

CHAPTER TWO

AESCHYLUS AND AGAMEMNON

Of the extant seven plays of the pioneer of Greek tragedy, Aeschylus, Agamemnon the first play of the trilogy The Oresteia, is chosen as representative of his works. In it not only Aeschylus' structural art and his genius for imaginative language, but the tension of his religious and moral thought is at its highest point. Werner Jaeger states that it is almost incredible that he completed this gigantic work, the most powerful drama in the entire literature of the world, in his grey old age soon before his death.

In this tragedy, Paris, son of Priam, who had been reared in defiance of the warning of the gods, robbed his host, Menelaus, of his beautiful wife-- Helen. This was a sin against the laws of hospitality, and Zeus, the god of strangers, saw to its punishment. Troy, the native land of Paris, and the city which harboured the criminals fleeing the wrath of the aggrieved husband and his Greek hosts, was left in a smoking ruin after a ten year's siege. Here the Agamemnon begins. But the avengers themselves, had not the clean hands of the pure; their fleet assembled at Aulis was

held up by contrary winds, and Agamemnon obtained a passage to Troy only by sacrificing his own daughter Iphigenia. The aftermath of the victory, the sacking of Troy and the return of the Greeks after the sacking serves as a prologue to the drama that unfolds with its flashbacks and ominous warnings brought about by the Chorus of old men-- not strong enough to fight the war, but wise enough to voice their views.

Aeschylus, an old soldier and one of the most decorated dramatists of his day, wrote this beautiful trilogy of which the first play Agamemnon portrays the greatness of man in times of woe and stress. True to his leanings and bent, the play he wrote depicted vivid battle scenes and the agony of human beings during the period and the aftermaths of war. It is undoubtedly the one area in which he is unequalled among his peers and Agamemnon may be the greatest play portraying a warrior's emotion, reactions, trepidations, and the final subjugation of a great spirit by forces beyond his control.

Agamemnon, Aeschylus' hero, and the commander-in-chief of the greatest armed forces and armada the world had ever seen up to that day, was forced to make a decision which involved not only his dignity, his religious beliefs, his

future but even those who were near and dear to him. The decisions that he had to make were not of the kind meant for ordinary people, they were the kind which separate mere mortals from heroes. Yet Agamemnon made them and stuck to his decisions. He did not shirk his responsibility in any way, nor did he make any excuses for his decisions which were made "in time of war", when split-second decisions were to be made by men of authority. Aeschylus, the old soldier, could visualise such dilemmas and he made excellent use of such episodes which rank with the momentous decisions made by men throughout the ages.

D.W.Lucas in The Greek Tragic Poets states:

Swinburne who was much given to the use of superlatives, called the Oresteia the greatest spiritual work of man; and there is no work of man to which such a statement could more justly be applied. There is nothing else like it. No other drama, not even the Book of Job, presents us with such concentrated, yet sustained magnificence of thought and language. The insoluble problem of the discovery of divine justice in the fortunes of human beings is taken up again from the Septem, and treated in more complicated form with new originality. The process of sin leading to punishment, which involves fresh pollution

and fresh punishment, until the only possible end is reached in the annihilation of the guilty race, is recorded again, but this time, by divine grace, a solution is found.¹

The first decision by Agamemnon was of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, his beloved daughter. It was made in the port of Aulis, where the Greek fleet was unable to set sail for Troy because of contrary winds ordered by Artemis, as a punishment and warning. The ostensible reason for punishing the fleet is the fact that an eagle had eaten a hare, which happened to be pregnant. Eagles eat hares naturally, and would not discriminate hares in the family way, even if they could do so, and asking for a human virgin's sacrifice for this offence in return, is not justified. Artemis is thought to have an ulterior motive in demanding such a high price for a small hare, albeit in the family way.

For Agamemnon, however, the problem that confronted him now was a dilemma and there is no way of getting out from under it peacefully or unscathed. It presented him with two alternatives, both of which demanding sacrifices of a different nature. On the one hand, it was his flesh and

¹D.W. Lucas, The Greek Tragic Poets, (London: Cohen & West, 1950), p. 68.

blood to be sacrificed on the altar of Artemis. It would mean the vengeance of the Furies, whose job it is to prohibit the shedding of kindred blood. It would also mean the perpetual enmity of Clytemnestra, his queen, the sister of Helen--the most beautiful woman in the world, and who was the cause of the present Trojan war. Clytemnestra, as befitting the sister of the most beautiful woman in the world, was one of the most highly strung and savage woman on record. She was capable of killing in cold blood--which she did to her husband in the end. She was not happy from the outset--of the Greeks mustering up for a "wanton". Sibling rivalry apart, (Leda, her mother, also bore Helen who was sired by Zeus, unlike her, who had an ordinary mortal father), the Trojan war was not welcomed by Clytemnestra and some of the Greeks, who considered it a waste of human life and limb.

Paris' elopement with Helen originated from a prize offered by Aphrodite, the love goddess, to Paris who had judged her the most beautiful of three goddesses. The prize, or bribe, was Helen (the most beautiful woman in the world). But Helen was not unattached, so Paris went to her house as a guest and eloped with Helen during her husband's absence. This made Paris's sin twofold, for not only was he an adulterer but he was also the violater of the code of

hospitality held sacred by all the Greeks. Therefore Zeus Xenios, god of strangers, saw to its punishment. Troy would also have to be destroyed, even at a cost of thousands after a siege of ten years because it harboured 'criminals', temples and all razed to the ground. The flower of Greek youth will be the price paid for its destruction. Both on the battlefield and on the high seas, the Greek host that boarded a thousand ships was decimated by the enemy consisting of gods and men and only one solitary ship with only one solitary leader, Agamemnon, managed to land on Greek soil as a result. The price of war is not disguised; it is not, however, always worth the price of crime to punish a crime. But apart from its relevance to the Trojan war, the sacrifice of Iphigenia started, or continued, a new train of sin and suffering.

On the other hand, was his position as the commander-in-chief of the Greek armed forces who were gathered to avenge the insult to their nation and their age-old sacred beliefs of "hospitality". It might have been an excuse also to plunder the "barbaric" capital city of Troy, whose treasures and economic success would have made the Greeks envious and jealous. It would mean betrayal to the assembled hosts and the Greek rulers of friendly states if

the sacrifice was abandoned and the army left idling for an indefinite amount of time. Even mutiny was possible if this state of affairs continue and the perilous position of the rulers of neighbouring states would be further jeopardized. "How shall I be a deserter, and betray my allies" Agamemnon had asked when confronted with the terrible demand for his daughter's life, Her mother probably cared less for military reputation, but she was not consulted. This was no excuse for her betraying her husband with Aegisthus and murdering him on his return, nor is Aeschylus interested in psychological motivation; but crime leads to crime, and Agamemnon, in sacrificing his daughter, was guilty of an offence against the mother which led to his own undoing. This is why a vivid picture of the sacrifice is the chief memory left by the first choral song of the Oresteia. But for Agamemnon, non-sacrifice of his daughter would also mean the displeasure of Zeus who had sanctioned this war. It was a choice without a choice and Agamemnon made it and bore the responsibility, like a true soldier. Mr.Lloyd-Jones in his "The Guilt of Agamemnon" states Agamemnon's dilemma:

Zeus is indeed determined that the fleet must sail: Agamemnon has indeed no choice. But how has Zeus chosen to enforce his will? Not by charging Calchas or some other mouthpiece to inform the king of his decisions; but by

sending Ate, to take away his judgment so that he cannot do otherwise.²

It would inevitably follow that Agamemnon is not responsible for his sacrifice. But to this Lloyd-Jones would not agree. He cites Homer's works in which Agamemnon excuses his behaviour by pointing to the action of Ate on his mind: but it does not occur to him to deny his responsibility, or to shuffle out of paying the enormous compensation which he promised Achilles for the woman Briseis taken from Achilles by the order of Agamemnon. He is a true tragic hero. He was a deeply religious and god-fearing man and it would have been very painful for him to please a deity by sacrificing his beloved daughter, the act which would have made another hate him. His magnanimity is demonstrated through his personal sacrifice for the collective good. In this connection, it would be prudent to enquire into the logic of Artemis' demand for the sacrifice of Iphigenia. The play itself shows very little reason according to the modern light of things as a great king's daughter was to be exchanged for a pregnant hare destroyed

² Hugh Lloyd-Jones, "The Guilt of Agamemnon" in Oxford Readings in Greek Tragedy, ed. Erich Segal, (Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 63.

by eagles. The goddess is surely asking an inordinately absurd penalty for the eagle which must eat hares as natural food. To punish the king for destroying the unborn hare, this again by eagles, is placing too much responsibility on the leader of the expedition. In search for acceptable explanations, regarding this illogical exchange, H.D.F.Kitto's lucid theory seems the best. In his Greek Tragedy he states:

Why does Artemis demand the sacrifice? What moves her indignation is the wanton destruction of life committed by the eagles: not that they eat the hare, for eagles must eat, but that they eat the unborn young too. The point of the comparison is the indiscriminate destruction of life that this war must bring.

...Aeschylus later writes two of his most moving stanzas: brave men are killed in this war "for another man's wife". This would be a natural result of the war, even though it was conceived by Zeus; and if rage concerning the dead is visited in this way on Agamemnon, it will be the counterpart, on the level of ordinary reality, of the indignation felt by Artemis towards the eagles. Deeds of this kind have their consequences; "the gods are not regardless of those that shed blood" (462)--"the gods", not Artemis alone.³

³ H.D.F.Kitto, Greek Tragedy, (London: Methuen, 1939), p.69.

According to Kitto, Artemis' price was Iphigenia and if Agamemnon could be deterred from shedding kindred and innocent blood by demanding such a price, her goal would be accomplished:

...if he must shed so much innocent blood "for an unchaste woman", let him first shed his own daughter's innocent blood-and take the consequences.⁴

Thus was Agamemnon made to take a decision which would not only affect his future, his beliefs and his god-fearing instincts, but also his descendants--for the bloodletting would continue long after his tragic death. His son and daughter would be hounded by the Furies for most of their lives.

Aeschylus was the first poet to grasp the bewildering strangeness of life, "the antagonism at the heart of the world". He knew life as only the greatest poets can know it; he perceived the mystery of suffering. Mankind as he saw fast bound to calamity by the working of unknown powers, committed to a strange venture, companioned by disaster.

⁴ Kitto, p. 69.

But to the heroic, desperate odds fling a challenge. The high spirit of his time was strong in Aeschylus. He was, first and last, the born fighter to whom the consciousness of being matched against a great adversary suffices and who can dispense with success. Life for him was an adventure, perilous indeed, but men are not made for safe havens. The fulness of life is in the hazards of life. And, at the worst, there is that in us which can turn defeat into victory. Edith Hamilton elucidates this special gift and achievement of the poet in The Greek Way:

In a man of this heroic temper, a piercing insight into the truth of human anguish met supreme poetic power, and tragedy was brought into being. And if tragedy's peculiar province is to show man's misery at its blackest, and man's grandeur at its greatest, Aeschylus is not only the creator of tragedy, he is the most truly tragic of all tragedians. No one else has struck such ringing music from life's dissonance. In his plays there is nothing of resignation or passive acceptance. Great spirits meet calamity greatly.⁵

The next decision that boded ill for him was the sacking of the Trojan temples thereby earning him divine

⁵Edith Hamilton, The Greek Way, (New York: W.W.Norton, 1983), p. 176.

resentment. there is a line in the ode of Agamemnon which bears the prophetic words "May I never be a sacker of cities" and Clytemnestra's warning to the victors to let them remember the holy places, for they still need a safe homecoming. The Herald, who brought news of the Greek victory, was explicit in his announcement that the altars and the temples of the gods are no more; and the seed of the whole country is destroyed. The Greek fleet bearing the victors and the sad remains of the killed is destroyed for this act of wanton destruction leaving a single ship bearing the leader, Agamemnon, to gloat over their ten-year siege and final victory. It is true that his speech on arrival at his palace looks back on his ruthless extirpation of his enemies:

...with doom of death for Ilium and uttermost
destruction;
...The smoke of pillage marks the city yet.
...the Argive host in arms. Which at the
setting of Pleides leapt like a hungry lion
across the towers
And slaked the thirst in streaming blood of
kings.⁶

However it is natural for Agamemnon to indulge in this most human of emotions after such a period of misery and

⁶ C.A.Robinson Jr., trans. "Agamemnon" An Anthology of Greek Drama, ed. C.A.Robinson Jr. (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1965). p. 25.

deprivations. It was ten years away from the bosom of the family with death and starvation beckoning every moment. It was fractiousness within the ranks and stark inhuman bravery to be seen to be believed from the quarters of the defenders. Aeschylus had vividly portrayed this kind of warfare with accuracy which would reflect personal experience at first hand. "Our beds were close to the enemy's walls; our clothes were rotting with wet; our hair full of vermin", That is not war as the novices see it. Edith Hamilton highlights this point:

Even more pointed are the words in Clytemnestra's announcement that Troy has fallen, when she pauses in the full flight of her tale of triumph to give a strange little realistic picture of a newly captured town:

"The women have flung themselves on lifeless bodies, husbands, brothers--little children are clinging to the old dead that give them life, sobbing from throats no longer free, above their dearest. And the victors--a night of roaming after battle has set them down hungry to breakfast on what the town affords, not billeted in order, but as chance directs.⁷

The speech sound oddly on a great queen's lips. It seems an old soldiers' reminiscence, each clear detail part of a picture often seen. These few passages throw light upon

⁷Hamilton, pp. 175-176.

Aeschylus' way of life and his empathy towards Agamemnon who has seen and bore what he had experienced. In sacking Troy, Agamemnon was caught in a vise of exquisite agony. On the one hand, Zeus had ordered him to destroy Troy. The Herald's cry of "Give glory to the conqueror! He has utterly cast down Troy with the crowbar of Zeus who brings retribution, and with it has devastated the land," is one of the pointers that denotes the order of the ultimate ruler of the gods. Greek culture prohibits the betrayal of the host and guest laws and the perpetrators must be punished at all costs. Zeus is the final arbiter and defender of these laws sacred to the Greek nation and could not tolerate Paris' betrayal of Menelaus' hospitality. His sanction to punish Paris and to sack Troy, the city that harboured such criminals, is just a natural consequence of the sacred laws.

Most of the troops that gathered at Aulis were there because of two reasons. The first was because it was a religious necessity and at the behest of their rulers to avenge a sacred wrong done by a non-Greek to a Greek king. The second and more important reason was because of the prospect of booty imagined and real from the vastly rich city of barbarian Troy. The troops were expecting booty and plunder from the captured enemy city to which they were to

lay siege for ten whole years. Most of the Greek forces joined the expedition expecting this as payment for the loss of life or limbs. Even if Agamemnon wanted to stop the carnage, destruction and plunder which was routine in wars of those days, his fellow commanders would not have permitted him to order it.

On the other hand, however, was again the divine resentment directed towards the plunderer of cities and the destroyer of temples. Agamemnon's dilemma and his decision could be understood once more. To be damned by Zeus if he did not destroy Troy and damned by other gods if he did destroy the temples as well. The decision had to be made on the spot. It was of a kind commanders make in battlefields and Aeschylus could portray it accurately and with unsurpassing experience. Aeschylus, a marathon warrior though he was, had stripped war of its glory. He had fought in the ranks and knew what war was like as only the man can who has seen it at close quarters. It is curious that he had perceived how money and war are bound up together. Hamilton quotes one of the most touching passages from Agamemnon in which the old maestro equates the glory-hunters with the bounty-hunters together with the inevitable consequences:

For all who sped
 forth from Greece,
 joining company,
 such grief as passes power to bear
 in each man's home
 plain to see
 Many things
 There to pierce a heart through.
 Women know whom they sent forth,
 but instead of the living,
 back there comes to every house
 armor and dust from the burning.
 And war who trades
 men for god,
 living for dead,
 and holds his scales
 where the spear-points meet and clash,
 to their beloved
 back from Troy
 he sends them dust
 from the flame,
 heavy dust,
 dust wet with tears,
 filling urns in seemly wise,
 freight well-stowed, the dust of men.⁸

He was the fore-runner of Euripides, the arch
 rationalist. Long before Euripides had brought his terrible
 indictment against war in The Trojan Women, Aeschylus had
 written such denouncements and the horrors of warfare. He
 was himself reliving the moments of Marathon, no doubt, when
 he wrote the decision of Agamemnon, his hero, to carry on the
 Trojan war. Agamemnon also had no choice left when the
 walls of Troy were breached, thanks to the wily but

⁸ Hamilton, p. 184.

brilliant ruse of Ulysses. Booty and plunder were what the troops wanted, Troy being razed to the ground was what Zeus wanted and on this occasion their wishes coincided. Agamemnon decided to sack Troy or at the very least, let his troops plunder the conquered city--bearing the brunt of the enormous responsibility. Agamemnon had once again earned his own destruction by deciding like a true leader and a tragic hero.

Clytemnestra, while painting the calamities that had befallen the citizens of the defeated city, inserts a warning to the victors. If the conquerors show pity, she says, towards the gods of the conquered land, and towards the shrines, then they may escape being conquered in their turn. But if they commit sacrilege, they may arouse the vengeance of the spirits of the dead. Clytemnestra's pretended fears are obviously her secret hopes and her dire warning is a sign of her wishful thinking. This speech looks forward to the later scene in which the Chorus gradually extracts from the innocent, optimistic Herald the news of the storm that has scattered the returning ships. Lloyd-Jones sums up this view:

This disaster was directly provoked by the sacrilege Clytemnestra had anticipated, and its occurrence greatly facilitated the

accomplishment of her plan: for it was owing to the storm that Agamemnon returned in a single ship and without his brother.⁹

Agamemnon was spared the destruction in the sea voyage to be struck down in his own home by a woman. The war into which Agamemnon led the Greeks brings suffering to the Greeks as well as to the Trojans, and the curses of those who lose their dearest ones will rest upon the leaders, responsible as they are for shedding much blood. The gods will not fail to mark the leaders, and "the Black Furies" wait. N.G.L. Hammond in his "Personal Freedom and its Limitations in the Oresteia" expresses his opinion to the effect, and went on to state that the full significance of this passage was felt by the audience in 458 B.C.; because it was probably in this year that the Erechtheid tribe suffered the loss of 177 men "in Cyprus, Egypt, Phoenicia, Halieis, Aegina and the Megarid."

Notwithstanding the horrors and the consequences of the war that was sanctioned by no less a being than Zeus, the punishment awarded the Greeks was inordinately harsh but

⁹ Lloyd-Jones, p. 64.

none more so than that of Agamemnon. To die fighting was the wish of a fighter of the lowest order, and for the leader of the greatest fighting force in history up to that time, it should be a requisite. But Agamemnon had to die in an unguarded moment away from his troops and his sword, which weapon a fighter never for a moment parts. He was away from his brother and his faithful guards, even the handful who accompanied him home. He died at the treacherous hand of his wife who was helped on by his arch-enemy Aegisthus, alone and unaided. What an ignominious end for such a great leader and a valiant king!!!

The sin of treading on purple is the next act of sacrilege for which the gods apparently exacted vengeance. Purple was deemed a prerogative of the gods in those days and a mortal treading on it is a sure way of earning the gods' anger. The gods of Olympus were jealous gods and they were perpetually guarding their preserves without moments of relaxation. Agamemnon was a truly god-fearing man and ordinarily he would never even think of poaching on the gods' preserves. It is also a very rare occurrence for a mortal, however powerful and noble he may be, to rival the gods and challenge their prerogative. It could also be

counted as an abnormal act of foolishness that could be likened to Thyestes' invitation of the gods to feast on human flesh. Critics have differed on this act of sacrilege on the reasons of Agamemnon's commitment. Some "apologize" on behalf of Agamemnon, while others have pointed out that it is the very evidence of his pride and hence his ultimate downfall. The apologists' case is that Agamemnon yielded to his wife's persuasion partly out of chivalry towards a lady and partly because after long years of struggle, he is weary and his nerves finally gave way. Lloyd-Jones has a perfect answer to the "apologists" argument:

This is not convincing. Chivalry of such a kind seems to be medieval and a modern rather than an ancient concept.¹⁰

Agamemnon, it is true, is finally persuaded by Clytemnestra to do the very thing he dreads, namely to antagonize the gods. His treading on purple, despite his protestations at the onset, was very sudden. How can we account for his rapid collapse? Actually we are discovering

¹⁰Lloyd-Jones, p. 67.

at this juncture that he is again facing a very important decision--one that would affect his future, his beliefs and his descendants. It is the same situation as at Aulis and Troy where he made fatal decisions to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia, and sack the temples of Troy as well as the city itself. Agamemnon, as could be seen from the events that preceded this final act of hubris, was a god-fearing man and humble enough to credit his victory to the gods. Can it be the same man that succumbed to the "spell" of his treacherous spouse? Of all the theories that have been put forward, Lloyd-Jones answer seems one of the best:

For the same reason as at Aulis; because of the curse. ¹¹

As Agamemnon succumbs, vanquished by the irresistible persuasion of Helen's sister, who was destined to be the instrument of his destruction, we look upon him not with scorn, but with compassion. Guilty as he is, he is not, like Aegisthus, mean and contemptible; destined as he is to ruin, at once guilty and innocent, he is truly a tragic figure. Lucas has explained the plight of Agamemnon:

¹¹ Lloyd-Jones, p. 69.

The great king does not altogether lack wisdom; he knows the dangers of his position and attempts to give the gods their due. Nor need we think that he is imposed on by the queen's lavish praise of him or of herself; but when she tempts him to enter his palace treading the purple carpet, he yields to persuasion and is fooled by the pride of his heart into supposing that by removing his boots, and seeking by a prayer to avert the anger of the gods, he can accept honors more than human yet escape the consequences.¹²

Upon reflection of Agamemnon's destiny, it is found that his fate has been pre-ordained from the outset. It was his lot to be killed in his palace--away from the battlefield that a warrior like him prefers. For a soldier to die away from battle is the greatest curse and to make matters worse, he had to be killed, not in combat with an enemy, but by a woman who lured him into a defenseless position and slaughtering him like a gentle lamb.

It was his fate also to be destroyed by females, both goddesses and mortals. It was fated that he muster up an army of Greeks to avenge Greek honour which was occasioned by a married woman eloping with another man. A goddess started this by giving this woman as a prize to the adulterer and it was another goddess who asked him to

¹²Lucas, p. 71.

sacrifice his daughter, yet another female, in exchange for a pregnant hare (which is female) so that his fleet may sail from Aulis. It was another female, Cassandra, who foretold his future and who might have caused insane jealousy to Clytemnestra, his queen, when he came back from the wars with Cassandra as the spoils of the final battle. If Clytemnestra had no intention of killing him before this episode, bringing home another woman would be the last straw. It was the woman Briseis given to Achilles and recovered by Agamemnon that nearly made the Greeks lose the war with Troy when Achilles refused to join the battle any more. It was females that made him lose every thing he loved--his love, his life and finally a warrior's death. If ever a man deserves our consideration and our compassion, it should be none other than Agamemnon, who was a great king and a warrior and whose nemesis all along were women, he who had fought and won great battles, who was noted for his leadership and valour was ironically destroyed by a woman.

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