

AGAMEMNON

“Many brave heroes lived before Agamemnon; but they are overwhelmed in unending night, unwept, unknown, because they lacked a sacred bard.” -Horace, *Odes* 4.9.25

When Troy fell, the Greek chieftains drew lots to see who would receive what Trojan captive as a slave. Cassandra, daughter of Priam and priestess of Apollo, went to Agamemnon, the general-in-charge on the Greek side. This was a terrible blow to Cassandra, who had already suffered rape at the hands of Ajax and had watched her boyfriend butchered before her eyes. Now she had to suffer the humiliation of serving the very man who brought about the destruction of her dear city. But she also had forebodings that something awful would happen to both Agamemnon and herself upon their return to Mycenae. Her suspicions were correct. The story of Agamemnon's return was one of the momentous events in the history of Greece, forever changing the way Greeks thought and lived. The Greek playwright Aeschylus, who lived and flourished in the first half of the 5th century B.C., tells the story of Agamemnon in a series of three plays that we refer to collectively as the *Oresteia*. The individual plays were named *AGAMEMNON*, *LIBATION BEARERS*, and *EUMENIDES*. I will describe for you the outline of these three plays (the details are in your book), adding commentary as I go.

*Follow along with the powerpoint presentation on the website as you read through this lecture.

1st play of the trilogy: *Agamemnon*

Aeschylus was a writer of poetry more than of drama, of ideas and thoughts more than action. The whole story can be summed up in one sentence: The chief general of the Greeks, Agamemnon, returning from the Trojan War to his palace in Argos (Mycenae), is there murdered by his wife Clytemnestra, aided by her lover, Aegisthus. Even so, the main incident occurs offstage, and the detailed description of the murder comes beforehand, oddly enough, from the mouth of Cassandra:

“See there, see there! Keep the mate away from the bull. She pins him down with the net, and strikes with a black horn. And he crumples in the watered bath. Guild, I tell you, and death there in the caldron wrought.”

Aeschylus' play is devoted to two interlinked questions:

1. What were the sequence of events that led up to the murder?
2. On whose side did justice lie?

The beginning of the play, a large section of it, is concerned with guilt: Paris is guilty, because he lured away Helen from her husband. Menelaos and Agamemnon are guilty for not shrinking back from a terrible war in order to bring one woman home. Above all, Agamemnon, who sacrificed Iphigenia, and then, after conquering Troy, simply obliterated it – people, walls, altars, temples, the very seeds that lay hidden beneath its soil. By the moment of Agamemnon's

triumphal entrance into the play, he appears about as guilty as a man could be – guilty as commander, guilty as father, guilty as husband.

There are other factors going on in the background to add to the moral texture of the play. Helen, when all has been said and done, is safe at home with her husband Menelaos, suffering no punishment for running off with Paris or causing the war. Many, many people suffered at Troy, on both sides, Greek and Trojan. Soldiers suffered in the cold and dampness of winter in their tents. The summer was blistering hot. Death was everywhere. Food was scarce. In contrast, we have this description of Helen's arrival in Troy:

“When she first came to the city of Troy, call it a dream of calm and the wind dying, the loveliness and luxury of much gold, the melting shafts of the eyes' glances, the blossom that breaks the heart with longing. But she turned in mid-step of her course to make bitter the consummation, whirling on Priam's people to blight with her touch and nearness. Zeus hospitable sent her, a vengeance to make brides weep.”

In a few words, Aeschylus has made Helen as lovely and demonic as can be? Why? Because Helen is an integral part of the **moral texture** of *Agamemnon*. We have to stand, and look at Helen too, to understand Agamemnon's murder – why did he kill his own daughter to bring her back?

The play opens with a watchman on a roof in Mycenae, looking for the relay of signal fires coming from Troy indicating that the war is over. He is tired, and he is worried. A dark cloud hangs over the city. Clytemnestra is inside the palace, muttering and brooding, seething with hatred for Agamemnon. She has taken on a lover, Agamemnon's own cousin Aegisthus. The two of them are definitely plotting something disastrous if ever Agamemnon returns home. When the signal fires do come, the story is set in motion.

The details of the story can be found in your book. Suffice it here to say that this is a story of moral confusion. The participants in this story are all basing their actions on an old principle, represented primarily by the older generations of the gods (the Furies), called *lex talionis*, that is, the law of retaliation. It's an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. There's no need of a trial – just instant revenge.

What's interesting here is that everyone believes that what they did fulfilled the demands of Dike, the goddess justice.

For example:

After Agamemnon arrives at the port, climbs on his chariot, and heads up to the lion's gate of Mycenae, a herald leads the way with these words: “Greet him who has dug Troy into the ground with the pick-axe of Justice (Dike)-bearing Zeus!”

And when Agamemnon arrives at the gate, he says this: “First, it is right that I should pay my respects to the land of Argos and her presiding gods, my partners in this homecoming as also in the *just* penalty I have inflicted on the city of Troy.”

Furthermore, Clytemnestra has been muttering that Dike will lead Agamemnon into the home and take care of his needs. And after that she murders him while crying out that justice has been done.

Then when Aegisthus arrives and sees the dead body of Agamemnon, he shouts, “O day that brought justice, now I know the gods exist!”

Further adding to the moral confusion of the play: Agamemnon has won a great victory, but all for one woman, as we have said, and with great cost. He did a great job, but upon entering the city, he stepped on the tapestry of the gods that was strewn aside his chariot for him. BUT, Clytemnestra, lest you think she is innocent, is the one who spread that carpet before him, even though it was a sacrilege for anyone to walk on it but a god, and she convinced him and seduced him to step on it. Clytemnestra has also been having an affair with Aegisthus, and she eventually kills, not just Agamemnon, but also Cassandra, who is completely innocent. She also mistreats her son Orestes by sending him into exile (so he won’t interfere with her plans) and by refusing to allow the other daughter, Electra, to marry (so her husband won’t interfere with her plans).

Wow. So much confusion. Is the old system of justice (Dike), represented by the Furies, bankrupt? Do the new Olympian gods have some way to straighten all this out, some modification of the *lex talionis*?

The first play never resolves the issue, but does give us a hint where the trilogy is going, when the chorus sings the following hymn to Zeus:

“Zeus, who laid it down that man must in sorrow learn, and through pain to wisdom find his way. When deep slumber falls, remembered wrongs chafe the bruised heart with fresh pangs, and no welcome wisdom meets within. From the gods who sit in grandeur, grace comes somehow violent.”

There is a popular theme/motif in Greek mythology and literature: Wisdom comes through suffering. The gods who sit at the helm show their kindness through violence. It’s like the Old Testament God who chastises his people and is so strict in the enforcement of the laws. Then, in the New Testament, he shows his grace – this grace wouldn’t have made sense, we are to understand, unless we first saw the strict demands and consequences of the law. In the same way, Zeus and the rest of the Olympian gods will take over from the previous, harsh and strict gods, and show a kinder, gentler face, at the right time, once they have exhibited their full righteous indignation and violence towards law-breakers.

2nd play of the trilogy – *Libation Bearers (Choephoroi)*

Several years later, Orestes comes home from exile, driven by the Fates, who are demanding that he take revenge on his mother for killing his father. That’s what the Fates do. They make sure some relative takes revenge for a wrong done to someone. When he arrives at Mycenae, he finds his sister Electra at Agamemnon’s tomb. Clytemnestra sent her there, after a terrifying dream in which she gave birth to a snake which turned around and then bit her on her breast.

Clytemnestra wants Electra to pour libations over Agamemnon's tomb to appease him, but instead, together with Orestes, plots the murder of her mother.

Orestes then enters the palace with his friend Pylades, disguised as travelers come to announce the death of none other than Orestes. Yes, that's a test question. Clytemnestra sends a servant to summon Aegisthus to hear the news. When Aegisthus comes, Orestes meets him privately and kills him. Clytemnestra hears him screaming, in a riddle, no lease, saying, "The dead are killing the living!"

Clytemnestra calls for her "man-slaying axe." It's too late. Orestes approaches her with his sword, and she pleads for her life, even baring her breasts so Orestes can see the breasts that suckled him as a baby. Orestes is about to give in, when his friend Pylades reminds him, "You received an oracle from Apollo, commanding you to do this." With that, Orestes regretfully rams the sword into his mother's chest.

But now the *lex talionis*, which seems to have no end, kicks in again. Orestes is the murderer now. The ghost of Clytemnestra sends the Furies to drive Orestes mad so that he will kill himself (no one is left to take revenge for Clytemnestra). Orestes runs off screaming.

Note: There is one difference at this point from all the other murders that have taken place. Orestes has killed, but he felt guilt, didn't want to do it, and resisted. He only did it because Apollo (and the Furies) demanded it.

3rd play of the trilogy: *Eumenides*

Orestes flees to the temple of Apollo, but the Furies pursue him there, and Clytemnestra comes in the form of a ghost, goading them on and demanding justice. Apollo tells Orestes to flee to Athens, to Athena's temple on the acropolis, and that only she in her wisdom can free him from their tortures and the tortures of guilt.

The Furies, meanwhile, are portrayed as bloody, dog-like women who hound their victims, tearing at them with fangs, and rarely stopping to rest. They have rotten flesh on their teeth from previous victims, and wings on their backs to help them move more swiftly.

Now, to make a long story short, Athena sets up the first trial by jury, 12 Athenians, with herself as the presiding judge. The winner of the trial only needed a majority of votes. The trial will take place on the Areopagos (Mars Hill) next to the agora.

The Furies argue on their side that they are the oldest law in the universe and can't be overturned no matter what. It's their right; justice, to their mind, is simple vengeance. If they aren't honored, they will destroy Athens.

Orestes argues that, first, Apollo commanded him to kill Clytemnestra, and he was only obeying the commands of the Olympian god. Furthermore, he argues, since he is being charged with killing his parent, he can say that the mother is not a true parent, only the father. Just as the

farmer (the father) plants a seed in the earth, so the mother is just the receptacle and nurturer of the seed, but the father is the source of it.

The vote of the jury is a tie, but Athena casts the deciding vote in favor of Orestes. The Furies are angry still, but she appeases them by giving them a new role (signaled by a name change, from “Furies” to “Eumenides,” or “Kindly-minded Ones”), and a shrine in the city of Athens where they will still be honored.

Thus Athena has taken the old conception of justice as an eye for an eye and replaced it with a new concept: trial by jury, which takes into account extenuating and mitigating circumstances. Justice is now tempered by mercy, reasons, and legal debate. Justice is made a beautiful thing, when once it was harsh and violent.

BUT (and this is the key to the myth): the Furies, representing simple vengeance, do not go away. They’re still in the city – with a kinder face, now – but still demanding the most simple concept of justice stay intact. Hold all the legal trials you want, but you can’t let the guilty get off scot free, and you can’t ignore the old principles of justice. They still stand behind the new tempered justice. Hold rational mercy and cold-hearted justice in balance is the message of this myth as presented by Aeschylus.