Agamemnon

by Nikos Akritas (April 2025)

Sacrifice of Iphigenia (Jan Steen, 1671)

> *Only may good from all this evil flower. —Aeschylus*, Agamemnon

In today's woke world, everything deemed originating in the West is regarded irrelevant or tainted with racism. The value Western societies place on any achievements is attributed to

bigotry—not their use, technical or scientific, nor their ability to communicate something about the human condition, philosophical or literary. No, they are celebrated purely because *white people* created them.

Works of literature, according to this view, are esteemed because of their cultural origins, not because they tell us anything about humanity. It matters not why Western societies regard certain works *classics*. The real reason is concealed: subtle, conspiratorial suppression of other societies through celebrating overwhelmingly *white output*. This outlook is not only anachronistic, projecting back in time the supposed prejudices of the current age, but betrays a lack of historical knowledge.

Until the latter half of the 20th century, international travel was extremely rare and the preserve of a tiny minority. Most people were poor and their lives extremely parochial; any knowledge of other cultures was through hearsay, if at all. Most people's perceptions, all over the world, of the *other* could hardly be anything but distorted caricature.

Recognising these limited social worlds shared something beyond their immediate environment resulted in viewing particular written works as *classics*. These convey something not just about local life and social mores but universal concerns amongst peoples of all societies. They grapple with issues common to all human beings, such as emotions, questions of right and wrong, and the conflict between individual desire and group loyalty.

The earliest classics available to Europeans were those of the Greco-Roman world. The discontinuity between that world and the medieval period in which Europeans re-discovered these works is measured in centuries. But as alien as that world was, there was something familiar: the shared experience of human anxieties and conflicts. They did not choose to study these texts because they were written by *white people*. In

fact, many considered them repellent because they were produced by polytheistic pagans, associated with the devil and temptation.

One such work is Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. The audience this play was written for would have been familiar with the background and its content. What was of interest to them was how, exactly, Aeschylus would interpret and present the story. Which emotions and dilemmas would be emphasised? This artistic licence is why the traditions of European literature are so powerful. From the ancient Greeks and Romans, through the medieval world to Shakespeare and the modern era, literature is a commentary on the shared human experience.

The story is set in the aftermath of the Trojan War, when Agamemnon, leader of the Greek forces, returns home after ten years of fighting. Its central reference point is not the war itself but an incident which took place immediately prior to it: the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Agamemnon's daughter. According to the story, Agamemnon sacrifices his own flesh and blood to appease the gods and ensure the Greeks reach Troy.

On the surface, this is a tale of filicide but at a deeper level it explores the fundamental conflict between personal and group loyalty. The group, in this case, being the Greek armies preparing for war with Troy. It is also a commentary on personal relationships and religion. To which does one defer, religious decree or human emotions? Is it appeasement of an unmerciful god that should influence one's actions or the ties of family and kinship?

Agamemnon and his coreligionists understand refusal to fulfill the wishes of this higher being will result in punishment. It is ultimately fear of divine wrath that obliges him to act in accordance with the god's wishes; this terrible act only serving to reinforce the god's omnipotence. Although the question is not explicitly raised, given the terrible act being demanded by this god, should one continue to worship

that god at all? (This theme is partly explored in the concluding play of the *Orestia* trilogy, which illustrates a shift from blind religious obedience to human-shaped laws).

It is this conflict between the gods' and human desires that makes Greek Tragedy so engaging. It is not the skin colour of Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides that was in the forefront of audiences' and later playwrights' minds but the unfolding of a story's conflicts and dilemmas.

As commentary on religious obligation in opposition to human feelings, it is also a meditation on the conflict between individual and group. For at the centre of the story, the main characters' immediate concerns are how to appease the mortal as well as immortal world. The consequences of their actions, devoid of detail, are already known before they act. Should they not choose to conform religiously, they are refusing to follow group expectations, resulting in being outcasts at best.

They must, ultimately, commit terrible acts to fit in with the group because the group has a common understanding of right and wrong, which is not necessarily prioritising individual and family relationships but placating their gods; placing religion above humanity. It is through this social pressure wrapped up in religious piety that Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigenia, ensuring a sure wind to get the Greek ships to Troy.

However, the murder of one's child demands justice. And so Klytaemnestra, Agamemnon's wife, waits for his return, plotting her vengeance.

> "To me this hour was dreamed of long ago; A thing of ancient hate, 'Twas very slow in coming, but it came."

Ensuring she is immediately informed of her husband's homeward voyage, by having a series of beacons lit relaying the message from Troy and thence across the Greek coastline, she waits. And she knits. She knits a shirt of closed sleeves and neck. Playing the dutiful wife as social mores demand, she welcomes her husband home and readies him a warm bath, to soak away the strains of his journey.

But Klytaemnestra hasn't just been waiting over the previous ten years. Her grief and resentment have festered, until the impotent rage she felt at the slaying of her innocent child is avenged through methodical calculation. She takes Agamemnon's cousin as her lover, not only betraying their marriage bed but plotting to rule with him in the king's stead. The pretence of loyalty, long dead, is played out upon Agamemnon's return.

And here, another question of universal significance arises: why remain faithful when those closest to you betray your trust? Is social convention stronger than fidelity or the bonds of kinship? If so, why are some held by these standards and not others?

For the woke who take issue with patriarchal societies, Classical Greece was indeed one, but here we have a play written 2,500 years ago questioning the dichotomy of expected behaviour between men and women. Drawing attention to common human emotions and raising questions about whether social conventions should justify a man for his actions and not a woman.

Klytaemnestra exacts her revenge in brutal fashion, playing the role of loyal wife, follower of social convention, and bowing to the appeasement of the gods—until the last moment. As Agamemnon steps out of his bath, she offers him the shirt and he becomes entangled as a fish in a net. At this moment she dispatches him with an axe. As he lies sprawled on the floor his last, gasping breath, spouting blood like dark spray.

There immediately follows a reference to the hypocrisy of the powerful. After slaying her husband, Klytaemnestra entreats those clamouring for what seems an inevitable ensuing battle, to put down their weapons, proclaiming, “Let us not stain ourselves with blood.” Delivering this line with blood spattered face, fresh from the mariticide just committed.

Klytaemnestra has her revenge. But is she right to take it? If it was the will of a god for her child to be sacrificed who, as mere mortal, is she to question that god’s demands? In such context the killing of her child is justified for religious purposes, ensuring benefit to the group. Are group interests above that of an individual’s happiness or even above an individual’s life? Here is a commentary on how individuals are obliged to put the group first, at cost to themselves, in the name of religion—satisfying the god of such a religion through bloodletting.

Which is the correct way to act? To satisfy a god and thereby the group? Or to protect one’s loved ones? Agamemnon could have refused to sacrifice his daughter but he chose religion and group loyalty above kinship. Klytaemnestra chose the opposite and for this she also must be punished. A theme pervading Greek Tragedy is the concept of inescapable fate. No matter the choice, human beings are damned to it.

It now becomes incumbent on Orestes, Agamemnon’s son, to take revenge for the killing of his father. He must kill his mother, knowing such an act will result in terrible retribution, again as a result of religious convention. But this is the subject of another of Aeschylus’s plays.

Interestingly, Orestes, by avenging his father, makes the same choice as his mother, putting ties of kinship above the gods. The expectation that he avenge the murder of his father is another illustration of the impossible choices one faces in life.

It is not belief in Greek gods or the rights and wrongs of the social mores of the time that are important here. Nor is it the skin colour of the playwright. It is the interplay between grief, pride, duty, responsibility, kinship, group loyalty, greed, revenge, justice, religious belief and the dilemmas one faces in life that all good literature addresses. Regardless of colour, timeless messages addressing universal human themes are why certain works are regarded *classics*.

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