

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

AGAMEMNON

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Agamemnon (in Racine's *Iphigenie*) **closed**

Overview The underlying theme of the play is an event diversely scripted in Greek mythology. As Euripides has it, in his *Iphigenia* (408 B.C.), the Greek fleet is stalled at Aulis, on its way to Troy—to begin defending Helen's honor. There is no wind, to drive the ships' sails, and to create this wind the gods demand the sacrifice of the daughter of Agamemnon, commander-in-chief of the Greek forces at Troy. The ancient Greek narrator, Pausanias (2d cent. A.D.) creates a solution—the one Racine uses—to the dilemma of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, whose nobility of spirit reveals her ready to give herself up for the Greek cause. That solution involves the substitution of a second sacrificial princess, in place of our beloved Iphigenie.

Character Agamemnon's character is closed, defeatist, and bumbling. Charged with leading the Greek forces against Troy, he is brought to a halt at the Greek port of Aulis, by a god-sent command that he must first sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenie, before the deadly calm breaks, and there is again wind. Given his closed character, Agamemnon is unable to share this terrible dilemma with his wife (Clytemnestra) and his daughter (Iphigenie), but rather decides to trick them into coming to Aulis, by declaring to them that Achilles wants to marry Iphigenie, in Aulis, before he takes off for Troy. The fall out from this deception is disastrous, for Agamemnon knows nothing of Achilles' planning, and furthermore will soon decide to prevent the arrival of the family from home. The fateful comedy of errors, created by Agamemnon, quickly turns the drama upside down. Et voila! We are still in Act I. Can you see why we call this Agamemnon bumbling? Closed is the word too, if by that we mean 'unable to communicate.'

Parallels Homer's own Agamemnon, the prototype of Racine's, shares with Racine's hero an inability to communicate, as we might put it today. Faced with a major kerfuffle, the fury of pride-wounded Achilles, at the opening of the *Iliad*, Homer's 'hero' has no creative sense of how to deal with other people; he is closed. Euripides, the master of psychology among the Greek tragedians, creates many 'heroes'—Jason (in *Medea*) and Pentheus (in the *Bacchae*) are good examples—who are ultimately weaker than the women (Medea and Agave and the bacchantes)--who overshadow them. Shakespeare's Macbeth is personally ambitious, but in the end it is only his wife, Lady Macbeth, who 'wears the pants in the family,' and who presses plans forward into (tragic) reality.

Illustrative moments

Dependent When first we meet Agamemnon, he is waking to another day of becalmed waters at Aulis, and laments to his servant, Arcas, that the life of kings is hard: he speaks of those who are happily free of the yoke that he, Agamemnon, bears, and who live in the obscurity where 'the gods have hidden them.' He closes in on his own problem-set, solely dependent as he is, he feels, on the fate the gods send. Agamemnon's mood eventually swings from side to side, but he is unable to explain the Iphigenie problem to others, with the result that no one can give him advice or consolation.

Remorseful At the point where we find Agamemnon he believes that he has successfully convinced his wife and daughter *not* to come to Aulis, and yet he has to believe he alone will be responsible, if the fleet is not able to sail. Already he begins to look back on his decisions and view them with remorse, seeing there was no way out of problems—except of course to discuss his dilemma with all the parties involved, and come to some sort of collective decision. Though the developing events have not yet played out to a conclusion, Agamemnon can already in Act One bemoan the situation he has put himself in, with no cards left to play.

Pathetic With rare candor, for a character in classical drama, Agamemnon exposes to us the dimension of shame which he feels growing around him—and the confession of which makes him an exceptional figure. Telling Arcas to go to Iphigenie, and dissuade her from coming to Aulis, he underlines a significant point: that his messenger should not let Iphigenie or Clytemnestra know to what danger he has exposed them, in even considering an earlier plan to deceive them into coming to Aulis. Agamemnon then adds the specific demand, that Arcas should make clear that ‘Achille a changé de pensée,’ ‘Achilles has changed his mind,’ and plans to postpone his marriage to Iphigenie until after the war. As happens in life, Agamemnon’s false story grows more involved as it develops.

Horried In the last scene of the first Act, Agamemnon learns that, in spite of his efforts to deceive his wife and daughter, he has failed. The mission on which he had sent Arcas—see above—has not arrived in time, and mother and daughter have not received the warning not to come. They have in fact just arrived at Agamemnon’s camp, in Aulis, where he must face the consequences of his multiple deceptions—for he has not only tried to trick his family but also Achilles, who is panting for his marriage to Iphigenie. Confusion, and Agamenon’s humiliation, could not be more overwhelming.

Discussion questions

Why do you suppose Racine devoted almost the entire first act of this play to the confusions and prevarications of Agamemnon?

In modernist literatures—Proust, Dostoyevsky—we are used to ‘introspective characters,’ who reveal their inner thoughts to us. Classical literatures are typically more ‘objectifying.’ How does Agamemnon, caught in his binds, reveal his inner thoughts and worries?

Why does Agamemnon have so much trouble telling the truth to his loved ones and to Achilles? What is the source of this weakness, in the commander in chief?