

# Analysis of tragedy in agameemnon



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Historically, Greek tragedies have been used as a means to convey particular political and ethical testimonials about society, usually in order to convey certain morals or to ensure order. In such chronicles, a protagonist grapples with a particular conflict or sets of conflicts, usually pertaining to some universal moral code. Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*, like many Greek tragedies, is no exception to the rule. *The Oresteia*, like many other Greek tragedies of its time, deals with issues of justice, honor, and kinship. However, the play itself does so in a way that even mystifies the audience. Unlike other Greek tragedies, it is difficult to ascertain whom exactly the protagonists and antagonists are. Moreover, The epic itself presents the audience with characters who are righteous in a sense, but very flawed morally.

Agamemnon is such a character. From what we are told by the chorus in the beginning play of the trilogy, Agamemnon is first presented to us as a man of honor, bravely leading his troops into victory during the Trojan War. But then we are told that Agamemnon, in order to change the winds to win the battle of Troy, sacrificed his own daughter, Iphigenia. The complexity of Agamemnon's character leaves the audience spellbound- is the man cruel, ambitious, virtuous? Before examining Agamemnon's acts, it is important to note the historical and political context for which the play was written. In the context of this particular story, the act of sacrificing one's kin for the sake of the state could indeed be deemed as righteous. Because Greek plays were very political, the theme of family loyalty was oftentimes presented as a danger for society and order. Unlike the Romans who worshipped family, Grecians were more focused on the importance of the state. Like in Sophocles *Antigone*, going against the state for the sake of family loyalty is seen as a very dangerous thing to do, resulting in dire consequences for all.

Because of the historical and political context of the play, Agamemnon's decision to sacrifice his daughter could be deemed as a logical decision, especially since the sacrifice was for the sack of Troy and the victory of the Greek army. However virtuous the act itself may have seemed given the context of the play, Agamemnon sacrifice of his daughter was faulted nonetheless, therefore making him a complex, multi-faceted character. It could be argued that out of sheer ambition, Agamemnon murdered his daughter. This is very important to note because the theme of ambition is what began the conflict of the trilogy in the first place. Remember, ambition is what originally sparked the ill-fated curse upon the house of Atreus (Agamemnon's father) when he maliciously murdered Thyestes and his children. Now, Agamemnon's responsibility for the bloodshed of his daughter for the sake of ambition is another ill-fated curse that has come upon his household for which the consequence will be his own death. Despite the ill-fated decisions of Agamemnon's ambition, he is depicted as virtuous nonetheless. The chorus presents Agamemnon as a moral character, facing a dilemma whether or not to kill his own daughter. This kind of dilemma is the kind of dilemma a protagonist would be faced with. Remember, Agamemnon fought the city of Troy for the sake of virtue, therefore making him a virtuous character. And like a protagonist, the heroic Agamemnon is faced with a conflict regarding whether or not to kill his daughter Iphigenia after he is commanded by the goddess Artemis to do so in order to spare the lives of his cavalry. Agamemnon contemplates this conflict with much grief: If I obey the goddess, and kill my daughter-What do I become? A monster to myself, to the whole world, And to all future time, a monster Wearing my daughter's blood - . But if I deny the goddess, then what happens? Will it be worse? An

utter defeat For us all. And for me-Disaster. As if I deserted this army, Disguised, a traitor to my oath, Shorn of honour. Agamemnon p. 13 This statement gives us some insight on Agamemnon's psyche and hence, his character. Although we are told of his act against his daughter, Iphigenia, we are given insight on Agamemnon's moral dilemma, therefore giving the audience the impression that this character does in fact have a sense of virtue and principles. In a sense, Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter is somewhat justified in that if he did not obey the command of the goddess, Artemis, it would have led to utter destruction of his army and of the honor code he must follow in order to be a noble ruler. Like a classic protagonist of Greek tragedies, Agamemnon is faced with a trying conflict in which he must make an ill-fated decision. However virtuous and honorable a picture the chorus portrays of Agamemnon, it is not long before we see that Agamemnon is flawed yet again. When Agamemnon makes his victorious return from Troy he proudly parades Cassandra, his mistress, before his wife and the chorus. We now are presented with an Agamemnon who is very arrogant and disrespectful to his seemingly faithful wife (surprisingly even to the standards of the Greek Hellenistic period). When Agamemnon speaks to his wife, he does so with contempt and disrespect: Guardian of my name, of my home, Great-hearted woman that you are, Daughter of Leda-Your eulogies are like my absence: Too long, too much Agamemnon, p. 43 Yet again the audience is left questioning whether or not Agamemnon is the protagonist or the antagonist. Unlike classical tragic protagonists, Agamemnon's flaws are dishonorable. Despite Agamemnon's long absence from Argos, he does not greet his wife with words of delight as she does to him. Instead, he embarrasses her in front of the chorus and his new mistress,

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Cassandra. Agamemnon presents to us another dishonorable flaw in his character during this dialogue between he and his wife. Although he initially refuses to step on the carpet Clytemnestra has had prepared for him, she cunningly induces him to do so, thereby coercing him to go against his principles. This is a key scene in the play because originally Agamemnon refuses to walk the carpet because he does not want to be hailed as a god: Do not speak these purple cloths That should be spread only for gods, Yes, only for the feet of gods, For the feet of descended gods. Do not spread them for me. Greet me as a man. Greet me as a god and the gods Will punish us all. Agamemnon p. 43 However, through much badgering, Clytemnestra finally convinces Agamemnon to walk on the carpet. Because Agamemnon defies his principles we see another weakness of this arrogant king. Although Agamemnon's physical presence in the Oresteia trilogy is very brief, his character's moral dilemma sets the stage for the entire play. Each character in the play has some sort of dilemma that he/she must face for the sake of justice. Clytemnestra must face the dilemma of avenging her daughters death by murdering her husband, both Orestes and Electra must murder their own mother and her lover in order to avenge their father's death, Aegisthus must avenge the death of his brother, and all the while the furies maintain responsibility for making sure no one kills their own blood relation. With this set up of the story, moral conflict for the sake of justice is inevitable and there is bound to be a blood bath. Because Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter for the sake of ambition and the curse of Atreus (Agamemnon's father), both crimes ignited a spark in the trilogy that compels each character to seek a revenge that has no end. Appropriately enough for Greek drama, each of these characters feel some sort of moral and ethical

responsibility to murder or torment for the sake of justice. But had not Agamemnon and Atreus sparked the initial flame to the curses, this vicious cycle would have been less likely to occur and such bloodshed would have not transpired. Ruler of Argos and wife to Clytemnestra, Agamemnon is quite a complicated character and it is very difficult to distinguish whether he is virtuous or immoral. Like a two-sided coin, we are given multi-facets of Agamemnon as a character. At times he is depicted as being very moral, and at other times, very immoral. Although presented very briefly in the play, his actions are the reasons for much of the conflict in the play regarding the other characters. Not only that, but Agamemnon's hopeless dilemma to seek vengeance through the use of violence sets the stage for much of the dilemmas yet to come in the trilogy, thereby making Agamemnon an essential character in this Greek tragedy.