2.5 THE LEGEND BEHIND *THE ORESTEIA*

Tantalus was a son of Zeus who ruled in Lydia, was admitted to the company of the gods, abused their hospitality, and was punished everlastingly by having food and drink just out of his reach; hence our 'tantalize'. Pelops was his son. Pelops won a bride by bribery, subsequently killing the man he bribed, who cursed him with his dying breath. The curse passed on. Pelops's sons, Atreus and Thyestes, quarrelled over the power and Atreus murdered Thyestes's sons, and served them up to him in a cannibal or 'Thyestean' feast. Thyestes cursed his brother's line, which thus inherited a double curse (Seneca in a gory rhetorical drama on this theme has a scene in which Atreus produces the heads of the children and says 'Do you recognize your sons?' to which Thyestes replies 'I recognize my brother'). A reus had two sons, Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, and Menelaus, king of Sparta, who thus divided between them the Peloponnese or Island of Pelops.

Zeus in the form of a swan seduced Leda, and from the resulting egg were hatched two girls, Helen and Clytemnestra, and two boys, Castor and Polydeuces (or Pollux). Helen grew to be the most beautiful woman in the world. (Homer, wisely, does not attempt to describe her but shows the old men watching her, and whispering that she was worth a war.) Helen married Menelaus, Clytemnestra Agamemnon. Throughout *The Oresteia* we must never forget that Clytemnestra is Helen's sister.

Across the Aegean, commanding the Dardanelles, was the powerful city of Troy, ruled by Priam. One of his sons, Alexander or Paris, was shepherding on Mount Ida, when he was called in to adjudicate in a divine beauty contest. All the candidates were goddesses. All offered bribes. Hera offered power, Athene wisdom, Aphrodite marriage to the most beautiful woman in the world. Paris chose the last (the romance of youth!).

The most beautiful woman in the world was married to Menelaus. Paris went to Sparta and eloped with Helen. We may now think that the Greeks saw a pretext for cutting the Trojan economic stranglehold on them, but ancient sources say nothing of this. At any rate, the Greeks were out for vengeance. Their forces mustered at Aulis, on the east coast, with Agamemnon in command. But, according to the usual myth, which Aeschylus does not follow, Agamemnon shot a deer sacred to Artemis. Adverse winds kept the fleet in port. The prophet Calchas declared that the goddess would be appeased only by the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigeneia. She was lured out under pretext of marriage to the heroic soldier Achilles, and killed. The fleet sailed.

The siege lasted ten years. Homer's *The Iliad* (properly *The Anger of Achilles*) records an episode in that decade. Clytemnestra felt no loyalty to Agamemnon after his murder of their daughter, and took Thyestes's surviving son Aegisthus as her lover, keeping the other daughter Electra at home, but sending their son Orestes away to Phocis in Central Greece.

Eventually Troy fell. The Greeks went too far and offended the gods by plundering temples. Their ships were scattered by a storm, so that Menelaus and Odysseus were years in their return. Agamemnon escaped and arrived with his prisoner-of-war and concubine, the Trojan princess Cassandra, who was dedicated to the god Apollo and hence sacrosanct. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus killed both Agamemnon and Cassandra.

As the years passed Orestes grew to manhood. Apollo through his oracle at Delphi told him to avenge his father. The killing of Aegisthus was just another episode in a feud. The killing of his mother raised acute problems of moral and ritual impurity but he did it. The earliest traditions concentrate on the killing of Aegisthus, which is treated as commendable. Later accounts tell how he was harried by the Furies or Avenging Spirits of his mother, until he eventually found purification in one way or another.

This, or something like this, would be the expectation of the Athenian audience once they knew the theme of the tragedy. But did it actually happen? Not all of it: we are not likely to believe in seduction by a swan, human birth of quadruplets from an egg, or a divine beauty contest. But Troy existed: so did Mycenae and Sparta. A war in the mid-thirteenth century is a historical possibility; the abduction of a queen would be a positive occasion for war. African studies have taught us to respect oral tradition. We need not doubt that the myth had a historical basis. But its historicity does not affect the drama.

3 THE ORESTEIA

3.1 READING

I want you now to read the plays through. Use your own method and your own pace. You may prefer to read quickly right through all the plays first, or you may prefer to take them one by one, and then go back over each. You may prefer to read a scene quickly and then pause and think about it, or you may like to read slowly first using my notes. But you should read the plays at least twice, once with close attention to detail, and once to see the plays as a whole. Do not forget that the stage directions are not in the original; they are put in by the translator.

3.2 NOTES ON *AGAMEMNON*

1 A startling opening, with the actor on the roof of the stage-building, and his rôle not god or hero or king but an ordinary down-to-earth watchman. The audience, knowing their Homer, would remember that according to *Odyssey* ll. 4,524ff. Aegisthus posted a spy to give warning of Agamemnon's approach. The performance would begin early in the morning, so the scene is appropriate. His cry for respite (rather 'release') produces an important image. So too the image of the dog (l. 3 cf. l. 607).

3 *Atreidae*: the family of Atreus, Agamemnon's father: it is pertinent because Aegisthus was son of Thyestes, Atreus's brother. The rival line has usurped the house.

11 Clytemnestra is not mentioned by name, but she is vividly characterized; the phrase 'lady's male strength' is an oxymoron, a seeming contradiction like 'bitter-sweet'.

13 Observe the nuance of fear.

21 This cannot be a stage-direction; the event must be imagined. An ancient commentator says 'There is need of a brief pause, then he gives a shout as if he has seen the beacon.'

25 Again Clytemnestra is not named: the circumlocution is pointed. It is not Agamemnon's queen but Aegisthus's lover who is waiting.

28 *Ilium*: i.e. Troy.

32 Greek dice were much as ours: a treble six was a winning score.

35 (Latter half) What does this mean? A Greek commentator tells us that the ox signifies money, stamped with the image of the ox which represented wealth, i.e. money makes him hold his tongue. The English word 'pecuniary' comes from a Latin word of similar derivation. (I personally trust the Greek commentator against those modern scholars who reject his evidence and think that it is a homely proverb.)

40 This long choral sequence sets the theme of the whole tragedy, and puts it firmly within the context of a divine dispensation.

41 *contestants*: a legal term, ambiguous between plaintiff and defendant, preparing us for the rule of law at the trilogy's end.

49 *eagles*: a fine simile. But note the ambiguities. The eagles have been robbed of children ('young', but the word is not elsewhere used of animals). But Helen was wife, not child. A child *has* perished, Iphigeneia at the hands of Agamemnon, one of the eagles.

59 *Fury*: a spirit of punishment; we shall meet them in the third play. Surely it is at this point, not at l. 82, that Clytemnestra enters through the palace door.

61 *Alexander*: i.e. Paris.

62 *promiscuous woman*: they do not name her. They mean Helen, but there were two brothers, and they married two sisters; both women were promiscuous, and one is before our eyes.

66 *Danaans*: i.e. Greeks.

67 *It goes as it goes now*: a direct statement, charged with irony. In the providence of the god crime brings disaster, and prayers cannot avert this. Clytemnestra is at this moment, as we presently learn, offering sacrifice and prayer — to what gods, with what intent?

80 *three footed*: The riddle of the Sphinx was 'What is four-footed and two-footed and three-footed, and is weakest when it has most feet?' The answer: 'Man, who crawls as a baby, walks as an adult, and has a stick in old age.'

83 *daughter of Tyndareus*: this also applied to Helen. Tyndareus was husband to Leda. Clytemnestra does not answer, her silence is impressive and ominous.

88–90 The invocation of the gods; bear it in mind when the herald speaks (l. 508ff.).

113 *land of Teucrus*: Troy, from a legendary prince.

119 The portent of the eagles and the pregnant hare. The eagles we know are Agamemnon and Menelaus. What of the hare? A pregnant animal contains unborn innocent young. In one sense the hare is Troy and the embryos the innocents who have suffered in an expedition that Zeus ordained against Paris (l. 61); in another the rending is the whole work of the expedition, and the unborn leverets represent the innocent Iphigeneia.

121 The refrain is significant.

122 *seer*: Calchas.

138 In the legend Artemis was angry because Agamemnon killed her sacred stag. Aeschylus *leaves this out*, deliberately. The anger of Artemis is due to the fact that the eagles kill the innocent.

151 Remember that Clytemnestra is actually offering sacrifice as they sing.

154–5 Sinister words!

160 *Zeus: whatever he may be*. The chorus turn to theology. There is a divine power in the universe, call it what we will, and he has ordained that we learn through suffering. But in between these two thoughts Aeschylus puts a passage of traditional mythology. Ouranos ruled the gods by violence and was overthrown by violence. Likewise Cronos. Zeus won the throne by violence. Will the spiral of violence never end, among gods or men? Aeschylus will work this out more fully in relation to Zeus in his Prometheus-trilogy; meantime he adumbrates his answer in his insistence on Zeus's wisdom. And the trilogy is the working out of his answer on the human scale.

205 Artemis opposes the expedition. The winds will not change unless Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigeneia: a blasphemous and unnatural cruelty. This is not a test of faith (cf. Abraham and Isaac), it is a barrier to the expedition. Agamemnon has to choose between this blasphemous crime and the censure of men. He chooses the crime. 'May all be well yet' (l. 216). This cannot be. He has not the courage to break the cycle of violence and so provokes Clytemnestra's violence in return. Violence breeds violence until someone breaks the cycle, or until all is brought under the rule of law. Aeschylus uses a myth to proclaim a contemporary truth. It is still contemporary.

223ff. This exquisite description of Iphigeneia finds an echo in a painting from Pompeii, and in the powerful lines in which the Roman poet Lucretius uses the story as part of his tirade against conventional religion:

> Herein this fear assails me, lest perchance
> You should suppose I would initiate you
> Into a school of reasoning unholy,
> And set your feet upon a path of sin:
> Whereas in truth often has this religion
> Given birth to sinful and unholy deeds.
> So once at Aulis did those chosen chiefs
> Of Hellas, those most eminent among heros,
> Foully defile the Trivian Virgin's altar
> With Iphianassa's lifeblood. For so soon
> As the fillet wreathed around her maiden locks
> Streamed down in equal lengths from either cheek,
> And soon as she was aware of her father standing
> Sorrowful by the altar, and at his side
> The priestly ministers hiding the knife

And the folk shedding tears at sight of her,
Speechless in terror, dropping on her knees
To the earth she sank down. Nor in that hour
Of anguish might it avail her that she first
Had given the name of father to the king;
For by the hands of men lifted on high
Shuddering to the altar she was borne,
Not that, when the due ceremonial rites
Had been accomplished, she might be escorted
By the clear-sounding hymenaeal song,
But that a stainless maiden foully stained,
In the very season of marriage she might fall
A sorrowful victim by a father's stroke,
That so there might be granted to the fleet
A happy and hallowed sailing. Such the crimes
Whereto religion has had power to prompt.
(1,80–101 tr. R.C. Trevelyan)
N.B. Iphianassa is Iphigeneia.

Figure 16 The sacrifice of Iphigeneia. Wall-painting from the House of the Tragic Poet. (Photo: Alinari.)

We must not forget whenever there is reference to sacrifice that Iphigeneia's mother is on stage sacrificing and preparing for a bloodier sacrifice. She has not learned the lesson either.

249 *Calchas*: the seer and sacrificial priest.

250 A key sentence. The translation should contain a reference to the scale of justice.

256 *She*: Clytemnestra.

257 *Apian land*: the Peloponnese, from a legendary king Apis.

268 This brings a passage of *stichomythia*, quickfire line-for-line exchange between Clytemnestra and the chorus-leader.

269 *Achaeans*: i.e. Greeks, as in Homer.

274 Dreams are to be important in the next play.

281 *Hephaestus*: the god of fire. Clytemnestra starts on a finely rhetorical speech, packed with high-sounding poetry and evocative names, filled with the New Learning and the excitement of exploring the world that the defeat of the Persians had made familiar. It would be pedantic to lose the magic in geographical analysis. Ida is the mountain above Troy and the beacons spring from island to island across the Aegean and down the mainland.

320–47 A sensitive account of the fall of Troy written by one who had been a soldier.

338 This sounds like the sort of vacuously pious sentiment often assigned to the chorus. But it is given to the terrible, magisterial queen. Why? Because vengeance is hers; she will repay. These vital lines are taken up at l. 527.

349 *may the best win through*: the phrase in Greek is closely similar to the refrain of the previous choral song (l. 121).

351 *no grave man*. So Macbeth to his wife:

> Bring forth men-children only,
> For thy undaunted courage should compose
> Nothing but males.

It has been shown that Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth derives through Holinshed, Hector Boece, Livy, and Accius, ultimately from Aeschylus's Clytemnestra (see M. Hadas *Old Wine, New Bottles*, chapter 8).

354 Clytemnestra must go out here: she is not present during the herald's speech (cf. l. 584).

355 This long choral ode has sometimes been taken as a flood of joy with fear supervening. This is wrong. Just here we miss the music and choreography which would in fact set the mood, but we have an indication in the rhythm of the Greek verse, which picks up the rhythm which told of the crime at Aulis and goes on with sinister thudding intensity for nearly 150 lines. Note that the ode covers the passage of several days, since Agamemnon's ship, however heroic, could not travel as fast as a beacon fire.

357 *net*: the first appearance of this vital image; here, as throughout this chorus, seemingly innocuous descriptions of the fall of Troy point forward to the coming disaster; Clytemnestra will entrap Agamemnon in just such a net.

362 *Zeus of the guests*: this is what is technically known as a cult-title. Greek gods and goddesses were worshipped under different titles representing different aspects of their being and work. It is an essential part of *The Oresteia* to observe what happens to the cult-titles of Zeus.

364 Clytemnestra will not use a bow, but her preparations are equally thorough.

371 So will Agamemnon trample a crimson carpet to his doom.

385–6 *Persuasion . . . Ruin*: these may seem frigid personifications of abstract qualities to us; to the Greeks they were vividly alive divine beings. Note the images in this stanza.

429 *Hellas* i.e. Greece.

437 One of Aeschylus's most powerful images.

463 The Furies are here encountered for the second time: before the day is out they will appear before our eyes. Paris sinned, Zeus struck him down; Agamemnon has sinned . . . but the chorus in their masculine scorn of women (cf. l. 484) do not discern the danger.

489 The song and dance end and the chorus turn to the normal rhythm of dialogue.

493 The herald enters from stage-right: from the 'country', in this case the beach. (Lattimore's stage direction at l. 502 does not allow enough time for the entry, though the chorus may speak before the herald is in sight of most of the audience.) Note how Aeschylus builds up suspense: we are awaiting Agamemnon. It is 300 lines before Agamemnon appears.

495 *dry sister of the mi e*: phrases like this, common in the early poet Hesiod, are not so much artificially 'poet c' circumlocutions, as the language of folk-riddles.

505 *broke*: the snappi.g of a mooring-rope in a storm.

506–7 Listen to this whole speech in the expectation of what is to come. Agamemnon might say the same words . . .

508ff. These invocations are charged with irony. He drops to the soil, as Agamemnon will drop in death. He raises his hands to the sunlight, which Agamemnon will see no more. He invokes Zeus, who decrees that the slayer shall be slain and the sinner suffer (note the absence of cult title here). He calls on Apollo, the Pythian king (the Pythia was the priestess of Apollo's oracle at Delphi), as Saviour and Healer, but Apollo can heal *or* hurt, save *or* kill, and the very titles remind us of the deadly disease infecting the palace. He speaks of the *agonioi theoi*, here translated as 'Gods of the market-place assembled'; the phrase is ambiguous, perhaps meaning the gods of the Greek festivals, or the gods of the market-place, or the gods of the political assembly, or the assembly of the gods, but unmistakably alluding to the *agon* or 'contest' that lies at the heart of tragedy. He prays to Hermes, god of heralds, but also the escort of souls to the underworld. He cries to the demigods, the ancestors ('heroes', which means demigods not he-men), and a chill creeps from his joyous words, for they remind us of the curse on the house of Atreus.

526 *vindictive*: with Zeus, and really a cult-title, Zeus the Avenger. The essence of the drama is here. Agamemnon *was* the instrument of Zeus in punishing Paris, but in doing so he himself became liable to punishment.

527–8 Two fearful l nes, truimphantly declaimed by the good, casual, worthy, unimaginative herald. Look back to l. 338, and think of the implications of 'seed'. 'Scattered' is not strong enough; rather 'extirpated' — as the eagles extirpated the seed of the hare, as Agamemno n extirpated the seed that was his own daughter.

534–7 The herald thr ws in a legal metaphor; Aeschylus deliberately introduces this, because one aspect of h s theme is the coming of the rule of law. In Athenian law the offender paid full restitu tion, and a fine ('twice over'). In Agamemnon's Court the City of Paris paid full restitu tion, *and* total destruction. Is that the justice of Zeus?

537 *Priam*: King of T oy, father of Paris.

538–50 A brief brilliant passage of *stichomythia*, the herald saying 'Thank God I'm through!', words which no-one can again speak till the play's end, and then wrongly, the chorus responding with darkly allusive words.

551 *the end*: it isn't the end; blood calls for blood; the spiral of violence snakes its way on.

555ff. A vivid description of what war means even to the victors. Aeschylus was a soldier and doesn't romanticize. This is the realism of Passchendaele or the Burmese jungle.

566–73 Irony.

580 *God*: strictly Zeus.

584 This shows that Clytemnestra has been off-stage during the previous choral song and the scene with the herald. The mention of her name serves as a stage-direction equivalent to *Enter Clytemnestra.*

592 Clytemnestra asserts her masculinity: in fifth-century Athens the woman's place was in the home, and Pericles told the women of Athens that their greatest glory was not to be spoken about by men for good or ill. Not so Clytemnestra!

605–12 A message charged with ironical ambiguities not wholly brought out in Lattimore's translation; *that longs for him*: rather 'the city's darling', from the word for *love*, an unexpected, almost scornful, word; *true as on the day he left her*: so was she any more true then than now? True to Iphigeneia, she might say; *watchdog of the house*: but the words can mean 'bitch in the home'; *gentle to him alone*: to whom? *fierce to his enemies*: a wrong translation: 'fierce to enemies': it is to her enemies that she will prove fierce; *in all her ways as this*: rather 'in all else the same': the words can mean either consistent or the same as Agamemnon (a man of blood); *the seal*: the seal which locked the storeroom, for whose contents the wife was responsible to the husband, and the seal of chastity; *to temper bronze*: no! 'to dip a bl de' ostensibly to temper it, but also to dip it in blood.

612 Although on this occasion the exit is not clearly marked, she surely now goes into the palace to prepare for Agamemnon's coming. She cannot be on stage during his first long speech: she emerges at l. 855.

617 *Menelaus*: Helen's husband, Agamemnon's brother.

636 Greek drama, although *drama* means action, is rhetorical, and uses speeches of high rhetoric to describe events off-stage, as here. As H. D. F. Kitto has said, the equation is now extended. Paris sinned, Zeus struck him down; the Greek army sinned, the gods struck them down; Agamemnon sinned . . . and we have seen the Avenger, the Fury, waiting.

645 Note the reference to the Furies.

681 *you*: i.e. Helen, as we find at l. 687. But it is presented as a kind of riddle.

687 *Helen*: the first part of the name could mean 'destroy' in Greek. We can make a similar wordplay; she is ships' hell, men's hell, cities' hell.

716 The parable of the lion cub. Overtly it applies to Helen, but the two sisters are one in destructiveness.

748 *Zeus hospitable*: a cult-title, with some irony.

749 *a vengeance*: literally, 'a Fury'.

763 At this point metre, music and dance change, back to the insistent thudding, sinister rhythm we have noted before. Pride (the Greek *hybris* is sometimes used as an English word) is a strong word, the pride which comes before a fall, the arrogance that brings Disaster (we have had this word at l. 386: Ruin; at l. 1433: Wrath — it is coupled with the Fury); it carries connotations of violence and violation. The chorus claim to be asserting something new. The ancient wisdom suggested that the gods were jealous of prosperity; an old story told of the autocrat Polycrates throwing his most precious possession, a ring, into the sea to avert that jealousy, and how the gods rejected the offering, returning it to him inside a fish, which had swallowed it. The chorus's present insight is that crime begets crime, *hybris* fathers *hybris*.

781 A key line. Zeus the Fulfiller is to bring the trilogy to its destined end. For the moment the meaning is more immediate, and related to Agamemnon's entrance, giving the words ironical meaning. The entrance is impressive; Aeschylus was a master of spectacle. The chorus continue to chant in a processional rhythm: no doubt accompanying the chariot as it paraded round the orchestra followed by an army of extras. In the chariot is a woman, seated, for she is a slave. She is not in fact named until l. 1035, but the audience would know from the myth who she must be; she does not speak until l. 1072 but this silence speaks more than words. Greek drama had introduced a third actor, but there remained a strong tendency to structure the plays in a series of two-person encounters. This made for more subtle effects. Aeschylus is not writing a drawing-room comedy with a seemingly eternal triangle. The woman is Cassandra, daughter of Priam, virgin priestess of Apollo, torn from sanctuary to be Agamemnon's slave and bedfellow. Her mute presence is a reminder of the sacrilege, and a crowning insult to Clytemnestra.

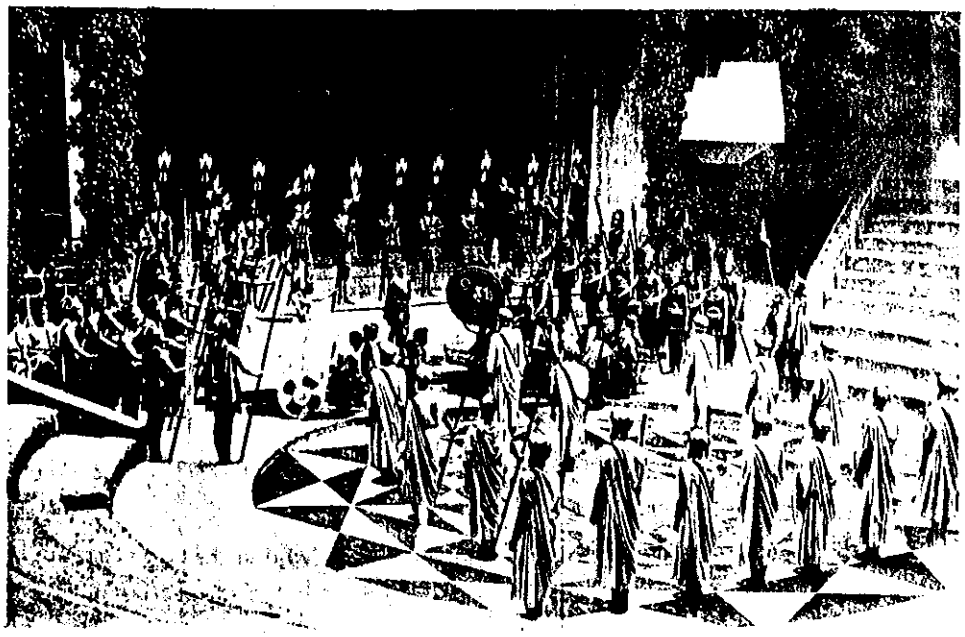
784 The patronymic address reminds us of the curse.

795–6 And so, as Agamemnon does not see through Clytemnestra's feigned love, he is not a good shepherd.

799 The chorus reveal that they thought the expedition wrong.

803–4 The text and its meaning are uncertain. They seem to refer to the scarifice of Iphigeneia and to Helen's wantonness: throughout this play any mention of Helen brings her sister to mind.

807 The chorus seem to take a pragmatic view. Their moral doubts disappear because of Agamemnon's success. We must remember that they would regard that success as demonstrating the gods' favour. Within an hour we discover that he has not succeeded. The interesting fact dramatically is that the chorus do not go along with Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in their success.



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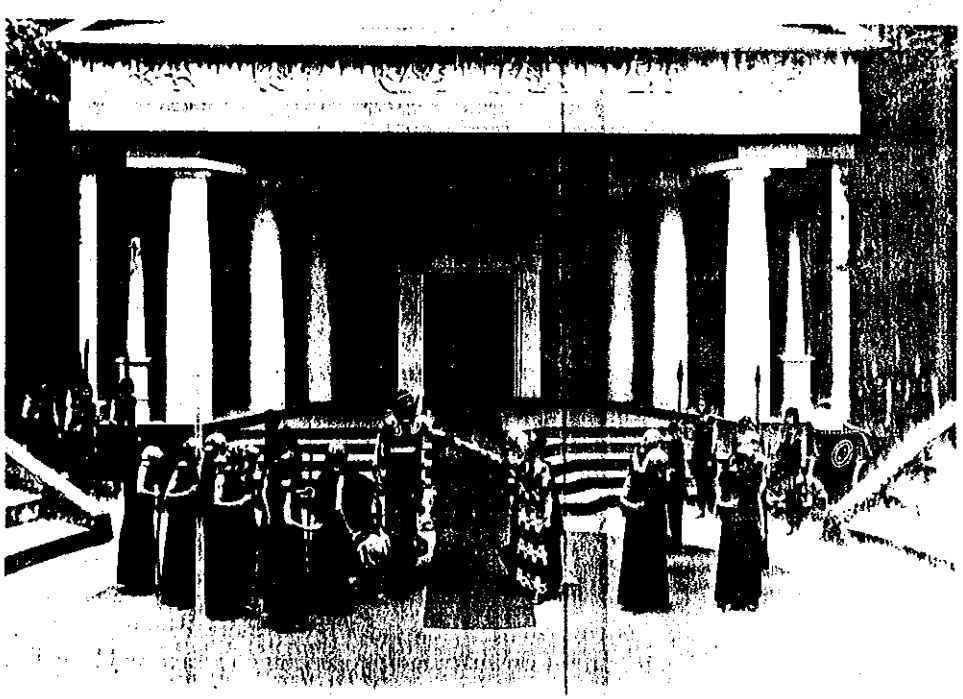


(b)

Figure 17 Agamemnon's entry: Bradfield School, Reading. (a) 1934 Production. (Courtesy of Bradfield College.) (b) 1976 Production. (Photo: Gerald Pates.)

811 The ambiguities in Agamemnon come out immediately. He is arrogant and self-certain, though his words may sound more arrogant to a twentieth-century post-Christian than to a fifth-century Athenian. He ignores the chorus and addresses the gods: this is both wrong and right. The gods were in partnership with him to sack Troy. Here is the crux of the problem. Zeus and Agamemnon *were* partners in bringing justice on Paris; yet on the human plane that act of justice calls for another counterstroke of justice, and so on *ad infinitum*.

841 *Odysseus*: Athene's favourite, trickiest of the Greeks, hero of *The Odyssey*. In one legend he had feigned madness to avoid military service, but had been found out. We do not know a story in which Agamemnon felt let down by the other Greeks.

844–50 This would strike the democratic Athenians as autocratic and dictatorial. Note the image of disease and healing. Fire or the knife will cleanse the body politic. It will indeed.

855 He is about to come down from the chariot when Clytemnestra re-enters from the palace with attendants carrying a crimson floor-tapestry. She addresses the chorus, and speaks of her husband in the third person.

868 The net again.

870 *Geryon*: a monstrous herdsman, usually with three heads, here with three bodies, as regularly displayed in archaic Greek art. He was killed by Heracles.

877 These are her first words to him, and they speak of Orestes. His absence is vital to the later plot; his part there is given dramatic force by the fact that he is the subject of her first words to Agamemnon.

887–94 Methinks the lady doth protest too much.

896 *watchdog of the fold and hall*: the double meaning as in l. 605 'wolf of the barracks'. Note that her gesture towards him, large and sweeping in the Greek theatre, cannot help taking in Cassandra. The phrase begins a series of vivid images.

898 *a father's single child*: the Orestes theme: he is the only *son*.

911 Fearful words. Justice will cause a crimson path of very different stuff to spring up. This is the turning-point, the *crisis* (to use a medical image) of the play. She is inviting him to 'trample down the delicacy of things inviolable' as did Paris (l. 371). If he does so he is doomed. This is the moment when his *hybris*, which has already expressed itself in violence and violation, challenges heaven, to be followed by *Ate* (Wrath), Ruin or Destruction.

914 *Daughter of Leda*: again it could apply to Helen.

920 Agamemnon is not an utter fool: he is flattered but deprecating. There was a strand in Greek mystical philosophy which sought to be one with God; the general Greek view was that for man to aspire too high was *hybris*. Linked with this here is the Greek scorn for oriental customs, especially in view of the still recent defeat of the Persian armies. In particular, prostration before the Greek King of Persia, which did not to the Persians imply that he was a god, only the gods' vicegerent, to the Greeks implied his divinity (Alexander the Great ran into difficulties over this). Note that we have here careful stage-directions in the text. Clytemnestra orders her servants to unroll the carpet from the very door of the palace to the foot of the chariot (superb spectacle) and prostrates herself.

929 The scribes who copied out Greek plays sometimes made mistakes. Lines 958–72 do not make 'dramatic' sense where they appear, and would fit excellently between l. 929 and l. 930. It would have been easy for a copyist to omit them by accident and then write them in at the foot of the page or in the margin. In these lines she piles on sombre imagery: the inexhaustible sea, the shade of the vine, the vintage of bitter grapes.

935 What would Priam have done? This is the question. Agamemnon fails to break the vicious circle: he makes the crimes of Troy his own.

940 Again the underlying sense that Clytemnestra is no normal woman.

943 Rather, 'Yield. Freely hand over the victory to me.' If he does yield, this is precisely what he will do.

950 A splendid dramatic moment. A slave unties his sandals. He prepares to descend, offers a prayer, looks down at the rich textiles, and suddenly checks and draws back. Will he at the last moment be saved? No, it is only to give orders about Cassandra: it rubs in his offence. He stalks in to his death.

973–4 These lines then rightly follow l. 955 and Agamemnon's exit. They should almost certainly be preceded by a scream of triumph (see l. 1236) not in our manuscript, but additional to the metre and easily lost in copying. She prays to Zeus the Accomplisher or Fulfiller. Zeus will fulfil, but not yet.

975 A difficult song of uncertain meaning, but clearly filled with foreboding.

992 Again the Fury.

1001 In much Greek philosophy the limited is good, the unlimited is evil.

1003 The theme of disease.

1007 And of shipwreck.

1008 Compare the story of Polycrates told in the note on l. 763.

1014 Remember that the plays were presented at a spring festival designed to secure the fertility of the land in the coming years.

1023 Asclepius, son of Apollo, a great healer, was struck by a thunderbolt.

1025 We have here another idea from Greek philosophy that the world is an ordered cosmos in which action and reaction are equal and opposite. Therefore, the chorus expresses hopelessness, for Agamemnon's crimes must, in such a universe, provoke requital.

1035 A masterstroke of drama. Suddenly Clytemnestra is back. Has the plot succeeded? Has it failed? Not yet. She is there to get Cassandra, still mute and unmoving, into the house.

1040 *Alcmena's son*: Heracles (Hercules) who in the myth was compelled to work as a slave.

1048 Again the net.

1051 *barbarian*: The Greeks called those who could not speak Greek *barbaroi*, the people who apparently go 'bar-bar-bar'; hence our 'barbarian'.

1062 Someone in the chorus tries gesturing, cf. l. 1254.

1064 Cassandra at this point rises, writhing in ecstasy. She does not speak or come down. Clytemnestra retires baffled. What has defeated her? Not Cassandra, but the power of Apollo, by whose oracle she herself will be killed. Apollo loved Cassandra, and offered her the gift of prophecy for her love. When she withheld her body he put her under the curse that her prophecies would not be believed. But she remained a virgin, wedded to the god and under his power, and Agamemnon's violation of her was a violation of Apollo's rights.

1071 *yoke*: she is to be butchered like an animal.

1072 Suddenly Cassandra breaks her silence with the most tremendous cry in Greek tragedy: 'Ototototoi popoi da. O Apollo! O Apollo!' Her words for the next hundred lines are sung or chanted and accompanied by dance. It is one of the greatest solo passages in Greek tragedy, to be compared only with Creusa's monody in Euripides's *Ion*.

1074 *Loxias*: title of Apollo.

1081 *My ruin*: in Greek this is an exact pun on the name of Apollo.

1092 She sees, in her prophetic ecstasy, the palace swimming in blood. It is worth reflecting that a play may have a colour. The colour of *Macbeth* is black, black as the thick and seeling night, black as the raven, black as the night when the stars hide their fires, black as the secret, black as midnight hags, black as Macbeth's soul. The colour of *Agamemnon* is red, red as the beacon, red as the fires that burn Troy, red as the flame of sacrifice, red as the fire that will cauterize the state, red as the crimson carpet, red as the tawny lioness, red as blood.

1096 She sees the spirits of the children of Thyestes, served up to their father as a meal by Atreus.

1103 *healing*: another repeated theme. Cassandra should know, she is in the grip of the god of healing.

1107–11 A clear vision, if the chorus could understand. A moment ago they thought she needed an interpreter; the need is theirs.

1115 She sees the net.

1117 The Fury again.

1125 She sees a cow goring a bull.

1143 *Itys, Itys*: Pandion, King of Athens, had two daughters, Procne and Philomela. Procne was married to Tereus. Tereus sent for Philomela, raped her and cut out her tongue. She embroidered her fate in pictures and sent it to Procne. Procne's revenge was

to kill, and serve up to him as a meal, their child Itys. The gods saved the girls from Tereus's revenge by turning them into a nightingale and a swallow, and him into a hoopoe. The nightingale's song was fitted to the name of the dead child. It is a peculiarly apposite story in its relation to the Atreus-Thyestes saga, and in its Athenian connection.

1157 *Scamandrus*; river of Troy.

1160–1 *Cocytus and Acheron*: rivers of the world of the dead; their names mean wailing and sorrow.

1178 The music and dancing stop and she breaks into speech-rhythms.

1190 *vengeful spirits*: Furies.

1193 Thyestes seduced Atreus's wife Aerope.

1202 Cassandra tells her own story plainly in stichomythia.

1214 Visionary ecstasy comes on her again, but the words are spoken, not sung and danced. The language is full of animal imagery: Aegisthus is seen as a craven lion, Clytemnestra as a bitch (her own word raised against her), a fabulous viper stinging at either end, a Scylla or sea-monster.

1246 Utterly lucid.

1248 A marvellous conceit, for the god of healing is inspiring her vision, and his oracle will govern the next stage of the story.

1251 The Greeks had a different word for human and male; this is the second. Again the insistence that Clytemnestra is not behaving naturally for a woman. The chorus no doubt are wondering about Aegisthus.

1254 Another magnificent line, taking off from the suspicion at the beginning of the scene that she did not understand Greek. She understands the Greeks better than they understand one another.

1255 *Pythian* i.e. Apollo's.

1258 More animal imagery.

1264–70 She strips herself of her prophetic adornments, or rather Apollo strips her of them. For this is what this scene is about. I called it a solo but that was really wrong. It is a *pas de deux* with an invisible partner. This scene brings Apollo invisibly on to the stage and into the drama. We must sense invisible hands stripping her of her robes and accoutrements — marvellous scope for miming. She is left helpless for the final rape of death.

1305 The father is Priam, the sons Paris, Hector and the others. During these last lines she has been moving slowly, inexorably towards the palace door; now she suddenly reels away, choked with the reek of blood.

1323 The Sun, who sees all, is a power of justice.

1326 Clytemnestra and Aegisthus will be revealed in the second play lying in death on the same moving platform as Cassandra and Agamemnon in this. And Apollo, who has brought her to this pass, will have decreed the killing of Clytemnestra.

1334 Aeschylus is too wise to prolong the agony further. The chorus have the briefest possible song and dance.

1343 It was the practice of Greek tragedy to report events too appalling to see, and perhaps too sacrilegious to present visibly at a religious festival. But here murder is heard, and it is devastating.

1346 The lines that follow have been pilloried by some critics. The twelve members of the chorus deliberate on what to do with all the formality of a committee meeting. The scene can however be more effective hot in the theatre than cold in the study. By tradition the chorus did not intervene in the action; here, however, they behave as if they might do so.

1372 The bodies are wheeled out on the *ekkuklema*.

1382 The net.

1386 Her hatred for Agamemnon comes out in this third blow.

1387 Literally 'Zeus Saviour of the dead', almost a parody of Zeus Saviour, to whom the third libation was poured.

1391 Her hatred displayed again in her savage joy as his blood spurts over her. Note how the old fertility ritual which underlies the tragic festival bursts through at this point.

1396 She claims that this is a just death. A just death perhaps, but is it a just killing?

1417 Now comes the real reason for the hatred, the murder of Iphigeneia like an animal; the murder, as she vividly puts it, of her own birth-pangs.

1432–3 Here come together Justice, *Ate*(Wrath) and the Avenging Fury.

1447 *excitement*: rather 'relish'; a metaphor from cooking, recalling to our minds Thyestes's banquet.

1448ff. What follows now is technically a Lament. The chorus sing and dance their grief. But Clytemnestra in the background sings and dances her triumph.

1466 *Danaan*: i.e. Greek.

1485–8 Key lines; they are couched in the ineluctable, thudding, sinister rhythm which has spoken earlier in the play of sin and retribution.

1492 The net seen as a spider's web.

1500 Here she appears as the instrument of vengeance on the house of Atreus; the cycle of violence is traced back further yet.

1525–9 The requital for Iphigeneia's death is explicit: she is dwelling on it.

1555–9 Bitter lines as she pictures Iphigeneia running to greet her father in the land of the dead.

1563–4 The chorus return to their first insight. The doer suffers. The sinner dies.

1567 The translation is slightly misleading. Clytemnestra sees the application of the chorus's insight to Agamemnon, but does not see the finger pointing at herself.

1573–6 She thinks she has ended the chain of murder. She has not.

1576 *fury*: madness, not the Avenging Fury.

1581 *fury*: this is the Furies.

1583 The curse on the house is revealed as the cycle of blood is traced back.

1602 *Pleisthenes*: in some versions he is Atreus's son and Agamemnon's father; here he seems to be a dimly conceived ancestor at an uncertain point in the family tree.

1611 Notice the association of the net and justice.

1617 Aegisthus behaves like a typical dictatorial autocrat.

1625 The chorus, standing up to him bravely, taunt him. Cassandra has called Clytemnestra a true lioness, Aegisthus a craven lion or scavenging wolf. Clytemnestra the woman, has played a man's role; the chorus call Aegisthus a woman.

1629 *Orpheus*: the legendary singer. There is irony in the words, since Orpheus charmed wild animals, and Aegisthus is implicitly accepting the comparison of himself with an animal.

1646 They begin to barter about the name of Orestes (cf. l. 1667). But he will be only one more link in the chain of violence.

1654 Clytemnestra has been ominously silent for nearly eighty lines. She has committed the decisive act (Aegisthus is mere bluster) and has no further use for violence; she knows that the elders are all bark and no bite, and with proud sarcasm she uses what she calls a woman's wisdom to plead for peace.

1671 An excellent image. But, though the chorus taunt him, they do not dare to taunt her.

1673 Aegisthus is busy threatening and triumphing. Clytemnestra gets down to the business of ruling.

3.3 NOTES ON *THE LIBATION BEARERS*

1 By the altar of Dionysus in the middle of the orchestra, the stage hands have placed a tomb. Lattimore's stage-direction (which has the tomb on stage, and no need for 'mechanical change') is probably wrong. The scene is thus compressed, for the tomb

(b) One thing is clear. Zeus is in the background of all that happens. The chorus in *Agamemnon* sing of disaster:

> and all through Zeus, Zeus,
> first cause, prime mover.
> For what thing without Zeus is done among mortals?
> What here is without God's blessing? (ll. 1485–8)

Here is the problem: Zeus demands the punishment of Paris (ll. 60,355); yet his human instrument offends in exacting that punishment. *The Oresteia* moves through a series of acts of justice, each demanded by Zeus, and each calling for a new requital.

(c) In *Agamemnon* there is scarcely a mention of Zeus, except for the theology of the opening chorus, without a Fury or Furies as his agents (see ll. 56–9, 463–70, 973–91). At the end of the trilogy the Furies are transformed into the Eumenides, the Kindly Goddesses. Doesn't this imply some change in Zeus and his purpose?

(d) The cult-titles are important here. The first is 'the great guest god', the protector of hospitality (*Agamemnon* l. 60). It is in this capacity that he sends Agamemnon on his mission of criminal vengeance. At the last he is Zeus the all-seeing, protecting the new order at Athens (*The Eumenides* l. 1045). As Zeus the Saviour he presides, through his daughter, over Orestes's acquittal (l. 760). As Zeus of the assembly, Zeus 'who guides men's speech in councils' he appears near the end. He has moved from the god of vengeance in society to the god of political order. It is hard not to see in this a politicizing of Zeus. His key-title throughout is Zeus the Fulfiller, Zeus who brings all things to completion. Has he possibly fulfilled himself?

(e) Gilbert Murray in his book *Aeschylus: The Creator of Tragedy* (see bibliography) went beyond even this. He took the three theological stanzas from the first *Agamemnon* chorus (ll. 160–83), and drew from them the thought that Zeus himself learned wisdom through suffering. He came by violence to his power, overwhelmed and imprisoned his opponents. But something happened. Ouranos was ousted by Cronus, Cronus was ousted by Zeus. The cycle of violence is there on the divine as on the human plane. But it does not go on, for Zeus is the Saviour of Orestes. In his last trilogy Aeschylus told of Prometheus, who served mankind. In the first and only surviving play Zeus appears to be an autocratic dictator. We know that at the end of the trilogy Prometheus was released from his torment by Heracles, Zeus's son, and that there was a reconciliation. Prometheus and Zeus both change. Murray's suggestion was that Zeus had experienced the lesson he taught to men. The world-power learns and grows.

It should be said that not all, perhaps not many, scholars would accept this. The exact interpretation, even the precise manuscript reading of the chorus is uncertain. But there does seem to be a parallel movement of thought on the cosmic and microscosmic scales.

5.2 RELIGIOUS MORALITY

Let us look then at the religious morality of the trilogy. There are two essential and related phrases; both contain the word 'suffering'; both are two words in Greek. One is 'wisdom through suffering' (*Agamemnon* ll. 177–8, 250); the other is 'the doer suffers' (l. 1564, cf. *The Libation Bearers* l. 313). Try to work out something of the interplay between these. What do they *really* mean?

Discussion

This is a highly controversial matter. The most naive interpretation is that these are parts of a commonsense popular ethic: 'if you pull pussy's tail, she'll scratch you', and when you've been scratched once or twice you learn not to pull pussy's tail. There is no doubt that there were such popular maxims, and some scholars of great eminence think that we should not look for any deeper meaning.

I think that this is wrong. First, the whole thing is put very clearly into a religious context: it isn't just 'do-as-you-would-be-done-by'. Look at *Agamemnon* ll. 176–82, 1563–4. This is cosmically conceived.

Secondly, the doctrine 'he who has wrought shall pay' (l. 1563) creates the spiral of violence, which is the dilemma of the drama. Paris acts wrongly, and must suffer at the hands of Agamemnon; but in acting against Paris Agamemnon becomes the next victim; and so on. 'Then who shall tear the curse from their blood?'

Thirdly, the suffering is not just the cat's scratch; in particular, Agamemnon cannot learn wisdom by being killed. There is a deeper reflection on these cosmic purposes involved. This seems clear at ll. 179–81, where it is the chorus, and indeed the audience, not the primary participants in the drama, who are wrestling with the problem of finding wisdom through suffering.

Fourthly, we are liable to be misled by our post-Renaissance and post-Reformation individualism. In the ancient world, whether Hellenic or Hebraic, we can find individualism, but the sense of the corporate is much stronger than it is with us, and it is important always to look first for this dimension. Orestes (*The Eumenides* l. 276) claims to have learned from his suffering. But what has he learned? The answer is not given, and his own conclusion is wholly in relation to the behaviour of Argos (ll. 276–98, 754–76). We might almost say that the answer to the moral dilemma is found in social and political reform at Athens!

Fifthly, one aspect of the suffering (language tricks us here, for the Greek word is not co-extensive with the English) is fear, anxiety and anguish. In the last play fear in the normal sense is transformed into awe (something close to the biblical notion of 'the fear of the Lord'), the sort of awe which leads men to respect Justice (*The Eumenides* ll. 517–25). The transformation of the Furies who inspire terror into the Kindly Goddesses who inspire awe is part of this process.

Finally, while I do not feel certain that Gilbert Murray is right in the interpretation offered in the previous section, I think the words of the *Agamemnon* chorus (ll. 160–83), the movement of the cult-titles of Zeus, and the sort of problems which Aeschylus turns to in the Prometheus trilogy all suggest that there are cosmic changes, and that the Way (wisdom through suffering/experience) is the same in heaven and on earth.

5.3 THE THEME OF SACRIFICE

Will you next think about the theme of sacrifice? How many acts of sacrifice or offering can you think of in connection with these plays?

Discussion

Think about the following points:

(i) Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia.

(ii) Clytemnestra's sacrifice (*Agamemnon* l. 87). We three times read of the cry of joy, a liturgical term appropriate to sacrifice (ll. 27, 586, 594), but she makes no such cry.

(iii) Priam's vain sacrifices (*Agamemnon* ll. 1168–71).

(iv) Agamemnon's death as ritual sacrifice: look at ll. 1035–8, 1056–8, 1277–8, 1385–92 (the third blow is a dreadful parody of the third libation offered to Zeus Saviour).

(v) So too Cassandra's: see ll. 1277–8.

(vi) Orestes's offering of his hair in *The Libation Bearers.*

(vii) The offerings which the chorus come to make on Clytemnestra's behalf, giving the play its title.

(viii) The great central liturgy at the tomb of Agamemnon.

(ix) The cleansing sacrifice offered by Orestes (*The Eumenides* l. 283).

(x) The bitter parody of libation represented by continued references to the drip of poison on to the land, and fruitless falling of blood into the dust (e.g. *The Eumenides* ll. 479, 682).

(xi) The establishment of a propitious ritual of sacrifice at the end of *The Eumenides.*

You may well have fitted others into this pattern.

6 LITERARY AND DRAMATIC INTERPRETATION

6.1 AESCHYLUS'S GRANDILOQUENCE

No translation can give the impact of Aeschylus's language. Attic prose-style was characterized by simplicity or plainness. Aeschylus can use such simplicity to good effect. Look at *Agamemnon* 1404–5:

> . . . That man is Agamemnon,
> my husband; he is dead . . .

or *The Libation Bearers* l. 1061:

> You can not see them, but I see them . . .

where the Greek is as simple as the English.

But this is not Aeschylus's chief impact. When we think of him we think of sonorous grandiloquent writing. Milton is perhaps his closest parallel in English, though Shakespeare mingles Aeschylean effects with monosyllabic directness:

> You sulphurous and thought-executing fires
> Vaunt-carriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
> Singe my white head!
>
> *King Lear* 3,2,4–6

Aeschylus loves compound epithets, such as we find here, or in Gerard Manley Hopkins (*passion-plunged, wimpled-water-dimpled, thunder-purple,* etc.), or in a lesser poet, who had none the less caught something of Aeschylean grandeur, Francis Thompson (*inter-particled, angel-populous, desert-drowned,* etc.)

Now look for a moment at *The Libation Bearers* ll. 423–8, which is really quite powerfully rendered by Lattimore. Lines 425–6 mean literally 'the outreachings of hand were there to see' with three adjectives qualifying the outreachings, none of them appearing anywhere else in Greek literature: 'tightly-beating, much-besprinkled, close-on-one-another-rubbing'. Or notice how Clytemnestra, who at the beginning of *Agamemnon* (l. 11) has a 'man-planner's heart', in *The Libation Bearers* (l. 889) sends for a 'man-slaying axe', or take *The Eumenides* l. 626, where there are three words in Greek, 'honour-granted (with) god-given sceptres'. Or look at some of the adjectives at the end of the same play: the 'beam-bearing torches' (l. 1022), the 'purple-stained robes' (l. 1028), the 'strong-manned future' (l. 1031), the 'honour-loving Daughters of Night' (l. 1033), the 'flamesprung torchlight' (l. 1041) and 'all-seeing Zeus' (l. 1045). Aristophanes satirically described Aeschylus:

> You first of the Greeks built a fortress of majestic words
> and a universe of tragic drivel.
>
> *The Frogs* 1004–5

6.2 AESCHYLUS'S IMAGERY

If we cannot really see the impact of his language in translation, we can see something of his imagery.

(a) Will you begin by thinking about three animal images: the eagle, snake, and dog or hound? Look especially at *Agamemnon* ll. 40–59, 104–139, 1233; *The Libation Bearers* ll. 246–64, 526–34, 1049; *The Eumenides* ll. 117ff; but you should recall other passages too.

Discussion

Here are a few scattered thoughts:

(i) In the first simile (*Agamemnon* l. 49), Agamemnon and Menelaus are compared with eagles robbed of their young. Shortly after comes the omen of the eagles devouring the hare (l. 114: note the parallel with the commander in that line, pointed by the spearhand at ll. 112 and 117). The birds whose bereavement wins Zeus's pity are birds of prey whose cruelty sickens Artemis. The image is continued in *The Libation Bearers* l. 246: this time it is the parent-eagle who is dead, and the fledglings who are left. (This is in fact anticipated at l. 174, 'matches well', and l. 227, 'shuddered with excitement', where the words used are metaphorically taken from bird-life.) The eagle, though honoured for its regal power, was to the Greeks primarily a bird of prey.

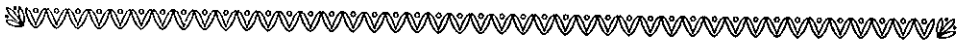
(ii) The primary use of the snake is as an image for Clytemnestra killing the eagle, Agamemnon (*Agamemnon* l. 1233; *The Libation Bearers* ll. 248–9, cf. l. 994). This image becomes linked with the net in which she entangled him; which is seen as the snake's coils. The snake-image is taken up in Clytemnestra's dream (ll. 526–34); she gives birth to a snake which bites her. Orestes, the viper's child, himself takes on the aspect of a viper. But more, the Furies who avenge Clytemnestra themselves have a tangle of snakes in their hair (l. 1049). the sequence snake-bites-snake is seemingly unending. The snake, though it can be a healing power (some drugs may kill or cure), and sometimes represents the ancestors (a power of earth), is on the whole sinister.

(iii) The hound first comes at *Agamemnon* l. 135 where the vengeful eagles are described as 'flying hounds'; this points forward to the entry of the vengeful Furies in whom all three images thus come together. But before this the image has been applied to the Watchman (l. 3), Clytemnestra (l. 604, cf. l. 1228), Agamemnon (l. 896), and Cassandra (l. 1093). Hounds were generally fierce; in addition to trained hunting-packs there were wolves and pariah-dogs.

(iv) The effect of all these images is to stress the bestiality of the violence. It depersonalizes all the characters including the Furies. Only at the end, by the grace of Athene, are Orestes and the Furies alike redeemed from this bestiality.

(v) Much of this can be linked to the analysis in Section 4.7 above. We might add to our columns the antithesis animal-human.

(b) Another important animal image is the lion. Would you offer some reflections on this? The key passages are *Agamemnon* ll. 716–36, 827, 1224, 1258; *The Libation Bearers* ll. 749–62; *The Eumenides* ll. 193, 355–6 (a less obvious one, this).



Discussion

The lion-cub is originally an image of Helen, but swiftly extends its scope. It is the symbol of the fifth column, of violence operating from within. So the Trojan Horse is a lion. So are Aegisthus and Clytemnestra for we must never forget that Clytemnestra is Helen's twin. In addition, the thought and language of the parable of the lion-cub recur without the actual image, to recall that image. The false friends against whom the chorus warn Agamemnon (l. 798) fawn like the lion-cub (l. 725). 'You may have been puzzled by my putting the nurse's speech in here, but the beginning and end of her account of Orestes precisely and verbally parallel the beginning and end of the parable, and her words that a baby is like a beast, of uncontrollable impulse, take on a more sinister meaning when this is seen. Orestes is the lion-cub brought up in Clytemnestra's house. The Furies too are lions, and the last reference to the Battlegod grown within is an image from rearing a wild animal in the home. The parable is thus a parable of the whole theme of the play.

(c) Here is something a little harder, so don't worry if you find it difficult. Clytemnestra entangles Agamemnon in a kind of net. This image has many ramifications. Can

you see how it is extended? I'll give you a few clues. Look at *Agamemnon* ll. 358, 1381–3, *The Libation Bearers* ll. 480–4, 997–1004, *The Eumenides* ll. 112, 306, and think about the carpet-scene and the hound-image.

Discussion

Some thoughts:

(i) *Agamemnon* ll. 1381–3 shows that Clytemnestra really entangled him in a bath robe or some such thing. The net is a metaphor, a sustained and important one.

(ii) The first mention of the net relates not to Agamemnon's death but to the fall of Troy. It is part of the continuity of crime and retribution. Further, Zeus slung the net, thus the image is established as part of the religious pattern.

(iii) The net is part of an image derived from hunting. The Greeks are described as huntsmen in their destruction of Troy (*Agamemnon* l. 695); the word means literally 'leaders of hounds'. So Clytemnestra is a hound driving her prey into the net. So too are the Furies hounds from whose net Orestes momentarily escapes.

(iv) The net in which Agamemnon is caught is in fact a robe, but this gives us an immediate parallel with the tapestries which Clytemnestra spreads before him in the carpet-scene. Here we actually see her drive him into the net; this is the first net in which she captures him. The point is visually made when at the end of *The Libation Bearers* the robe in which he was killed is spread out on the stage as was the carpet.

(v) The language which Orestes uses at this point creates a further link with the last play. He calls it something binding. When he comes to Athens he seeks to be set free (*The Eumenides* l. 248); the Furies hold him in with a binding spell (l. 306), but he finally finds release.

(vi) The Fates spin a thread (*The Eumenides* l. 334): here too religious links are made.

(d) What images in the plays have made most impact on you?

Only you can answer that!

6.3 THE PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS

Now think for a little about the principal characters. Aristotle in *The Poetics* said two things about character in tragic drama. First, it should be subordinate to plot. Second, characters should be (a) good (but not perfect), (b) true to type, (c) true to tradition, (d) consistent. We are of course not bound to accept Aristotle's generalizations, but he was a subtle analyst of Greek drama. What do you think about the main characters in the light of this analysis?

Discussion

We have already said enough to see that the drama is not primarily about individuals. It is about the redemption of the House of Atreus, and about the cutting of the spiral of violence. But these are worked out through the lives of individuals.

There are five principal characters, three human (Agamemnon, a small part but a determinative one; Clytemnestra; and Orestes), two divine (Apollo and Athene). Minor figures — the Watchman, Cassandra, Aegisthus, Electra, the Nurse and the Priestess — are skilfully sketched, and Cassandra is something more.

The demand that characters shall be good is an odd one. Perhaps it is primarily a negative one. Aristotle does not believe that absolute villains make for good tragedy; they are appropriate to what we call melodrama. Further he does not believe in saints on the stage, their calamities are insufferable (so, we may add, sometimes are they). Plainly Agamemnon is not in the obvious sense good. Modern critics have castigated him; he has been called ambitious, bloody, boastful, cold, cowardly, cruel, feeble, proud, sensuous, superstitious, vain and weak. Some of this is overstated and some arises from post-Christian ethical values. Still he is one of the eagles who offend Artemis by tearing the leverets, and his treading on the carpet is an act of moral weakness. Equally he is Zeus's instrument, and this heroic side must be uppermost. Clytemnestra is also not good, though she has many of the virtues deemed appropriate to a man. She is not without reason for her vengeance, and the vengeance over, she shows a wisdom and moderation which Aegisthus lacks. Orestes is to us a little colourless as an individual. This is because he is the embodiment of the House. His momentary weakness before his mother is to be seen both as right in the awareness of conflicting claims and as wrong in going against the divine command. He claims to have found wisdom through suffering; therefore he was not perfect in wisdom before. Even Apollo does not escape unscathed; some of the Furies' shafts strike home. Only Athene is the embodiment of good.

We do not like the idea of characters running to type; this is part of our individualistic vanity. Someone came up to a friend of mine and said, 'Have I met you somewhere, or are you just a type?' He was very cross! Agatha Christie's Miss Marple solves her problems by checking against types she has known in village life. Jung's introvert and extravert are part of a sophisticated, scientific classification by type. Perhaps we see truth-to-type most obviously in the minor characters: the Watchman, Aegisthus and the Nurse. (Electra is, I think, an exception here.) But is not Agamemnon in some sense the type of the authoritarian leader, Clytemnestra of the master-criminal, Orestes of the young hero, Apollo of the divine healer, Athene of the divine wisdom? One thing Aristotle might not allow: Clytemnestra is not true to the type of womanhood as he conceived it.

Truth to tradition is easier. As F. L. Lucas puts it, it would not do for a Biblical dramatist to portray Jeremiah as a buoyant optimist, or Herod with a passionate fondness for children. All the characters fit their legends adequately, though Aeschylus shows some originality in portraying them.

Consistency, however, is harder. Negatively, it is easy to see what Aristotle is about; he would not accept in tragedy the more implausible conversions found in Restoration drama. It has been said that there is no development in character in Greek tragedy. I do not think that this is true. Certainly Oedipus in Sophocles's play attains to self-knowledge, and Orestes in this trilogy has become schooled in suffering. We are in any event all inconsistent in some sense because we are complex. This is true of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra and Orestes. It is even true of Apollo. The only major character who is wholly consistent is Athene, who is also wholly good. A minor character like Aegisthus is wholly consistent, for he is a type. But the complexities of the main characters hang together; in this sense they are consistent. The only character who seems to me inconsistent is Electra. This is because Aeschylus uses her for two different purposes. At first she anticipates the final *dénouement* by expressing a spirit very different from that of the blood-feud. She is a type of womanhood contrasting with Clytemnestra. But after the recognition scene she becomes twinned with Orestes and mouths the sentiments of vengeance as is dramatically and traditionally necessary.

6.4 AESCHYLUS'S MASTERSTROKES

What points would you say mark off these plays as the work of an experienced master of the Greek theatre? Think of the theatrical qualities of the plays.

Discussion

I'd like you at least to consider the following points:

(i) The use of the third actor (check mentally, and textually, on this).

(ii) The full use of the resources of the theatre, the startling opening on the roof of the palace; the moving platform with its tableau in each play, not least in the echoing of the first play in the second, and its unexpectedly early use in the third; the crane to bring in Athene; the use of an understage entry for the ghost of Clytemnestra.

(iii) The elaborate spectacle, particularly in the entry of Agamemnon (and the subsequent carpet-scene); the offerings at Agamemnon's tomb; the appearance of the Furies; and the final procession which must have taxed the resources of the theatre to the utmost.

(iv) The integration of the chorus with the action to an unusual degree, as towards the end of *Agamemnon*, where they make as if to intervene, and finally defy Aegisthus: in *The Libation Bearers*, where their persuasion of the nurse to alter her message is the most decisive intervention of the chorus in the action of any Greek play; and the part played by the chorus in the final play.

(v) The flexible use of the stage area and the orchestra. Note that in *Agamemnon* Clytemnestra must be in the stage area, but Agamemnon and Cassandra remain for a long time in the orchestra; in *The Libation Bearers* Electra comes with the chorus into the orchestra, where Agamemnon's tomb presumably stands, and she and Orestes must be close to the chorus in the central spectacle; in *The Eumenides* Athene's statue must also be central for the Furies to weave their binding-spell round Orestes. Note too the unexpected entry of the chorus from the stage building in the last two plays.

(vi) The *stichomythia* (a line-for-line exchange) is handled with great skill.

(vii) The choral lyrics and monodies are luscious and appealing, and we can sense behind them a little of the power of music and dance.

(viii) Spectacle apart, there are a number of theatrical master strokes. I should single out Clytemnestra's silent sacrifice (*Agamemnon* ll. 83ff); the carpet-scene, symbolic as well as spectacular (*Agamemnon* ll. 905ff.); the whole Cassandra episode (*Agamemnon* ll. 1072ff.), the moment when Pylades speaks (*The Libation Bearers* l. 900); the visible manifestation of the Furies coming on top of their invisible presence (*Eumenides* ll. 64ff.); the handling of the trial scene (*Eumenides* ll. 566ff.). (Ancient critics would probably have added the recognition-scene, *The Libation Bearers* ll. 164ff.).