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Stockton Vatsyayana Crane  
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Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch  
Homer Tolstoy Gogol Busch  
Darwin Thoreau Twain Plato  
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**The Agamemnon of Aeschylus  
Translated into English Rhyming  
Verse with Explanatory Notes**

Aeschylus

# Imprint

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## PREFACE

The sense of difficulty, and indeed of awe, with which a scholar approaches the task of translating the *Agamemnon* depends directly on its greatness as poetry. It is in part a matter of diction. The language of Aeschylus is an extraordinary thing, the syntax stiff and simple, the vocabulary obscure, unexpected, and steeped in splendour. Its peculiarities cannot be disregarded, or the translation will be false in character. Yet not Milton himself could produce in English the same great music, and a translator who should strive ambitiously to represent the complex effect of the original would clog his own powers of expression and strain his instrument to breaking. But, apart from the diction in this narrower sense, there is a quality of atmosphere surrounding the *Agamemnon* which seems almost to defy reproduction in another setting, because it depends in large measure on the position of the play in the historical development of Greek literature.

If we accept the view that all Art to some extent, and Greek tragedy in a very special degree, moves in its course of development from Religion to Entertainment, from a Service to a Performance, the *Agamemnon* seems to stand at a critical point where the balance of the two elements is near perfection. The drama has come fully to life, but the religion has not yet faded to a formality. The *Agamemnon* is not, like Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, a statue half-hewn out of the rock. It is a real play, showing clash of character and situation, suspense and movement, psychological depth and subtlety. Yet it still remains something more than a play. Its atmosphere is not quite of this world. In the long lyrics especially one feels that the guiding emotion is not the entertainer's wish to thrill an audience, not even perhaps the pure artist's wish to create beauty, but something deeper and more prophetic, a passionate contemplation and expression of truth; though of course the truth in question is something felt rather than stated, something that pervades life, an eternal and majestic rhythm like the movement of the stars.

Thus, if Longinus is right in defining Sublimity as "the ring, or resonance, of greatness of soul," one sees in part where the sublimity of the *Agamemnon* comes from. And it is worth noting that the faults which some critics have found in the play are in harmony with this conclusion. For the sublimity that is rooted in religion tolerates some faults and utterly refuses to tolerate others. The *Agamemnon* may be slow in getting to work; it may be stiff with antique conventions. It never approaches to being cheap or insincere or shallow or sentimental or showy. It never ceases to be genuinely a "criticism of life." The theme which it treats, for instance, is a great theme in its own right; it is not a made-up story ingeniously handled.

The trilogy of the *Oresteia*, of which this play is the first part, centres on the old and everlastingly unsolved problem of

The ancient blinded vengeance and the wrong that amendeth wrong.

Every wrong is justly punished; yet, as the world goes, every punishment becomes a new wrong, calling for fresh vengeance. And more; every wrong turns out to be itself rooted in some wrong of old. It is never gratuitous, never untempted by the working of Peitho (Persuasion), never merely wicked. The *Oresteia* first shows the cycle of crime punished by crime which must be repunished, and then seeks for some gleam of escape, some breaking of the endless chain of "evil duty." In the old order of earth and heaven there was no such escape. Each blow called for the return blow and must do so *ad infinitum*. But, according to Aeschylus, there is a new Ruler now in heaven, one who has both sinned and suffered and thereby grown wise. He is Zeus the Third Power, Zeus the Saviour, and his gift to mankind is the ability through suffering to Learn (pp. 7 f.)

At the opening of the *Agamemnon* we find Clytemnestra alienated from her husband and secretly befriended with his ancestral enemy, Aigisthos. The air is heavy and throbbing with hate; hate which is evil but has its due cause. Agamemnon, obeying the prophet Calchas, when the fleet lay storm-bound at Aulis, had given his own daughter, Iphigenia, as a human sacrifice. And if we ask how a sane man had consented to such an act, we are told of his gradual temptation; the deadly excuse offered by ancient superstition; and above

all, the fact that he had already inwardly accepted the great whole of which this horror was a part. At the first outset of his expedition against Troy there had appeared an omen, the bloody sign of two eagles devouring a mother-hare with her unborn young.... The question was thus put to the Kings and their prophet: Did they or did they not accept the sign, and wish to be those Eagles? And they had answered Yes. They would have their vengeance, their full and extreme victory, and were ready to pay the price. The sign once accepted, the prophet recoils from the consequences which, in prophetic vision, he sees following therefrom: but the decision has been taken, and the long tale of cruelty rolls on, culminating in the triumphant sack of Troy, which itself becomes not an assertion of Justice but a whirlwind of godless destruction. And through all these doings of fierce beasts and angry men the unseen Pity has been alive and watching, the Artemis who "abhors the Eagles' feast," the "Apollo or Pan or Zeus" who hears the crying of the robbed vulture; nay, if even the Gods were deaf, the mere "wrong of the dead" at Troy might waken, groping for some retribution upon the "Slayer of Many Men" (pp. 15, 20).

If we ask why men are so blind, seeking their welfare thus through incessant evil, Aeschylus will tell us that the cause lies in the infection of old sin, old cruelty. There is no doubt somewhere a [*Greek: prôtarchos hAtê* ], a "first blind deed of wrong," but in practice every wrong is the result of another. And the Children of Atreus are steeped to the lips in them. When the prophetess Cassandra, out of her first vague horror at the evil House, begins to grope towards some definite image, first and most haunting comes the sound of the weeping of two little children, murdered long ago, in a feud that was not theirs. From that point, more than any other, the Daemon or Genius of the House—more than its "Luck," a little less than its Guardian Angel—becomes an Alastor or embodied Curse, a "Red Slayer" which cries ever for peace and cleansing, but can seek them only in the same blind way, through vengeance, and, when that fails, then through more vengeance (p. 69).

This awful conception of a race intent upon its own wrongs, and blindly groping towards the very terror it is trying to avoid, is typified, as it were, in the Cassandra story. That daughter of Priam was beloved by Apollo, who gave her the power of true prophecy. In

some way that we know not, she broke her promise to the God; and, since his gift could not be recalled, he added to it the curse that, while she should always foresee and foretell the truth, none should believe her. The Cassandra scene is a creation beyond praise or criticism. The old scholiast speaks of the "pity and amazement" which it causes. The Elders who talk with her wish to believe, they try to understand, they are really convinced of Cassandra's powers. But the curse is too strong. The special thing which Cassandra tries again and again to say always eludes them, and they can raise no finger to prevent the disaster happening. And when it does happen they are, as they have described themselves, weak and very old, "dreams wandering in the daylight."

The characters of this play seem, in a sense, to arise out of the theme and consequently to have, amid all their dramatic solidity, a further significance which is almost symbolic. Cassandra is, as it were, the incarnation of that knowledge which Herodotus describes as the crown of sorrow, the knowledge which sees and warns and cannot help (Hdt. ix. 16). Agamemnon himself, the King of Kings, triumphant and doomed, is a symbol of pride and the fall of pride. We must not think of him as bad or specially cruel. The watchman loved him (ll. 34 f.), and the lamentations of the Elders over his death have a note of personal affection (pp. 66 ff.). But I suspect that Aeschylus, a believer in the mystic meaning of names, took the name Agamemnon to be a warning that [Greek: *Aga mimnei*], "the unseen Wrath abides." *Agâ*, of course, is not exactly wrath; it is more like Nemesis, the feeling that something is [Greek: *agan*], "too much," the condemnation of *Hubris* (pride or overgrowth) and of all things that are in excess. *Agâ* is sometimes called "the jealousy of God," but such a translation is not happy. It is not the jealousy, nor even the indignation, of a personal God, but the profound repudiation and reversal of *Hubris* which is the very law of the Cosmos. Through all the triumph of the conqueror, this *Agâ* abides.

The greatest and most human character of the whole play is Clytemnestra. She is conceived on the grand Aeschylean scale, a scale which makes even Lady Macbeth and Beatrice Cenci seem small; she is more the kinswoman of Brynhild. Yet she is full not only of character, but of subtle psychology. She is the first and leading example of that time-honoured ornament of the tragic stage, the sym-

pathetic, or semi-sympathetic, heroine-criminal. Aeschylus employs none of the devices of later playwrights to make her interesting. He admits, of course, no approach to a love-scene; he uses no sophisms; but he does make us see through Clytemnestra's eyes and feel through her passions. The agony of silent prayer in which, if my conception is right, we first see her, helps to interpret her speeches when they come; but every speech needs close study. She dare not speak sincerely or show her real feelings until Agamemnon is dead; and then she is practically a mad woman.

For I think here that there is a point which has not been observed. It is that Clytemnestra is conceived as being really "possessed" by the Daemon of the House when she commits her crime. Her statements on p. 69 are not empty metaphor. A careful study of the scene after the murder will show that she appears first "possessed" and almost insane with triumph, utterly dominating the Elders and leaving them no power to answer. Then gradually the unnatural force dies out from her. The deed that was first an ecstasy of delight becomes an "affliction" (pp. 72, 76). The strength that defied the world flags and changes into a longing for peace. She has done her work. She has purified the House of its madness; now let her go away and live out her life in quiet. When Aigisthos appears, and the scene suddenly becomes filled with the wrangling of common men, Clytemnestra fades into a long silence, from which she only emerges at the very end of the drama to pray again for Peace, and, strangest of all, to utter the entreaty: "Let us not stain ourselves with blood!" The splash of her husband's blood was visible on her face at the time. Had she in her trance-like state actually forgotten, or did she, even then, not feel that particular blood to be a stain?

To some readers it will seem a sort of irrelevance, or at least a blurring of the dramatic edge of this tragedy, to observe that the theme on which it is founded was itself the central theme both of Greek Tragedy and of Greek Religion. The fall of Pride, the avenging of wrong by wrong, is no new subject selected by Aeschylus. It forms both the commonest burden of the moralising lyrics in Greek tragedy and even of the tragic myths themselves; and recent writers have shown how the same idea touches the very heart of the traditional Greek religion. "The life of the Year-Daemon, who lies at the root of so many Greek gods and heroes, is normally a story of Pride

and Punishment. Each year arrives, waxes great, commits the sin of Hubris and must therefore die. It is the way of all Life. As an early philosopher expresses it, "All things pay retribution for their injustice one to another according to the ordinance of Time." [1]

[Footnote 1: See my *Four Stages of Greek Religion*, p. 47. Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy*, Chapter I. See also the fine pages on the Agamemnon in the same writer's *Thucydides Mythistoricus*, pp. 144, ff.

(E. Arnold 1907). G. M.]

To me this consideration actually increases the interest and beauty of the *Oresteia*, because it increases its greatness. The majestic art, the creative genius, the instinctive eloquence of these plays—that eloquence which is the mere despair of a translator—are all devoted to the expression of something which Aeschylus felt to be of tremendous import. It was not his discovery; but it was a truth of which he had an intense realization. It had become something which he must with all his strength bring to expression before he died, not in a spirit of self-assertion or of argument, like a discoverer, but as one devoted to something higher and greater than himself, in the spirit of an interpreter or prophet.

# AGAMEMNON

## CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

AGAMEMNON, *son of Atreus and King of Argos and Mycenae; Commander-in-Chief of the Greek armies in the War against Troy.*

CLYTEMNESTRA, *daughter of Tyndareus, sister of Helen; wife to Agamemnon.*

AIGISTHOS, *son of Thyestes, cousin and blood-enemy to Agamemnon lover to Clytemnestra.*

CASSANDRA, *daughter of Priam, King of Troy, a prophetess; now slave to Agamemnon.*

**A WATCHMAN.**

**A HERALD.**

CHORUS of Argive Elders, faithful to AGAMEMNON.

## CHARACTERS MENTIONED IN THE PLAY

MENELÂÛS, *brother to Agamemnon, husband of Helen, and King of Sparta.*

*The two sons of Atreus are called the Atreidae.*

HELEN, *\_most beautiful of women; daughter of Tyndareus, wife to MENELÂÛS; beloved and carried off by Paris.\_*

PARIS, *son of Priam, King of Troy, lover of Helen. Also called ALEXANDER.*

PRIAM, *the aged King of Troy.*

*The Greeks are also referred to as Achaians, Argives, Danaans; Troy is also called Ilium.*

*The play was produced in the archonship of Philocles (458 B.C.). The first prize was won by Aeschylus with the "Agamemnon", "Libation-Bearers", "Eumenides", and the Satyr Play "Proteus".*

## THE AGAMEMNON

*The Scene represents a space in front of the Palace of Agamemnon in Argos, with an Altar of Zeus in the centre and many other altars at the sides. On a high terrace of the roof stands a WATCHMAN. It is night.*

### WATCHMAN.

This waste of year-long vigil I have prayed  
God for some respite, watching elbow-stayed,  
As sleuthhounds watch, above the Atreidae's hall,  
Till well I know yon midnight festival  
Of swarming stars, and them that lonely go,  
Bearers to man of summer and of snow,  
Great lords and shining, throned in heavenly fire.

And still I await the sign, the beacon pyre  
That bears Troy's capture on a voice of flame  
Shouting o'erseas. So surely to her aim  
Cleaveth a woman's heart, man-passioned!  
And when I turn me to my bed—my bed  
Dew-drenched and dark and stumbling, to which near  
Cometh no dream nor sleep, but always Fear  
Breathes round it, warning, lest an eye once fain  
To close may close too well to wake again;  
Think I perchance to sing or troll a tune  
For medicine against sleep, the music soon  
Changes to sighing for the tale untold  
Of this house, not well mastered as of old.

Howbeit, may God yet send us rest, and light  
The flame of good news flashed across the night.

*[He is silent, watching. Suddenly at a distance in the night there is a glimmer of fire, increasing presently to a blaze.]*

Ha!

O kindler of the dark, O daylight birth  
Of dawn and dancing upon Argive earth  
For this great end! All hail! – What ho, within!  
What ho! Bear word to Agamemnon's queen  
To rise, like dawn, and lift in answer strong  
To this glad lamp her women's triumph-song,  
If verily, verily, Ilion's citadel  
Is fallen, as yon beacons flaming tell.

And I myself will tread the dance before  
All others; for my master's dice I score  
Good, and mine own to-night three sixes plain.

*[Lights begin to show in the Palace.*

Oh, good or ill, my hand shall clasp again  
My dear lord's hand, returning! Beyond that  
I speak not. A great ox hath laid his weight  
Across my tongue. But these stone walls know well,  
If stones had speech, what tale were theirs to tell.  
For me, to him that knoweth I can yet  
Speak; if another questions I forget.

*[Exit into the Palace. The women's "Ololûgê" or triumph-cry, is heard within and then repeated again and again further off in the City. Handmaids and Attendants come from the Palace, bearing torches, with which they kindle incense on the altars. Among them comes CLYTEMNESTRA, who throws herself on her knees at the central Altar in an agony of prayer.*

*Presently from the further side of the open space appear the CHORUS of ELDERS and move gradually into position in front of the Palace. The day begins to dawn.*

## **CHORUS.**

Ten years since Ilion's righteous foes,  
The Atreidae strong,  
Menelaüs and eke Agamemnon arose,  
Two thrones, two sceptres, yoked of God;  
And a thousand galleys of Argos trod

The seas for the righting of wrong;  
And wrath of battle about them cried,  
As vultures cry,  
Whose nest is plundered, and up they fly  
In anguish lonely, eddying wide,  
Great wings like oars in the waste of sky,  
Their task gone from them, no more to keep  
Watch o'er the vulture babes asleep.  
But One there is who heareth on high  
Some Pan or Zeus, some lost Apollo—  
That keen bird-throated suffering cry  
Of the stranger wronged in God's own sky;  
And sendeth down, for the law transgressed,  
The Wrath of the Feet that follow.

So Zeus the Watcher of Friend and Friend,  
Zeus who Prevaileth, in after quest  
For One Belovèd by Many Men  
On Paris sent the Atridae twain;  
Yea, sent him dances before the end  
For his bridal cheer,  
Wrestlings heavy and limbs forespent  
For Greek and Trojan, the knee earth-bent,  
The bloody dust and the broken spear.  
He knoweth, that which is here is here,  
And that which Shall Be followeth near;  
He seeketh God with a great desire,  
He heaps his gifts, he essays his pyre  
With torch below and with oil above,  
With tears, but never the wrath shall move  
Of the Altar cold that rejects his fire.

We saw the Avengers go that day,  
And they left us here; for our flesh is old  
And serveth not; and these staves uphold  
A strength like the strength of a child at play.  
For the sap that springs in the young man's hand  
And the valour of age, they have left the land.

And the passing old, while the dead leaf blows  
And the old staff gropeth his three-foot way,  
Weak as a babe and alone he goes,  
A dream left wandering in the day.

*[Coming near the Central Altar they see CLYTEMNESTRA, who is still rapt in prayer.]*

But thou, O daughter of Tyndareus,  
Queen Clytemnestra, what need? What news?  
What tale or tidings hath stirred thy mood  
To send forth word upon all our ways  
For incensed worship? Of every god  
That guards the city, the deep, the high,  
Gods of the mart, gods of the sky,  
The altars blaze.

One here, one there,  
To the skyey night the firebrands flare,  
Drunk with the soft and guileless spell  
Of balm of kings from the inmost cell.  
Tell, O Queen, and reject us not,  
All that can or that may be told,  
And healer be to this aching thought,  
Which one time hovereth, evil-cold,  
And then from the fires thou kindest  
Will Hope be kindled, and hungry Care  
Fall back for a little while, nor tear  
The heart that beateth below my breast.

*[CLYTEMNESTRA rises silently, as though unconscious of their presence, and goes into the House. The CHORUS take position and begin their first Stasimon, or Standing-song,*

**CHORUS.**

*(The sign seen on the way; Eagles tearing a hare with young.)*

It is ours to tell of the Sign of the War-way given,  
To men more strong,  
(For a life that is kin unto ours yet breathes from heaven  
A spell, a Strength of Song:)  
How the twin-throned Might of Achaia, one Crown divided  
Above all Greeks that are,  
With avenging hand and spear upon Troy was guided  
By the Bird of War.  
'Twas a King among birds to each of the Kings of the Sea,  
One Eagle black, one black but of fire-white tail,  
By the House, on the Spear-hand, in station that all might see;  
And they tore a hare, and the life in her womb that grew,  
Yea, the life un-lived and the races unrun they slew.  
*Sorrow, sing sorrow: but good prevail, prevail!*

*(How Calchas read the sign; his Vision of the Future.)*

And the War-seer wise, as he looked on the Atreid Yoke  
Twain-tempered, knew  
Those fierce hare-renders the lords of his host; and spoke,  
Reading the omen true.  
"At the last, the last, this Hunt hunteth Ilion down,  
Yea, and before the wall  
Violent division the fulness of land and town  
Shall waste withal;  
If only God's eye gloom not against our gates,  
And the great War-curb of Troy, fore-smitten, fail.  
For Pity lives, and those wingèd Hounds she hates,  
Which tore in the Trembler's body the unborn beast.  
And Artemis abhorreth the eagles' feast."  
*Sorrow, sing sorrow: but good prevail, prevail!*

*(He prays to Artemis to grant the fulfilment of the Sign, but, as his vision increases, he is afraid and calls on Paian, the Healer, to hold her back.)*

"Thou beautiful One, thou tender lover  
Of the dewy breath of the Lion's child;  
Thou the delight, through den and cover,  
Of the young life at the breast of the wild,

Yet, oh, fulfill, fulfill The sign of the Eagles' Kill!  
 Be the vision accepted, albeit horrible....  
 But I-ê, I-ê! Stay her, O Paian, stay!  
 For lo, upon other evil her heart she setteth,  
     Long wastes of wind, held ship and unventured sea,  
 On, on, till another Shedding of Blood be wrought:  
 They kill but feast not; they pray not; the law is broken;  
 Strife in the flesh, and the bride she obeyeth not,  
 And beyond, beyond, there abideth in wrath reawoken—  
 It plotteth, it haunteth the house, yea, it never forgetteth—  
     Wrath for a child to be."  
 So Calchas, reading the wayside eagles' sign,  
     Spake to the Kings, blessings and words of bale;  
     And like his song be thine,  
*Sorrow, sing sorrow: but good prevail, prevail!*

*(Such religion belongs to old and barbarous gods, and brings no peace. I  
 turn to Zeus, who has shown man how to Learn by Suffering.)*

Zeus! Zeus, whate'er He be,  
 If this name He love to hear  
 This He shall be called of me.  
 Searching earth and sea and air

Refuge nowhere can I find  
 Save Him only, if my mind  
 Will cast off before it die  
 The burden of this vanity.

One there was who reigned of old,  
 Big with wrath to brave and blast,  
 Lo, his name is no more told!  
 And who followed met at last  
 His Third-thrower, and is gone.  
 Only they whose hearts have known  
 Zeus, the Conqueror and the Friend,  
 They shall win their vision's end;

Zeus the Guide, who made man turn  
Thought-ward, Zeus, who did ordain  
Man by Suffering shall Learn.  
So the heart of him, again  
Aching with remembered pain,  
Bleeds and sleepeth not, until  
Wisdom comes against his will.  
'Tis the gift of One by strife  
Lifted to the throne of life.

*(AGAMEMNON accepted the sign. Then came long delay, and storm while the fleet lay at Aulis.)*

So that day the Elder Lord,  
Marshal of the Achaian ships,  
Strove not with the prophet's word,  
Bowed him to his fate's eclipse,  
When with empty jars and lips  
Parched and seas impassable  
Fate on that Greek army fell,  
Fronting Chalcis as it lay,  
By Aulis in the swirling bay.

*(Till at last Calchas answered that Artemis was wroth and demanded the death of AGAMEMNON'S daughter. The King's doubt and grief.)*

And winds, winds blew from Strymon River,  
Unharboured, starving, winds of waste endeavour,  
Man-blinding, pitiless to cord and bulwark,  
And the waste of days was made long, more long,  
Till the flower of Argos was aghast and withered;  
Then through the storm rose the War-seer's song,  
And told of medicine that should tame the tempest,  
But bow the Princes to a direr wrong.  
Then "Artemis" he whispered, he named the name;  
And the brother Kings they shook in the hearts of them,  
And smote on the earth their staves, and the tears came.

But the King, the elder, hath found voice and spoken:  
"A heavy doom, sure, if God's will were broken;  
But to slay mine own child, who my house delighteth,  
Is that not heavy? That her blood should flow  
On her father's hand, hard beside an altar?  
My path is sorrow wheresoe'er I go.  
Shall Agamemnon fail his ships and people,  
And the hosts of Hellas melt as melts the snow?  
They cry, they thirst, for a death that shall break the spell,  
For a Virgin's blood: 'tis a rite of old, men tell.  
And they burn with longing. — O God may the end be well!"

*(But ambition drove him, till he consented to the sin of slaying his daughter, Iphigenia, as a sacrifice.)*

To the yoke of Must-Be he bowed him slowly,  
And a strange wind within his bosom tossed,  
A wind of dark thought, unclean, unholy;  
And he rose up, daring to the uttermost.  
For men are boldened by a Blindness, straying  
Toward base desire, which brings grief hereafter,  
Yea, and itself is grief;  
So this man hardened to his own child's slaying,  
As help to avenge him for a woman's laughter  
And bring his ships relief!

Her "Father, Father," her sad cry that lingered,  
Her virgin heart's breath they held all as naught,  
Those bronze-clad witnesses and battle-hungered;  
And there they prayed, and when the prayer was wrought  
He charged the young men to uplift and bind her,  
As ye lift a wild kid, high above the altar,  
Fierce-huddling forward, fallen, clinging sore  
To the robe that wrapt her; yea, he bids them hinder  
The sweet mouth's utterance, the cries that falter,  
— His curse for evermore! —