Leda" and snubs her; her speech, he says, was too long. He dislikes flattery and recognises that it would be hubristic to walk in on the cloth. Hubristic - overproud so as to compete with the gods.

She argues with him and by comparing him to Priam and then appealing to his victor's generosity changes his mind. He has his shoes removed, throws a verbal pinch of salt over his shoulder towards the gods, and tells Clytemnestra to be nice to Cassandra as he goes. Clytemnestra comments that they are wealthy enough to afford a bit of ruined cloth, and is triumphant.

Note: The red cloth on which he walks is a symbolic river of blood for all the dead of Greece and Troy his men and he have caused.

4th Stasimon A song foreboding evil. Too much success and wealth is ominous, life that has been destroyed will be paid for.

4th Episode: Clytemnestra comes out to fetch Cassandra so that she can kill her at the same time as Agamemnon. Ostensibly trying to help Cassandra adjust to her new slave status she in fact rubs Cassandra's nose in it while patting herself on the back. Cassandra, by her silence, wins the argument and Clytemnestra has to go in without her, telling the Chorus to make the girl understand. She thinks that Cassandra must be a barbarian - not a speaker of Greek.

The Chorus are gentle with Cassandra who suddenly breaks out with a cry to Apollo to great effect, disturbing the Chorus. Cassandra says she is to be destroyed and shrinks from the blood stained house of Atreus. She sees the murdered and eaten children of Thyestes and then goes on about a looming plot - a cleansing ritual becomes murder with a hunting - net. She calls on the Furies. The Chorus are so uneasy about all this that they try to be rationalistic about it. She reverts to Paris's elopement which has doomed her and her family. Speaking more clearly, she tries to warn of Agamemnon's murder by going into detail about what she divines. The Chorus rather pruriently ask her about her relationship to Apollo: she was wooed by him and accepted the gift of prophecy from him but then refused to lie with him. He punished her by causing her prophecies never to be believed. This now occurs as the Chorus refused to believe that Agamemnon is threatened. Suddenly she tears off her priestess' garland and throws down the sceptre. She prophesies that she and Agamemnon will be avenged by a son come to kill his mother. Ceasing to be sorry for herself she prays Apollo for a quick, painless death (a prayer which is soon to be granted). In dignity she accepts her fate and moves towards the palace door but then starts back in horror because it is so blood - encrusted. She pulls

herself together again, praise for the vengeance for her to be complete when Clytemnestra and Aigisthus are killed, and goes into the palace.

5th. Stasimon: the Choros reflecting on the uncertainty of fortune and success are interrupted by the cry of Agamemnon being murdered within. They dither, not being sure who it is who cries out and thinking it might be a revolution. Each old man speaks two lines and they disagree with one another.

5th Episode: The palace doors open and Clytemnestra stands with the two bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra, a silver bath and a purple robe. Cassandra's body has been arranged obscenely on top of Agamemnon's and Agamemnon's blood has bespattered Clytemnestra.

Clytemnestra speaks exultantly of her victory and throws off all hypocrisy gladly. She struck three blows to kill Agamemnon before he died; Cassandra needed only one blow. She is sure justice is on her side and tells the Choros so - as if she expected them to agree.

But they are horrified and tell her that in the eyes of all Argos she is a murderess. She says that Agamemnon was a murderer - of Iphigeneia, and defends herself; but finishes by threatening them. Aigisthus will partner her and keep her safe. She abuses both Agamemnon and Cassandra for their sexual relationship and has enjoyed killing Cassandra.

The Choros lament Agamemnon passionately and blame Helen. Clytemnestra does not (Clytemnestra is Helen's sister). Then they blame the curse of Atreus; this she accepts; she says she is its instrument. Did the god allow this? asks the Choros. They say that she is not guiltless just because of the curse. She must expect justice in her turn - though they do not remember that Cassandra had said so. Clytemnestra insists that Agamemnon got what he deserved. The Choros realise that life will now be wretched in Argos; Clytemnestra will not even be able to bury Agamemnon properly. At the end of this scene the Choros and Clytemnestra are at least in agreement on one point: The sinner dies.

Aigisthus enters rejoicing, telling how his brothers died as children served up as food to their father - but he does not mention what his father had done to bring down this fate. He claims he planned Agamemnon's murder to pay back Agamemnon's father. The Choros express their disapproval - Aigisthus too will have to pay.

He threatens them with repression - but has armed men with him like a tyrant. They will not be silent but defy him and there is a slanging match in which they call him a coward hiding behind Clytemnestra. They hope Orestes will come back and make him pay. He orders his guards forward and the Choros prepare to resist with their staves but Clytemnestra steps forward to stop both sides from fighting. She sends the Elders home and pacifies Aigisthus with difficulty. Even so the Choros get the last word abusing Aigisthus as they go off.

Clytemnestra ends the play by saying that she and Aigisthus will rule jointly and by force.