

Multiple perspectives in "agamemnon"



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The play *Agamemnon* involves a variety of characters who introduce and contribute towards some of the major themes of the play, such as justice and revenge. While the play is dominated by Clytaemnestra and the Chorus, we are introduced to different angles in the story by minor characters, such as Cassandra and the Herald. The diversity of characters plays a large role in Aeschylus' drama, as they provide the audience with multiple perspectives on the concepts central to the plot. With the introduction of each new character, new ideas are brought about, leaving the audience with an understanding that the characters have different opinions of or knowledge about the events that take place throughout the play. The play lacks on-stage action, but keeps the audience's interest by allowing audience members to interpret each character's views. The difference in perspectives adds depth to each character and dramatic interest to the play, and complexity and variety to the dominant themes.

Early in the play, we learn that there is a difference in the characters' beliefs with regard to justice and revenge. When the sacrifice of Iphigenia is discussed, we can see that there is a difference in perspectives between Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, providing the audience with insight on the nature of both characters. Agamemnon believes that the sacrifice was performed as an act of justice, but Clytaemnestra refuses to agree.

Agamemnon committed the act in order to appease the God of nature, Artemis, who bore "a grudge" after the Danaans' army had killed a hare. Upon killing the animal, the army faces strong winds, which stops their voyage to the city of Troy. Thus, Iphigenia was sacrificed to appease the god. The controversy over whether this was an acceptable act is between

Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra, scarcely including Cassandra. In the play, we see that Agamemnon placed duty above family. He describes that his heart would be "heavy", regardless of whether or not he kills his daughter, but in the end he felt that he could not be a "traitor" to his fleet. His act was performed in the name of justice, but simultaneously follows the common Greek belief, that "Learning comes through suffering". Using this ideology, we can relate how Agamemnon felt that the suffering he would face, from having sacrificed his daughter, would allow him to repent the sin of upsetting Artemis. In contrast, Clytaemnestra believes that the killing was an act of murder - not a sacrificial procedure. She claims that Iphigenia "did not deserve" to be betrayed. Clytaemnestra especially conveys her lack of agreement when she claims that it is Agamemnon who deserves to suffer, for being willing to commit the act. Here, the difference between the characters' perspectives is evident.

Additionally, Cassandra adds a very interesting perspective to the play by bringing in the theme of family, and relating this theme to matters of justice. She states that Clytaemnestra "shares" Agamemnon's guilt for his murder, as she herself commits murder against a family member - her husband. Cassandra's role ironically demonstrates an idea that the Greeks believed: "Revealed to that man's descendants / Is the price for recklessness". The correlation between this belief and Cassandra's statement shows the way that acts of evil can affect the entire family. This idea closely follows the theme of revenge in the play, for example, as seen in the murder of Thyestes' children. The sacrifice of Iphigenia allowed Clytaemnestra to believe that she needed to act against her husband. Each event affects the

family as a whole. Cassandra emphasizes this idea by prophesizing that Agamemnon's son will seek revenge. Cassandra allows the audience to understand that revenge and family are closely tied. With all the different perspectives presented here regarding the death of Iphigenia, the audience must decide which character to support. The disagreement also touches upon the difference between societal classes. Throughout the play, the audience is exposed to the differing morals of royalty and the common people, and this divergence adds to the dramatic intensity of the play.

We can further see a difference in perspectives over the theme of justice later in the play, when the Chorus speculates whether Clytaemnestra's act of murder was in the name of her daughter or for power. The queen believes that the murder has done her daughter justice, and therefore was a necessary act, but the Chorus does not agree. After the Queen confesses her crime, they believe that her "mind is unhinged", and they weep for their King. They are appalled by Clytaemnestra's actions, but also believe that Agamemnon's death will bring justice for the children of Thyestes, who died at the hands of Agamemnon's father. This realisation surprises the audience, as they may have only been concerned with bringing Iphigenia justice. The Chorus acknowledges that while Clytaemnestra's actions were shocking and deserved retribution, they balanced the "scales of justice" for another incident. The personification of justice in the line, "Justice tilts against those who are to learn / By suffering" allows the audience to visualise a scale with justice and suffering on opposite sides. If we compare this with the Chorus' opinion, we can assume that the Chorus believes that Clytaemnestra has balanced the scales of justice - through Agamemnon's suffering, the children

that Atreus murdered were avenged. On the other hand, the Chorus also suggests that the suffering is not over, and that the Queen is yet to pay for her mistakes. At this point, it is clear that Clytaemnestra is not bothered about the words of the old men of Argos, as she feels that she has done her duty. Here, the difference in perspectives gives us insight on the characters' beliefs and Greek culture.

In the play, Cassandra not only reiterates the theme of revenge, by repeating the events that have already taken place, but she also foreshadows the revenge that is yet to come. In her short appearance on stage, Cassandra recollects all the events that have taken place in the name of justice and revenge, from the abduction of Helen, to her own death. She claims to be aware of the "age-old wrongdoings" that have taken place in the castle, reminding the audience that revenge and justice have taken their toll on multiple characters. Before her death, Cassandra prophesized that somebody will come to Argos and "seal these killings" in the name of family, again focusing on the relationship between revenge and family lines. This hint is intriguing and ambiguous to the audience, turning their attention towards who will return and what actions they will take.

Through multiple characters, the audience is exposed to different forms of justice, such as the form which is dealt by the gods. The different forms add variety to the theme of justice. Cassandra's character tells the Chorus that she possessed the gift of prophecy before deceiving Apollo. She then explains that after her "offence", the god made it so that people would no longer believe her prophecies. Thus, we see that Cassandra believes that the curse was a punishment for her actions - an act of either revenge or justice.

Since the gods hold the highest positions of power, it is only appropriate for them to punish those who deceive them. The Chorus also participates in communicating this message, by often looking to the god, Zeus, to take decisions. This mentality is clear at the beginning of the play, when the members of the Chorus state that it was Zeus who was appalled by the abduction of Helen, and he who " sends the sons of Atreus after Paris". We later witness another character, the Herald, claim that Zeus ultimately " brings justice" in the battle between the brothers and Paris. In the course of the play's action, we can see that the gods are seen as respected figures of the highest authority, and they are seen treating everyone equally, no matter whether a king or common man, since " Wealth is no safeguard". In Agamemnon, spectators must understand the relationship between the gods and the people in terms of the way that justice is dealt. Through all the various characters' perspectives, nobody questions the gods, but rather everyone accepts them and believes them to be fair. This not only highlights the link between the Gods and the justice system, but also the understanding between the mortals and the gods.

The various perspectives that are introduced in Agamemnon are useful, especially for highlighting the themes of justice and revenge. The different opinions given by each character add depth to the topics by including other relevant themes, such as family, respect, and authority. A variety of ideas about these major motifs help give the audience an idea of the mentality of each of the characters, creating a relationship between the audience and the characters. Aeschylus has used multiple perspectives to add variety to

themes, thus adding complexity to the play by including conflicting ideas and giving characters remarkable depth.

Works Quoted From: Aeschylus, and Philip De May. *Agamemnon*. Ed. John Harrison and Judith Affleck. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2003. Print.