

# BLAMING AGAMEMNON

## MORAL CONFLICT AND THE FIRST CHORAL SEQUENCE

### OF AESCHYLUS' AGAMEMNON

John Jackson and Marius Vermaak, Rhodes University, Grahamstown<sup>1</sup>

Consider the following questions: is moral value subject to luck?<sup>2</sup> How should we understand and cope with moral conflict?<sup>3</sup> What do lines 40-263 of Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* mean, and why do the Chorus sing them? Martha Nussbaum in her recent book<sup>4</sup> answers these questions and sees a deep connection between them. The sub-title of her book is "Luck and Ethics in Greek philosophy and tragedy" and in Chapter 2 she argues that the first choral sequence of *Ag.* answers the second question and gives a partial answer to the first. She also claims that Aeschylus has been misunderstood because of misguided modern philosophical assumptions concerning the two questions.

On the whole moral philosophers have taken moral value to be immune to luck. The goodness of the moral person cannot be destroyed by what just happens to him. Nussbaum takes up a suggestion by Bernard Williams that:

A deeper sense of exposure to fortune is expressed ... in Greek literature, above all in tragedy. There the repeated references to the insecurity of happiness get their force from the fact that the characters are displayed as having responsibilities, or pride, or needs, on a scale which lays them open to disaster in corresponding measure, and that they encounter disaster in full consciousness.<sup>5</sup>

She argues that tragedy correctly shows that not only human happiness but moral goodness itself is subject to luck, *tuchē*. Moreover, goodness is valuable precisely because it is fragile. One way in which moral bad luck impinges on our lives is in the form of moral conflict. Philosophers have denied too, in the face of common sense, that conflict is possible. Real moral conflict cannot occur, since moral principles cannot by definition conflict; and apparent conflict can be completely resolved by rational moral thought, leaving the subsequent action morally correct and blameless. Nussbaum (1986:25) writes that:

Greek tragedy shows good people being ruined because of things that just happen to them, things that they do not control. ... But the tragedies also show us, and dwell upon, another more intractable sort of case - one which has come to be called, as a result, the situation of "tragic conflict". In such cases we see a wrong action

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- <sup>1</sup> We would like to thank our colleague, Mrs Brenda Bell, for her helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
  - <sup>2</sup> Two papers that opened the modern debate in moral philosophy on this issue are: B. Williams, "Moral luck", in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge 1981); and T. Nagel, "Moral Luck", in *Moral questions* (Cambridge 1979). See also A. Kenny, "Aristotle on moral luck", in *The heritage of wisdom* (Oxford 1987).
  - <sup>3</sup> C.W. Gowans (ed.), *Moral dilemmas* (New York 1987) is a useful introduction to recent philosophical discussion of this issue.
  - <sup>4</sup> M. Nussbaum, *The fragility of goodness*. (Cambridge 1986).
  - <sup>5</sup> B. Williams, "Philosophy" in M.I. Finley (ed.), *The legacy of Greece: a new appraisal* (Oxford 1981) 253.

committed without any direct physical compulsion and in full knowledge of its nature, by a person whose ethical character would otherwise dispose him to reject the act. The constraint comes from the presence of circumstances that prevent the adequate fulfillment of two valid ethical claims.

She has the following kind of case in mind: Someone wants or has reason to do A and wants or has reason to do B, but cannot do both, either because doing A is just doing not-B or because some contingent circumstance makes the alternatives incompatible.<sup>6</sup> Agamemnon faces such a dilemma at Aulis. She objects to the philosophical understanding of such cases, because the theory distorts our intuitive experience: we just do not respond to conflicts as puzzles for which we have to find the right answers, but as situations where we have to do evil.

The debate about the proper understanding of moral conflict is the key to Nussbaum's reading of the first choral sequence. In this paper we avoid this issue to concentrate on the question whether her interpretation of the Aeschylean text is plausible.

Let us discuss the main points of her interpretation first:

- (1) The Chorus expresses Aeschylus' own view.

Nussbaum does not say this directly, but expressions such as "what he has put before us", "Aeschylus has indicated" and "he suggests" (1986:49-50) imply a tendency to equate the Chorus' view with that of Aeschylus.

- (2) The Chorus expresses a consistent view of the nature of Agamemnon's conflict.

Nussbaum (1986:33) sees her task as follows:

The sacrifice of Iphigenia is regarded by the Chorus as necessary; but they also blame Agamemnon. Critics have usually explained away either the necessity or the blame, feeling that these must be incompatible. ... It is, however, possible to arrive at a coherent understanding of both aspects of the situation, if only we look more precisely at the nature and genesis of this necessity and also at what the Chorus finds blameworthy in the conduct of their chief.

- (3) Agamemnon's conflict is necessary in the sense that two equally valid moral claims conflict, but its origin is contingent in the sense that this does not come about through any wrongdoing on his part.

According to Nussbaum (1986:33-34), the Chorus is confident that the command of Zeus to pursue the Trojan expedition is just. She relies on *Ag.* 55-66 and a remark about the Trojans in the first stasimon. She finds it significant that the Chorus does not question or even try to justify Artemis' intervention.

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<sup>6</sup> This rough definition covers cases ranging from the trivial to the tragic. Nussbaum (1986:27) gives a loose set of criteria for serious conflict. The values involved must be central to our and the person's conception of the good; sometimes harm is done to other people; sometimes the harm done is irreparable; sometimes the conflict requires the person to act against and not merely neglect a desired project; etc. Nussbaum does not distinguish sharply between moral and other values, since the Greek texts don't, and since it would beg the question.

Whether we are to infer that her anger is caused by her general pro-Trojan sympathies or by her horror, as protector of the young, at the impending slaughter of Trojan innocents, the force of Aeschylus's omission of a personal offence is to emphasize the contingent and external origin of Agamemnon's dreadful dilemma (Nussbaum 1986:33-34).

Nussbaum does not ignore the background family guilt of the House of Atreus, but argues that reference to this is not sufficient to explain how the guilt enters Agamemnon's life. This guilt is attached to him by the dilemma which contingently confronts him, and which offers no guilt-free course of action.

It is important that the necessity of the conflict does not eliminate Agamemnon's freedom. All action is the outcome of choice (freedom) within constraint (necessity). Agamemnon acts freely within the very tight constraints of the dilemma. He sees his options clearly, reacts with anger and grief (203-204), since he understands that neither option is without evil (206-213), makes up his mind (this process is veiled in *Ag.*), and decides to sacrifice Iphigeneia.

(4) Agamemnon makes the right decision.

Agamemnon's decision is correct both as far as the consequences are concerned (if he does not sacrifice, everyone will die) and for reasons of piety (the pressing claims of Zeus and Artemis). Nussbaum quotes evidence that this is Agamemnon's (212) and the Chorus' view (188-190) of the consequences; that the divine commands are just, has already been established.

(5) The Chorus blames Agamemnon for his emotional response to his decision and action.

What the Chorus find blameworthy in Agamemnon is that he becomes a willing victim of his own bad luck. It is not so much what he does, as the way he does it. He adjusts his emotional response too glibly. Before the decision he saw the evil of both alternatives; after taking the right decision he suppresses its horror. For Nussbaum this crucial transformation is revealed in lines 214-217, which she translates:

For it is right and holy (*themis*) that I should desire with exceedingly impassioned passion (*orgai periorgos epithumein*) the sacrifice staying the winds, the maiden's blood. May all turn out well. (Nussbaum 1986:35)

She reads this as an expression of "a peculiar optimism". The correctness of the decision seems to justify both his action and his emotion. The Chorus blame him for this.

And when he had slipped his neck through the yoke-strap of necessity, blowing his mind in an impious change of direction, from the moment he changed his mind and turned to think the all-daring. For men are made bold by base-counselling wretched madness. He dared (*etla*) to become the sacrificer of his daughter. (219-225)

This is perhaps the most striking feature of Nussbaum's interpretation: her understanding of why the Chorus blame Agamemnon. It requires that the Chorus take the emotions to play a rational and cognitive role. Nussbaum develops such an account of the emotions at length in Chapters 9 and 10. She attributes it to Aristotle, and prefers it to standard philosophical views of the emotions as irrational and involuntary. A bonus of the Aristotelian account of the emotions is that it allows Nussbaum to make good sense of a notoriously difficult passage later in *Ag.*, 799-804: translating *tharsos hekousion* as "a willing boldness of temper" presents no difficulties (Nussbaum 1986:43-44).

- (6) The Chorus's own emotional response is an illustration of a more adequate response to conflict.

The Chorus contrast their own response to the sacrifice with Agamemnon's ruthless performance of the act. In their description they movingly pick out the pitiful and horrible details, to which he is blind. Agamemnon never shows remorse; the Chorus have been racked by remorse during the intervening ten years ("the painful memory of pain drips, instead of sleep, before the heart", as Nussbaum translates lines 179-180). This seems to be the difference between a moral and a blameworthy response to conflict. There is another difference as well: the Chorus' response leads to moral progress, wisdom; the other to punishment and death. Nussbaum (1986:45) connects this with the oft-repeated *pathei mathos* maxim:

But we must now add, with the *Agamemnon* chorus, that the experience of conflict can also be a time of learning and development. The deep meaning of the proverbial *pathei mathos* ... is that hard cases like these, if one allows oneself really to see and to experience them, may bring an increase in self-knowledge and knowledge of the world. An honest effort to do justice to all aspects of a hard case, seeing and feeling it in all its conflicting many-sidedness, could enrich future deliberative efforts.

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So much, then, for Nussbaum's interpretation of the first choral sequence of *Ag.* While it may be attractive and thought-provoking as an account of the experience of moral conflict, it poses some problems as a reading of Aeschylus.

Let us begin with the question of the identity and role of the Chorus. One cannot assume (as Nussbaum does, point 1) that they are the spokesmen of Aeschylus himself. Would the same apply to the Chorus of *Eum.* i.e. the Erinyes? Surely not!<sup>7</sup> Who are the Chorus of *Ag.*? Early in the play (72f.) they are identified as the elders of Argos, but they also at times represent the following:

#### Observers at Aulis:

- The words "what happened thereafter I neither saw nor mention" (248)<sup>8</sup> not only express horror at the deed, but may also remind the audience that the elders were not actually present.

#### Greek soldiers at Troy:

- The Chorus graphically express the hatred felt by the soldiers for the land in which so many of them lie buried (454-455).<sup>9</sup> Although the third person is used, this is the soldiers' point of view.

#### Menelaus:

- The Chorus movingly describe Menelaus' sense of loss at Helen's departure (410-426).

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<sup>7</sup> For a fuller discussion of the identity of the Chorus see Maurice Pope, "Merciful heavens", *JHS* 94 (1974) 112-113.

<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, from now on we use our own translations of the passages quoted, following the text of Denys Page (Oxford 1972).

<sup>9</sup> The conciseness of *echthra d'echontas ekrupsen* almost defies translation.

### The community as a whole:

- Even more eloquently they describe the terrible and **permanent** losses experienced by many families and express the anger of the community (427-474).

### Agamemnon himself:

- The relevant lines are 206-216.

To expect a single consistent view from such spokesmen as these (who represent various groups and individuals) is unreasonable (*pace* Nussbaum, point 2). Indeed one cannot always expect this even when they are simply being the old men of Argos. For example, when the death cries of Agamemnon are heard, individual members are at variance with one another about what action to take (1346f.). We suggest that the only reason Nussbaum expects the Chorus to be consistent is that she assumes that they express a specific viewpoint viz. that of Aeschylus.

With Nussbaum's third and fourth points we are in agreement.

But what of her view (point 5) that the Chorus blame Agamemnon for his emotional response to the sacrifice? With this part of her interpretation we have the most difficulty. Certainly, several of the terms used are condemnatory, especially *dussebē* (219) *anagnon* and *anieron* (220) (which all imply an offence against the gods). But in the previous strophe it is clear that they are aware of his awful dilemma, and from this awareness their sympathy could be inferred (205-214).

What should one make of this? Perhaps they are expressing the responses of different people who witnessed the sacrifice: some were sympathetic, others blamed Agamemnon. But this interpretation may be rather superficial. Nussbaum claims that the Chorus agree with what Agamemnon does, but blame him for his emotional response: how he does it. Is this the only explanation of the apparent inconsistency, or even the most plausible one? Following Dover, we would argue that the Chorus respond to the sacrifice both as an **action** (what is intentionally done) and as an **event** (what simply happens). They acknowledge the correctness of the action, but the intrinsic evil of the event elicits from them an intense emotional reaction, which accounts for the strong condemnatory language which they apply to Agamemnon. This might not be a fully rational response, but it is a natural one: what they describe here is their (or the observers') reaction at the time, not their cool assessment after ten intervening years. As Dover remarks, "The Chorus describes Agamemnon's dilemma fairly, then reacts to the outcome as men do react".<sup>10</sup> Nussbaum's interpretation is ingenious, but it is not called for unless one assumes consistency on the part of the Chorus.

As for the apparent transformation of Agamemnon's character (214-217) and his "peculiar optimism", Nussbaum may have misunderstood the mood of the words "May all turn out well" (her translation of *eu gar eiē* (216)). Throughout *Ag.* there are several other prayers for deliverance. Whenever this motif occurs, the mood of the speakers is at best one of anxiety (e.g. the Watchman 1, 19-20), at worst one of sheer despair (e.g. the Chorus, 998).<sup>11</sup> In fact it is only

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<sup>10</sup> *The Greeks* (Oxford 1980) 92; for a fuller account of the Chorus' reaction, see "Some neglected aspects of Agamemnon's dilemma", *JHS* 93 (1973) 58-69.

<sup>11</sup> See also 121 (repeated in 138, 159), sung by the Chorus, and the pathetic prayer of Cassandra in 1291-1294. The only person who appears to make this kind of prayer with any feeling of confidence is Clytaemnestra: see 349 and possibly 973-974.

at the end of *Eum.* that such a prayer can be uttered with any real feeling of confidence (974-975, 1033-1047). From a dramatic point of view it makes better sense to associate the words *eu gar eiē* with pessimism rather than optimism.<sup>12</sup>

On the interpretation (in more general terms) of lines 214-217, a passage from *Cho.* (827-830) may be enlightening. There Orestes is given the following encouragement:

Be bold when your time comes to act  
And when she cries "Child",  
Shout "Father!"  
And carry out the blameless destruction.

The Chorus do not name Iphigeneia, but the verbal similarities with *Ag.* 228f. are so striking that the audience are surely meant to be aware of parallels between Agamemnon's situation and Orestes'.<sup>13</sup> Agamemnon has been (virtually) ordered by Artemis to kill his daughter; Orestes has been (explicitly) ordered by Apollo to kill his mother (*Cho.* 558-559, 900-902; *Eum.* 64-84).<sup>14</sup> (Is it mere coincidence that these deities are twins?) In both cases failure to do the deed would involve disobedience to Zeus:<sup>15</sup> in the case of Agamemnon this is obvious; in the case of Orestes, less so, at least for the time being, but in the last play it is made clear that Apollo's action is strongly linked with Zeus (*Eum.* 616-621).<sup>16</sup>

Of course an important difference is the moral position of the victims: Iphigeneia is innocent; Clytaemnestra guilty. But perhaps according to Nussbaum's interpretation, Orestes ought to feel revulsion or remorse at his own deed simply because Clytaemnestra is his mother, and without reference to what she has done. For a time he does hesitate. Then Pylades, whose silence up to now (900) must have puzzled the audience, speaks his only lines in the play, in which he reminds Orestes of Apollo's instructions. These three lines have a decisive effect not only on the action of the play, but also on Orestes' character. As happened to his father, Orestes becomes brutal. The deed has to be done - dire punishment is threatened if it is not (*Cho.* 276-284, *Eum.* 465-468) - and it can only be done if he forces himself to be different from his normal self, or to become (in colloquial terms) a "monster". Is not Agamemnon in a similar position? Is it too much to suggest that far from exhibiting an inadequate emotional response (Nussbaum, point 5), Agamemnon (like Orestes), in order to do the deed, has to force himself to be a "monster" precisely because he is a naturally sensitive person? Perhaps he finds it necessary to assume a "willing boldness of temper" (as Nussbaum translates *tharsos hekousion* [803]).

However, Nussbaum's interpretation of this phrase is problematic. She may be right to accept the reading *hekousion* and to link the phrase with Agamemnon rather than Helen, but there is no reason to suppose that the Chorus are referring here specifically to the Aulis episode. Rather their criticism is that lives have been lost - hence the plural *andراسi*. That the men at Aulis suffer in some way is clear enough (184-196), but there is no indication that any of them actually

<sup>12</sup> On the pessimistic tone of the hymn to Zeus, see Pope *art. cit.* 107f. W.B. Stanford refers to Agamemnon's prayer as "pathetically futile" (*Greek tragedy and the emotions* [London etc. 1983] 128).

<sup>13</sup> *litاس....patrōiاس* (*Ag.* 228), "*teknon*", "*ergōi patros*" (*Cho.* 829). For another striking parallel, see *Ag.* 154-155 (*Mēnis teknopoinos*) and *Cho.* 648-651 (*teknon d'epeispherei domois ... Erinys*). On the importance of parallels in general between these two plays, see A.F. Garvie, *Aeschylus Choephoroi* (Oxford 1987) (2nd. ed.) xxxvf.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *Eum.* 200-207, 276-285, 578-579, 593-596.

<sup>15</sup> Garvie (*op. cit.* xxxi) points out that it was also the will of the underworld powers and dead Agamemnon that Clytaemnestra should be punished. On the power that dead Agamemnon is seen (at least by Orestes) to have, see *Eum.* 598.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. 16-19, 713-714.

die. The phrase *andrasī thnēiskousi* refers more naturally to the men who died at Troy: the community's sense of outrage at the loss there of so many lives is strongly emphasised elsewhere in the play (see above).

There seems, then, to be little evidence that the Chorus (or anyone else besides Clytaemnestra) blame Agamemnon for his emotional response to the sacrifice of Iphigeneia.

Nor is there evidence to suggest (as Nussbaum does, point 6, with reference to lines 179-180) that the Chorus have felt remorse during the intervening ten years or that they have made progress in moral terms. The point here is likely to be a more general one: all-powerful Zeus has ordained the doctrine of *pathei mathos*. At this stage the precise meaning of this strophe is cryptic: perhaps Aeschylus does not expect the audience to grasp it fully until the end of the trilogy.

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Certain elements are ignored by Nussbaum:

#### **Good news from Calchas (line 156):**

Amidst the gloom and horror at Aulis, one is inclined to forget that much of Calchas' message was positive: "with many good things" (156).<sup>17</sup> Doubtless one of those "good things" was the expectation of victory at Troy. For Agamemnon this would have meant that the expedition ordained by Zeus must succeed at all costs - quite literally.<sup>18</sup> What this implies is that the dilemma was not quite as problematic for Agamemnon as one might imagine.

#### **"Another woman" (lines 225-6):**

An important motif in *Ag.* is that the Trojan war was conducted for the sake of "another woman" or a "promiscuous woman" - i.e. Helen.<sup>19</sup> Its prominence in lines 225-226 may have the effect of focusing the audience's attention not only on Agamemnon's "guilt" (which is still not clear), but also on Helen's "guilt" (which is obvious).

#### **Subsequent references in the *Oresteia* to Iphigeneia:**

Nothing more is said about Iphigeneia in *Ag.* until lines 1415f. The speaker is Clytaemnestra, who cites the sacrifice of her daughter as her chief motive for murdering Agamemnon. Although she refers to the episode three times and in strong terms, what she says is not necessarily intended by the playwright to increase the audience's sense of Agamemnon's guilt. There is an interesting parallel between lines 228-237 and 1415f., especially in terms of the motif of killing an animal, but the sarcasm and blasphemy of Clytaemnestra's remark that he did the deed "to charm away the gales of Thrace" (1418) belie any serious attempt by her to understand Agamemnon's dilemma. Compare her tasteless description of the affectionate greeting between father and daughter in the Underworld (1555-1559). Besides, Clytaemnestra's position as a

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<sup>17</sup> *xun megalois agathois*.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. the point made by D.H. Roberts (with reference to Apollo) that an oracle must be fulfilled: "Sometimes (as in the *Oresteia*) ... the fulfillment of an oracle ... appears not so much inevitable as necessary: something for which both gods and mortals are responsible and which both must desire". (*Apollo and his oracle in the Oresteia*, *Hypomnemata* 78 [Göttingen 1984] 121.)

<sup>19</sup> The description varies from one reference to another. See also 62, 448, 800 (where she is named), 823, as well as the passages 404-419, 681-749.

commentator on Agamemnon's guilt is seriously undermined by her adultery with Aegisthus<sup>20</sup> and the fact (which emerges in *Cho.* 135-136) that she and Aegisthus have deprived Orestes of what is rightfully his.

What may be particularly significant is the lack of any mention of Iphigeneia by the Chorus. If the Chorus (all or part thereof) were strongly convinced of Agamemnon's guilt at Aulis, would they not make some reference to it - especially now that the "silence" which has pervaded the play has been broken?<sup>21</sup> It is tempting to suggest that Aeschylus has surprised us (i.e. the audience) by subtly playing on our expectations: a superficial hearing of lines 218f. may prompt some sense of Agamemnon's guilt at Aulis, and so we expect an unequivocal condemnation of him at the end of the first play. This is precisely what does not happen, and so we are compelled to rethink this complex issue.

The only reference to Iphigeneia in the rest of the trilogy occurs in *Cho.* 242. Nothing is said or implied about the morality of the sacrifice. And surprisingly, in the last play, the Erinyes (who take Clytaemnestra's side) make no reference to Iphigeneia: although they normally punish the shedding of kindred blood (*Eum.* 212), their only concern here is one particular version of it: matricide (*passim*).

What all this suggests is that Nussbaum has exaggerated the dramatic importance of Agamemnon's dilemma at Aulis.

A general problem with Nussbaum's interpretation is that it imposes on the play an understanding of *dikē* ("justice") which is anachronistic. And yet throughout the *Oresteia* there are several features of *dikē* which one cannot ignore, even though to many 20th century minds they may appear "primitive" or at least unsophisticated:

- (a) Guilt can be inherited through a curse on a family.
- (b) The *dikē* that ultimately prevails in the *Oresteia* is strongly linked with Zeus' supremacy, a supremacy which has come about not only through coercion (e.g. *Eum.* 973f.) but also through brute force, as the audience are reminded during the hymn to Zeus which occurs in the middle of the account of Calchas' prophecy (*Ag.* 167-175).
- (c) Both Apollo and Athene help to secure Orestes' acquittal by associating themselves with the *dikē* of Zeus<sup>22</sup> in ways that from a moral or even logical point of view a modern audience would find highly unsatisfactory: Athene, whose casting vote as presiding judge is crucial, remarks (*Eum.* 736f.) that she herself had no mother and prefers male to female. Apollo refers (657-666) to the myth about the mutual challenge of Zeus and Hera that each should produce a child unaided: Athene's presence is upheld as evidence of Zeus' success, but Hera's equally great success in producing Hephaestus is ignored (very conveniently).
- (d) Apart from Athene, the jury votes in equal numbers for acquittal and condemnation. What this means is that much importance is still attached to the retributive type of justice represented by the Erinyes. And Athene herself in her words of assurance to them (804) appears to give them more prominence in human society than they might have had before.

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<sup>20</sup> The infidelity of Agamemnon, as implied by the presence of Cassandra, would probably not have worried the contemporary audience very much!

<sup>21</sup> See 36-39, 248, 263 and 548. Note also the long silence of Cassandra (783-1072) and the "eloquent" silence of Iphigeneia (239-247).

<sup>22</sup> Apollo and Zeus: 616, cf. 713-714; Athene and Zeus: 973-975.

- (e) Group interests are important, more so than Nussbaum may recognise. Throughout her discussion she places great emphasis on Agamemnon as an individual. However both sons of Atreus are described as intensely upset by Calchas' message (Ag. 203-204). And whatever the correct reading of line 216 may be,<sup>23</sup> there is nothing in the text to suggest that *epithumein* should be translated as "I should desire". As for the "battle-loving leaders" (*philomachoi brabēs*) who remain unmoved by Iphigeneia's supplications (228f.), Menelaus is likely to be one of them, and possibly there are others. In lines 239-240 the phrase "each of the sacrificers" (*hekaston thutērōn*) implies that Agamemnon is not the only target of Iphigeneia's "eye's piteous dart" (239-240). This shows that others besides Agamemnon were involved in the dilemma at Aulis. No doubt it would have been the view of the contemporary audience that the interests of the group should prevail over those of an individual.<sup>24</sup>

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But the question of Agamemnon's guilt still needs to be answered. Apart from the curse, is there any other way in which guilt enters his life (Nussbaum, point 3)? Some commentators have suggested that his action of stepping on carpets fit only for the gods is an act of *hybris* (944f.). In a sense it is, but what may be more significant in terms of his character is that he allows Clytaemnestra to persuade him to do something against his better judgement.<sup>25</sup> A much more important example of *hybris* is his excessive punishment of Troy. The first signs of this come from a speech by Clytaemnestra (320f., esp. 330-347). Of course, in more ways than one, she has an axe to grind, and she would probably welcome these additional justifications of her intended murder. However, the audience would probably remember (from the post-Homeric epics) that acts of *hybris* such as mentioned by her *did* take place at Troy.<sup>26</sup> These impressions are strongly confirmed by the Herald's speech (503f.). He has come ostensibly to tell the good news of Troy's capture, yet he lays far more stress on negative aspects of the war, notably the excessiveness of the punishment: "Double was the penalty paid by the sons of Priam for their failings" (537). Perhaps unwittingly Agamemnon himself refers to the excessiveness of it all (827-828):

A flesh-eating lion leapt over the walls  
And licked the blood of kings until he was satisfied.

All these references should be seen against the background of the Chorus' words (364f.):

(Zeus) for a long time stretched the bow,  
So that the arrow should not fall at random  
Either short of the mark or beyond the stars.

The point here is not only that Zeus ordained the punitive expedition, but that he intended the punishment to strike the mean between inadequacy and excess. Agamemnon has failed through being guilty of excess. There is little doubt that the point would have been appreciated by the contemporary audience: on the Acropolis, towering above the theatre of the Dionysus, were grim reminders of excessive action taken by the Persians twenty years earlier, and a generation later a lively interest in the question of whether or not to use excessive force is reflected in Thucydides'

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<sup>23</sup> *periorgōs epithumein* (MSS) or *periorgōi s<ph>* (Page). See Nussbaum, note 36.

<sup>24</sup> See Dover *art. cit.* 66, *Greek popular morality in the time of Plato and Aristotle*, (Oxford 1974) 292f.

<sup>25</sup> See H. Lloyd-Jones, (*Aeschylus : Oresteia, Agamemnon (translated with notes)* (London 1982) *ad loc.*

<sup>26</sup> See Lloyd-Jones *op. cit. ad loc.*

version of the Mytilenean debate (3.37-48). Perhaps the ultimate tragedy of Agamemnon is that in moral terms he succeeds in his difficult dilemma at Aulis but fails in his more straightforward task at Troy, for ironically he becomes guilty of the very crime for which his expedition has attempted to punish Paris: *hybris*.

Many aspects of the *Oresteia* might disappoint those modern readers who expect to find a subtle and sophisticated view of moral issues, such as is presented by Nussbaum. Even so, the contemporary audience would have found much in the trilogy to be thought-provoking and innovative. It might have left some problems unresolved, but at least it would have conveyed to the audience the notion that moral issues - such as the dilemma at Aulis - could be complex. And the idea of ending the story in *Athens* and involving the Areopagite jury cannot have failed to startle the audience who witnessed the first production in 458, particularly since it was only three years previously that the Areopagus had been deprived of many of its judicial functions during the reforms by Pericles and Ephialtes. What is more, the Areopagus hill was close by and would have been clearly seen during the procession from the *agora* just before the trilogy began. Perhaps what Aeschylus was trying to say to his fellow countrymen through his bold adaptation of a well-known story of long ago and the astonishing richness of his language, was that they should think about *dikē* in at least some of its complexities and take an active part in promoting it, not only in their personal lives but more importantly in the life of the community.