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DISSIMILAR REPRESENTATIONS OF AGAMEMNON  
IN ANCIENT GREEK LITERATURE

EMILY BELLWOAR  
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Reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Lisa Sternlieb  
Professor of English  
Honors Advisor and Thesis Supervisor

Marcy North  
Professor of English  
Faculty Reader

\* Signatures are on file in the Schreyer Honors College.

## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the discrepancies in the portrayals of Agamemnon in three ancient Greek texts. Homer's *Iliad*, Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* each depicts Agamemnon with an astounding level of variety, both intertextually and intratextually. Despite any differences in plots, authorship and genre, Agamemnon as a character should maintain some semblance of a consistent figure. All three texts are analyzed, establishing the vast differences between each version of Agamemnon. This thesis hopes to prove how his actions, values, motivations and capabilities are all unusually dissimilar for such a prominent and influential mythological figure.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ancient Greek literature is, undeniably, greatly influenced by Greek mythology. This is especially true for epics and tragedy. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, two of the first and most famous epics in history, both concentrate on mythological tales, incorporating the direct involvement of the Greek pantheon. Similarly, “Attic tragedy almost always drew its plots from heroic myth” (Mastronarde 44). Aristotle recognized another correspondence in content between the two genres when he wrote in his *Poetics* that “epic poetry agrees with Tragedy in so far as it is an imitation in verse of characters of a higher type,” or characters with elevated social status and superior morals (Aristotle, Part V). While many texts of Ancient Greek literature have similar inspiration and content, at times they have a shocking degree of dissonance. Authors are able to create variations from other renditions by altering the characterizations of known figures. Many of the mortals in Greek mythology have known roles and characteristics; for example, Odysseus is typically described as cunning while Achilles is skilled at fighting and prone to rage. Individual authors may alter situations, attitudes or other secondary traits, yet certain qualities are essential to these characters. There are some unique figures, however, that do not seem to have such intrinsic characteristics. While this lack of cohesion may be more common in minor characters, such dissonance seems jarring with more prominent figures.

Agamemnon is one such character. As the commander-in-chief of the Achaeans in the Trojan War he has power, authority and renown. He has a very influential role in well-known myths, including the curse of the house of Atreus and the sacrifice of his daughter, Iphigenia. He is also known for the dispute with Achilles that sparks the principle dispute in Homer’s *Iliad*. Despite his important social status and mythological influence, the character itself is rather

nebulous. An analysis of Agamemnon's roles in Homer's *Iliad*, Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* shows that his character drastically changes both intertextually and intratextually. Ultimately Agamemnon is a character distinguished by inconsistencies. "Poets were drawing upon an essentially loose and floating body of material with a vast number of interconnections and associations" (Mastronarde p. 44). However, even allowing for the plasticity of storytelling and mythology, the character of Agamemnon is strikingly disparate among ancient Greek tragedy and epics. His personality, values, and decisions all vary to extraordinary degrees. The character of Agamemnon shifts from an indecisive and inadequate ruler, to a deficient ruler typified by rage, to a pious yet unlucky husband, among a multitude of other changes. As a character he is continuous in almost name alone. This paper hopes to prove the extent of dissonance between the three ancient Greek texts.

## Chapter 1

### General Similarities

#### Agamemnon's Place in Mythology

Although many aspects of Agamemnon's character change, certain details of Agamemnon should stay the same throughout and between each text to maintain the integrity of the myths. In order for the texts to have a semblance of unity and legitimacy they must figure into the larger mythology that the audience and readers understand. Homer, Aeschylus and Euripides all "wrote with the expectation that their audience had a certain familiarity with poetic and oral traditions" (Mastronarde 44). In each text, therefore, Agamemnon generally had the same cultural identity, social status, family, and military responsibility. These attributes all provide the foundation for a character, yet they do not supply any inherent personality. These qualities also establish Agamemnon's place within the traditions of the Trojan War and the myths surrounding the curse of the house of Atreus. Within the context of the Trojan War, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, the *Iliad*, and *Agamemnon* each describes Agamemnon's departure for the war, his involvement in the ninth year of the war, and his eventual return to Argos, respectively. Although these characteristics are similar across all three texts, upon closer examination even these basic facts disclose a few incongruities between the portrayals of Agamemnon.

Agamemnon's cultural identity is a significant factor of his character. Although *nationality* is an anachronistic term, similar allegiances play a part in his decisions.

Agamemnon's loyalty to Hellas and the stronger, more personal loyalty to his own city-state both impact his involvement in the Trojan War and his social and political roles. Some texts

claim he is the king of Argos, such as Aeschylus' tragedy *Agamemnon*, which is set in Argos.

Others claim he is the king of Mycenae. Euripides' tragedy *Iphigenia at Aulis* includes both. At one point the chorus mentions that Agamemnon sent men and ships "from Cyclopean Mycenae" (239-302). At another time in the same play Menelaus states that he was waiting for the arrival of Agamemnon's wife and daughter from Argos (325-350). The *Iliad* recognizes Agamemnon's rule of Argos but often uses the general and exalted epithet of "king of men" when describing Agamemnon. Regardless of whether he was king of Argos or Mycenae, or whether both names refer to the same location or area, he is indisputably a king of a notable Greek city-state.

Agamemnon's family is a large factor of his involvement in the war. Every text recognizes the fact that he has a wife, Clytemnestra, and a brother, Menelaus. Helen is both Clytemnestra's sister and Menelaus' wife, providing Agamemnon with two more reasons to go to war against Troy and bring Helen back to Helas. Aside from his personal connections to the war, Agamemnon proves to be a very important militaristic leader. "Agamemnon appears to be merely 'the most powerful ruler of his time in Greece,' and as such, and as having furnished most ships and men, to have been made commander-in-chief of the expedition" (Shewan 147). As commander-in-chief of all of the Achaeans he was "their leader in the fight, praying and sacrificing on their behalf, and entrusted with chief executive and judicial functions" (Shewan 150). *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Agamemnon* and the *Iliad* all recognize Agamemnon's authority over the army, despite any variations in attitudes towards the war or his success as a leader.

Agamemnon is also commonly attributed with multiple children: Iphigenia, Electra, Chrysothemis, and Orestes. Here the three texts differ in their descriptions of some of Agamemnon's most fundamental background information. The entire plot of *Iphigenia at Aulis* concerns Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia in order for the gods to allow the



Achaean journey to Troy. *Agamemnon* involves the revenge of Clytemnestra on Agamemnon for killing their daughter. In both cases, therefore, Agamemnon clearly sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia. The *Iliad*, however, mentions three surviving daughters named “Chrysothemis and Laodikē and Iphianassa” (9.145). The epic mentions nothing of a sacrifice, either of a daughter named Iphianassa, one named Iphigenia, or any other human being.

Similar to the Medea myth, the filicide may simply be a later addition to Agamemnon’s mythology. However the timeline of this mythological variation is unclear. Hesiod, a poet considered to have lived around the time the *Iliad* was created, mentions the sacrifice of Iphigenia. He “adds explicit allusion to the delay of the Achaean fleet and the *aploia*, the inability to sail” in *Works and Days*, and “a Hesiodic fragment of the *Catalogue of Women* ... represents the earliest known literary source for the sacrifice of Agamemnon’s daughter” (Hollinshead 421). Therefore, although the *Iliad* makes no mention of any sacrifice, a contemporary author of Homer does accept the sacrifice of Agamemnon’s daughter. Despite any general similarity in dates, Hesiod’s mention of the sacrifice was still one of the first known references, meaning that tradition was not yet firmly established. The introduction of Iphigenia’s sacrifice may then simply be a natural progression of a plastic mythology. Another potential explanation is that Homer knew about the mythological sacrifice of Iphigenia but excluded it on purpose, perhaps in order to “characterize Agamemnon more sympathetically” (Martin 11). In some ancient works, “Iphianassa and Iphigenia are both listed as daughters of Agamemnon,” while in other texts, as in Euripides’ plays, “Iphigeneia, daughter of Agamemnon, is described as a substitute for the Homeric Iphianassa” (Hollinshead 421). The myth of Iphigenia was therefore anything but set in stone.

The plots of *Agamemnon* and *Iphigenia at Aulis* both rely upon the sacrifice of Iphigenia. Although the inconsistencies surrounding her character can most likely be attributed to a natural and common flexibility of myth, such a difference greatly differentiates Agamemnon's characterization between these two tragedies and the *Iliad*. Agamemnon's grief, motivations for war, and his valuation of the importance of the war are all influenced by Agamemnon's actions and decisions concerning his daughter. Even this slight alteration to his family tree has substantial ramifications for his characterization. In order to analyze the differences between the existing portrayals of Agamemnon, such a difference must be noted, yet also accepted in order to discern other, perhaps more severe changes in his character.

### **Similarities in Circumstances**

In each text Agamemnon experiences misfortune. Dramas and epics as genres must contain some level of difficulty in order for there to be an action about which to write. Furthermore tragedy "is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude" (Aristotle Part VI). This quality of imitation separates tragedy from comedy, yet also relates tragedy to epics. In each work Agamemnon faces serious and unfortunate situations. In *Iphigenia at Aulis* he must choose between sacrificing his daughter and preventing his troops from sailing to battle in Troy. In the *Iliad* he must relinquish Chryseis, a spoil of war, which sparks the dispute between Achilles and Agamemnon. In *Agamemnon* he must manage returning home after war and confront his angered and manipulative wife. Although frequent conflict is a common element that deeply influences Agamemnon as an individual, it does little to affect his portrayed personality. These misfortunes are mainly external. While "character determines

men's qualities... it is by their actions that they are happy or the reverse. Dramatic action, therefore, is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions" (Aristotle Part VI). Unfortunate circumstances may be a common factor throughout each text involving Agamemnon, yet that is a product of the genre and does not directly influence his characterization.

It must be noted that Agamemnon may be particularly unfortunate because of the curse on the house of Atreus. Mythologically, Agamemnon is fated to experience miserable and murderous situations as a result of "Atreus' murder of his nephews and the subsequent curse on his descendants" (Sorum 537). Both the sacrifice of his daughter and his murder by his wife fall under the category of the curse on his household. However, similar to Aristotle's argument about dramatic action, the curse is also an external agent. His character is connected to the curse, yet it is not determined by the curse. Agamemnon's personal actions and decisions as a result of the curse are the only important indicators of his true characterization.

All three portrayals of Agamemnon are clearly based on the same figure in mythological history. They generally share the same background information, such as his name, his family, his social roles and his military obligations. However, despite the same foundation, each portrayal varies in some aspects of his character. Family relationships are clearly extremely important motivators for Agamemnon's actions; yet even the people in Agamemnon's family change throughout the text. Another common factor in his background information is his regular misfortune. However, this unluckiness is external to his characterization. Even the curse upon his family may provide some circumstantial commonalities, yet it does not decide his choices or value system. Thus even some of the most primary elements of his character are not particularly established.

## Chapter 2

### Contextual Differences

It must be recognized that there are certain limitations when comparing texts from different authors, with different contexts and in different genres. The context of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, *Agamemnon*, and the *Iliad* all impact the overall plots of each work, and therefore what decisions or situations confront Agamemnon. However, these dissimilarities cannot be responsible for all of the disparities between the portrayals of Agamemnon. Circumstances determine what choices he has to make, and in that way each text examines his different moral inclinations. Nevertheless, they do not create or alter his innate values; the situations merely test them. If Agamemnon's character were to be the same throughout, different plots would only enhance steadfast principles by simply proving his value system in a different way. Although the authorship is different for each text, the obvious knowledge the authors had of their predecessors' texts establishes a potential for unity throughout; variety cannot be attributed to ignorance. Furthermore, *Agamemnon* displays a distinct lack of cohesion within individual texts, dispelling any argument that the differences should be attributed to differences in authorship. Genres also do not provide any excuse for sporadic characterization, despite the clear technical difference between the two dramas and the epic. As Aristotle describes, both genres are extremely similar. Moreover, he states that unity in character is important regardless of plot, genre, or intertextuality. Therefore, although some may argue that the context of each text makes the character portrayals too different to compare, in reality they do not affect Agamemnon's characterization.

### Varying Plots

All three texts take part in the larger myth of the Trojan War and each individual work concerns itself with a different part of the story. *Iphigenia at Aulis* describes the interval immediately before the Achaean army leaves for the war, the *Iliad* recounts part of the ninth year in the decade long campaign, and *Agamemnon* relates the titular character's return from Troy.

Since the texts contain different plots, the characters will be faced with different challenges and choices, and the general themes will also change. However, accepting that the superficial situations are different, the texts are still united and comparable. Although the circumstances are different, the value systems and the processes with which Agamemnon makes decisions are the most defining features of his characterization. The differences in plots are important to recognize, yet they do not create his character. Neither can they be used to discount any disparities of the portrayal of his character.

Depending upon their temporality in relation to the Trojan War, the characters, and the texts themselves, all have differing attitudes towards the war. In each of these stages the texts present varying opinions; some characters are in favor of the benefits the war can accomplish, while other characters oppose the horrors of war. Each text portrays either side to varying degrees, just as the views of Agamemnon himself change.

In *Iphigenia at Aulis* Euripides portrays Agamemnon as alternating between either opinion. Faced with a moral dilemma, he entertains both the desire for war and the contempt for the horrors it causes. In that way the audience still gets to see the ways in which he feels about the war. For Agamemnon the war itself is not the problem; rather the fact that he must choose

between the war and something else he cherishes. The *Iliad* presents Agamemnon during the war. Nine years into the war, Agamemnon exhibits varying opinions of the war. As an epic the text mainly focuses upon the glory and prowess found in battle. However, the fact that, again, Agamemnon is shown to alternate between embracing the war and running from it suggests that the actual war itself does not govern his personality. The war is merely an obstacle that allows the audience or readers to witness his nature.

*Agamemnon* is slightly different from the other two texts because the contrasting viewpoints of the war are displayed through different characters, rather than Agamemnon changing his mind. Agamemnon is not even on stage for the majority of the play; his character is visible for fewer than 300 lines of the 1,700 lines in the tragedy. Instead his wife Clytemnestra and the chorus provide the majority of the commentary on the war and Agamemnon's involvement within it. Aeschylus' tragedy describes, at least more explicitly, the awfulness of war, "presenting the Trojan War in terms of unglamorous realism" (Leahy 9). The tone of the text is generally more skewed to the negatives. However, much like the other two texts, the specific segment of the Trojan War does not alter the representation of Agamemnon. "The actual items singled out for realistic treatment... are not incidental to the plot but directly related to Agamemnon's own moral responsibility" (Leahy 12). The negative opinions and tones within the text are a result of Agamemnon's choices instead of the circumstantial plot. Again, despite differences in plot, Agamemnon's values and personality are still largely evident and influential.

The differences in plots do not negate the ability to compare the texts. They instead provide different frameworks for the individual character to display his own traits. Although Agamemnon's characteristics may change between texts and within the texts themselves, these

variations reflect a difference in the portrayals of the individual character more than simply a change in plot or situation.

### **Different Authors**

The differences in authorship also posits a potential excuse for the differences between portrayals of Agamemnon. Each was written at a different time, with different styles, and for different reasons. Had they been writing about the same plot, a difference in author could potentially drastically alter the thematic purpose and focus of the work, as well as the representation of the characters. The same is possible for texts with different plots, although this may simply be less noticeable. There are, undeniably, some differences between these texts as a result of the different authors; yet the texts themselves are somewhat less distinct than one might imagine.

Often attributed as part of the inception of “Western” literature, “the *Iliad* was composed somewhere in the “archaic” period of Greek history between 750 and 550 BCE” (Martin 1).

Although the specific dates for the two dramas are known, much less is sure about the *Iliad*. “It is not known who composed the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, when, where, for what audience, and how” (Martin 36). Any information would have to be inferred from the text itself, not from any reliably historical source. In regards to authorship, many question whether or not a figure called Homer actually existed. Scholarship about this concern has determined that, most likely, “Homeric poetry represents a multigenerational art form: no one poet would have devised a system so large, tight, and pervasive” (Martin 41). The collaboration of multiple figures may

give some excuse for the inconsistencies of Agamemnon's portrayal within the *Iliad*. However, such an excuse does not refute the existence of such dissonance.

*Agamemnon* is the second oldest text of the three. It was the first installment of the *Oresteia*, a trilogy concerning the murder of Agamemnon and his son Orestes' revenge.

Aeschylus produced this trilogy in 458 in Athens at the age of sixty-seven (Fagles and Stanford 14). A century, at the very least, had passed since the *Iliad* was written. In 480 BCE, about two decades before the *Oresteia* was produced, "the Persians sacked Athens;" soon afterwards the Greeks defeated the Persians (Fagles and Stanford 13). Such a combative historical context, many argue, deeply influenced Aeschylus' text. D. M. Leahy believes that Aeschylus, negatively affected by the suffering of war, and his tragedy both "present the War in an antiheroic, disillusioned tone, which robs even victory of its glamour" (Leahy 8). Robert Fagles and W. B. Stanford argue that the trilogy is largely optimistic, that "it breathes the buoyant spirit of the city" (Fagles and Stanford 14). However, both Fagles and Stanford acknowledge that the trilogy, as a whole, progresses from darkness to light. *Agamemnon*, as the first play in the *Oresteia*, is rather dark with respect to both the Trojan War and Agamemnon's murder.

Compared with the *Iliad*, the historical context has now shifted. "The prominence of Homer in the Traditional education encouraged the idea of war as glorious," (Leahy 8). Aeschylus clearly incorporates pessimistic sentiments about the nature of war, although some say this is not the ultimate message. Clearly there are a few stylistic differences between the *Iliad* and *Agamemnon* as a result of their historical framing.

Such a difference in style does not necessarily contravene any semblance of unity between the two works. Aeschylus evidently had the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in mind when he wrote *Agamemnon* because he reportedly "referred to his work as 'slices from the banquet of Homer'"



(Fagles and Stanford 14). The text itself is closely tied to the *Iliad*, containing many mentions of the war. Aeschylus' "powers of assimilation were impressive... He deepened Homer with even older, darker legends and lifted him to a later, more enlightened stage of culture" (Fagles and Stanford 14). This understanding of the epics does not mean that Agamemnon's character will be cohesive across both works. "Agamemnon "is a brave but reckless king in the *Iliad*, and Aeschylus presents him here as majestic in his power but inhuman" (Fagles and Stanford 30). Obviously Aeschylus had a deep knowledge of the Homeric epics, so any change in character portrayal could conceivably be entirely intentional. This reason may explain some of the variations between the figures of Agamemnon, but it can hardly excuse the multitude and magnitude of the variations in his characterization. Again, Agamemnon experiences drastic changes within the individual text. To put it simply, "Agamemnon is a mass of contradictions" (Fagel and Stanford 30). Therefore intentional and stylistic changes from the *Iliad* cannot justify the paradoxes contained within Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*.

Although the plot of Euripides' play is the first in the mythological timeline it was the last text to be written. He lived from about 485 - 406 BCE. *Iphigenia at Aulis* was "the last play he wrote and was produced after his death" (Hadas 355). Since this play was created last, Euripides must have had knowledge of the other two texts. There are multiple references to the *Iliad* in the text, such as when the Old Servant asks Agamemnon if he will "cheat Achilles of his bride without fanning his fury into a mighty blaze against" him and his wife (115-127). This can be seen as an obvious allusion to Achilles' fury when Agamemnon takes Achilles' war prize Chryseis. The mythologies are so clearly connected and the *Iliad* is such a pervasive and influential text that Euripides must have been influenced by it. Euripides alludes to Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* when Clytemnestra mentions a "woeful homecoming" (1175-1218). He also does

so when Iphigenia advises her mother not to hold a grudge against Agamemnon, saying that she is “angry at [her] husband to no purpose” (1365-1395). Such “ironic allusions... all build to the inevitable confrontation of the husband and wife, the crucial moment in *Agamemnon*” (Sorum 537-538). This demonstrates Euripides’ knowledge of and willingness to work with Aeschylus’ play.

Further connection between Euripides and Aeschylus can be drawn considering they were both two of “the great triad of Greek tragic poets,” comprised of Euripides, Aeschylus and Sophocles (Hadas vii). Moses Hadas notes that each man produced dramas around the same time, and that Greek literature and their mythological inspiration are naturally similar. As a result there is a “superficial sameness about the products of all three” and “their dramatis personae are often identical” (Hadas vii). However, Euripides does maintain stylistic differences that distinguish him from Aeschylus and Sophocles. Euripides “was concerned with accurate psychological perception. His predecessors were not” (Hadas xix). Instead of using fixed, merely archetypal characters Euripides tended to show development and progression of mentality and personality. Hadas describes Agamemnon as a “plainly pompous, ambitious, ineffectual politician” (x) in one section and as “a decent father” in another (355). These characteristics are not mutually exclusive, to be sure, but they point to a complexity of personality that goes beyond a straightforward stock character. This could potentially explain the differences between texts and the dissimilarities within *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Euripides may have simply portrayed a natural progression of character instead of a rather haphazard and disjointed figure. However, again, the portrayal of Agamemnon seems to go beyond that of just a round character. He often changes his mind and proceeds to alter his story as to *why* he

changes his mind. Furthermore, personal accounts and those of other figures often disagree.

Together these differences make his progression from beginning to end anything but natural.

Although the authors may have different takes on the character of Agamemnon, they are still working from the same mythological inspiration. Each text contains references to the preceding works, indicating a close knowledge to not only the background story but previous authors' specific portrayals of Agamemnon. This connection between works allows for a solid comparison between the texts, despite the differences in authorship. Upon acknowledging that the characters may be different stylistically, their motivations and value systems should maintain some integrity throughout the different texts. Instead, each poet augments any changes that result from authorship with aggressively unusual changes in character, both intertextually and intratextually.

### **Different Genres**

Another technical dissimilarity between the texts is the difference in genre. Both *Agamemnon* and *Iphigenia at Aulis* are dramas, specifically tragedies, while the *Iliad* is a narrative, specifically an epic. With these distinctions in genre come multiple inherent differences. In his work *Poetics*, Aristotle categorizes such differences in genres into three groups: medium, manner, and objects. Using Aristotle's terminology to get a better understanding of the differences between genres, one will notice that although each genre is ultimately unique, both tragedies and epics are very closely related. The largest difference between these two genres is seen through medium; dramas include rhythm, tune, singing and

instruments at times while narratives are largely non-musical. In both manner and objects, however, each genre is startlingly similar.

Although little is known about the origins of the *Iliad*, including for what audience it was intended, many people believe that it was verbally passed down for purposes of entertainment, and later performed in competitions (Martin 38 and 41). Regardless of motivation, the manner in which an epic poet presents his story is through narration. The narrator can “either take another personality as Homer does, or speak in his own person, unchanged” (Aristotle Part III). The audience or readers then must gain all of their information through either the narrator or the direct dialogue of the characters. Dialogue from the characters is one way in which drama and narrative overlap; with dialogue there is no intermediary between the audience and the events of the story. Narratives may vary the amount of dialogue included, yet “sixty percent of the *Iliad* is character speech” (Martin 45). Therefore one of the techniques for writing that is most reminiscent of drama comprises the majority of this epic. Although the *Iliad* does not include any rhythm or harmony, both of which are standard inclusions in ancient dramas, it is undeniable that, to some degree, “Homeric technique is that of the dramatist” (Martin 43).

As stated above, Aristotle believes the subject matter of both epics and dramas to be extremely similar, if not identical. Each genre incorporates or creates high characters. “Homer, for example, makes men better than they are,” and, similarly, “tragedy [aims at representing men] as better than in actual life” (Aristotle Part II). Aristotle goes on to say that characters are the second most important determiners of a tragedy’s quality, superseded only by plot (Aristotle Part VI). He believes that both of these factors must maintain some kind of unity in each text.

Aristotle states that “unity of plot does not, as some persons think, consist in the unity of the hero. For infinitely various are the incidents in one man’s life which cannot be reduced to unity”

(Aristotle Part VIII). This does not mean, however, that Aristotle gives authors license to change characters at will. A character's actions may change and evolve, yet any change must still be a logical and fluid progression. One key factor "to be aimed at for Character ... is consistency" (Aristotle Part XV). No author should include "motiveless degradation of character," whether in their own text or upon considering pre-existing texts. Therefore epics and tragedies are once again united across the lines of genre. Each must respect previous characterizations and maintain a unity of character, regardless of whether one is a drama or a narrative.

While epics and tragedies "differ, in that Epic poetry admits but one kind of metre and is narrative in form, they differ, again, in their length" (Aristotle Part V). Tragedy more often than not is restricted to representing only one day. Epic, by contrast, "has no limits of time" (Aristotle Part V). This may allow for a rounder and more fleshed out characterization, which could potentially account for differences in characterization. However, since characters are supposed to conserve unity throughout a text, added length should not alter a character's representation.

Therefore comparison between the two texts in regard to characterization should not pose any problems.

Understandably, Aristotle considered tragedies and epics to be closely connected; he even believes that the "epic poets were succeeded by Tragedians, since the drama was a larger and higher form of art" (Aristotle Part IV). He believes that there was a natural progression from one to the other, yet he also clearly favors drama over narrative. Although they are so closely connected, they do differ in medium and length. As a genre narrative varies from drama by the inclusion of a narrator, yet the *Iliad* is able to reconcile the two genres by mostly consisting of dialogue and speeches. Ultimately both epics and tragedies are comparable, despite the differences in genre categorization.

## Chapter 3

### Agamemnon's Indecisiveness

Perhaps the most obvious way in which Agamemnon displays his inconsistency in each text is through his propensity for changing his mind. At “several times in the [*Iliad*] he is on the point of psychological breakdown” (Donlan 267). Within the same texts this indecisiveness may be a response to difficult circumstances, warring values, or insanity; between texts this reflects what seems to be an inherently inconsistent person. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle states that an inconsistent character can maintain unity, but “he must be consistently inconsistent” (Aristotle Part XV). Continued erratic behavior is itself some form of constancy, but it still proves that Agamemnon’s character is less stable than other similarly important figures in mythology. He lacks a grounding feature that persists throughout representations. Furthermore, even the motivations for his inconsistencies change throughout texts. Sometimes his decisions seem to be made for personal gain and others for the good of all the Achaeans, sometimes for intense and heartfelt reasons, sometimes seemingly on a whim. It is true that Agamemnon is consistently inconsistent, yet since the motivations are also extremely disparate Agamemnon’s lack of constancy cannot be justified.

### Changing His Mind

In each of the texts Agamemnon changes his mind multiple times about very important decisions. In *Iphigenia at Aulis* he changes his mind so often it almost becomes comical. It is a “play in which so many characters change their minds so frequently that it can be read as the dramatization of indecision itself” (Sorum 528). Before the play even starts he has already

alternated between two decisions, either to sacrifice Iphigenia or not. Originally, he says, he “would never bring himself to kill [his] own daughter,” yet after Menelaus pleads with him, he convinces Agamemnon “to do the awful deed” (93-114). In this same passage Agamemnon makes clear that he is writing a letter in order to prevent Iphigenia from leaving Argos, marking another shift in decision without providing a reason. However this decision appears steadfast; Agamemnon’s resolve holds strong even when Menelaus pleads with Agamemnon again that is until he hears that Iphigenia has arrived.

Agamemnon had already disputed all of his brother’s arguments on the matter, so none of Menelaus’ reasoning could have caused this change of heart. Instead it seems that Agamemnon makes his choice in order to avoid the wrath of the army. Only “four know the true situation: Calchas, Odysseus, Menelaus” and Agamemnon himself (93-114). However, as Achilles points out, “Odysseus will lead” a “host of men” to come and take Iphigenia away (1347-1365).

Agamemnon does not believe it will stop there. He believes that “there rages a passion in the Hellene host to sail,” and the rage is so strong that, if they are denied this possibility “they will kill [his] daughters in Argos” (1261-1314). Agamemnon still maintains his reasoning of protecting his family, for he sees that Iphigenia is doomed to die regardless of what happens.

Agamemnon’s actions still seem strange since he bases such important decisions entirely on assumptions. Herbert Siegel believes Agamemnon reacts so strongly to the news of Iphigenia’s arrival because Agamemnon fears Odysseus (Siegel 262). Yet Agamemnon’s “view of reality is not devoid of truth” (Siegel 263). Agamemnon suspects Odysseus will disclose the oracle and rally the troops in order to sacrifice Iphigenia, despite the fact that Menelaus advises Agamemnon that Odysseus is “nothing to fear” (499-540). Undeniably Agamemnon changes his mind numerous times throughout the text, yet the potential reasons for these changes are even

more abundant. He is motivated by “his love, conscience, ambition, weakness and fear,” all to varying degrees at different times throughout the play (Siegel 265). Occasionally the changes are motivated by internal decisions, sometimes unexplained and seemingly without stimulus.

Other times the changes are the result of persuasion or unfortunate external events, such as Iphigenia’s arrival. Many different motivations and forces are acting upon Agamemnon in Euripides’ play, causing such an irregular character.

Similar inconsistencies can be seen in the *Iliad*, except Agamemnon’s erratic decisions mainly concern whether or not to fight or retreat. In Book 2 Zeus instructs Agamemnon in a dream to “arm the flowing-haired Achaians for battle / in all haste; since now you might take the wide- eyed city / of the Trojans” (2.28-30). Armed with the supposed knowledge of victory Agamemnon decides to test his troops’ resolve. Instead of directing his troops to arm for battle, he instructs them to get in their ships and return home. Book 9 presents “a curious replay of Agamemnon’s nearly disastrous advice of Book 2” when he “calls the dispirited troops into assembly and reveals to them that it is Zeus’ desire that they return without honor” (Hammer 8). This time he speaks from personal fear rather than as a result of any direct message from the gods. The assembly, led by Diomedes, speaks against this decision, insulting Agamemnon in the process. Acquiescing to their persuasion, he once again builds up his commitment to the war. Already he has mentioned returning home twice, yet he suggests this once more in Book 14. Agamemnon again recommends fleeing to the ships, stating that “there is no shame in running, even by night, from disaster” (14.80). After one of the men in his assembly, this time Odysseus, reprimands his cowardice, Agamemnon is then encouraged by Zeus disguised as an old man. By reiterating Agamemnon’s favor of the gods, Zeus is able to convince Agamemnon to stay. In doing so Zeus also instills in Agamemnon a passion so strong that Agamemnon’s war cry “in the



heart of every Achaian implanted great strength to carry the battle on, and fight without flinching” (14.151-152). The *Iliad* portrays Agamemnon in many different ways, oscillating between the cowardly man and the strong, impassioned warrior and leader.

Walter Donlan recognizes that Agamemnon’s character is represented as a “somewhat untidy blend” of different types, and that “of all the characters in the *Iliad* Agamemnon is the most mixed-up emotionally” (Donlan 267). However, he also believes that “the figure of Agamemnon in the *Iliad* is one of the most brilliantly conceived characterizations in literature... depicted with superb sensitivity” (Donlan 267-268). For Donlan these dramatic shifts reflect a fragile and complex personality. However, Agamemnon not only switches between extremes frequently, he also does so unbelievably quickly and easily. Such a propensity for variability, admittedly more common with him than any other character in the work, suggests a characterization that tends more towards unstable rather than simply complex or delicate.

Agamemnon’s characterization in Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* is no less complicated. As stated by Robert Fagles and W. B. Stanford, “Agamemnon is a mass of contradictions” (30). As opposed to the sometimes bumbling and inept leader in the *Iliad*, “Aeschylus presents him here as majestic in his power but inhuman” (Fagles and Stanford 30). Since Agamemnon’s time on stage in this play is particularly short, his decisions are not as contradictory as in the other two texts; rather they seem to be entirely baseless. His main, and ultimately fatal, decision is whether or not to walk on the crimson tapestries upon his return to Argos. Agamemnon originally doesn’t consider walking on it, attesting that the thought of it fills him with dread (918). He says that it is womanly and that “only the gods deserve the pomps of honour / and the stiff brocades of fame” (912-916). However, Clytemnestra is quickly able to overpower him “in a tense, brusque dialogue - less than a minute in performance” (Fagles and Stanford 32). She causes him

to admit that there are certain situations, namely if a prophet demands it, in which Agamemnon would walk on the tapestries. She also has him confess that Priam would walk on it, implying that he should be able to as well. Agamemnon does not agree with her other arguments belittling the opinion of the common people and suggesting that a bit of gall pairs well with glory. Yet he still recognizes that “victory in this ... war of [theirs] ... means that much to [her]” (937).

Ultimately he seems to give into her argument not because of anything she said, but rather because she is so determined. This could be a result of his guilt for sacrificing their daughter, leaving for ten years, or possibly an “expectation that she will repay him by graciously admitting his war-prize concubine into the palace” (Meridor 39). The text does not provide any clear motivation.

It is interesting to note that Agamemnon’s decisions do not often result from persuasion by other people. In the *Iliad* Agamemnon’s council insults and, at times, convinces him to return to war. However, in Books 2 and 14 the gods are ultimately the deciding persuasive force behind his decisions. Clearly their words hold more sway than those of another mortal. Their word is taken as fact; therefore the influence may also be described as more situational than persuasive. In *Iphigenia at Aulis* he was first convinced by Menelaus before the play begins. During the tragedy the assumed circumstances more than anyone’s arguments, and in fact in opposition with certain arguments, finally determine his choices. In *Agamemnon* none of Clytemnestra's words have as much sway as her apparent determination. In a way she ultimately persuades him, yet it was by his personal value system and perception of her rather than her actual arguments. In this way Agamemnon’s character seems to be a strange mixture of obstinate and flimsy. He is difficult to persuade, yet he also manages to change his mind often, and at times illogically.

## Insanity

One potential reason for the insubstantiality of Agamemnon's character is insanity. In each of the texts either Agamemnon himself or other characters attribute his irregular behavior to madness. Although this is fairly common for Agamemnon's character, each text differs as to the characters' attitudes towards madness and the claimed level of potency.

In *Iphigenia at Aulis* Agamemnon is credited with madness throughout his decision making process, yet this madness is limited and specialized. When Clytemnestra asks the Old Servant if Agamemnon has gone mad he replies that Agamemnon "is in his senses, except toward you and your child; there he is not sane" (875-893). Furthermore, the insanity can be become active or inactive moment by moment. When she asks the servant if the letter was meant to save Iphigenia or bring her to Aulis, he replies that "it said not to bring her. [Agamemnon] was sane at that moment" (875-893). Interestingly enough, although Agamemnon mentions that he may be going insane, he never blames his actions upon the insanity. He often complains about the situation yet he never denies his involvement. Commenting on his decision to prevent Iphigenia from coming to Aulis, he laments, "Ah me, I am out of my mind. I am heading for ruin. But go," instructing the Old Servant to deliver the letter regardless of his mental instability (128-170). When talking with Menelaus, however, Agamemnon takes the opposite opinion. He asserts that his actions prove his sanity, since he "has the wit to repair a previous mistake" (385-416). While other characters believe Agamemnon to be mad, the madness does not seem to excuse his actions for Agamemnon or for other characters. Clytemnestra surely still holds a grudge against him. Rather than using insanity as a scapegoat Agamemnon takes an inconsistent stance on whether or not he even is mad.

Contrastingly, the *Iliad* uses madness almost exclusively as an excuse. In order to reconcile with Achilles, Agamemnon blames his actions on madness. This occurs in both Book 9 when he first offers gifts to persuade Achilles to return to war, and in Book 19 when both Agamemnon and Achilles reunite. When Agamemnon confesses to this madness he “is not confessing to a ‘cooperative’ moral error” (Adkins 302). Instead he is placing the blame entirely away from himself. He clearly states, “I am not responsible / but Zeus is” (19.86-87). He attempts to save face by describing other events where even Zeus was tricked by madness. According to this stance on insanity Agamemnon should be forgiven of any wrongdoing because it was the work of the gods, not him; this event in no way shows weakness since even the king of the gods was subject to madness at one point. Moreover, this gives him the ability to easily reconcile with Achilles. “Since [he] was deluded and Zeus took [his] wits away from [him] / [he is] willing to make all good and give back gifts in abundance” (19.137-138). This opinion of madness is clearly in opposition with the negative perception of madness in *Iphigenia at Aulis*. In the *Iliad* insanity only works to Agamemnon’s benefit and fixes problems rather than explaining but not excusing Agamemnon’s actions.

Unlike the other two texts, *Agamemnon* does not provide any explicit mention of madness in regard to its titular character. Clytemnestra’s ability to easily change Agamemnon’s mind does, however, point to some level of mental instability. He states that he has “a sense of right and wrong,” yet he fails to listen to his conscience. Furthermore Clytemnestra’s act of sincerity and good humor is particularly transparent. Even the chorus says “it takes no seer to know / [Clytemnestra] only says what’s right” instead of what is true (612-613). Agamemnon’s decision to trust Clytemnestra more than his conscience would easily fall under the claim of madness in either of the other texts. However none of the characters rely upon this explanation.

None even mention it in connection with Agamemnon, showing that although Agamemnon's poor decisions are often credited with madness, its use is not consistent throughout all three texts.

### **Deception**

Agamemnon's propensity for deception, as well as his declared distaste for it, appears in a couple of the texts, namely *Iphigenia at Aulis* and the *Iliad*. He does not create or rely on deception in *Agamemnon*. Instead he finds himself on the other side of deception, blind to the trick until it is too late.

In Euripides' play *Agamemnon* states that he does not like cleverness or "a smart tongue" (325-350). However, throughout the play he uses deception in order to help his situation. The secret letter he sends at the beginning of the play is sent out in the middle of the night through a discrete messenger. He obviously does not want to be caught so Menelaus does not find out that he has changed his mind. He also lies to Iphigenia and Clytemnestra in the previous letter in order to bring them to Aulis. He creates a fake engagement between Iphigenia and Achilles, dragging yet another figure into the deception. Achilles then finds himself to be somewhat guilty, for his "very name, a murderer though it never lifted a sword, would have killed" Iphigenia (925-969). Perhaps he is most duplicitous when he first speaks to Iphigenia. He never lies to her, but instead uses double-talk, a very clever and deceitful skill. Euripides' *Agamemnon* is therefore hypocritical, for although he claims to dislike craftiness he often employs it in order to get what he wants.

The Homeric Agamemnon has a similar but not as blatant dislike for cleverness. When he encourages his troops in Book 4, he insults Odysseus, a famously clever figure, for his “ways of treachery” (4.339). Previously in Book 2 he had intentionally and naively tested his troops by giving them instructions to return home. This failed utterly when the troops followed through wholeheartedly instead of arguing to stay. Obviously Agamemnon in the *Iliad* is not as clever or skilled at deception as the Agamemnon in *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Similarly, Aeschylus’ representation of Agamemnon is a straightforward character that is neither particularly clever nor duplicitous. Instead those characteristics are assigned to his wife, and Agamemnon in turn suffers their consequences. The characters of Agamemnon in the different texts all have various attitudes towards and aptitude for deceit. Agamemnon’s inconsistencies with his decisions, his different attitudes towards insanity, and his relationship with deceit all prove that Agamemnon’s character is much more disparate than any single figure should be.

## Chapter 4

### The Divine

Agamemnon's perspective on the divine in each text indicates different values and levels of agency for each portrayal. The gods play very prominent roles in the *Iliad* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*. They are responsible for the plots and even meddle with mortals' actions throughout each story. The *Iliad* dedicates large portions of text to the deeds of the gods alone, while in *Iphigenia at Aulis* the audience does not witness them directly, yet the gods are very much involved. No gods appear on stage in *Agamemnon*, and neither does Aeschylus include any mention of individual gods, only referencing them collectively. They still greatly impact the action of the play, both by motivating characters and, potentially, by causing events. It is important to note that while the gods are separate from the figure Agamemnon, a mortal, they still influence his characterization by determining his level of agency in his actions. It is true that the gods are external influences, yet depending on whether or not Agamemnon's actions are the results of fate or his own choice matter in his level of guilt and, as a result, his personality in each text.

Agamemnon's attitude towards the gods also changes with each portrayal; at different times he blames them, respects them, talks with them or ignores them. The role of the divine in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, the *Iliad* and *Agamemnon* is a significant factor in establishing the degree of variation between the portrayals of Agamemnon.

### Treatment of the Gods

The gods in *Iphigenia at Aulis* do not appear in person throughout the play, yet they are still particularly influential. Artemis instigates the plight of Agamemnon, once Calchas decipheres her demand for Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter in order for the army to reach Troy. At the end of the play the Messenger recounts how, just as Calchas was going to sacrifice Iphigenia, Artemis replaces her with a deer. This merciful act by Artemis is, some believe, not the original ending of the play, yet Hesiod mentions these events in his *Catalogue of Women* (Lines 15-30). However, Artemis' rescuing of Iphigenia conflicts with the depiction of the gods in the rest of the play. Before this moment the gods come across as rather distant and cruel. They do not appear directly, they only work through oracles. Furthermore, they demand the murder of an innocent without giving a clear or adequate reason. Classical mythology supplies varying reasons for such an abominable demand. Some believe that Artemis, "the goddess of childbirth, outraged at the [foreseen] sacrifice of innocents at Troy, may demand an innocent of Argos in advance," as a way of making Agamemnon pay for sins he will commit in the future (Fagles and Stanford, 25). However, this explanation is never referenced in Euripides' play. The lack of a clear motivation in the text creates the image of a powerful deity who can inflict pain and suffering for no reason. Agamemnon, in turn, appears more pitiable.

However, even when Agamemnon laments his situation, he never blames the gods. He fully believes that they have the power and authority to require such an action, and he never questions their lack of motivation. He bemoans destiny, blaming his high birth. He also blames many other characters, including "Paris and Helen, the army, and Odysseus for the current necessity" (Sorum 533). Never once in the play does he inquire as to why this must be done or supplicate the gods for another option, further solidifying the image of the gods as powerful and



cruel, yet distant. Euripides depicts Agamemnon as trusting of the gods' control, yet not particularly pious. He does not pray or perform any other sacrifice than that which is explicitly demanded. He is not especially religious, nor particularly irreverent. His relationship with the divine is especially complex considering his opinion of oracles. Agamemnon believes that "the whole breed of prophets is rotten with ambition" and he does not balk when Menelaus suggests murdering Calchas in order to keep him quiet (499-531). Although Agamemnon has some respect for the gods, he clearly does not extend this regard to mortals who speak for the gods. Ultimately Agamemnon maintains agency for his choice, but he still earns pity for the seemingly unfounded situation created by the distant and cruel gods.

The gods play a much different role in the *Iliad*. One of the key differences is that the gods are directly represented in the narrative; their discussions, actions, and motivations are clearly spelled out for the audience to see and understand. The gods are also more apparent to the mortal characters within the text. The gods talk to them and aid or combat them in battles. Such direct involvement demonstrates a high level of power and control in almost every aspect of the characters' lives. The gods can persuade and control the minds of mortals, either explicitly or secretly. Some personally fight in battle, for either side. They can even decide the fate of events before they take place. Although the gods are extremely powerful, they are also at times shown to be rather fickle. Zeus sent a prophecy predicting that the Achaeans win the war in the tenth year, yet both Zeus and the mortal men seem to doubt that this prediction will come to pass. The first time Agamemnon wants to return home he says:

Zeus son of Kronos has caught me badly in bitter futility.

He is hard: who before this time promised me and consented

that I might sack strong-walled Ilion and sail homeward.

Now he has devised a vile deception and bids me go back  
to Argos in dishonor having lost many of my people. (9.18-22)

Although predictions are believed to be accurate and binding, they can be overturned by a god's change of mind. Such a shift in favor seems to happen often in the *Iliad*, especially with Zeus and Agamemnon. Zeus at times works to protect and aid the Achaeans, sometimes he tricks them, and at other times he simply works against them. This shift in alliance between sides can be altered by supplication. Although the gods are believed to have ultimate control over the lives of mortals, humans are able to maintain some level of control over their lives by supplicating and honoring the gods, or obeying the oracles.

Agamemnon, however, does not seem to use the option of supplication very often. At the onset of the narrative Agamemnon does not heed the words of Chryses, a priest of Apollo, even when he made his request in the name of both Zeus and Apollo (1.21). Agamemnon only returns Chryseis upon hearing a prophecy from Calchas stating that Apollo demands it. Agamemnon follows through with this action, yet he does so grudgingly. Furthermore he insults Calchas by calling him a "seer of evil" who delights in recounting cynical messages, and never accomplishing or saying anything excellent (1.106-108). Although at times Agamemnon seems to lack any respect for the words of the gods, at other times he does take stock of what they say. He believes Zeus' dream message in Book 2, and, as stated above, he is very easily swayed into rejoining the fight in Book 19. He also "accomplishes perfect hecatombs to Apollo" after returning Chryseis in order to make things right with the gods and show them proper respect (1.315). Thus Agamemnon is, again, characterized by complexity. He is portrayed as both irreverent and pious at various times throughout the epic. The gods, although extremely powerful and influential, can control fate yet the mortals still maintain agency.

Agamemnon markedly shifts in piety between the other two texts and *Agamemnon*.

Aeschylus presents a character who is extremely reverent to the gods; the first lines Agamemnon says in this tragedy are “First / with justice I salute my Argos and my gods,” naming the gods as his “accomplices who brought me home and won / my rights from Priam’s Troy” (794-797). In this same speech he thanks the gods three more times and requests a sacrifice in their honor. When Clytemnestra presents the option of walking on the tapestries one of Agamemnon’s biggest concerns is that he would be participating in a level of ceremony that is reserved for the gods. Even when he ultimately decides to walk on the tapestry, an action uncharacteristic of the pious Agamemnon from 100 lines early, he still has the gods in mind, hoping that “no god watch and strike [him] down with envy” (944). Although Aeschylus never includes a mention of specific gods’ involvements, the situation may lead the audience to believe that the gods were watching. Agamemnon’s focus on the gods draws a clear connection between his impiety and his subsequent murder.

This reverence for the gods, and his hubristic action *despite* such understanding of what is right and wrong, makes Agamemnon appear even more culpable for his actions. Such a characterization is completely opposite from that of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, where the gods’ detached yet powerful presence seems to needlessly inflict pain and difficult choices. The *Iliad* depicts a figure who has little control, but also someone who is neither extremely pious nor completely irreverent. Agamemnon’s respect for the gods and their attitude towards him both vary dramatically between each text, and even at times within the same text.

## Fate

The motivations for Agamemnon's choices are rather volatile, yet many of the choices themselves are already established by the mythological contexts of the stories. *Iphigenia at Aulis*, the *Iliad* and *Agamemnon* must all consider fate as an important influence upon Agamemnon's character. He is both a personal victim of the House of Atreus, as well as the gods' general control over the fate of all mortals. Although these factors are common in all three texts, each work differs in the degree to which it recognizes the impact of fate and the agency Agamemnon has with his own decisions.

The characters in *Iphigenia at Aulis* do not seem to focus on fate as a large influence in their lives. Although the prophecy establishes a choice that Agamemnon must make, Artemis's "offer and demand are only conditional" (Siegel 258). He is given a choice as to what happens, instead of being told outright what will happen regardless of human action. In this play "the act of making a choice is crucial for the characters" (Sorum 527). Therefore an overarching, fated ending is not necessarily a consideration for the characters, although it is well known by those witnessing the play. The audience understands "the constant tension that is generated between the plot ... and the traditional story, in which the sacrifice (whether of Iphigenia or an animal substitute) is completed and the Greek expedition sails to Troy" (Sorum 527). Although the dramatic figure of Agamemnon is fated to make this decision, such a tradition is based upon his choice. He is the original instigator of this tradition. In reality the plot must go a certain way. In the fictional world of the play, Agamemnon is not bound by any tradition, since he has not yet made his decision.

Euripides' portrayal of Agamemnon also seems to disregard any type of fate that results from the curse of the house of Atreus. "References to the story of the house of Atreus ... begin

in the prologue and first episode,” yet they are fairly vague allusions that only a knowledgeable audience would understand (Sorum 536). They do not indicate any awareness or acceptance on the part of the characters. However, this play easily identifies with the curse, wherein family members murder one another. According to the myth of the curse, Agamemnon kills his daughter, causing his wife to kill him for revenge, which in turn prompts his son to kill Clytemnestra. This play concerns a key moment in the chain reaction of the curse; yet Euripides does not include any direct references to it, and the characters seem to have no knowledge of it.

Neither is the curse mentioned in the *Iliad*. However, the curse does not relate as readily to this narrative. Agamemnon does not harm any family members, nor does he become harmed as a result of any of them. In fact, when his brother Menelaus becomes injured in Book 4 Agamemnon completely overreacts and “clucks like a frightened mother hen” (Donlan 263). Furthermore the *Iliad* completely ignores the fact that Agamemnon murdered his daughter in order to make the journey to Troy, stating that all three of his daughters are still alive. Helen even describes him as “son of Atreus, blessed, child of fortune and favor” (3.182). Not only does the text fail to mention the curse, Agamemnon seems to enjoy the opposite relationship with his family and the gods.

Fate does, however, greatly influence the epic, mainly through prophecies and the expectation of justice. Mortals seem to believe that the gods demand and preserve this cosmic balance. Many times the Achaeans warrant the campaign against Troy as a means of honoring Zeus and re-establishing justice. Men have to work in order to maintain it, yet their actions in doing so are either aided by or approved by the gods. When Chryses was turned away by Agamemnon, his supplication to Apollo compelled the god to enact revenge for an unjust situation. This, then, caused Agamemnon to make the situation right again. Similarly, when

Achilles was slighted by Agamemnon, Achilles' supplication to his mother Thetis caused her to plead with Zeus. Zeus then altered the course of the war, provoking Agamemnon to make things right with Achilles. "Agamemnon's acceptance of Achilles' gift and consequent acceptance of his social superiority within the Achaian hierarchy is an entirely appropriate ending to the Achilles-Agamemnon tale, since it effectively reverses the issue which has been central to it" (Postlethwaite 100). Such a chain of events created a fair and just ending for all parties involved.

*Agamemnon*, more than either of the other texts, includes the curse of the house of Atreus and the inevitable divine enforcement of justice. Aeschylus' tragedy is the only text out of the three to directly mention the curse. Cassandra, as a seer, is able to grasp the extent of the curse, stating that a "monstrous - *thing*" "is growing, massing, deep in the house" (1102-03). She even mentions what the curse entails, describing the curse as affecting "the house that hates god, / an echoing womb of guilt, kinsmen / torturing kinsmen" (1088-89). The curse ultimately serves as the motivation for the plot in all three tragedies of the *Oresteia*, following one revenge after another, and, eventually, the curse's resolution.

Although the curse is closely connected to justice in *Agamemnon* the representation of justice is not as simple or optimistic as it is in the *Iliad*. The chorus expresses "an ancient saying" that describes how "a reckless act / can breed impiety" yet "the house kept straight and just / is blessed with radiant children" (744-754). Thus good deeds will be rewarded while sins will ultimately bring the wrongdoer harm. Similarly, both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus claim to be working as agents of Justice when they murder Agamemnon, avenging Iphigenia (1430, 1635). Alone, this reasoning aligns with that of the *Iliad*, yet the chorus goes on to add to this, saying "Even a man's fate, held true on course, / in a blinding flash rams some hidden reef" (1007-08). These beliefs are not necessarily mutually exclusive, yet together they create a fairly

pessimistic notion. Bad things will happen to you as a result of your crimes, but they may also happen suddenly and for no reason. Furthermore, the chorus states that all that happens, both the good and the bad, is “all through the will of Zeus” (1513). Therefore, according to these three sentiments presented in the tragedy, Agamemnon has very little control over his life. He is fated to die as a result of his actions, both killing Iphigenia and walking on the tapestries, as a member of the house of Atreus, and, if none of those, possibly as a result of an unwarranted shift of fate.

All three texts greatly vary in the amount that each admits to fate as a contributor to Agamemnon’s actions. Euripides’ play does not include fate, and even promotes the importance of choices over fate. The characters in the *Iliad* strive to maintain justice, mending what had been broken. Aeschylus’ play strongly relies upon the force of the curse and fate, yet his representation of fate is fairly pessimistic. Ultimately, Agamemnon’s agency in his actions varies with each text. Euripides focuses on the importance of Agamemnon’s choice, assigning complete responsibility for his decision. The Agamemnon in the *Iliad* has some control over his decisions, yet the gods will strive to preserve justice, whether through their own influence or the actions of other mortals. He is therefore responsible, yet not entirely in control. The Agamemnon in Aeschylus’ tragedy has the least control; he is a slave to fate. His choices seem predetermined yet he must suffer for them. Thus even the control each character has over his life alters with each text.

## Chapter 5

### Leadership

Agamemnon's character is largely connected to his role as the commander-in-chief of the Achaean army in the Trojan War. As previously established, since each portrayal of Agamemnon is based on the same mythological figure, his role as general unites the character to some degree. However each poet personalizes Agamemnon through variations in his motivation for leadership and his leadership capability. Agamemnon's portrayal as either a respectable or flawed commander varies throughout the text, which in turn causes his character to be seen as respectable or flawed. His success matters for his mythological representation, as well as his literary characterization. Each text also presents different criteria that distinguish good leadership from bad leadership. While his actions demonstrate his leadership, his motivations for his actions are equally important in ascertaining his characterization. They indicate his value system; what he considers important is a defining part of Agamemnon's essence as a character, something that should be even more constant than his actions. However, once again *Iphigenia at Aulis*, the *Iliad*, and *Agamemnon* each depict a different set of principles.

### Capability

Euripides' Agamemnon has already been established as a character distinguished by contradictions; with leadership he is no different. The oscillation between his decisions about Iphigenia reflects not only his role as a father but also as a general in the war. Additionally he



alternates between characteristics that other figures in the play feel represent good or poor leadership. Early in the play Agamemnon laments his role as a man of high birth, and the Old Servant responds by stating that he does not “admire this attitude in a chief” (16-48). The servant then establishes optimism and acceptance, even enjoyment, of one’s position of authority, as indicators of a good leader. He also determines that Agamemnon does not embody those characteristics. Later Menelaus states that he would not “make a man chief of his country or commander of its armies” for his courage, but rather a “general must have a head; any man with shrewdness may be a governor of a state” (351-385). Presenting another standard, Menelaus specifies that intelligence and cleverness outweigh courage. Agamemnon is not in battle at any point in the play, and Menelaus’ comment seems to devalue any prowess with fighting as a measure for leadership. Instead, a good leader will have a strong mind. Throughout the play Agamemnon does not appear to be a man of strong mind. He is clever at times, even cunning, such as when he plans to send a letter to his daughter in the middle of the night, or when he uses clever double talk upon her arrival. Yet he was able to be persuaded by his brother before the play begins, showing some weakness of mind. He also changes his mind frequently, giving the impression of a person without steadfast reasoning.

Although Agamemnon professed to the Old Servant that he does not enjoy his high birth and the grief that accompanies it, Menelaus describes him as an ambitious man who campaigned for his position as commander-in-chief. Menelaus says Agamemnon “touched every man’s right hand,” “kept [his] doors open for any of the citizens,” “accosted” men until they decided to join the war efforts, and generally “bid for popularity” (325-350). Thus, in order to win this position Agamemnon had to be an exemplary leader. This means making himself available to the people, being personable, and providing the most manpower. Although Agamemnon portrayed these

qualities for a time, after gaining the position Menelaus claims that Agamemnon “changed [his] tune,” becoming closed off (325-350). Furthermore, Menelaus qualifies this by stating that “a good man ought not to change his disposition when he gets up in the world” (325-350). Again, Agamemnon proves to be an inconsistent character, at times displaying the qualities of an outstanding leader and other times proving himself to be inadequate.

The *Iliad* also presents a complex character, especially in terms of his leadership capabilities. Since this epic takes place during the war, it is arguably the text that depicts Agamemnon most clearly in his role as a military leader. Unlike in *Iphigenia at Aulis*, there is no mention of Agamemnon campaigning for this role in the *Iliad*; instead his legitimacy is based on heredity and wealth. Agamemnon inherited his authority from his ancestors as evidenced by his scepter, which is afforded lengthy description in Book 2. His wealth allows him to contribute men and supplies to the army, similar to Agamemnon’s character in Euripides’ play. “Hereditary noblemen have privileges and therefore ought to fight bravely. Their wealth gives them capabilities which mere strength could not provide” (Adkins 293). Agamemnon received the position of commander-in-chief almost automatically since he “furnished the most ships and men” of all the Achaean kings (Shewan 147). Both factors equate, in the eyes of the Achaeans, to approval and selection by the gods themselves, accounting for Chryses’ description of Agamemnon as “beloved of Zeus” (1.74). His position is not based on personal merit; he did not earn the position by any act of his own. This becomes glaringly obvious throughout the text. Other characters are described as being stronger, braver, wiser, cleverer, and as having more divine ancestry. Yet none of these figures are commander-in-chief since none of these characteristics outweigh wealth and heredity.

The beginning of the play shows a fairly selfish and “autocratic leadership of Agamemnon” (Hammer 3). He keeps Chryseis despite the wishes of the other men, he insults whoever opposes him, and he seems to listen only to counsel that comes from the gods. As the *Iliad* progresses Agamemnon’s authority seems to diminish, in practice rather than any official loss of position. After the test of his troops’ resolve fails in Book 2, Odysseus takes charge.

Odysseus even “took from [Agamemnon] the scepter of his fathers,” a powerfully symbolic action, since the scepter represents Agamemnon’s heredity and favor of the gods (2.186).

Agamemnon also endures “sneers and vituperation... from Achilles, Sthenelus, Diomedes and Odysseus,” who call him “a coward, liar, wretch, fool, sine-bibber, babbler, and he and his plans are not merely criticized but even ridiculed” (Shewan 151). When Agamemnon needed to make a decision in Book 10, he considers “the best counsel” to be to “seek out Nestor” so they could work out a plan together instead of deciding by himself (10.17-19). Along the way he assembles even more men to help with the decision. After he reconciles with Achilles, “all their subsequent dealings are marked by a deference on Agamemnon’s part to the wishes or commands of Achilleus” (Postlethwaite 102). The end of the epic shows Agamemnon willingly and readily taking direction from the man with whom he had such a power struggle in Book 1. Thus the selfish autocrat from Book 1 becomes a deferential and inadequate leader for the rest of the text.

While prowess in battle is not the deciding factor for the position of commander-in-chief, it is still an important ability for an Achaean king. One of Achilles’ primary insults in Book 1 is accusing Agamemnon of never fighting alongside his people in battle. In Achaean society, especially during a war, “the best armed and bravest are most highly valued” (Hammer 294).

Such an accusation by Achilles is gravely insulting, yet the rest of the epic depicts Agamemnon as a character who does participate in the fighting, to a degree. Agamemnon is usually the first

fighter mentioned by the poet in any battle, and he “is naturally the first of the heroes on the field that the poet makes Priam single out” (Shewan 151). In the duel proposed by Hektor in Book 7 Achilles is one of the nine men to volunteer; the poet even describes him as “far the first to rise up” (7.162). However, he is never actually chosen for either of the two individual battles mentioned in the *Iliad*.

One of Agamemnon’s only impressive displays of fighting abilities appears in Book 11 with his *aristeia*, in which he is often compared to a lion and kills eight named men. It is “most elaborate, and ends with a special distinction” with recognition from the gods (Shewan 151).

However, others view his actions as less heroic, even “inferior to [those] of any other warrior” in the epic (Postlethwaite 98). While Agamemnon’s *aristeia* does depict his most excellent period in battle, he is “the only warrior, on either side, to retire from battle because of pain from his wound rather than disablement” (Postlethwaite 99). Furthermore, “Agamemnon is the first hero in the poem to make a clear miss with a spear throw, missing both the intended victim and everyone else too” (Postlethwaite 99). This failure is especially shameful for Agamemnon since he is often considered by other men to be the best of spearmen. In the funeral games of Book 23 Achilles awards Agamemnon the prize from the spear throwing competition without making him compete. This action may be viewed as Achilles formally acknowledging Agamemnon’s leadership and abilities, finally ending the feud between the two men. N. Postlethwaite, however, recognizes the dissonance between Agamemnon’s actions and this honor.

Postlethwaite considers Achilles’ decision to be an attempt “to avoid the possible embarrassment of being defeated in competition” or an effort to “humiliate Agamemnon by making a statement which all know to be incorrect” (99). Such varying views on Achilles’ actions can easily be warranted by Agamemnon’s discordant portrayal throughout the epic. At

times he is depicted as an exceptional warrior, at other times he can barely compare to the other men in his assembly. When combined with his “disastrous” leadership characterized by obvious blunders (Hammer 4), the Agamemnon as commander-in-chief is “the exemplar of a proud man whose responsibilities are often greater than his ability to cope with them” (Donlan 268).

Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* presents a far different aspect of Agamemnon’s leadership. The war is over, his military responsibilities are finished. Instead he is resituated back into his role as king of Argos, but not for very long. The play does not show much of his ruling style, except for his changing level of humility and hubris, and his short description of the war. His first speech describes the glory of his success, yet the language is saturated with gruesome imagery.

Agamemnon describes “the annihilation / for the city,” how they “raped” the city and burned it so the only seamark is the tower of smoke. He likens their victory to a “bloody lion [that] lapped its fill, / gorging on the blood of kings” (794-814). Such vocabulary clearly demonstrates a leader who embraces his monstrous actions and highlights his success and cruelty to his foes. Yet this passage is fairly short and only references his understanding of a finished war.

The clearest method of determining his capability as a leader of Argos is through the opinions of the other characters. After his death, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus plan to take over his rule. The chorus strongly opposes this, citing their scheming and regicide as unfavorable characteristics (1666-67). Although killing the king just as he returned from battle marks them as “pathetic,” so too does the fact that Aegisthus did not have the courage to actually carry out the murder. The chorus considers him weak for his lack of courage, stating that “No Greek / worth his salt would grovel at [Aegisthus’] feet” (1699-1700). The men of Argos thus value honor and courage, while they consider treachery and cowardice to be characteristics that mark a man as unfit to rule.

Other peripheral characters directly express their opinions of Agamemnon, yet with shifting favor. Upon hearing of Agamemnon's return, the Watchman says, "Just bring him home. My king, / I'll take your loving hand in mine and then ... / the rest is silence" (36-38).

Obviously the Watchman has no ill will towards Agamemnon, desiring that he makes it home safely and expressing a devotion to him. The Herald, similarly, talks very highly of Agamemnon. The Herald describes him, saying he "brings us light in the darkness, / free for every comrade, Agamemnon lord of men" (513-514). He goes on to say that Agamemnon "is blest, / the one man alive to merit such rewards" (521-522). However, the Herald also proceeds to disclose at length some of the atrocities of war, saying "A long, hard pull we had, if I would tell it all" (546). Such a realistic portrayal of the war makes the previous descriptions of Agamemnon seem slightly forced and saccharine.

The chorus also adds some complexity to Agamemnon's public opinion. When they first talk to him, they reveal that they "drew [him] in [their] mind in black; / [he] seemed a menace at the helm" for taking so many men on a pointless campaign (785-786). However, once he returned victorious, their attitudes shift dramatically. Since he won, "from the depths of trust and love / [they] say Well fought, well won - / the end is worth the labor!" (789-791). After hearing of Agamemnon's death, their esteem for him stays high. They, rather dramatically, wish for their own deaths since their "dearest shield lies battered" (1480). As evidenced by the shield imagery and the quickly changing opinion of the chorus, Agamemnon's capability as king in *Agamemnon* is closely connected to his success in battle. A good king must also be honorable, and brave. Like *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Aeschylus's play also proposes knowing one's constituents as an important factor for a good leader. Just as Agamemnon needed to make himself available to his people during his campaign for power, the Chorus in *Agamemnon* state that "the good

shepherd knows his flock” (779). A leader, therefore, must have a healthy relationship and familiarity with his people. The chorus mentions this just as Agamemnon returns from a 10 year war, possibly drawing attention to his extensive absence; yet the striking contrast between Agamemnon and the awful leadership potential of his murderers somewhat restores his image. Compared to Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, Agamemnon is clearly more beloved and understood by his people.

Agamemnon proves to be a generally competent ruler in Aeschylus’ play, largely because of his success in his campaign against Troy. However, the latent anti-war undertones create a complication of his public opinion which is only decided by his murder. When viewed in the context of the other two works, the figure of Agamemnon is ultimately extremely diverse.

*Iphigenia at Aulis* determines a good leader to be intelligent and open to his community.

Agamemnon neither consistently strong minded nor available to his constituents; yet ultimately Euripides portrays him as a fairly adequate king. The *Iliad*, however, paints the picture of a man out of his depth. He has moments of glory, but on average Agamemnon proves to be an inconsistent character who ultimately falls short of what a good leader should be. All three texts include different criteria for what makes a capable leader, and each rendering of Agamemnon produces different results, showing once again that his character is almost too dissimilar to compare.

### **Motivation**

Agamemnon’s motivation is perhaps equally as important, and equally as dissonant, as his leadership capabilities. His incentives determine why he has the position of commander-in-

chief, what compels him to search it out or maintain it, and, in turn, his value system. These should be more innate characteristics than his leadership capability in different situations.

Motivations speak to innate personality and character; yet even these alter to a startling degree.

In *Iphigenia at Aulis* Menelaus does not just expose Agamemnon's hypocrisy in leadership, but also his desire to go to war. Despite the fact that Agamemnon tells the Old Servant that he laments his authoritative position, or the fact that he tells Iphigenia he would rather stay than go to war, Menelaus states that Agamemnon originally was eager to go to war. Menelaus describes Agamemnon's "unhappy face [and] ... distress at the thought... of being deprived of [his] command and losing the great glory" (351-385). Furthermore Agamemnon actively sought out a solution. Upon hearing that he would have to sacrifice his daughter he was "glad at heart, and readily promised" (351-385). Therefore, at one point in time he was extremely motivated by glory and delighted in the thought of war. Later he experiences a substantial shift and seems to value family and justice over fighting a war for Menelaus' "worthless wife" (385-416). In this tragedy it becomes apparent that "he is a victim of his fear of the army and its leader, Odysseus" (Siegel 263). As a leader he seems to take stock in what his troops desire, in this case to go to war. However, originally this deference to the wishes of his men is based in a fear for the lives of his family. Only later does he make his decision for the good of his people. "It is Hellas for whom [he] must, whether [he] wish or not, offer [her] as a sacrifice. [He] cannot resist the claim of country" (1261-1314). Agamemnon's decision as a leader is ultimately determined by his devotion to his people, yet his motivations are anything but consistent throughout the play. These shifts may be the result of a need to adapt to situations or a natural changing of his mind; however, since his character's motivation changes so often



and at times between two opposite reasonings, such a variation instead points to an innately volatile character.

Agamemnon's motivation in the *Iliad* is an amalgamation of different factors, such as glory, honor, material wealth, and the return of Helen; yet almost all of them can be traced back to reputation. "Agamemnon, as commander-in-chief, is responsible for the safety and success of the entire expedition" (294). The success or failure of the war will be attributed to him, so the stakes are high. Furthermore the *Iliad* depicts a "shame culture, where it is as important to avoid the imputation of cowardice as to avoid cowardice itself" (Adkins 297). In order to maintain his authority it is important for him to appear powerful and authoritative. When Agamemnon wanted to flee in Book 9 he was persuaded by the ridicule of the other men. Agamemnon himself even uses reputation to motivate his men to fight. In Book 4 he convinces Diomedes to fight well by comparing him to his father, and telling him that his father was far superior. Diomedes, in turn, says that he "will / find no fault with Agamemnon ... / for stirring thus into battle the strong-greaved Achaians," since the war is so closely connected with Agamemnon's own honor. Agamemnon's motivation is fairly consistent throughout the text, yet it greatly differs from that of Euripides' tragedy. Reputation appears in the *Iphigenia at Aulis*, yet only in relation to Achilles and Iphigenia, never as Agamemnon's motivation.

*Agamemnon* differs from the other two because Agamemnon's motivation for his action is never addressed. Many people comment on the war and how seemingly useless it was, yet Agamemnon never comments on why he decided to follow through with it. He states that "for their mad outrage / of a queen [the Achaeans] raped" Troy (808-809). He still fails to mention his personal motivation; he never again mentions anything about this queen. All who hear it

understand it to be Helen, yet this lack of a description sheds no light upon the individual motivation for Aeschylus' Agamemnon.

Thus the motivations change in each text. Euripides provides multiple motivations for Agamemnon, yet his pride for his country ultimately prompts his decisions, proving him to be a leader of his people and for his people. The *Iliad* presents a character who is essentially driven by reputation. Aeschylus does not even include motivation for Agamemnon. He simply has the position of leadership, and although Agamemnon admittedly seems to embrace the war and his success, the audience never sees a clear influence. Thus each portrayal of Agamemnon appears to operate independently of the other two.

## CONCLUSION

Agamemnon as a character in Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis*, Homer's *Iliad*, and Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* is based on a common mythological figure. Ancient Greek mythology, however, is not grounded in any dogma; it is malleable, changing with each new literary interpretation. Certain elements must remain the same in order for the new words to assimilate into the pre-existing tradition. Most plot lines are clearly established, securing characters' decisions. Well known figures often have specific character traits that are innate to their stories and unite different representations. Agamemnon clearly does not.

All three texts create a confusing mess of inconsistencies. Everything from Agamemnon's decisions, his religion, and his leadership change drastically. Although each subsequent text clearly references and understands the depictions of Agamemnon in the previous texts, hardly any of his characteristics are consistent throughout. Not only do the characteristics change for each text; the focus and themes of each portrayal of Agamemnon change as well.

This in itself suggests the insubstantiality of Agamemnon's foundation as a character. Each text was able to focus on a different aspect of his character, pushing the rest to the background, indicating that he has no single characteristic that must take center stage, or at least get common recognition. Admittedly some of these differences can be attributed to differences in the context of each work, whether the author or the genre. Yet many of the variations of his character happen within the same play. Ultimately the figure of Agamemnon is uncommonly convoluted. He is a necessary figure in different myths, yet as a character he is altered in order to fit whatever character the poet desires.

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## ACADEMIC VITA

Emily Bellwoar  
emilybellwoar@gmail.com

### School Address

224 S. Burrowes St., #104  
State College, PA 16802

### Permanent Address

27 Barrington Lane  
Chester Springs, PA 19425

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## EDUCATION

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA  
B.A., English  
Minors in Classics & Ancient Mediterranean Studies, Spanish  
Honors in English, Expected May 2015  
Dean's List – All Semesters  
Schreyer Honors College Scholar

## AREAS OF STUDY

American literature, British literature, Native American literature, Classical Greek and Roman Drama, Shakespeare, Polar Exploration literature, Spiritual Autobiography, Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies, Spanish language

## ACADEMIC HONORS & AWARDS

Penn State University Dean's List – all semesters (2011-2015)

Paterno Undergraduate Fellowship through the Penn State College of the Liberal Arts (2011-2015)

- Fellowship awarded to Penn State Liberal Arts majors who demonstrate excellence in academics and extensive fellowship toward Penn State University

## ACTIVITIES

Penn State Panhellenic Dance Marathon (2012-2015)

- Helped raise money to support the Four Diamonds Fund, which finances pediatric cancer treatment and research.
- OPPerations Committee – Committee member, Lieutenant
  - Worked to ensure a safe and clean environment during THON events and THON weekend
- Finance Committee – Captain
  - Managed a committee of 30 committee members
  - Counted and processed monetary donations made to THON

Penn State Competitive Ballroom Dance 2015

## **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

Siana, Bellwoar &McAndrew, LLC, Intern, May 2013-August 2013, May 2014-August 2014

- Gained writing and editing experience with professional documents
- Worked with attorneys and clients
- Organized and implemented filing systems