

How far do you feel that Aeschylus intended us to feel that
Agamemnon deserved his fate?

In his tragic play, 'Agamemnon', Aeschylus presents the audience with a variety of interesting protagonists, one of the main ones being the great king himself. Over the course of the play, we learn of Agamemnon's terrible fate as events, both past and present, are unfolded to us. The audience may have greatly mixed views on whether Agamemnon truly did deserve this fate. Was it only fitting, considering his character and actions, that he met such a bloody, gruesome end? Or were there other factors, which were beyond his control, to be taken into consideration?

It is fair to say that Agamemnon does display characteristics, which could be antagonistic to the gods, consequently making him far less favourable to them. In this way, one might say it is only fair that the gods should punish him, if his behaviour merits it. He is, for example, an extremely boastful man. Upon his arrival at the palace, he tells of how he won the war, and brought the city of Troy to ruins. Although he salutes his gods, Agamemnon does not praise them as his betters. Instead he calls upon them almost as if they were his equals, his 'divine counterparts'. By saying "I salute my gods, my accomplices who brought me home and won my rights from Priam's Troy" Agamemnon almost reduces the gods to his lieutenants on the battlefield; to mere pawns in his great enterprise, not the all powerful beings who engineered the whole thing. So we can see that Agamemnon shows great disregard and even blasphemy towards the gods.

Another example of the king wanting to set himself above the gods, is when Clytaemnestra cunningly induces him to walk up to the palace on the sacred crimson tapestries. Although Agamemnon realises it is wrong, saying, "give me the tributes of a man and not a god", he is very proud of his achievements, and feels he should be worshipped as a god. Here, Agamemnon shows tremendous arrogance, which the ancient Greeks called 'hubris'. He displays hubris a great deal in his speeches, particularly in his opening speech. He is also blasphemous to the gods of Troy, who, although not his own gods, should not have been treated with such flippant disrespect. He says:

" The storms of ruin live!

Her last dying breath, rising up from the ashes

sending us gales of incense rich in gold."

Agamemnon was not content with simply burning Troy to the ground, he also had to 'rape' the city of all its wealth, overturning its temples and sacred places. He also says "we were right" and is steadfast in his conviction that he only took what was rightfully his. In this Agamemnon shows how immoderate and avaricious he really is. We feel that he has overstepped the mark of decency, and does indeed deserve to be punished for his wicked deeds. We soon learn that not only has Agamemnon purged and plundered the holy places of Troy, but also he has kidnapped Cassandra, a high priestess and favourite of her gods. Once again, by taking her back to Argos as his lover, the king has shown his arrogance.

As well as his callous pride, another of Agamemnon's distinctive characteristics is his determination. He will allow nothing to get in his way, nor will he forsake an opportunity for glory. Agamemnon was even prepared to sacrifice his own daughter, Iphigeneia, in order to procure the good winds he needed to sail to

Troy with his army. On page 110, the chorus says, "Yes, he had the heart to sacrifice his daughter". We are horrified that a father could show such cold detachment towards his own child, his own blood, and we agree with Clytaemnestra when she says, "Act for act, wound for wound. By the sword you did your work and by the sword you die." Indeed, one might say that if a life has been taken it can only be 'repaid' with another life, or as the Bible says "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth". Thus, we feel no sympathy towards Agamemnon upon his death, in fact, we almost pity Clytemnaestra, and although her act is not laudable, we can see how it is fitting and justifiable.

Similarly, although Agamemnon is loved by his people, and they are glad of his return, many feel bitterly towards him for taking their men folk away to die in the cause of 'another man's wife'. To make matters worse, Agamemnon shows no compassion for his people, who are in mourning for the loss of their loved ones. He is cold and inconsiderate, showing no respect for the many who gave their lives under his command.

Although there are numerous examples to argue that Agamemnon's downfall was bought about by his own hand, there are also many arguments for the opposite side. One might argue that although he did not always display the virtues and good grace expected of a king, Agamemnon was doomed to failure from the very beginning through absolutely no fault of his own. His unfortunate background, and a tragic sequence of events were bound to lead him along the road to ruin. Therefore, we could say that Agamemnon's fate was unfair, because it was totally beyond his control. His cruel destiny had been planned long before he was born and there was nothing he could do to prevent it.

Agamemnon and his brother Menelaus, were the sons of Atreus, king of Mycenae. When Atreus' brother Thyestes seduced his wife and contested his right to the throne, Atreus exacted vengeance in a horrific way. He murdered Thyestes's children, and served up their flesh in a stew for their father to eat. When Thyestes found out, he fled into exile with his one remaining son, Aegisthus. It was believed that bloody events such as these were caused by a curse upon the house of Atreus. This curse would continue to punish their bloodline, being passed down through the generations. Clytaemnestra describes it as a demon, which lives in the house and causes all their troubles. She says:

"The spirit lives within me,
our savage ancient spirit of revenge.
In return for Atreus' brutal feast
he kills his perfect son"

We feel great pity for Agamemnon; he should not have been punished for the wrongdoings of his father and his ancestors. There was also a saying in ancient Greece that 'the sins of the father are visited upon the son'. Atreus committed a wicked crime, and so naturally, his sons would inherit his evil streak. The chorus even says "a curse burns bright on crime, full-blown the father's crimes will blossom, burst into the sons". Agamemnon had no choice in the matter, and because of this, we feel he did not deserve his fate. However, one might question Agamemnon's helplessness and innocence with the argument that, although he had no choice in his parentage, he did have the choices of free will. He did not need to carry on the murderous traditions of his father's house.

Although we condemn Agamemnon's decision to sacrifice his daughter, to some extent we can sympathise with him. He faced a great dilemma at Aulis. On one hand, he had been ordered to go to Troy and take revenge on Paris, by Zeus.

However, in order to carry out Zeus commands, he first needed to appease the goddess Artemis with a sacrifice before she would give them fair winds to sail to Troy. We greatly pity Agamemnon, who loses out either way. If he does not go to Troy he will be severely punished by Zeus, but at the same time he will have to sacrifice Iphigeneia, his own flesh and blood.

Similarly, we can defend Agamemnon's course of action in Troy. It was not his fault that so many men died. After all, they were fighting in a war and knew perfectly well that every second spent on the battlefield put their lives at risk. Even the king himself was prepared to die for the cause. Indeed, we can see some sense of justice in Agamemnon, amongst his multitude of undesirable characteristics. He knew that Paris had done wrong, and that he needed to be punished. However, the innocent people of Troy did also suffer at the merciless hands of Agamemnon.

In conclusion, I would say that Aeschylus has presented the audience with a mixture of factors, and we can see how often they are interlinked. The argument that although the house of Atreus was cursed, but Agamemnon still had a choice to do right or wrong is the perfect example of this. We can see that in some ways the king wholly deserved his fate, and yet in others there was little he could do to prevent it. It is up to us to make the final decision. Personally, I think that Agamemnon would have fallen under the curse of his father's house at any rate, even if he had been a more prudent king. He did not need to display such arrogance in the face of the gods, nor did he need to 'add insult to injury' by plundering all of Troy, once he had brought her and her people to their knees. In this way it is true to say that to some degree his own success was his undoing. However, I think that in spite of all his wrongdoings and unacceptable behaviour, providence had decreed Agamemnon's unfair fate long before there was anything he could do to change it.