

**AGAMEMNON,
TRANSLATED FROM
AESCHYLUS BY THE
EARL OF CARNARVON**

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Agamemnon, Translated from Aeschylus by the Earl of Carnarvon by Aeschylus

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AESCHYLUS

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TRANSLATED FROM ÆSCHYLUS.

BY

THE EARL OF CARNARVON.



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1879.

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PREFACE.

IN adding one more to the many translations of this—the greatest perhaps of all ancient tragedies—it is unnecessary for me to say anything of its scope and character. This has already been done by distinguished scholars, and little remains to be accomplished in the way of annotation, conjecture, or emendation. But it is perhaps desirable that I should very briefly explain the principles which have more or less guided me in the composition of this little volume.

For the sake, too, of English readers, whose knowledge or recollections of the plot may not be quite clear, it is perhaps well to recapitulate the principal facts on which

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this drama is based. The story, indeed, varies in the old Greek writers; but the legend adopted by Æschylus is briefly this:—

Atreus, king of Argos, and Thyestes were brothers, sons of Pelops and grandsons of Tantalus. Thyestes seduced the wife of his brother Atreus, who in turn drove him into banishment, but before long recalled him under the pretence of forgiveness and reconciliation, to inflict upon him the horrible retribution of a banquet, at which he was induced to eat the flesh of his own murdered children.

From this fiendish atrocity spring the long succession of crime begetting crime and the curse which is ever calling for atonement and never receiving satisfaction; and on this idea, so familiar to Greek dramatists and audiences, rests the story of this gloomy and magnificent play. In revenge for this cruelty perpetrated on his father Thyestes,

Ægisthus seduces Clytemnestra, the wife of Agamemnon, during his absence at the siege of Troy, and with her aid and by her hand murders Agamemnon on his return home.

The character of Ægisthus is represented as base, cowardly, treacherous; that of Agamemnon, haughty, unattractive though unsuspecting; whilst that of Clytemnestra is perhaps one of the grandest combinations of masculine capacity, lofty indifference to insult, subtle and unscrupulous resolve, that ancient or modern poetry can show.

She has often been compared to Lady Macbeth, and making due allowance for the necessary difference in the conception of classical and modern character, the comparison seems no unfair one. And as the only affection and loyalty in Lady Macbeth are given to her husband, so the only softness in Clytemnestra's character is reserved for Ægisthus.

In one passage indeed she alleges a pretext for the murder of Agamemnon in his consent to the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigeneia, at the instance of the prophet Calchas, who had declared that a virgin's blood could alone release the wind-bound fleet of the Greek heroes in the harbour of Aulis ; but the pretext hardly rises in gravity to a plea of self defence. It is rather a bitter sarcasm thrown out against her murdered husband by one who is indifferent alike to its acceptance or rejection.

The reference to the fate of Iphigeneia—the omens which presage it—the exquisite description of the sacrifice, which have inspired at least two beautiful allusions in Latin and English poetry—all these are introduced as the shadows of coming events, darkening the mind of the bystanders and preparing them for the final catastrophe, rather than as offering apology or justification for Clytemnestra's act.

The scene is laid at Argos in front of the Palace of Agamemnon in the early morning, and the Chorus consists of Argive elders, who have held the office of a Council of State during the absence of the Sovereign.

In translating into English verse this great Play, I have sought, whilst adhering as near as I could to the sense of the original, so to render the words and phrases that they should be readily understood by any ordinary English reader, assuming only that he is acquainted with the story on which the drama is founded. For this reason, where I have had to choose between an exact rendering which would be unintelligible to any but a scholar, and the freer translation which would commend itself to one wholly ignorant of Greek, I have chosen the latter.

I am therefore conscious of some occasional divergence from the original; but I have endeavoured to avoid any alteration of the general