



Aeschylus' Agamemnon
The 2010 Cambridge Greek Play
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www.cambridgegreekplay.com

Schools and students tickets £15

Other tickets £15/20/25

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Box office 01223 503333

Book online at www.cambridgeartstheatre.com

Director	Helen Eastman
Composer	Alex Silverman
Designer	Neil Irish
Lighting designer	Neill Brinkworth

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CONTENTS

BACKGROUND

Aeschylus	4
The House of Atreus	5
The Trojan War	6

THE PLAY

Character notes	8
Synopsis	10
The Oresteia	14
Satyr-Drama	16
Rhetoric	17
Similes and Metaphors	18
Battle of the sexes?	20

THE PRODUCTION

Choruses	21
Original Staging	22
Production History	24
The Cambridge Production	25

BACKGROUND

AESCHYLUS

Aeschylus is the earliest of the three 5th-century BC tragedians whose plays have come down to us, the other two being Sophocles and Euripides. Seven of Aeschylus' plays have survived in full, of which **Agamemnon** is one of the most famous.

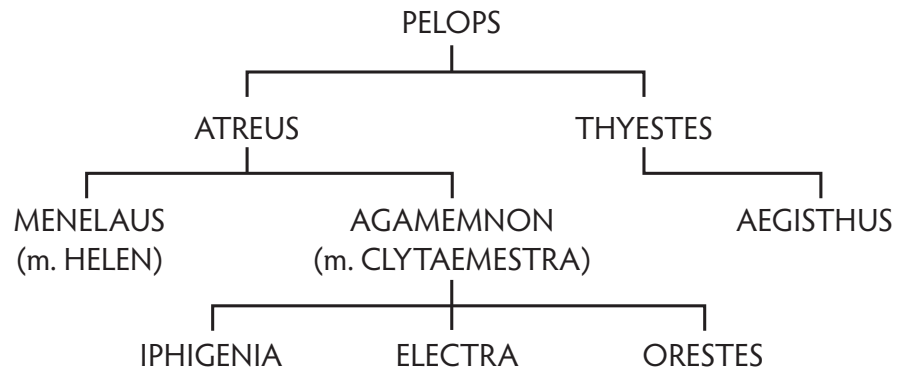
Born around 525 BC, Aeschylus fought on the winning Greek side during the Persian Wars. He took part in the battle of Marathon in 490 BC, and either fought or was present at the battle of Salamis in 480. It is important, when reading or watching the **Agamemnon**, to remember that Aeschylus had military experience, and his descriptions of the soldiers' hopes and fears must have drawn on his own experiences.

Aeschylus first competed in the Athenian tragic competitions in the 490s, winning his first victory in 484 BC. He continued to compete throughout his life, writing more than seventy plays, and was awarded first prize a number of times. He was a popular and well-known playwright. **Agamemnon** was produced in 458 BC, along with the other plays **Choephoroe**, **Eumenides** and **Proteus**, and came first. These were some of Aeschylus' last plays: he died a couple of years later in 456, in Sicily.



**AESCHYLUS
WAS A
POPULAR AND
WELL-KNOWN
PLAYWRIGHT**

THE HOUSE OF ATREUS



The family of Agamemnon and Clytaemestra is often referred to as 'the House of Atreus', and has a particularly bloody and tragic history.

Atreus and Thyestes, the two sons of Pelops, quarrelled over the kingship in Argos, and when Atreus became king, he banished Thyestes from the land. However, when Atreus found out that Thyestes had secretly committed adultery with his wife, Atreus invited his brother back for a sacrificial banquet and prepared a gruesome feast: he killed two of Thyestes' sons and cooked their bodies, serving Thyestes a meal made of his own children.

At the end of this banquet, Atreus showed Thyestes the hands and heads of his sons, and the father realised that he had eaten his own children's flesh. In response, Thyestes called down a terrible curse upon the whole House of Pelops.

The curse is borne out in the subsequent generations of this family: Agamemnon kills his own daughter Iphigenia and in turn is killed himself by his wife Clytaemestra (with the help of her adulterous lover Aegisthus, the one surviving son of Thyestes); both Clytaemestra and Aegisthus are then killed by Orestes (in some versions, he does this with the help of his sister Electra).

ACTIVITY

Take the family tree and now imagine what each character might look like. Cut pictures out of newspapers or magazines and stick one next to each name. Is this how you'd imagine the cast of this play?

THE TROJAN WAR

The story of the Trojan War forms one of the foundational stories of Western literature. This epic clash between the Greeks and Trojans was fought over a woman – Helen.

Renowned far and wide for her exceptional beauty, Helen's hand in marriage had been sought by many Greek kings, and in order to avoid conflict between the various suitors, her father had made them all swear an oath to support his final decision.

After all the suitors had taken this oath, Helen was married to Menelaus, the king of Sparta, while her sister Clytemnestra married Menelaus' brother, Agamemnon, king of Argos.

Years later, the Trojan prince, Paris, was called upon to judge a divine beauty contest between the goddesses Hera, Athena and Aphrodite. Each goddess tried to bribe him by promising rewards. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, said that she would give him the most beautiful woman in the world as his wife, and persuaded by this, Paris judged her to be the winner. With Aphrodite's help, Paris sailed to Sparta, where he seduced and abducted Helen, taking her back with him to Troy.

In response, Helen's former suitors raised an army, which was led by Agamemnon as commander-in-chief, to attack Troy and retrieve Helen. The Greek army gathered at Aulis before sailing to Troy itself, and while they were there the goddess Artemis grew angry with the Greeks. To punish the fleet she sent bad weather and storms, grounding the ships and preventing the army's departure. The only way to stop the goddess' anger was for Agamemnon to sacrifice his own daughter, Iphigenia. In order to get the young girl to Aulis, the Greeks pretended that she was being brought there to marry the hero Achilles, and when she arrived she was killed by her own father in order to appease the goddess. Once this had been carried out, the winds lifted and the fleet could sail to Troy.

The Trojan War itself was a long and bitter conflict, with both sides losing many formidable warriors. From Homer's epic poem **The Iliad**, we hear of a battle between two such champions, in which the Greek hero Achilles fought and killed the Trojan prince Hector. Achilles himself, the best of the Greek warriors, was later killed by Paris in the final stages of the War.

After ten long years of fighting, the city of Troy remained impenetrable. The Greeks then came up with a trick – the famous Trojan Horse, masterminded by the wily Greek hero Odysseus. They



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constructed a huge horse-shaped structure out of wood which concealed a number of Greek warriors inside it, left it on the shore for the Trojans to find, and then sailed to the nearby island of Tenedos, pretending to have departed altogether. The Trojans, discovering the Horse and believing the Greeks to have finally gone, brought the Horse into the city and rejoiced, thinking the War to be over.

That night, while the city was asleep, the Greeks descended from the Horse and opened up the city gates to the rest of the army, who had sailed back under cover of darkness; the Greek army poured into an unsuspecting Troy, the city was conquered, and Menelaus finally reclaimed his wife Helen.

This is the point at which the play **Agamemnon** opens: back in Argos, a watchman is waiting on the roof of Agamemnon's palace, as he has done every night for the past year, looking out for the signal-flares which will tell him that Troy has finally fallen to the Greeks...

ACTIVITY

Do you believe the Greeks should have gone to war to win back Helen?

Split into two groups. One group makes the case for the war. One group makes the case against.

Protest your point using slogans and banners – are there any quotes or passages from the play which would make good anti-war or pro-war propaganda?

THE PLAY

CHARACTER NOTES

WATCHMAN

Loyal to Agamemnon, this servant has been set the task of keeping a nightly watch for the fire-beacons which will signal the fall of Troy.

CHORUS

The chorus consists of Argive men who were too old to join the original expedition to Troy. Fearful and ineffectual, they have been waiting for ten years for their king to return. They rejoice at the news that Troy has fallen, but are unable to shake their growing sense of unease.

CLYTAEMESTRA

The sister of Helen and wife of Agamemnon, she is cunning and manipulative, and described as a 'woman who thinks like a man'. Unable to forgive her husband for sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia at the beginning of the Trojan expedition, in his ten-year absence she has begun an adulterous relationship with Aegisthus and plots to murder Agamemnon on his return home.

HERALD

A soldier with the Greek army, the herald is overjoyed to finally return home to Greece.

AGAMEMNON

The leader of the Greek expedition, and king of Argos. At the start of the Trojan War, he had to make the terrible decision to sacrifice his own daughter Iphigenia for the sake of the expedition. He has survived ten hard years of fighting at Troy, only to fall at the hands of his wife when he arrives home.

CASSANDRA

A princess of Troy, made into Agamemnon's slave after her city fell. Cassandra was loved by the god Apollo, who gave her the ability to foresee the future – but when she deceived him, he ensured that her prophecies would never be believed.



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ÆGISTHUS

The son of Thyestes, he nurses a deadly grudge against his cousin Agamemnon.

ACTIVITY: DIARY ENTRIES

Imagine that you are one of these characters writing in their diaries. Write a diary entry for the night before the army returns from Troy. What would they say? What issues are they most worried about?

SOME EXAMPLES

You are **Agamemnon** at Troy, preparing to sail home. What are you most looking forward to, after ten years of fighting? How do you feel about seeing your wife again?

You are the **Watchman**, waiting for a sign that the war is over. With no other means of communication, you are waiting for a flame signal. What are you thinking and hoping? What do you fear when Agamemnon returns? How much do you know about Clytemnestra's affair with Aegisthus? Do you have friends fighting? Do you believe they should have gone to war?

SYNOPSIS

The play opens with the **Watchman** keeping his lookout from the roof of the palace of Agamemnon, king of Argos. He has been instructed by the queen to keep vigil every night for a year, waiting for the signal-flames which will indicate that Troy has finally been sacked by the Greek army.

After hinting that all is not well in the house, he catches sight of the signal fires, and rejoices, hoping that his master will come home soon.

The **chorus of elders** enter, and sing a long narrative song, telling how they were too old to go to Troy ten years previously, and recapping the origins of the War. They consider the role of the gods in the conflict, and remember the sacrifice of Iphigenia.

While the Greek army was encamped at Aulis, Artemis had been offended by 'the eagles' feast': the army had seen the omen of two eagles eating a pregnant hare, and in her anger at the eagles, and her pity for the hare, the goddess caused endless storms and bad weather which prevented the fleet from sailing. Her anger could only be appeased by the sacrifice of Agamemnon's daughter Iphigenia. Agamemnon had agonised over what to do, asking 'Which of these alternatives is without evil?', but finally putting on 'the yokestrap of necessity', he killed Iphigenia for the sake of the expedition.

Clytaemestra enters, and after a brief exchange with the chorus, describes in a vivid and detailed speech the fire beacons spreading from Troy to Greece, and then imagines the scenes in Troy, and the actions of both the conquered and the conquerors.

The chorus sing of the importance of revering Zeus and Justice, and describe the theft of Helen from Menelaus. The War has caused much grief: urns filled with ashes are arriving back home in place of the men who set off to fight. They wonder how much trust to place in the message of the fire-beacons, and see a herald approaching, who will be able to give them a more accurate report.

The **Herald** enters: he has come straight from Troy, and rejoices to be back home in Greece, greeting the land, gods and the palace itself. He tells the chorus about the many hardships the army have endured at Troy.

Clytaemestra says that she has already been sacrificing in honour of the army's return, and gives the herald instructions to tell Agamemnon to return home as quickly as possible, where he will



**"WHICH
OF THESE
ALTERNATIVES
IS WITHOUT
EVIL?"
– AGAMEMNON [211]**

find a wife 'as faithful as when he left her'.

The chorus question the herald, and learn that upon leaving Troy, the Greek fleet was scattered by a violent storm; the fates of many of the leaders, including Agamemnon's brother Menelaus, are still unknown.

The chorus sing of Helen, suitably called because her name sounds like the Greek for 'to destroy' or 'to capture' (helein). They compare the situation at Troy to that of a lion cub being reared in a human home: initially it was delightful to both young and old, but when the lion matured, it showed its true nature by slaughtering the household's flocks. Just so, the arrival of Helen at Troy initially appeared to be a good thing, but ended up destroying the city.

Agamemnon and **Cassandra** enter on a chariot, and the chorus welcome their king, wondering how to address him in the correct way, and warn him about the dangers of false sympathy; they did not approve of his actions when he initially led the army to Troy, but now they do.

Agamemnon thanks the gods who have allowed him to destroy Troy. He tells the chorus that he is able to see through false >>



The arrival of **Agamemnon** and **Cassandra** as envisioned by Neil Irish for the Cambridge production

<< SYNOPSIS CONT'D

appearances, and that he will take time to carefully consider the best interests of the city.

Agamemnon is on the verge of entering the palace to greet his household gods, when Clytaemestra enters with her attendants, who are carrying rich purple textiles.

Clytaemestra delivers an extravagant speech in which she describes to the elders her love for her husband: she has suffered sitting at home without him, and hearing terrible rumours about what was happening to him at Troy; these reports even led her to attempt suicide several times. In order to protect their son Orestes, she claims, he has been sent away and is being looked after by their good friend Strophius.

After lavishly praising Agamemnon as the only source of security and safety, Clytaemestra tells him not to step on the ground, but to enter the house by walking over a path of purple tapestries.

Agamemnon asks Clytaemestra not to pamper him with such wasteful and luxurious behaviour; by trampling on the rich fabrics, he will surely invite the envy of the gods. Clytaemestra, in a terse short exchange, convinces her husband to step on the tapestries, and he gives in to her. Before walking into the house, he indicates Cassandra, who is still sitting in the chariot, and asks that she be treated kindly, since she is his 'choice flower out of many rich possessions'. Clytaemestra claims that their household will always be prosperous, and prays to Zeus to fulfil her prayers. She follows her husband inside the palace.

The chorus wonder why they are so fearful, and hope that their worries are unjustified.

Clytaemestra enters and addresses Cassandra, asking her to come inside as well. The queen gets no answer, and, growing impatient, goes back inside.

Cassandra then breaks out into wild cries, calling on Apollo. Gifted with the ability of prophecy, she claims to be able to see the house's bloody past and imminent future. In a series of riddling and cryptic visions, she describes how Clytaemestra will entrap her husband in a net and kill him in the bath, and also foretells her own death.

Speaking more rationally, she explains to the chorus how Apollo had given her the gift of prophecy, but that she was also destined never to be believed. After further visions, and foretelling that one day her murder and that of Agamemnon will be avenged,

**IF THE CHORUS
ARE GOING
TO CONDEMN
CLYTAEMESTRA,
THEY SHOULD
HAVE
CONDEMNED
AGAMEMNON
LONG AGO.**

Cassandra walks into the house, knowing that she is going to her death.

From inside, Agamemnon cries out that he is being struck down. As the chorus wonder what to do, the doors open and Clytaemestra is revealed, standing over the murdered bodies of Agamemnon, who has been tangled in a giant robe, and Cassandra.

Clytaemestra claims that up to this point she has been deceptive, and now reveals her true feelings. She describes the murder of her husband in gory detail, saying how she trapped him in a robe and struck him three times, rejoicing when his blood showered her. She justifies her actions: if the chorus are going to condemn her, they should also have condemned Agamemnon long ago when he killed his own daughter.

Aegisthus, her adulterous lover, is mentioned for the first time: with his support, she has no reason to be fearful. The chorus are horrified by her actions and words.

Aegisthus enters and rejoices over the corpses. He relates how his father Thyestes had been treated by Agamemnon's father Atreus, who served him a meal of his own children's flesh. He has finally exacted revenge on behalf of Thyestes. Aegisthus threatens the chorus with violence, but is restrained by Clytaemestra. The play ends with Aegisthus and Clytaemestra going back inside the palace: Clytaemestra claims that 'You and I will control the house, and arrange everything well.'

ACTIVITY

- Thinking about themes: if you had to say what this play was about in one word, what would it be? Write a word down.
- See what words other people have written down. Vengeance? Justice? War? Family? Marriage?
- Make a big list of these words.
- Write the numbers 1-10 on sheets of paper and put them across the floor.
- Call out each of these words, for example 'family'. Everyone in the group moves up and down the scale depending on how strongly they feel about each thing. Standing near 10 means you really care. Standing near 1 means you don't.
- Which of the themes in the play interest you most?

THE ORESTEIA

The ancient Greek dramatists competed at the festivals with a set of four plays: three tragedies and a satyr-play, presented in that order. The three tragedies could be on three unrelated themes, or they could form a continuous story told in three instalments.

Aeschylus was particularly known for writing connected sets of plays, and the **Agamemnon** fell into this category. It was followed by the two tragedies **Choephoroe** ('The Libation-Carriers') and **Eumenides** ('The Kindly Ones'). The trilogy as a whole was known as **The Oresteia**, or 'The Stories about Orestes', and these three plays traced the changing fortunes of a single family and household.

The first two tragedies powerfully illustrate how violence leads to more violence. In the final play, however, we find a kind of resolution, as the endless self-perpetuating cycle of murder is transformed into the establishment of the lawcourt where murder trials can be settled in a legal setting.

Choephoroe picks up the story of **Agamemnon** by focusing on the reactions and revenge taken by the children of Agamemnon and Clytaemestra. Clytaemestra is now ruling Argos with Aegisthus, believing her son Orestes to be far away in exile, while their daughter Electra is treated like a slave within the palace.

The play opens as Orestes returns to Argos, accompanied by his friend Pylades. Standing by Agamemnon's grave, Orestes makes offerings to his dead father, asking for success in the revenge he intends to take upon his mother and Aegisthus. Electra and a chorus of women enter, and in turn make drink-offerings (the 'libations' of the play's title) to Agamemnon, and pray for the return of Orestes.

Brother and sister are finally reunited, and, spurred on by the chorus, the two siblings join in a powerful prayer to their murdered father. Orestes and Pylades get into the palace by pretending to be strangers bringing the news that Orestes has died, and once inside, they kill Aegisthus. Orestes then confronts his mother, forces her inside the palace despite her pleading, and kills her also.

The doors of the house open to reveal Orestes standing over the murdered bodies of his own mother and her lover, and he displays the material in which his father had been caught and murdered – just as, in **Agamemnon**, Clytaemestra had stood triumphantly over the corpses of Cassandra and Agamemnon, entangled in the robe.



**IN THE FINAL
PLAY, THE
CYCLE OF
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ESTABLISHMENT
OF THE LAW-
COURT**

But Orestes is not able to enjoy his bittersweet success for very long, as he is suddenly tormented by visions of the Furies (or the 'Erinyes') – terrible avenging spirits, with snakes for hair. Driven mad by his visions, Orestes exits, leaving the chorus to wonder when the suffering of the family will finally end.

Orestes continues to be tortured by the Furies in the third and final play, **Eumenides**. He is under the protection of the god Apollo, but is being driven ever onwards by the monstrous Furies, and will not be released from them until he makes his way to Athens and the temple of the goddess Athena on the Acropolis. We also see Clytemestra again, this time as a ghost who appears and encourages the chorus of Furies to keep chasing after her son. Orestes eventually makes it to Athens, where he stands trial for the murder of his mother, with the god Apollo arguing in his defence in front of a jury of citizens. The votes are cast, and found to be equal on both sides – which, under Athenian law, acquits Orestes, who exits rejoicing. The Furies are enraged that he has escaped and want to punish Athens, but Athena persuades them to relent and accept a cult in Athens. The play ends with a torchlit procession as the Furies are escorted to their new home, and become the 'Eumenides' – the kindly ones.

SATYR-DRAMA

The three tragedies of **The Orestia** were concluded with the satyr-play **Proteus**. Satyr-drama was a very different genre to tragedy: it consisted of humorous takes on well-known legends, and always featured a chorus of satyrs.

These creatures were half-goat, half-human, and were characterised as being obsessed by food, drink and sex. The chorus of satyrs was usually introduced into mythological plots in which they did not play a traditional role, and the plays featured plenty of obscenity and elements of slapstick comedy.

Coming after a sequence of three serious tragedies, the function of the satyr-play appears to have been comic and emotional relief, and it poked fun at the conventions of tragedy in a light-hearted way.

In **Agamemnon** we learn that Agamemnon's brother Menelaus was blown off course in a storm as the fleet sailed from Troy, and the chorus and Herald speculate as to his fate. In the satyr-play **Proteus**, the audience would have found out what had happened to him: he and his men ended up in Egypt, where they encountered Proteus, the immortal shape-shifting 'Old Man of the Sea'. Proteus was able to change his shape at will, and Menelaus and his men had to struggle with the god as he transformed into a series of beasts and elements, before he admitted defeat and revealed to them how to get home.

Proteus is a lost play, and only a few scraps of text survive, but it must have told of Menelaus' adventures with the satyrs in Egypt. Menelaus' entertaining travels would have contrasted strongly with the sufferings of his brother Agamemnon, which the audience would just have watched in the three plays of **The Oresteia**.



**SATYR-DRAMA
WAS A VERY
DIFFERENT
GENRE TO
TRAGEDY**

RHETORIC

The use of rhetoric – effective, persuasive speech – is an important aspect of the **Agamemnon**. Clytaemestra has to use all of her powers of persuasion and manipulation to ensure that the chorus do not suspect her plans, and then to convince Agamemnon to walk over the purple tapestries into the house, where he will be killed.

The play shows such an interest in rhetoric because it was an essential part of ancient Athenian education. Being able to write a good argumentative speech was considered a really important skill in Athens. If you wanted to be a good citizen and politician you had to be able to argue your viewpoint in the courts or civic meetings.

Children were taught how to write good debate speeches by imagining that they were a character from a play, and arguing something from their point of view.

ACTIVITY

Write one of the following speeches:

- Clytaemestra arguing she was right to kill Agamemnon
- Agamemnon justifying his decision to sacrifice Iphigenia

How can you make it persuasive? Include four or five arguments which back up your case.

How can you make the language more persuasive? Try using alliteration, rhetorical questions, examples, metaphors...

Now try performing your speech to an audience. How convincing is it?

SIMILES AND METAPHORS

Aeschylus' use of language is complex and often obscure. His images are frequently bold, surprising and difficult to untangle. This section will get you to think carefully about one aspect of Aeschylus' language: the use of similes and metaphors.

A simile is when two things are compared because they share common characteristics. For example, Clytaemestra says that Cassandra probably speaks a barbarian language which is difficult to understand **like the twittering of a swallow**.

A metaphor is when one thing is said to be another thing. For example, Cassandra says that Clytaemestra **is a two-footed lioness, sleeping with a wolf** (Aegisthus) **in the absence of the noble lion** (Agamemnon).

Think of similes to describe the characters in Agamemnon. Complete these ones, and then think of your own.

- Iphigenia was as innocent as a...
- Clytaemestra is as cunning as a...
- The chorus are as fearful as...
- The watchman is as as a...
- Cassandra is as ... as a ...
- Agamemnon is as ... as a...

There are lots of different similes and metaphors used throughout Agamemnon. Here are some examples.

DOGS

This image occurs several times during the play.

At the start, the watchman is propped up on the roof of Agamemnon's palace 'like a dog'.

After the herald has reported that Troy has fallen, Clytaemestra claims that Agamemnon will find in his palace 'a wife, just as faithful as when he left her, a watchdog of the house, excellent towards him but hostile to his enemies.'

Finally, when Cassandra cries out that she can sense the bloody history of the house, the chorus comment that, just like 'a dog with a skilled nose; she is on the trail of the murders of those whom she will find.'

Think carefully about these similes and metaphors. What does it mean to be 'like a dog'? For example, in Greek literature, dogs



**AESCHYLUS'
IMAGES
ARE BOLD,
SURPRISING
AND DIFFICULT
TO UNTANGLE**

are often represented as being loyal to their household and fiercely protective of their offspring, and they can also be vicious and dangerous.

What other associations can you think of? Which of these associations are present in the three examples above? What do these add to our understanding of these characters?

THE SACRIFICE OF IPHIGENIA

At Aulis, when Agamemnon decides to kill his own daughter, Iphigenia is lifted up over the altar 'like a goat'. She is gagged so that she cannot speak, but can only look piteously at her sacrificers, 'like in a picture'.

Think about these two similes. What impression do they give of the sacrifice? How do they make you feel about the decision of Agamemnon and the suffering of Iphigenia? Why do you think Aeschylus chose these images?

THE MURDER OF AGAMEMNON

The speech of Clytaemestra in which she exultingly describes how she killed her husband is full of striking and powerful imagery and language.

*I did it this way, and I won't deny it,
so that he could neither flee nor ward off his doom.
A limitless net, like you might use for fish,
I throw around him - an evil wealth of garment.
And I strike him twice, and in the space of two screams
his limbs collapsed. And to him when he had fallen
I add a third blow, a welcome thanksgiving to Zeus
the saviour of corpses, who lives below the ground.
Thus, after falling, he forced out his own spirit,
and coughing out a sharp spurt of blood,
he hits me with a black shower of gory dew,
and I rejoice no less than the harvest rejoices
in the blessing given by Zeus,
when it is giving birth to the buds.*

Why does Clytaemestra compare the robe that she throws around Agamemnon to a fish-net? How does this make us feel about his death?

Clytaemestra compares the effect of her husband's blood spurting onto her to rain sent by Zeus which falls on the ears of corn and makes them rejoice. Why does Clytaemestra say that she is like the ears of corn which are 'pregnant' with their crop? What is the effect of comparing Agamemnon's gory blood to life-giving rain?

BATTLE OF THE SEXES?

In the original production of **Agamemnon**, all the actors would have been male, and so would the great majority, if not all, of the audience. Tragedy was written, produced and acted by men. Athenian women had very limited rights and freedom, and were not allowed to play any role in public life, apart from taking part in some religious occasions such as funerals.

Yet many Greek tragedies focus on women as their key figures, and **Agamemnon** itself presents a striking central female character who dominates, deceives and destroys the men who surround her. The play makes a very powerful statement about the dangers of such a woman.

The relationship between Clytaemestra and her husband Agamemnon is particularly interesting. Agamemnon has just come home as the victorious commander-in-chief of a ten-year long war; he has conquered the great city of Troy and its famous king Priam, and has made it safely back to his homeland, triumphant and with his chariot loaded down by many rich spoils, including Priam's own daughter, Cassandra. He seems to be a model of prosperity and good fortune. However as soon as he gets home he is outwitted, overcome and killed by his own wife.

The clash between male and female here is very interesting, as it shows that no matter how successful and powerful a man is, he might still be in danger from his wife waiting at home.

ACTIVITY

The chorus accuse Clytaemestra of speaking like a man. She accuses them of behaving like women. Work through the text and note where behaviour is said to be masculine or feminine. What does this tell us about society at the time?

Imagine the play performed entirely by men. What effect does this have? What if the play is performed entirely by women? What if the gender of all the actors is reversed - so a man plays Clytaemestra and a woman plays Agamemnon? Experiment with your group to see how the gender of the actor affects how we listen to the text they are speaking in this play.



**TRAGEDY WAS
WRITTEN,
PRODUCED
AND ACTED BY
MEN**

THE PRODUCTION

CHORUSES

All Greek tragedies featured a chorus alongside their main characters. The chorus was a group of actors who took on a collective identity. In *Agamemnon* the chorus consists of Argive male elders, but in other plays we find choruses who represent groups of sailors, slaves or women. Typically, the structure of a Greek tragedy would alternate between spoken scenes featuring the main characters, and then songs sung (and danced) by the chorus. These songs, called choral odes, usually comment on the action that has just happened on-stage. The chorus may react to the events with fear or hope; they may pray to the Gods, or try to offer advice to the main characters. The choral odes provide space for the audience to reflect on the events which they have just witnessed, and they can also provide some emotional relief after a very intense and involving scene.

ACTIVITY

Look at this verse spoken by the chorus.

*For War's a banker, flesh his gold.
There by the furnace of Troy's field,
Where thrust meets thrust, he sits to hold
His scale, and watch the spear-point sway;
And back to waiting homes he sends
Slag from ore, a little dust
To drain hot tears from hearts of friends;
Good measure, safely stored and sealed
In a convenient jar - the just
Price for the man they sent away.*

Lines 437-444, translation Philip Vellacott

Think of all the ways you could perform this and try them.
For example –

- All speak it together
- All say a line each
- Sing it
- One person speak while the others hum
- Divide into two groups and give some lines to each group

What works? What doesn't? What aural effects can you create?

Can your chorus move as they speak? What happens if they move altogether? What happens if they move slowly? Or separately?

ORIGINAL STAGING

The original staging of *Agamemnon* would have looked very different to how we now envisage theatrical space.

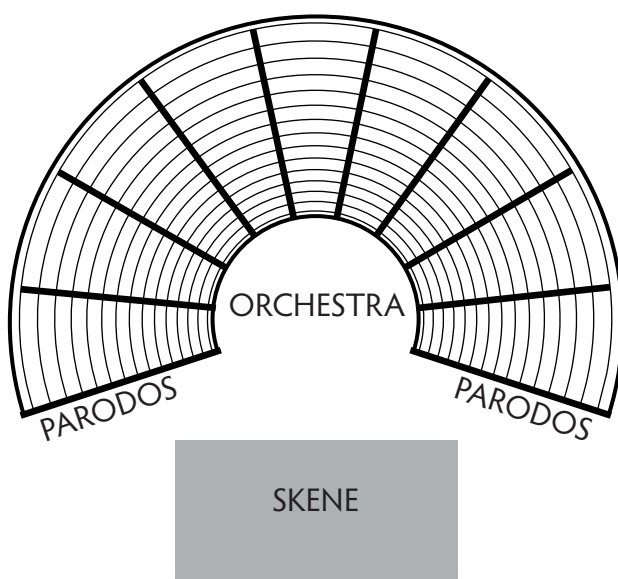
The ancient theatre in Athens was open-air, with the audience arranged in a roughly semi-circular arc in the **theatron**, and facing the **orchestra**, the central space where the chorus danced and sang. At the back of the **orchestra** was the **skene**, the stage-building, which in *Agamemnon* represented the palace of Argos. The **skene** had a door which characters could use to enter and exit. On either side of the **orchestra** were two long **parodoi** (singular parodos). The chorus entered and left via the **parodoi**.

All the actors were male. They wore elaborate costumes and masks which fully covered their faces. This meant that they could not use facial expression as a physical way of conveying meaning, but rather relied on gesture.

Agamemnon contains a number of staging effects which would have been new and exciting for the audience to watch. The play opens with the watchman perched on the top of the **skene**, an unusual piece of staging.

Later, Agamemnon and Cassandra enter by chariot along one of the **parodoi**, which would have been a spectacular visual effect. The off-stage death cries of Agamemnon as he is struck down in the bath also represented an innovative use of the **skene**.

Finally, the moment when Clytaemestra throws open the palace doors to reveal the murdered bodies of her two victims would have presented a striking tableau.



**THE ANCIENT
THEATRE IN
ATHENS WAS
OPEN-AIR**

ACTIVITY

- Think about theatrical space: look carefully at the play's exits and entrances. Who goes into the house, and who comes out of it? Who controls who goes in and out of the house? What does 'the house' symbolise in this play, and why?
- Think about how you would stage your own production of Agamemnon.
 1. What place and time period would you set your production in, and why?
 2. What kind of costumes would you design?
 3. What would your stage look like, and why? What would the front of the palace look like, and why?
 4. Design the two following important props: i) the purple tapestries which Agamemnon walks on as he goes into the house to his death. ii) the 'net' in which Clytaemestra traps her husband and kills him.



One of Neil Irish's designs for the **Herald** in the Cambridge production

PRODUCTION HISTORY

After its first performance at Athens, the **Agamemnon** was revived, in antiquity, at theatres throughout the Greek speaking world. It was then transmitted as a written text through subsequent generations. Napoleon recited the text to his companions in exile, reflecting on his own situation.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries we see the **Agamemnon** performed once more on the stage – both in the original Greek and in many different translations. Performances originally started at Universities and to select educated audiences, before spreading into the main theatre tradition.

In the last hundred years the play has been translated into innumerable languages and adapted, re-adapted and interpreted throughout the world. The play has been made into operas and films. Poets from Ted Hughes to Tony Harrison, from Anne Carson to Marina Carr have produced versions of the text and directors including Ariane Mnouchkine, Peter Stein, Steven Berkoff, Yukio Ninagawa and Peter Hall have created productions. These have been wildly different, drawing on a range of more recent theatre traditions in their style. The play has maintained a dialogue with the most cutting edge techniques in theatre. Katie Mitchell's production at the National Theatre in London used video screens, live filming and interactive media to create the sense that the public figures in the play were being constantly watched by the world and the press.

Many productions have used the play as an allegory for their own time, to explore their own society's issues of revenge, war, gender or power. Sometimes these allegories have been created with specific language, but often they have been created through visual aspects of the production which create a parallel with another world or time. The Farber Foundry's **Molora** (a version of the **Oresteia**) explored truth and reconciliation by setting the play in their own contemporary South Africa.

Any production now sits in a relationship with this whole history of productions and it is a testament to the timelessness of the play's themes that it continues to be regularly produced at theatres throughout the world.



*Helen Mirren as Cassandra,
BBC 1979*



*The Farber
Foundry's
Molora*

**NAPOLEON
RECITED THE
TEXT TO HIS
COMPANIONS
IN EXILE**

THE CAMBRIDGE PRODUCTION

Recent Cambridge Classics graduate Lizzie Mitchell went to catch up with director Helen Eastman and composer Alex Silverman, and got a glimpse of the method and madness to come.

Helen Eastman: The special thing about the Cambridge Greek Play is that it's in Greek, and it's been the tradition for over a hundred years to produce a play in Cambridge in Greek every three years.

So every three years the original Greek gets to meet whatever's going on in contemporary theatre, in what have been some incredibly dramatic and exciting productions over the last hundred years, directed by some extraordinary people, composed by some extraordinary people.

When the option of coming in to direct the 2010 Greek play came up I was incredibly keen, because you're really only going to get asked once in a career to direct a Greek tragedy in Greek.

So then I started to think about what play to do. What I really wanted to do was something very elemental and iconographic which could have a very strong visual life, and a very strong musical life, but that could basically work in the original language. So I looked at the **Agamemnon** and realised that it hasn't been a Cambridge Greek Play since the early 1950s.

I think the Agamemnon is one of the most accessible stories you can tell. I wouldn't say there's a lot of action, but it's the most physically visual Greek tragedy.

The really clear Aeschylean plotlines, if they're pushed through with some pace, are really accessible to quite young audiences. This production is absolutely not going to go on for hours – it's just going to pack it all in and race.

Obviously, when you're fifteen, being dragged along to see a play in Greek is a difficult cultural experience, but I think it should be a pleasant surprise. It's not about having to have enough Greek to understand it – you don't have to have Greek, although there's plenty there for people who love the original poetry. But you just want people to be actively engaging with something that's really stimulating in lots of ways, and active and musical and visual and everything else, rather than sitting there thinking, 'Oh God I'm watching a play in Greek'.

At this stage, there's no specific contemporary political analogy in mind, although having said that, one of the toughest things to do is to do anything military and be non-specific – it isn't possible to

clothe a soldier in a non-specific way. I'm more interested in the timelessness of the story rather than the time-specific-ness of an analogy, in its expression of gender, in the story of the returning heroes, and in its slightly rawer, more elemental aspects.

It will, though, be in dialogue with all the other Agamemnons of the last twenty years, be that Katie Mitchell's, be that the South African **Molara Oresteia**, or the many brilliant productions of the play which I've seen and which are no doubt both consciously and subconsciously working away in my mind as ways to interpret the text... there's a dialogue with the whole performance history of the **Agamemnon**.

And I think what's quite exciting is to treat these as living performance texts. I'd certainly have no fear about making cuts or whatever you need to do to make something work as a living textual piece, because that's what the Cambridge Greek Play is doing alongside what Cambridge academics are doing – they're two different and necessary approaches to the same text, but it's important that every text is revisited as a sort of working text.

LM: What are your plans for the original score accompanying the production?

HE: The musicians will probably be quite integrated into the production, so there probably won't be an orchestra in a pit, there'll probably be an orchestra in the set. Somewhere. Hidden next to three projectors and an urn and a red carpet...

Alex Silverman: The plan we have at this point is to set a lot of the play to music, although I have no intention of setting every word. There are wonderful set pieces to work with, as there are in any play on this scale, and finding, creating a world in which this play happens involves creating a sound-world in which this play happens, including the moments of ritual, moments of everyday life, moments of extraordinary action, which each have to have their own noises, noises which help us to draw a distinction between things that happen in the text and what's actually going on.

Vocal music is going to be an important part of this, and I want to use singing to interpret and enliven the choruses. There is a huge and wonderful rhythmic content in verse, which is not necessarily going to dictate in a distinct and exact way the rhythmical content of the music, but it's certainly going to inform it.

HE: It's important to communicate that, because people often

**THERE IS
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– ALEX SILVERMAN,
COMPOSER

don't realise the rhythmic variation that you get in Greek tragedy in the lyric.

AS: And it's exotic. The sort of music you listen to today, in terms of rhythmic variation, is still comparatively tedious. Four beats in a bar is about as much as we can normally cope with. But variations of fifteen, followed by nine, followed by eleven, lots of odd numbers... they're essential components of the verses that we have here. And they're things to draw upon, not necessarily to translate absolutely literally – I don't think every chorus needs to be sung or spoken or performed in its exact metrical measurements as we understand them – but on the other hand that material is there, and it will form and infiltrate the score as it happens. Taking as much as we can from the text is really important.

HE: Rather than Alex handing over a score that will go into rehearsal, he'll be involved in the process of making theatre in the rehearsal room, which is about moulding and shaping tone and texture and pace and rhythm and crescendo and light and dark to get the state right in the room, and that's why you need an absolutely first-class theatre composer in the room so that you can make those choices, that actually, this is where we need to go at this point, this is where we need more excitement or more stillness.

LM: The production pairs professional creatives with student actors. How do you bring them together in one show?

HE: We work with students and members of the university. The idea is that the process is a reasonably long learning curve for them. We cast at the start of 2010 and started workshopping in the Easter vacation. They're currently being trained one-on-one in Greek, and we'll be rehearsing intensively over the summer, creating an ensemble that can really work together. That's a real gift in that you've got some time to work and build a strong dynamic.

AS: We're rocking up into town with a professional creative team who are going to be working for a good part of a year on this play, and we're looking for people who want to grasp that.

A longer version of this interview is available online at www.cambridgegreekplay.com