

# **DIVINE PROVIDENCE OR HUMAN FRAILTY – AN EXAMINATION OF AESCHYLUS' AGAMEMNON**

**BY**

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Last year I decided to see the Cambridge production of the Agamemnon. So to prepare for it, I got out my old copy of the play edited by Deniston and Page and first published in 1957.

Professor Page's introduction is fascinating, but on reading the play I found I could not agree with his basic theme. This is that the action of the play is so pre-ordained that, in effect, Agamemnon's character has little influence on the tragic outcome. Further, Agamemnon was doomed from the start because the Trojan expedition set out at a time when Artemis was angry because of the killing of a pregnant hare by two eagles. Somehow this interpretation did not seem consistent with a great work of literature which had survived for nearly two and a half millennia.

The Greeks were superstitious in a sense which is difficult for us to understand, and they did have a strong concept of destiny, and Aeschylus probably did want at least one of the messages of the trilogy to establish that if wrongdoers get away with evil in their lifetime, the gods could take their revenge on subsequent generations – the sins of the father would be visited on the sons. However, in the greatest Greek tragedies the gods tend to work through the weaknesses of the characters.

So, for example, in Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus Oedipus is fated to kill his father and marry his mother. However, the way in which this outcome is achieved is through Oedipus' character. Oedipus is represented as a good king, determined to do what is right by Apollo for his people, but he is also arrogant, impatient and does not suffer fools gladly. Before he becomes king, Oedipus meets his father at a cross-roads without realising who Laius was. He kills Laius in a fit of what we would call "road rage". The dispute was over who had right of way, but Laius was performing a sacred embassy. So who would an Athenian audience think was in the right? One suspects that the average Athenian would perhaps have taken the view that Laius was in the right because of the sacred purpose of his mission, and that for Oedipus to attack Laius for not giving way to him in the circumstances narrated was well over the top. So, although divine providence may have brought Oedipus unwittingly to meet his father at the cross roads, it is Oedipus' character which determines the action of the play and results in his downfall.

So do the gods work through flaws in Agamemnon's character, or is the action of the Agamemnon so inevitable that his character is hardly relevant to his downfall?

As in the OT, the critical events which govern the action of the play and the motives of the characters have happened before the play begins. The chorus tell us about the curse on the sons of Atreus, and how Atreus had tricked his brother, Thyestes, into dining on the meat of his own children. They relate the story of the abduction of Helen, but they have their doubts about whether Helen's abduction can really have justified a full scale war against a powerful city.

σο δὲ μοι εἰσαφέν οὐρανῶν ὑπὸ τρητῆαν  
ἔχενης ἕνεκ; οὐκ ἔπι κεύσω,  
καρτ' ἀπορόσως ἦσθα γεγραμμένος  
οὐδ' εἰ πραπίσαν οἶά κε νέμων

("You seemed to me by sending the army for Helen's sake – I will not hide my thoughts – to draw an ugly picture in my mind and not to be directing the tiller of the ship of state sensibly" – 799 – 802)

What would an Athenian audience have thought? Would Athens have ever gone to war over "another man's woman"? Does Agamemnon's decision to go to war represent strength or a weakness in Agamemnon's character? Was it really sound judgement to take the entire Achaean army to Troy just to please his brother? And then was it really worth sacrificing his daughter in order to bring back home his brother's wife?

στένουσι δ' εὖ λέγοντες ἄν  
δρα τούτων ὡς μάχης ἴδρι  
τὸν δὲ ἐν βουαῖς καλῶς πέσοντ'  
ἄλλοτρίας διαί γυναικός

("They weep as they praise their men, saying how this man was an experienced warrior and how that man fell gloriously in the slaughter – all for another man's wife" – 445-447)

The central theme of the Agamemnon is revenge: Clytemnestra's revenge for Agamemnon's human sacrifice of her daughter. The question has to be asked: could the sacrifice have been avoided? Professor Page thinks not, and for that reason once the expedition had set out for Troy, Agamemnon had no choice. So it is worth considering how the chorus treat the story of what happened at Aulis (199 – 245).

The fleet is held up by unfavourable weather – a phenomenon not understood in Classical Greece and therefore likely to be deemed to be evidence of the anger of the gods. It was therefore natural to consult the omens, and the fleet's prophet then declared that Iphigenia had to die.

γάντις ἐκίλαξεν πρόφραυ Ἄρτεμι

("The seer cried out, relying on Artemis" -202)

So, if we are to believe Professor Page, Artemis had sent the bad weather because the fleet had set off at a time when two eagles had attacked a pregnant hare. No doubt an Athenian audience would have accepted this.

However what happens next seems to depend more on Agamemnon's character than on inevitability. Agamemnon does not like what he is expected to do. He does not want to pollute his fatherly hands with his daughter's blood, but what WOULD people think if he failed to do this?

Ἄως λιτόνους γένωμα  
ἐυπραχίας ἀραπτῶν;

("How may I become a deserter, and err in respect of the alliance?" 212)

One has to ask oneself how an early 5<sup>th</sup> Century Athenian audience might have reacted to this. This is difficult because we have very little evidence from the scanty contemporary literature which has come down to us from that time. So one has to look for clues amongst the literature of the late 5<sup>th</sup> Century and the fourth century.

We have to bear in mind that the Greek gods did not behave like angels or Christian saints. They argued with each other like adults and children in any large family, and did beastly and spiteful things to each other – and also to mortals who either did not obey their rules or simply got in their way. Their concept of morality was at a far more basic and simple level than in any developed religion.

Artemis was the goddess of hunting, and therefore had what we might call a vested interest in ensuring that game was allowed to procreate – in order to maintain the stock. Artemis was not the weather god, nor was she the god of the sea. These were under the power of Zeus and Poseidon respectively. So why should Agamemnon have allowed his soothsayer to "rely on Artemis"(202)?

πρὸς ἄρταμιον

The Greeks had a remarkably practical way of dealing with their gods. If a god was angry, the god could be appeased by sacrifice. Disobedience to the rules of the god could be expiated by prayer and sacrifice.

The gods were also remarkably fickle, and could take different sides. So Hera supported the Greeks while Aphrodite supported the Trojans. If one god was displeased, one could ask another god for deliverance or ask Zeus to intervene. In this story then, Hera, Zeus' wife, favoured the Trojans. So, instead of "relying on Artemis", why did not Agamemnon ask her to intercede to Zeus and get him to turn the weather off?

This is precisely what happens in Aeneid 1 – although in reverse. Juno is jealous of Aeneas. So she calls on Aeolus to shipwreck the Trojan fleet in a storm. Aeneas prays to Venus, who then intercedes with Zeus and asks him to stop the storm. Jupiter then sends the winds back to Aeolus' cave. Granted that the Aeneid was written nearly 400 years after the Agamemnon, it is nevertheless still consistent with the Homeric legends which many Athenians of Aeschylus time would have known by heart.

If we accept that an Athenian audience might have expected Agamemnon to try sacrificing to some other god than Artemis after Artemis had demanded the sacrifice of his daughter, what does this tell us about Agamemnon's character?

Prophets and soothsayers appear regularly in ancient literature. They seem to have had the kind of status a "scientific adviser" currently enjoys in modern government. They were like the boffins or experts you cannot argue with because of their supposed superior knowledge of things kings and governments find difficult to understand. We have a number of important historical examples of their influence.

At the Athenian siege of Syracuse narrated in Thucydides VI, the Athenian general, Nicias, would do nothing unless the omens were favourable. As a result he procrastinated and procrastinated, and the Athenian army in Sicily was lost. Thucydides clearly regarded Nicias as a good but weak man.

On the other hand, Xenophon took some extraordinary risks to extricate the Greek army from Persia after Cyrus had been killed. On nearly every occasion when his judgement was questioned, as an apparently devoted religious man would in those days, he took the omens. Surprise! Surprise! The omens always turned out right. In fact the omens always seem so accurate in their predictions in the Anabasis that one is left wondering whether this was luck, coincidence, or a genuine supernatural revelation of divine guidance – from gods we no longer believe in. Or could it be that Xenophon was able to influence the opinions of the soothsayers – in much the same way as in modern times some determined political leaders are sometimes able to apply pressure on their expert advisers – as may have happened, for example, before the Iraq war?

So one has to ask: would an Athenian audience have expected Agamemnon to be master of his soothsayers or their helpless captive? Lines 206 – 217 suggest that Agamemnon abjectly accepted what the soothsayer told him without argument: he was a Nicias and not an Xenophon! Although of course neither Nicias nor Xenophon were known at the time of the first performance, I use them as examples of types of leader which an Athenian audience might well have been familiar with.

So far we have only examined the narrative in the choral odes. Although we hear much about him from the chorus, Agamemnon makes no personal appearance until half way through the play. It follows that the character we see on the stage has to be consistent with the character portrayed in the choral odes and vice versa. So it is possible to check if one's view of the character in the odes corresponds with what we see of him on stage.

He arrives in a chariot (or wagon) with Cassandra standing beside him. She is his mistress as well as his prisoner and slave. The fact that she rides with him suggests he holds her in special favour – as he tactlessly tells his wife later on.

αὐτὴ δὲ πολλῶν χρημάτων ῥησάρειον,  
άνθος, στρατοῦ δωρήμα, ἐμὸν γυνέσσεται

("Here she is with me – the chosen flower of many treasures, the army's gift" 954-5)

He stops the chariot (809), and proceeds to use it as what we would call a soapbox - to deliver a political speech. Cassandra is at his side all the time and he doesn't even acknowledge his wife until she speaks directly to him at 876.

His speech is not what I believe an Athenian audience would have expected. The chorus and the herald have spoken at length, and with graphic realism, about the hardships of war and the tragic loss of life of so many young men. The account is so graphic that one wonders if it reflects the poet's own experience of war in his own time. An Athenian audience is more likely to have expected from Agamemnon something like the funeral oration, as narrated in Thucydides II, when Pericles praised the sacrifice of the Athenians who died in the first year of the Peloponnesian War. But all Agamemnon can think about is the glory of capturing Troy and burning it to the ground – after committing sacrilege by plundering the temples of the Trojan gods. There is little about honouring the dead: everything to glorify himself as a successful war leader. There is nothing to give comfort to the families of the fallen. There is no mention of the dispersal and wreck of the Greek fleet and possible loss of his brother, Menelaos, as described by the Herald in 634ff.

The chorus allude to a sense of public dissatisfaction with Agamemnon and disloyalty within his own household. He completely misses the point. He acknowledges their concern, but assumes that the concern arises out of nothing more harmful than a sense of personal jealousy. He tells them that his only ungrudging supporter (or trace horse) over the last ten years was Odysseus – and even he didn't want to go to Troy in the first place.

νόσος δ' Ὀδυσσεύς ὅσπερ οὐχ ἔκωσ' ἔπειτα,  
ζηχθεὶς εἰσῆπος ἦν ἐγὼ σείραφύρος

("Only Odysseus who did not sail willingly was ready for me, my tracehorse" 841-2)

Clytemnestra picks up on this. She talks to the chorus about her husband as if he wasn't there. She talks about her feelings of being left in the palace during his ten year absence. She turns to him, at last, to excuse his son's, Orestes' absence, and then indulges him in a kind of false flattery which scarcely conceals her contempt. Finally she urges him to step down from the chariot and walk over a carpet of purple clothes taken from the statues of the gods.

His speech has only been slightly shorter than hers, but he accuses her of talking too much

Μακρὰν γὰρ ἔειπεν

("You've gone on for far too long" - 916)

and tells her off for suggesting he should walk on the vestments of the gods.

Μὴ δὲ ἔγχεαι σπρώσασθαι ἐπιφθόρον πόρον  
τίθει θεοῦ τοι τοῖσδε τιναλφεῖν χρωῶν

("Do not lay a path of envy for me, when the gods should be honoured with these garments" 921)

She argues with him in a flattering way and suggests that in some circumstances it might be his duty to tread on the vestments of the gods, and that what he is really afraid of is the criticism of men – not the anger of the gods.

Agamemnon gives in very easily - in spite of the arrogance and impiety his action suggests - and almost in the same breath, tells Clytemnestra to take Cassandra into the palace and make her welcome there.

The overwhelming impression is of a man who is insensitive, vain and foolish, and whose judgement is weak. This is perfectly consistent with the impression of a king who was content to abjectly accept the advice of his soothsayer and sacrifice his daughter without considering other options.

Returning to the choral odes, the fact that Artemis had demanded Iphigeneia's sacrifice does not mean that Aeschylus intended his audience to believe that the soothsayer was giving incorrect advice. It is true that Artemis wanted the sacrifice – but Artemis could have been overruled by Zeus – perhaps if Agamemnon had offered a sacrifice or prayers to Hera first.

So, when Cassandra prophesies her own and Agamemnon's deaths, that too is seen by Aeschylus as a perfectly valid prophecy. However, in Cassandra's case there was nothing either she or the chorus could do to prevent the fulfilment of the prophecy. By the time she had spoken it was too late.

The fate of Oedipus may have been ordained by agencies he could not control, but the prophecy of his fate could not have been fulfilled without a fatal flaw in his character – and so it is with Agamemnon. His vanity, weak judgement and arrogance lead him to sacrifice his own daughter without considering how to get round Artemis' decrees, blinds him to the disloyalty in his own house which the chorus see only too clearly, and makes him an easy victim for murder.

So what then is the message behind the Agamemnon? Clearly Aeschylus attaches some importance to the notion that the sins of the father should be visited on the children, but Aeschylus finds this unsatisfactory, as is clear from the way the chorus react to the murders. There is no passive resignation or acceptance of the murders as the will of the gods. They have only anger and contempt – particularly for Aegisthus. To my mind the Agamemnon has to be viewed as part of the trilogy and the message of the trilogy is all about justice – justice according to an incipient notion of what we would call the rule of law. Aeschylus does not see vengeance as justice, particularly as it carries away the lives of innocent people along with the guilty. In the play Cassandra is the innocent bystander and the chorus give her their full sympathy and understanding.

The conflict between justice and revenge is resolved in the final play of the trilogy, where the crime of Orestes in killing his mother is judged before the legal tribunal of the Court of the Areopagus – and Orestes is acquitted. Without acquittal he would have been pursued by the Furies for the rest of his life. So in the end justice, as ordained by a court of law, prevails over vengeance.

The conflict between justice and vengeance is already clear in the Agamemnon. Aegisthus sees Agamemnon's murder as justice.

Τραπέζι δ' αὐτῶν ἦ δίκη κατ' ἤθελον

καὶ τῶσα τ' ἀνδρὸς ἠγάλην θυρῶος ἔν  
ἦσαν συνάχας μὴ χαρὴν δυσβουλίας

("Justice has brought him to his doom, and though not present in the house at the time, I reached him by the plot I laid" 1607-1608)

But the chorus instantly reject this

οὐ φησὶ ἀλύσει ἐν δίκῃ τῶσον κάρα  
σηροριφείς, εἴτε ἴσθε, λευσίτους ἀράς

("Know this clearly – I say that in justice you shall not escape the people's stoning curses" – 1612)

Vengeance is not justice. That is the message – as much in the Agamemnon as in the rest of the Oresteia.

ENDS