

**THE AGAMEMNON OF
AESCHYLUS, WITH
BRIEF ENGLISH
NOTES BY F.A. PALEY**

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The Agamemnon of Aeschylus, with Brief English Notes by F.A. Paley by Aeschylus

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With brief English Notes

BY

F. A. PALEY, M.A.

CLASSICAL EXAMINER TO THE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON.



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INTRODUCTION.

ΠΡΟΛΟΓΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΠΡΟΛΟΓΟΙ well sums up the drift and purpose of the three great tragedies that form the trilogy of the *Orestea*, by calling them "three acts, as it were, of one plot." The *Agamemnon*, he says¹, is 'the Crime,' the *Choephores* is 'the Vengeance,' and the third, the *Eumenides*, is 'the Avenger's Trial.' In all there is a moral purpose which is developed not only very finely, from a poetic point of view, but very powerfully as the theological and philosophical teaching of an earnest, reverent, and religious mind. A fatalist by birth and education, a predestinarian by conviction, and a pessimist by the workings of a naturally gloomy mind, he traces a whole chain of family evils to ancestral crime. Originating in a delusion or moral infatuation, *δρῶν*, the subsequent crimes and woes are with him the necessary effects of a cause. The murder of Agamemnon by the hand of his wife, and that of Clytemnestra by the hand of her son, are but the results of atrocities long before committed by Pelops and Atreus; for sin ever produces a brood 'like unto itself' (v. 785).

As in all works of the highest art it will be found that our admiration increases with further study, so it is especially true of the *Agamemnon* to say, that the more carefully its plot and composition are studied, and the more pains are taken to master its many difficulties, the more it will seem to develop new beauties and new points of interest in the characters of the principal actors. To understand the play rightly and thoroughly is, without doubt, a high intellectual effort and exercise. The pride of Agamemnon, the unrelenting vindictiveness of Clytem-

¹ Introduction, p. 1, ed. 1878.

nestra, and the undeserved misery of the captive Cassandra, are all worked out with singular skill, power, and consistency, subordinate to the general and main doctrine of the play, that *Crime will have its Punishment*, and contempt of divine laws will be followed by a certain and inevitable Nemesis. It is a grand moral lesson, in which, although Fate and Destiny (*δῶδῶκη*) are prominent ideas, Divine Justice is never lost sight of. The ethical bearing of the play therefore was altogether on the side of natural religion.

The following is a brief outline of the succession of events. (1) A watchman on the palace roof sees the beacon-light announcing the capture of Troy, and at once gives information to the expectant queen, who busies herself with preparations for a general rejoicing. (2) The chorus describes, not without forebodings of evil, the causes of the expedition, the omens seen on the way, the sacrifice of Iphigenia. (3) Clytemnestra narrates to the chorus the stations of the beacon-lights, and expatiates on the relative positions of the captured and the conquerors. (4) A choral ode follows on the treachery of Paris, the grief of the injured Menelaus, the sufferings and secret murmurs of the people who are compelled to engage in a war for his selfish ends. (5) A herald arrives, bringing a detailed account of the events of the capture, followed by a narrative of disasters from a storm in the return. Between the two speeches, the queen makes a hypocritical protestation, half suspected by the chorus, of her love for her lord. (6) Another choral ode on Paris and the fascinations of Helen, with reflexions on one crime begetting another. (7) Agamemnon enters in a car with Cassandra, and boasts of his success, and the vengeance that has at last overtaken Troy. Clytemnestra addresses him with apparent affection, and a contest between them ensues about his walking on costly carpets into the palace. (8) The chorus more plainly than before bodes evil, though present appearances seem favourable. (9) Cassandra utters wild words, not understood by the chorus, and more and more plainly foretells her own and the king's fate. (10) The

groans of Agamemnon being killed are heard within the palace. The chorus hesitate as to what course they should pursue, when Clytemnestra comes forth and avows the deed. (11) Recriminations ensue with the chorus, who threaten vengeance. (12) Aegisthus asserts that the deed was a just one, and that his own wrongs as well as Clytemnestra's have been avenged. The play concludes with an assertion of his power and his determination to put down opposition by force.

It has never been sufficiently observed, though it is a fact of much importance and interest, that Aeschylus nowhere shows any knowledge of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in this trilogy. He followed epics which contained in full the account of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the early family feuds of the house of Atreus, and the rape of Helen; as well as others which described the return of the Greeks, the storm off the Grecian coast, and the murder of Agamemnon. These latter events are alluded to in the *Odyssey*, indeed, as the detention of the fleet is slightly alluded to in the second Book of the *Iliad*; but the poet did not take his accounts from these sources. He followed poems which in his time appear to have had both more popularity and more authority, the *Cypria* (*Κύπρια ἔπη*) and the *Nécora*.

The following extracts from Proclus' epitome of the *Cypria* (p. 234, ed. Westphal) will make this perfectly clear to the reader.

"Paris, at the suggestion of Aphrodite, builds a fleet, and Helenus (his inspired brother) utters predictions about the coming marriage¹. Cassandra foreshows the troubles that will follow. Paris is entertained hospitably at Sparta, in the palace of Menelaus². He offers Helen presents at the entertainment. Menelaus goes off to Crete, charging Helen to entertain her guests. During his absence the lovers meet, and sail off after putting most of her property on board³. He arrives at Troy and there solemnises the marriage⁴. The leaders of the Grecian fleet are summoned

¹ *Ἰδέμεν προφήτεται*, *Ag.* 396. Horace followed the same or a very similar relation in *Od.* i. 15.

² *Ag.* 392.

³ *Ag.* 718.

⁴ *Ag.* 687.

from the states, and meet at Aulis. Here a sacrifice is offered, accompanied by a prodigy of a snake and a nest of sparrows¹. Calchas the seer prophesies what will happen from the omen. On the return of the fleet from Mysia, a storm overtakes it, and the ships are dispersed. They meet a second time at Aulis, where Agamemnon offends Artemis by boasting of the death of a stag in hunting. The goddess detains the fleet, and Calchas commands the sacrifice of Iphigenia, who is brought to Aulis by her mother under pretence of marrying Achilles².

From the *Néστος* the poet took the account of the second storm, and the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. From the *Ἰάλιον Πέλοισι* he borrowed the allusion to the wooden horse and the sacrilege committed by Ajax in carrying off Cassandra and the Palladium from the temple of Athena³.

The scene of the play is laid at Argos, which, somewhat strangely, the tragics identify with Mycenæ. That town had in fact been dismantled by the Argives ten years before the acting of this play in 458 B.C. The Chorus consists of twelve elders, who in the absence of the king are Regents, and have the care of the city delegated to them as a Council of State, for which reason they call themselves *γαίης μορφόρρους ἔρατες* in v. 248, and they are addressed by the queen as *πρόβητες Ἀργείων* in v. 829.

¹ *Iliad* ii. 511. From this passage the word *σπονδών* was imported into the play (v. 143), necessarily in later times, because it is against the metre.

² The subject of the *Iphigenia at Aulis* of Euripides

³ Proclus, pp. 230, 240. *Agam.* 352, 798.

ΤΑ ΤΟΥ ΔΡΑΜΑΤΟΣ ΠΡΟΣΩΠΑ.

ΦΤΛΛΞ.

ΣΟΡΟΣ ΓΕΡΟΝΤΩΝ.

ΚΑΤΤΑΙΜΝΗΣΤΡΑ.

ΤΑΛΘΥΒΙΟΣ ΚΗΡΤΣ.

ΑΓΑΜΕΜΝΩΝ.

ΚΛΕΣΣΑΝΔΡΑ.

ΑΙΤΣΘΟΣ.