

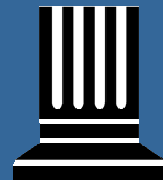




Aeschylus

Agamemnon

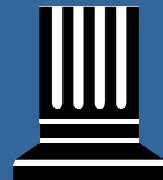
- Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is the first tragedy in the *Oresteia* trilogy
 - in *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra kills her husband Agamemnon when he comes back from Troy in triumph
 - in the next play of the trilogy (*The Libation-Bearers*), Agamemnon's son Orestes returns and murders his mother Clytemnestra in revenge
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Aeschylus

Agamemnon

- in the final play of the *Oresteia* trilogy (*The Eumenides*), Orestes is put on trial and acquitted of Clytemnestra's murder
- this trilogy is Aeschylus' greatest work
- it was composed only two years or so before his death
- this shows that he stayed active in theatre and was a vital creative force well into later life


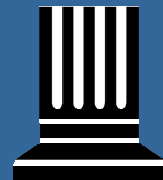




Aeschylus

Agamemnon



- not only did Aeschylus write and choreograph *The Oresteia* but he acted in it at its premiere
 - most likely, he played Clytemnestra, the main character in *Agamemnon*
 - even though there are no trialogues in the play, the dramatic action requires that there be at least two other actors
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Aeschylus

Agamemnon

- one actor must play Clytemnestra (the protagonist's role), one must play Agamemnon and one must play Cassandra
- these three characters appear on stage in the one scene together
- a breakdown of the division of roles among actors shows why this is so



Aeschylus

Agamemnon



Actor 1

Actor 2

Actor 3

Watchman

Prologue: The long wait for Agamemnon to return

CHORAL ODE: The Chorus remembers Iphigenia

Clytemnestra

The Beacon Speech: The Greeks have won at Troy

CHORAL ODE: The Chorus thanks the gods for victory

Clytemnestra Herald

A Report from Troy: The Greeks are returning

CHORAL ODE: The Chorus remembers Helen

Clytemnestra Agamemnon (Cassandra)*

Clytemnestra greets Agamemnon

*Cassandra does not speak during this scene



Aeschylus

Agamemnon

Actor 1

Clytemnestra

Actor 2

Agamemnon

Actor 3

(Cassandra)*

Clytemnestra goes inside the palace with Agamemnon

CHORAL ODE: The Chorus has a sense of foreboding doom

Clytemnestra

(Cassandra)*

Clytemnestra tries to make Cassandra come inside

Cassandra

Cassandra foresees her own and Agamemnon's deaths

CHORAL ODE: The Chorus hears Agamemnon being murdered

Clytemnestra

Clytemnestra (on the *ekkyklema*) gloats over Agamemnon's body

Clytemnestra Aegisthus


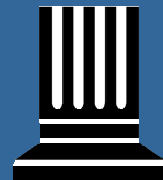
Aegisthus and the Chorus quarrel



Aeschylus

Agamemnon




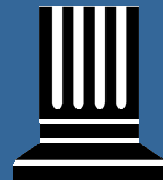
- the play opens with a servant—a **Watchman**—waiting for his master Agamemnon's return from Troy
 - the Watchman speaks from the roof of the palace (the *skene* building)
 - the time is dawn—plays at the Dionysia began when the sun rose
 - in the darkness, the Watchman's voice sounds as if the palace itself is speaking
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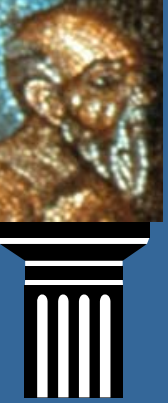


Aeschylus

Agamemnon



- the chorus of **Argive elders** enters next
 - it is composed of elders because old men and young boys were the only males left in Argos during the Trojan War
 - once the chorus enters, it spends the entirety of the play on stage singing and dancing
 - and helping no one at all!
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Aeschylus

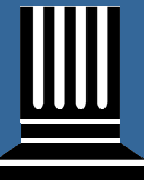
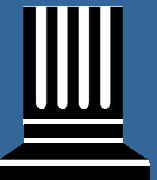
Agamemnon



- Aeschylus' odes are densely packed with imagery and poetic expressions:

Since the young vigor that urges
inward to the heart
is frail as age, no warcraft yet perfect,
while beyond age, leaf
withered, man goes three footed
no stronger than a child is,
a dream that falters in daylight.

Aeschylus, Agamemnon 76-83


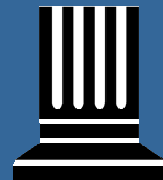




Aeschylus

Agamemnon




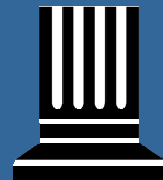
- at some point during the first choral ode, Clytemnestra enters
 - it is difficult to determine her precise movements in this play, which is unusual in Greek tragedy
 - normally, all characters' entrances and exits are announced
 - by withholding these announcements, Aeschylus is showing her sneakiness
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Aeschylus

Agamemnon



- a **Herald** reports that the Greeks are returning
 - Clytemnestra tells him to leave and send in Agamemnon
 - the audience knows that, if Clytemnestra meets Agamemnon in the play, this actor will have to play him
 - this is a highly sophisticated technique called **metatheatre**
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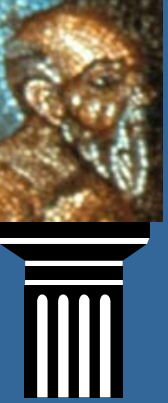
Aeschylus

Agamemnon

- when Clytemnestra finally meets Agamemnon, her speech is full of irony and concealed rage at her husband:

Had Agamemnon taken all
the wounds the tale whereof was carried home to me,
he had been cut full of gashes like a fishing net.

(Agamemnon 866-872)



Aeschylus

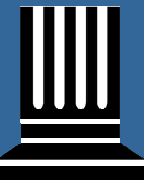
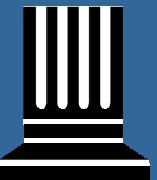
Agamemnon



- when Clytemnestra finally meets Agamemnon, her speech is full of irony and concealed rage at her husband:

If he had died each time that rumor told his death, he must have been some triple-bodied Geryon back from the dead with threefold cloak of earth upon his body, and killed once for every shape assumed.

(Agamemnon 866-872)



Aeschylus

Agamemnon


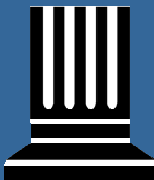
- to test whether Agamemnon knows about her plans and to see for herself how blindly self-absorbed he is, Clytemnestra rolls out a **purple carpet** for him to walk on as he enters the palace
- the purple carpet is actually a collection of tapestries, i.e. textile artwork from inside the palace



Aeschylus

Agamemnon



- the question Clytemnestra is asking herself is: Will Agamemnon commit *hubris* by walking on works of art?
 - “as Priam might have, if he had won”?
 - the stripe of purple running up the stage into the palace is a symbol foreshadowing the blood that is about to pour out of the door
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Aeschylus

Agamemnon


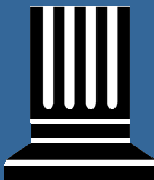
- Agamemnon proves to be as full of himself as he is in Homer and treads the carpet as he proceeds inside the palace
- he walks on a symbol of his own blood!
- but first he makes Clytemnestra agree to take Cassandra inside the palace
- concubines are not a Greek custom so this is a terrible insult to his wife



Aeschylus

Agamemnon




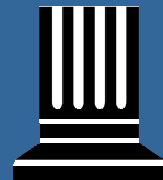
- but Clytemnestra is so pleased her husband does not know about her plan to kill him that she ignores the insult Cassandra represents to her wifely dignity and exults:
The sea is there, and who shall drain its yield? It breeds precious as silver, ever of itself renewed, the purple ooze wherein our garments shall be dipped. And by God's grace this house keeps full sufficiency of all. Poverty is a thing beyond its thought.
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Aeschylus

Agamemnon




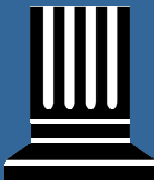
- Aeschylus' treatment of **Cassandra** is one of best aspects of the play
 - at first, she does not speak
 - the original Greek audience would surely have concluded that this part is being played by a mute actor
 - especially after the next scene when Clytemnestra tries to make her come inside the palace
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Aeschylus

Agamemnon




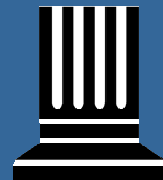
- but after remaining silent for two scenes and an entire choral ode, suddenly Cassandra not only speaks but sings!
 - the actor playing Cassandra at the premiere was, no doubt, a famous singer in the day whom Aeschylus has kept hidden thus far behind Cassandra's mask and costume
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Aeschylus

Agamemnon




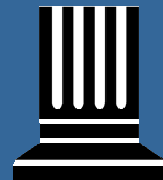
- Cassandra can see the future and knows that Clytemnestra is going to kill her as well as Agamemnon
 - she sees all time as happening at once
 - for instance, when she approaches the doors of the palace, she sees and smells the flesh of children roasting
 - they are Thyestes' sons eaten by him a generation before in that very palace
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Aeschylus

Agamemnon




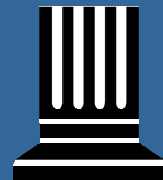
- in a brilliant stroke of theatre, Aeschylus shows how Cassandra can speak the future plainly but not be believed
 - her first words in Greek come in a wild, off-kilter meter called **dochmiacs** which make her sound insane
 - but as the scene progresses, she calms down and begins to speak more clearly in a normal cadence (**iambus**)
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Aeschylus

Agamemnon



- but the clarity of her words comes too late to convince the chorus that her prophetic vision is valid
 - the chorus has already made up its mind that she is a madwoman and so they do not listen to her
 - thus, Aeschylus shows how Cassandra can speak the truth but not convince anyone to believe her
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Aeschylus

Agamemnon

- in frustration, Cassandra throws down her staff and tears off her holy garland and stomps on it
- this is an act of heresy against the god Apollo
- she can no longer bear living and turns to enter the palace, in full knowledge she will be killed inside



Aeschylus

Agamemnon



- her last words are poignant:

Yet once more will I speak, and not this time my own death's threnody. I call upon the Sun in prayer against that ultimate shining when the avengers strike these monsters down in blood, that they avenge as well one simple slave who died, a small thing, lightly killed.

(Agamemnon 1327-1330)





Aeschylus

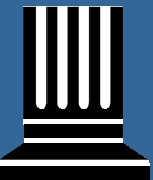
Agamemnon



- her last words are poignant:

Alas poor men, their destiny. When all goes well,
a shadow will overthrow it. If it be unkind,
one stroke of a wet sponge wipes all the picture out;
and that is far the most unhappy thing of all.

(Agamemnon 1327-1330)


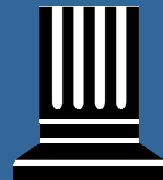




Aeschylus

Agamemnon



- almost immediately, the chorus hears Agamemnon's cries as Clytemnestra is butchering him in his bath
 - the chorus is confused and feeble, and they do nothing but debate what to do
 - the doors of the palace open to reveal Clytemnestra (on the *ekkyklema*) covered in blood, gloating in triumph over Agamemnon's body
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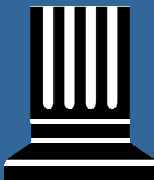

Aeschylus

Agamemnon



Clytemnestra:

I struck him twice. In two great cries of agony he buckled at the knees and fell. When he was down I struck him the third blow, in thanks and reverence to Zeus the lord of dead men underneath the ground. Thus he went down, and the life struggled out of him; and as he died he spattered me with the dark red and violent driven rain of bitter savored blood to make me glad, as gardens stand among the showers of God in glory at the birthtime of the buds.



Aeschylus

Agamemnon

- the play ends with Clytemnestra singing a triumphant dirge (*kommos*) over Agamemnon's corpse
- in the last scene, Aegisthus appears and quarrels with the chorus
- the final lines are *trochaics* (DUM-da) which show an increased pace of action