

Aeschylus' Agamemnon: Myth to Tragedy

Julian Fong

January 6, 1998

Aeschylus' play *Agamemnon* is not the first rendition of the myth. The story of Agamemnon's homecoming from Troy and subsequent murder is dealt with in Homer, Pindar, Stesichorus, Hesiod, and other poets and was well-known to the Athenian audience watching Aeschylus. However, Aeschylus borrows and blends these traditions, broadening a simple story of murder and betrayal by giving the important characters justifiable motives, both on the human and divine level. This allows him to construct a play based on tragic conflicts far more complex than those in the mythical sources he uses.

Besides minor details (such as location; Aeschylus makes Agamemnon king of Argos for political reasons; Pindar locates the action in Amyklai; Homer generally sets it in Mycenae), we find Aeschylus making changes in the background history of the characters prior to the play's main action through details provided in the *parados*. Even the chorus' first mention of Agamemnon gives us a significant alteration:

Menelaus and Agamemnon, my lord,

twin throned, twin sceptered, in twofold power¹

Jones asserts that Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus share an *oikos*, not just being brothers by blood but sharing a household and house²; the quotation (as well as the Herald's strangely overwhelming concern for Menelaus' lost ships³) corroborates it. Generally, this is not the accepted myth; in the *Iliad* and in other poems, Menelaus is the ruler of Sparta. But by combining their houses, Aeschylus is granting Agamemnon a far stronger claim against Alexander (Paris) alongside with Menelaus, for "he came \ to the house of the sons of Atreus ... and shamed the guest's right of the board shared."⁴ This is a more compelling reason than simply being the brother of Menelaus, for it is indirectly Agamemnon's household and hospitality which have been violated by Paris' abduction.

Later in the same ode, the chorus sings about Agamemnon's involvement in the Trojan War. Here we have another break with tradition, in the recounting of Iphigenia's sacrifice at Aulis. This episode is not told in Homer; in fact, as stated in the *Iliad*, Agamemnon's daughters do not include Iphigenia (or for that matter, Electra)⁵, if we can rely on Sophocles' distinction between her and Iphianassa⁶). There is even a tradition where Iphigenia is the daughter of Helen and Theseus, and subsequently adopted by Clytaemnestra⁷. More in line with Aeschylus is Pindar's Eleventh Pythian ode, where there is a brief summary of Agamemnon's death reflecting on Clytaemnestra's

¹Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (Chicago, 1953), l. 42-3

²John Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London, 1962) p. 84

³Aeschylus, l. 674-679

⁴Aeschylus, l. 400-2

⁵Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1974), IX l. 145

⁶Sophocles, *Electra*, trans. David Grene (Chicago, 1957), l. 158

⁷According to Stesichorus, as described in Pausanias' *Description of Greece*, 2.22.6

motives:

.. Was it Iphigeneia,
Slain at Euripos far from her land,
That stung her to uplift
The wrath of her heavy hand?⁸

Aeschylus follows the last tradition thereby giving Clytaemnestra her overwhelming reason for Agamemnon's murder: "he slaughtered like a victim his own child".⁹ And in terms of the trilogy, Iphigenia must indeed be Clytaemnestra's "own child" and not adopted, otherwise the argument used by the Furies later - that the shedding of kindred blood is of paramount evil - is hollow. To bolster her position, he must discard any tradition where Iphigenia is miraculously saved by Artemis (as in Hesiod, where she becomes Hecate, or in the *Cypria*¹⁰ she is replaced by a deer, both by will of Artemis).

But why must Agamemnon sacrifice Iphigenia at all? The *Cypria*¹¹ asserts that Agamemnon is to blame, for he, "while at the chase, shot a stag and boasted that he surpassed even Artemis", and that Artemis demands his daughter's death in retribution. Euripides, in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, follows a different version of unknown antiquity where Agamemnon had promised Artemis the fairest fruit of one year's produce; the goddess therefore claims Iphigenia.¹² However Aeschylus drops any direct reference to a personal affront offered by Agamemnon to Artemis: he substitutes a version where the goddess is angered at the death of an unborn hare killed by two ea-

⁸Pindar, *Pythian XI*, trans. C.M.Bowra (London, 1969)

⁹Aeschylus, l. 1417

¹⁰Not extant; ascribed to Stasinus. This passage is noted in a summary of the *Cypria* by Proclus. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, *Hesiod, The Homeric Hymns, and Homerica* (Project Gutenberg's Etext)

¹¹*Ibid*; part of the same summary by Proclus.

¹²D.J.Conacher, *Aeschylus' Oresteia: A Literary Commentary* (Toronto, 1987), p. 92

gles. Through symbolism, Aeschylus is adding a level of tragic conflict at the divine level. On the one hand, Agamemnon must avenge himself on Paris, the transgressor of his (and Menelaus') house's hospitality, or risk offending Zeus, the god of *xenia*. On the other hand, Artemis as protector of the unborn is angry at the carnage that the two Atreus brothers ("the flying hounds of her father"¹³) will inflict upon future generations of Troy (symbolized by the hare) and thus ensures Agamemnon's destruction even though this is counter to Zeus' wishes. Furthermore among the various reasons offered for this substitution, Fraenkel's answer makes most sense: that by removing the direct offence it emphasizes that Agamemnon's deliberate decision is the cause of all his sufferings¹⁴.

By adding or keeping Iphigenia's sacrifice, Aeschylus changes Clytaemnestra's role from accomplice to avenger. From beginning to end of the play it is now entirely Clytaemnestra who arranges her husband's death. We see her as the implementor of the elaborate system of beacon lights and watchmen heralding the fall of Troy. First, this illustrates her strength of will simply in its orchestration; second, it implies her desire to be forewarned of Agamemnon's return giving her time for preparation. Later, she entices Agamemnon to his doom, and it is by her blade that both Agamemnon and Cassandra die. Thus Aeschylus is following the tradition sketched in Pindar's Ode in placing Agamemnon's death solely "at the strong hands\Of Klytaimestra"¹⁵. Perhaps to make his death at the hands of a woman more plausible to his Athenian audience, Aeschylus also does away with the murder scene as described in the *Odyssey*¹⁶. Instead

¹³Aeschylus, l. 135

¹⁴Eduard Fraenkel, *Agamemnon* (Oxford, 1950), Vol. 2, p. 99, in Conacher, p. 77

¹⁵Pindar, l. 17-18

¹⁶Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York, 1961), IX l. 405-440

of being killed along with his followers as they sit down to wine, Agamemnon is slain when he is by himself in his bath, naked and unarmed. Perhaps as well Aeschylus is rawing sympathy away from Clytaemnestra in making his death pitiful. Various other details of Agamemnon's death as planned by Clytaemnestra can certainly be seen as transgressions, for Aeschylus points out that Agamemnon is on the way to make sacrifices to the gods in thanksgiving when he is killed. This forebodes that the cycle of violence must continue into the next play.

In fact, Homer's *Odyssey* clearly gives Aegisthus the main role. After luring away Agamemnon's guard and seducing Clytaemnestra¹⁷, it is his sentry who gives him time to prepare his arrangements, he who persuades Agamemnon to attend a banquet¹⁸ and he who kills Agamemnon. Clytaemnestra aids only in killing Cassandra (implying her only motive is jealousy and not some maternal instinct); inconsistently however, Agamemnon's ghost does say "she waited to stab her lord and king"¹⁹. Aeschylus ignores this tradition; he also ignores another mentioned in Stesichorus in which it is Aphrodite, incensed at Tyndareus for ignoring the goddess in sacrifices, who makes his daughters (Helen and Clytaemnestra) "deserters of their husbands".²⁰ Removing any hint of seduction, whether or not instilled by divine power, makes it clear that Clytaemnestra is not passively being manipulated by Aegisthus, but is indeed actively avenging her daughter's death. Only by giving her this motive and reinforcing it can Aeschylus set up the next conflict in the *Libation Bearers*; for if Clytaemnestra is in this way justifiable, it makes Orestes' matricide equally less justifiable.

¹⁷*Odyssey*, III l. 234-312

¹⁸*Odyssey*, IV l. 511-547

¹⁹*Odyssey*, XXIV 199-200

²⁰Scholiast attributes this to Stesichorus. See Evelyn-White

However, Aeschylus does not entirely drop Aegisthus from the picture; he is not merely Orestes' other victim, mentioned as an afterthought as in Pindar. First his relationship to Agamemnon is now made unambiguous; he is the son of Thyestes, the brother of Agamemnon's father Atreus; the *Odyssey* links Thyestes and Aegisthus once but never Thyestes and Atreus, and neither does the *Iliad*. Contrast this with one tradition where Agamemnon and Menelaus are the grandchildren of Atreus (being themselves sons of Pleisthenes)²¹. Pleisthenes is never mentioned in the *Iliad*, but is mentioned by Aeschylus as the ancestor of Atreus²². Perhaps the playwright has here rearranged the family tree to strengthen Aegisthus' case from merely the usurper as depicted in the *Iliad*; he is now avenging Atreus' murders of his brothers by killing Atreus' son. Furthermore his adultery mirrors that of Thyestes as earlier hinted at by Cassandra. Yet the relationship between Aegisthus and Agamemnon is even more interesting when Aeschylus mentions Thyestes' curse on the house of Atreus, echoing earlier hints by Cassandra and Clytaemnestra. The *Odyssey* never mentions conflict between Thyestes and Atreus; Book II of the *Iliad* almost hints otherwise as it describes Agamemnon's staff of office, and how it was passed from Pelops to Atreus, who "gave it to the shepherd Thyestes" and from there to Agamemnon. There is no mention of the feast of Thyestes in Hesiod or Pindar. As described earlier though, Aeschylus seems to want the reader to focus on the curse not only on the immediate father of Agamemnon but also on the curse on the founder of the house, Tantalus; why else would the Chorus pointedly mention his name²³?

²¹Tzetzes attributes this to Hesiod. See Evelyn-White

²²Aeschylus, l. 1602

²³Aeschylus, l. 1369

By utilising and altering various traditions and ignoring others, Aeschylus has turned the myth into a tragedy by establishing the conflicts of two right causes. Aeschylus gives Agamemnon a stronger cause against Troy yet calls down Artemis' anger, so that Agamemnon is forced to decide between two such causes; that of abandoning his justifiable war (justifiable both by him and by changes in the myth) , or sacrificing his own daughter. By choosing the latter course of action he ensures his eventual destruction by his wife Clytaemnestra, who instead of being a passive accomplice now avenges her mother's love with murder; while Aegisthus is himself avenging the wrongs of a previous generation. The theme of retribution justified by past wrong is echoed throughout these myths which Aeschylus combines into the tragedy, in order to show how this archaic moral order based on this theme is not sufficient in the new moral order; this theme forms Orestes' conflict in the remainder of the trilogy.