

# AGAMEMNON at the Getty Villa

## FROM DIRECTOR STEPHEN WADSWORTH

### THE WORLD OF AGAMEMNON

Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, consisting of three plays—*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*—is the only complete cycle that survives from the fifth century B.C., and *Agamemnon* is arguably the earliest dramatic masterpiece of Western culture. Aeschylus's audiences, who watched all three plays in one day, were intimately familiar with the historical and cultural references in the plays. Twenty-six centuries later, we offer these notes to orient our audiences. There are many versions of most of the stories referred to in *Agamemnon*; we follow Aeschylus's version in these notes.

### AGAMEMNON

**Agamemnon** ruled Mycenae from the city of Argos. He married **Clytaemnestra**, mortal daughter of Zeus and Leda, and had three children, **Iphigenia**, **Electra**, and **Orestes**. All five family members were the subjects of dramas by the three great playwrights of the fifth century B.C. in Athens—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Iphigenia and Electra are not featured in Aeschylus's script, but they appear in this adaptation, in the chorus.

### THE HOUSE OF ATREUS

Agamemnon's grandfather **Pelops** won his wife in a chariot race by cheating, then betrayed and killed his co-conspirator, who as he lay dying, cursed the next generation of Pelops's family. Pelops's two sons, **Atreus** and **Thyestes**, inherited this curse and lived it out in a grisly power struggle. Thyestes seduced Atreus's wife and disputed the throne of Argos. Defeated and exiled, he returned with his children as a supplicant. Atreus welcomed his brother back with a celebratory feast, at which he served Thyestes a dish of his own slaughtered sons. Upon realizing what he had eaten, Thyestes cursed Atreus and all his descendants. Atreus's two sons were Agamemnon and **Menelaus**, who married Clytaemnestra's sister, **Helen**, popularly known as Helen of Troy. You'd think marrying Helen of Troy would be curse enough, but Thyestes' curse chased Atreus's sons all their lives.

### AEGISTHUS

Thyestes, after losing his children and cursing Atreus, sired another son, **Aegisthus**, whom he reared and trained to seize the throne of Argos from Agamemnon. During the Trojan War, Aegisthus formed an alliance with Clytaemnestra, moved in with her, and forged with her a plot against Agamemnon—a plot that suited them both.

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### **THE TROJAN WAR**

A magnificently fortified city-state in what is now western Turkey, Troy was ruled by King **Priam**, husband of Hecuba and father of—among others—**Cassandra** and **Paris**. The god Apollo had tried to rape Cassandra, but she resisted successfully, and he cursed her with a gift of prophecy that no one would believe until the day she died. When it was foretold that Paris would bring Troy's destruction, Priam isolated the prince on a mountaintop. The three most powerful goddesses—Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite—visited the handsome Paris there and prevailed upon him to say which of them was the most beautiful. Hera offered him all of Eurasia, Athena offered him victory over the Greeks, and Aphrodite offered him the most beautiful woman. Paris went for the beautiful woman, and this was Helen. On a visit to Menelaus's palace, Paris fell in love with her, and they escaped to Troy. Bent on revenge, Menelaus and his brother Agamemnon rallied all the Greek armies to the port of Aulis and planned to sail for Troy.

### **IPHIGENIA AT AULIS**

The goddess Artemis opposed the Greek attack on Troy and whipped up hostile winds, making it impossible for the Greeks to sail. The armies languished on the beach, but Agamemnon dug in his heels, reluctant to send them home and fail his brother's offended honor. Artemis ultimately offered him a deal: she would give him favorable winds if he would sacrifice his own daughter. Agamemnon took the deal, lured Clytaemnestra and his children to Aulis with the promise that Iphigenia was to marry the great hero Achilles. And there in Aulis the family was torn apart—Iphigenia slaughtered, Clytaemnestra betrayed, both parents heartbroken, and Agamemnon gone for the ten-year siege at Troy. Thyestes' curse was in full swing. Clytaemnestra went back to Argos and ruled there throughout the long war in Troy.

### **THE GODS**

Many of the Greeks' myths show their gods as a capricious, sensual lot, playing rough with one another and toying with human life. The rules of engagement were clearly laid out: when human beings poached on the prerogatives of the gods, they would be punished. They were to live their daily lives, worship, make sacrifices, and leave the fates of others to the gods. When they took fate into their own hands, they would be punished. Hence an essential tenet of Athenian life, the rule of the golden mean: live life always in moderation, do not indulge in excess of any kind. Even excessive health, wealth, or other good fortune, says the chorus in *Agamemnon*, can lead to trouble, "the reach for power can recoil." And God forbid you should destroy another country and deface its temples. Zeus, king of the gods and god of hospitality (among other things) plays a key role in *Agamemnon* as the people of Argos ponder the horror of the Trojan War: the Trojan prince Paris betrayed the hospitality of Menelaus when he stole Helen away, and Zeus's revenge incites the people to anger and acts of war—all of it excessive, of course. They lose their heads and overstep the bounds, taking the fates of others into their own hands.

## THE TRAGIC HERO

The tragic hero *must* take matters into his or her own hands when circumstances require action. The tragic hero must act, for whatever reason—to protect his people, to uphold honor, to get justice. Yet, as the great mantra line of *Agamemnon* declares, "He who acts must suffer." How can you take decisive action in dire circumstances *without* stepping over the golden mean and incurring the disapproval of the gods? Moreover, the ancient system of justice—an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a life for a life, Troy for Helen—equated justice with "excessive" action and left humans no choice but to overstep the bounds if justice demanded it. Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra feel they have no choice but to act, to take life, and so they must suffer. Later in the *Oresteia* cycle Orestes and Electra decide to act, and they too must suffer toward the truth.

## THE ORESTEIA

What is the truth toward which these characters must suffer? There is a growing awareness through *Agamemnon* that the old system of justice doesn't work, can't work, that it makes of life a vicious cycle, that true justice must be something else. Clytaemnestra exits the play with a yearning: "If we could end the suffering, how we would rejoice." Aeschylus's ultimate purpose in the *Oresteia* is to encourage his characters—humans and gods alike—and his audience, to debate the reality before them, to search for new truths, to discover a way to end the suffering. In the second play Orestes and Electra inherit the tragic-hero mantle as they avenge their father with an act of brutality. In the third play Orestes, hounded by the Furies (the ancient goddesses of justice), finds in the goddess Athena a sympathetic, dispassionate spirit, and before our eyes she renovates justice, calling on the Furies to defend their position, on Orestes to defend his, and on a group of citizens to vote for one or the other. Athena's invention of the jury puts an end to the vicious cycle of retributive justice. She invites the old goddesses (who have lost the case) to play a new role in a new kind of society, and with them, leads the cast and the public out of the theater and through the streets of the forever-changed city. It is one of the most joyous, radical, and triumphant conclusions in world drama, especially after the terrible tragedies and seemingly futile suffering of the first two plays.

## AESCHYLUS

The *Oresteia* cycle reflects the golden age of Athens in the fifth century B.C.—a flourishing of independent thinking, democratic culture, and artistic achievement in which the theater was a central forum. In the context of a religious festival, the citizenry gathered in the amphitheater for an event of equal parts political meditation, civic engagement and aesthetic transport. In the *Oresteia*, art and political action are inextricable. And its political content is multilayered. For example Aeschylus, veteran of the recent Persian Wars, which had traumatized the Athenians and at one point even cost them their city, engages his audience in a complex rumination on the costs of war. The Athenians had won these wars but lost so many and so much, and *Agamemnon* hooks their ambivalence unsparingly. Aeschylus

launches the play with a densely languaged, morally knotty, oppressive sequence and challenges his audience no less than his characters to debate the issues and find the truth. He is a master of ambivalence and celebrates the fallibilities and uncertainties of his characters as much as, or perhaps even more than their strengths.

### **ROBERT FAGLES**

The great translator and poet of this version of *Agamemnon* described Aeschylus's writing to me thus: "His language in the first play is like magma, like a hostile, impassable landscape through which the characters must struggle in their hunger for resolution and the truth." Bob Fagles, who died in March of this year, translated Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Sophocles' *The Three Theban Plays*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*, as well as the *Oresteia* plays—all cornerstone epics of western European culture. His muscular, biting language has in itself what historian Thomas Cahill calls "a gorgeous strength capable of burnishing each detail to brilliance." I worked with him on the *Oresteia* for several years, and he continued to search for the truth of the plays as we took it to the stage in Berkeley (2001), always interested in adapting his text with me so that it might suit the actors at hand and find its mark. We miss him and salute him with this investiture of the ever-changing *Agamemnon*.

—Stephen Wadsworth

**[All text taken from the program for *Agamemnon*, at the Getty Villa September 4 – 27, 2008.]**

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### **MEDIA CONTACT:**

Mike Winder  
Getty Communications  
310-440-6471  
[mwinder@getty.edu](mailto:mwinder@getty.edu)