

Characters in Homer

AGAMEMNON (agreeable)

Overview Agamemnon brings heavy baggage with him to Troy, in the Greek battle against which he has been chosen Commander in Chief. In order to move the Greek fleet from the port at Aulis, where it is stalled for lack of wind, he is called upon to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia—various accounts tell either of her tragic death or mythical salvation—as the price of movement. (Agreeable he is, as we have said, meaning agreeable to the dictates of fate.) Taking charge of the Greek forces on the shore before Troy he immediately steps into a major brouhaha with the most powerful and charismatic of the Greeks, Achilles, and is once more confronted with the demands of fate. Greatly preferring to reject and punish Achilles, he is to learn agreeableness the hard way, by discovering that the success of the Greek mission will in the end depend on reconciliation with Achilles.

Character Agamemnon is a deliberate and professional military man—Americans might think of Douglas MacArthur or Dwight D. Eisenhower. The collateral ancient literature, which surrounds the tale of sacrifice at Aulis, suggests a man with insufficient human savvy—a natural victim of his wife, who will kill him and his girlfriend, a dad fumbling at Aulis with the dictates of a cruel fate—yet one who, in the end, makes it through, and when absolutely obliged gives in to the demands of fate, and prevails. All that is ‘deliberate and military’ about Agamemnon is most clearly exposed by contrast with the mercurial brilliance of Achilles, who by preference lives by his own laws.

Brusque Agamemnon can be harsh—usually the trigger to his discovery of how he must ‘agree’ with the gods. As the Greek fleet settles into battle position around Troy, Agamemnon is addressed by an elderly wise man, Calchas, whose daughter is Agamemnon’s prisoner, and for whose release the old man begs. Agamemnon virtually drives him away: ‘her will I not set free; nay, ere that shall old age come upon her in our house, in Argos, far from her native land, where she shall ply the loom and serve my couch.’ As we are to learn, the hostility to Achilles, which underlies this ‘brusque’ behavior, is ultimately self-destructive to Agamemnon and his fellows. The professional military man yields in the end.

Dreamer Lodged in the sea shore encampment, Agamemnon has a powerful dream which claims to be ‘a messenger from Zeus.’ ‘He biddeth thee call to arms the flowing-haired Achaeans with all speed for that now thou mayest take the wide-wayed city of the Trojans.’ But the dream was deceptive. The text continues: ‘So spake the Dream, and departed and left him there, deeming in his mind things that were not to be fulfilled. ‘A good listener to fate, in general, Agamemnon mistakenly interprets this dream to be reliable, and he hurries to the ‘great hearted elders,’ assembled before Nestor’s tent, to inform the leaders of the nature of his dream, and the steps to be taken.

Confident On top of things, at his best, the Agamemnon of Book VIII singles out heroes who are excelling among the Greeks. On one occasion he stands by a special favorite, Teukros, who is causing havoc in the Trojan ranks. ‘Shoot on in this wise,’ exhorts Agamemnon, ‘if perchance thou mayest be found the salvation of the Danaans (Greeks) and glory of thy father, Telamon...’ Agamemnon goes on to outline the ‘meed of honor’ he foresees bestowing on Teukros: ‘a tripod of two steeds with their chariot, or a woman that shall go up into thy bed.’

Stricken At the beginning of Book IX the spirits of the Greeks are close to broken, for division in their ranks—Achilles is still sulking, with dreadful consequences—has weakened them as a fighting force. ‘They sat sorrowful in assembly, and Agamemnon stood up weeping, like unto a fountain of dark water that from a beetling cliff poureth down its black stream...’ With heavy heart, seeing no way to win Achilles back, Agamemnon foresees a shameful return from battle to his home in Greece. He goes on to the fateful words: ‘so come, even as I shall bid let us all obey; let us flee with our ships...’ So close the whole expedition is to total disaster.

Parallels Classical literatures abound in hero figures, and in fact provided the key concept of the hero. Homer himself provides a number of heroic instances, to parallel the rather stiff military prowess of Agamemnon. Hector, Achilles, Diomedes—a military figure, and then of course the Aeneas and Turnus of Virgil's *Aeneid*. We have dubbed Agamemnon good natured, and tried to give the term a special tweak. Agamemnon, like many ancient heroes, wants success and wants to follow, toward success, the path the gods have given. The lone hero, doing it on his own without divine coverage, is left for later ages. yet even figures like Roland, Joan of Arc, or Charles de Gaulle fight best when they believe they have the gods on their side.

Discussion questions

How do you explain the misleading dream sent to Agamemnon, assuring him of impending victory? What does Homer mean by this narrative move?

Is Agamemnon an effective leader of men? How does his weeping, before the troops, impact their spirit and courage?

Agamemnon is quite brutal to the old seer Calchas, who requests the return of his daughter. Yet we have called Agamemnon 'agreeable.' Can you see that Agamemnon's desire to comply with fate makes him 'agreeable'?