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Agamemnon at Aulis: On the Right and Wrong Sorts of Imaginative Identification

Sophie-Grace Chappell[1]

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Abstract

Williams' discussion of dilemmas in his classic paper "Ethical consistency" famously focuses on an example that has not bothered commentators on and respondents to Williams as much as it should have bothered them: the example of Agamemnon in Aeschylus' play. In this paper I try to pick apart what Williams wants to say from what is really going on in the text that he unfortunately chooses for his example. I compare with Williams' discussion of Agamemnon four other commentators on this crucial passage in Aeschylus' play: Plato, Socrates, Aristotle—and Bernard Williams' Greats tutor Eduard Fraenkel, whose epochal Corpus Christi seminars on the play Williams attended (along with Iris Murdoch, Hugh Lloyd Jones, and other rising stars of the time). I shall argue that these commentators led Williams astray. They are surprisingly prone to the same flaws of rationalism, impersonality, and moralism in making sense of Aeschylus' extraordinarily subtle and brilliant depiction of Agamemnon; and Williams' discussion inherits these flaws. This is an obviously ironic fact, especially given that a very fruitful reading of the passage—one that I think makes much better sense of what Aeschylus actually says—points a deeply Williamsian moral. It takes Agamemnon at Aulis as a study of a key step in the corruption of a character, a study that gets its power and its horror from its ability to show us how that process looks *from Agamemnon's own viewpoint.*

Keywords Ethics · Ancient Greek philosophy · Bernard Williams · Agent-regret

I

A question that we might think worth moral philosophers' attention is the question "What is it like to be someone else?" But as Bernard Williams often pointed out, moral philosophy—as distinct from literature—has tended to overlook this and adjacent questions because of three things: its *rationalism,* its *impersonality*, and its *moralism.* By its rationalism I mean, here, moral philosophy's (and indeed philosophy's) familiar fixation—on the whole—with the propositional and the cerebral, and its neglect of the affective and the experiential and the dispositional. By moral philosophy's *impersonality* I mean its familiar quest for the absolute conception, its attempt to move as far as it can towards the point of view of the universe, the view of reality "as it is anyway", the view from nowhere. Finally, moral philosophy's *moralism* is its instinctive rush to judgement: its aversion to taking up any viewpoint on reality that is, in one way or another, morally compromised. Moral philosophy does of course engage in narrative thinking from time to time, for example in the construction of examples or thought-experiments. But there is, pervasively, a tacit assumption that any protagonist of a narrative with whom we are supposed to *engage* or *identify* will be an innocent, a good person; and that engagement will be difficult or impossible if s/he is not. Rather as there is (or is supposed to be) a puzzle of imaginative resistance in the philosophy of fiction—a puzzle about why it is possible for someone with normal historical beliefs to imagine fictionally that Napoleon won at Waterloo, but not possible for someone.with normal moral beliefs to imagine fictionally that rape is all right—so there is a marked resistance, in the narratives that moral philosophy occasionally entertains, to do anything that comes anywhere near identifying with bad characters.

Here too there is a marked contrast with narrative art. To say that narrative art *sometimes* invites us to imaginatively identify with bad people, or with morally ambiguous people, or with people in bad or morally ambiguous situations—this is if anything to understate the case. We might

✉ Sophie-Grace Chappell
Sophie-grace.chappell@open.ac.uk

[1] The Open University, London, UK

almost wonder what *else* narrative art does but precisely that. And if imaginative identification is indeed *identification*, if it involves me in making someone else's perspective my own, albeit temporarily and fictively—then when the perspective is a truly wicked person's, it is not hard to see why the moralistic are worried; indeed we might almost be inclined to go moralistic ourselves.

Consider for instance Shylock:

> **SALERIO**
>
> Why, I am sure, if he forfeit thou wilt not take his flesh. What's that good for?
>
> **SHYLOCK**
>
> To bait fish withal. If it will feed nothing else, it will feed my revenge. He hath disgraced me and hindered me half a million, laughed at my losses, mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies—and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions? Fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that. If a Jew wrong a Christian, what is his humility? Revenge. If a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge. The villainy you teach me I will execute—and it shall go hard but I will better the instruction.

Shylock's obsession with revenge, however understandable in his circumstances, has something very ugly about it. Our repugnance (and Salerio's) at the hatred that he evinces, and the cold murderous cruelty that he is prepared to enact, brings a reservation to the compassion we feel for his social alienation.

More complicatedly still: as well as something morally ugly, there is something aesthetically grand about the intensity of Shylock's passion, and the bitter eloquence, and the pathos, with which he vents it. Of course there is, for *The Merchant of Venice*, like all Shakespeare's plays, is not a sermon; it is an entertainment. And Shylock's bitterness, as Shakespeare depicts it, is dazzlingly entertaining. Indeed to call it "entertaining" is to understate the case: this is great art. Shylock's words have a magnificent *hauteur*, the dignity of disdain we might call it. And the fact that he has that dignity serves to subvert our repugnance from the ugliness of his vengefulness; it makes it possible for us to move back towards imaginatively identifying with him. And *this* idea—that the morally ugly can be aesthetically grand, and that a mindset's being aesthetically grand is a reason or at least a motivation for us to imaginatively identify with it—is one that moralistic moral philosophers from Plato on have always found *very* hard to stomach.

Second example. Consider this lament:

> I have lived long enough. My way of life
> Is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf,
> And that which should accompany old age,
> As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
> I must not look to have, but, in their stead,
> Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath
> Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare not.

Touching? Affecting? Something we naturally empathise, sympathise, and identify with? Why, yes; though of course an under-informed reader might wonder *why* the speaker is so lonely and accursed. As most of my readers will no doubt have spotted already, the answer is: because the speaker is Macbeth (*Macbeth* 5.3.2), and he is speaking once he has attained the kingship of Scotland and murdered everyone who gets in his way. He is cursed and deserted, and *rightly* cursed and deserted, for being a bloody and oppressive tyrant. And yet this—his last lament before he dies in battle—is also beautifully touching. Shakespeare's achievement here, as elsewhere in this extraordinary play, is to make us feel sorry for a monster. He shows us *what it is like* to be, to have become, a moral monstrosity; he makes something that is aesthetically beautiful and delightful and fascinating out of something ethically repulsive. Shakespeare's invitation to his audience to feel what Macbeth feels, and to get aesthetic pleasure out of contemplating the morally despicable state of bitterness and self-pity that Macbeth is in, is an invitation that most of us find irresistible, and reasonably too; but the moralistic may well find it unsettling.[1]

Very similar comments apply to my third Shakespearean example, a sleeper who awakes from a terrible nightmare:

> Give me another horse: bind up my wounds.
> Have mercy, Jesu!—Soft! I did but dream.
> O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!
> The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight.

[1] In the remarkable film *Downfall* (*Niedergang,* refs) there are moments where we are made to feel sorry for Hitler—moments that naturally prompted intense debate in Germany. I am not of course saying that they shouldn't have. Feeling sorry for Hitler *is* a morally uncomfortable condition. What interests me is that it is a possible response to some art, and an appropriate one too.

> Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.
> What do I fear? myself? there's none else by:
> Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I.

This is Richard III speaking: this is *his* last lament before he meets his deserved end.[2] No one, the moralist will say, *should* be sympathising with this paragon of wickedness; yet here too what Shakespeare does is take us right into the experience of a deeply evil man, and make something out of it that is not only humanly comprehensible and identifiable-with, but also both artistically and philosophically remarkable. (A whole paper could be written on the last line that I have just quoted—it seems to be one of Shakespeare's existentialist moments; indeed a paper, or two, probably has been written on it. But I can't pursue that here.)

The charge of moralism against standard-issue moral philosophy is not that it doesn't or can't "do things like these". These examples that we have been considering are distinctively *artistic* (and specifically dramatic) achievements. Moral philosophy is not drama, and does not need to try to be; it would be absurd to suggest that moral philosophy ought to attempt to *mimic* such achievements. But it should be possible for moral philosophy to find a way or ways of reflecting on such cases, of making ethical sense of them, and of the imaginative identifications that they involve; and it should be possible for moral philosophy to do this without distorting the cases.

I think these things are indeed possible, and have sometimes even been actual. But my point here is that they are not very common. Of course some philosophers have written movingly and perceptively and even wisely about evil (one thinks at once of Mary Midgley, Jonathan Glover, and Hannah Arendt). Still, *most* moral philosophy makes no attempt at all to get "under the skin" of atrocities, or of monsters like Macbeth and Richard III—to parallel, in its own way, what Shakespeare does with them. Most moral philosophers, I suspect, would be deeply worried by the very idea of attempting to imaginatively identify with people as clearly and profoundly wicked as Macbeth or Richard. They have little to say except that these characters *are* wicked, or evil, which often looks like little more than a way of keeping them at arm's length. And when moral philosophers do approach atrocities and monsters, the results are often distorted by, at least, the three factors about moral philosophy that I have mentioned above—rationalism, impersonality, moralism. These factors and others have limited the range of imaginative identifications that are available to moral philosophy, particularly as compared with narrative art; indeed they have made it very difficult to see imaginative identification as a central part of moral philosophy at all. The result has been to make moral philosophy shallower, less humane, and less interesting.

II

Rationalism, impersonality, and moralism are very old factors in moral philosophy; pretty well as old as moral philosophy itself, if you assume, as seems reasonable, that moral philosophy began with Socrates son of Sophroniscus. All of them are visibly in play in Plato's famous discussion of art in *Republic* II-III. The dramatic or epic narrative art that Plato's character Socrates discusses there is, strikingly, drawn almost entirely from just two sources: one of them is Homer, and the other is Aeschylus. With both authors Socrates is vigilant against the danger that he might contaminate himself and his hearers with exactly that unwholesome enthusiasm for, and fascination with, bad people and their bad deeds that might very well be contracted by an avid reader of *Richard III* or *Macbeth*, such as myself. Plato's Socrates studiously restricts himself to talking about the effects on the soul of various snippets of drama and epic that he alludes to, without ever allowing his allusions to develop any dramatic momentum of their own, or turn into an Ion-like rhapsodic performance that (as it were) parasitically colonises space within his own larger work. (For contrast, notice how this is *exactly* what happens when the Player King in *Hamlet* is put to reciting from an imaginary *Hecuba*, which, very clearly, is meant to be a play that the young Shakespeare himself might have written: *Hamlet* 2.2.)

The assumptions underlying Plato's discussion are explicitly and avowedly rationalistic, impersonalising, and moralistic. Aristotle's discussions of dramatic art are, as we might expect, less vitiated by such assumptions. In particular his main discussion, in the *Poetics,* while not quite describable as a victory for common sense and realism, certainly represents some very important kinds of escape from Socratic and Platonic moralism. In sharp contrast to the decidedly Soviet austerity of *Republic* II-III, where nothing is allowed but the depiction of stern virtue (insofar as any *depiction* is allowed at all), Aristotle says explicitly (*Poetics* 1452b35-1453a27) that the protagonist of the ideal tragedy is not—heaven forbid—a villain; but not especially virtuous either. He is ὁ μήτε ἀρετῇ διαφέρων καὶ δικαιοσύνῃ μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν μεταβάλλων εἰς τὴν δυστυχίαν ἀλλὰ δι᾽ ἁμαρτίαν τινά, τῶν ἐν μεγάλῃ δόξῃ ὄντων καὶ εὐτυχίᾳ: "someone who is not specially distinguished for virtue or justice, and who does not fall into misfortune through wickedness and vice, but because

[2] *Richard III* 5.3.176–182. The speech, as written by the Shakespeare of about 1592, goes on for another 24 lines. An older Shakespeare, I suspect, would have deleted most of those lines, which (in my view) are too close to "telling" as opposed to "showing", and would have contented himself with little more than the marvellous compactness of the dense and mysterious lines that I quote here.

of some mistake he makes; and he should be one of those who live in great honour and good fortune" (1453a10-12). This is patently an improvement on the stern-virtue view of narrative art; it is at least a denial that the most important and worthwhile art must always be concerned, as extreme moralism from Plato to Stalin has constantly insisted, only with heroic virtue.

However, Aristotle's analysis of Attic tragedy is, and is obviously, wildly over-schematic, and over-schematic in a way that matters for my purposes here. Aristotle's analysis is also obviously inadequate to anything more than a small selection of the matter that it is supposed to apply to. It is strange that the philosopher whose approach to drama can often seem unnervingly reminiscent of his approach to shellfish ("Find as many different kinds of specimen as you can, and then look for some generalisations that cover them all") should also be the philosopher who at times seems to think that the only business of tragedy is always and everywhere to aspire to the condition of *Oedipus Rex*. And why Aristotle thinks that the natural place to start is with the decidedly Sellars-and-Yeatman[3] premiss that the possibilities to consider are that tragedy might be about either Good Men or Bad Men, who either move from Good Things to Bad Things or from Bad Things to Good Things—and that eliminating three of these permutations and passing over the fourth in silence entitles him to move straight to his own view, that tragedy is about Morally Middling Men (who, we may add, have to be aristocrats[4]) moving from Good Things to Bad Things—heaven only knows. How does Antigone fit into this scheme? Is she a Morally Middling Man? How does Aeschylus' *Eumenides* fit into it, or Sophocles' *Philoctetes*? If we pretend for a moment that we accept Aristotle's way of talking, then why, on that way of talking, aren't these both plays where a Good Man moves from Bad Things to Good Things, and so plain counter-examples to his theory? There are even Greek plays which were surely known to Aristotle where the protagonist not only fails to meet with disaster but is not, heaven help us, an aristocrat at all, at least not ostensibly: Euripides' *Ion* stars a temple slave (as he is when the play starts) for whom pretty much everything turns out well.

It is hard not to hear something schematic and moralistic, too, in Aristotle's famous proposal that the protagonist succumbs to the play's "reversal" μήτε διὰ κακίαν καὶ μοχθηρίαν μεταβάλλων εἰς τὴν δυστυχίαν ἀλλὰ δι' ἁμαρτίαν τινά ("he does not fall into misfortune through wickedness and vice, but because of some mistake he makes"). Despite the New-Testament sense of the word ἁμαρτία this is not, of course, a theory of tragedy as caused by *sin*. (There can be no such thing as a tragedy caused. (simply and solely) by sin (as such), as is amply clear from the failure of *Paradise Lost* to count as a tragedy. The reasons why not are interesting; but that's another paper.) What it is, is a theory of tragedy where the disaster is caused by the protagonist's Fatal Flaw. (Equally familiarly: the Fatal Flaw is very often *hubris*, outrage, pride that oversteps.) And I say this is moralistic, because it moves us back towards the idea that the protagonist, in order to be someone with whom we can imaginatively identify, must be—really—*morally good*: must be a good person, *if only* he, or she, did not have that one crucial weakness.

The trouble here too is that nearly all actual drama simply does not fit Aristotle's pattern. And it is not just notoriously formally-wayward dramas like Shakespeare's plays that fail to fit Aristotle's pattern; most classic Attic drama does not fit it either. Maybe not even Aristotle's own pet example, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, fits it, not at any rate if we translate ἁμαρτία as "fatal flaw". It is not a *character-flaw* that brings Oedipus down; and there is something wrong about calling it a *mistake*, too. The closest concept to Aristotle's ἁμαρτία that is actually there in Aeschylus and Sophocles is the Homeric concept of ἄτη, "ruinous delusion". But these are two utterly different concepts, the difference lying above all in their theological presuppositions: ἄτη cannot exist at all unless there are gods like the pagan Greeks', whereas ἁμαρτία presupposes no particular theology whatever. In tone and in content ἄτη is as far from ἁμαρτία as the troublingly absolute traditional Christian concept of *mortal sin* is from the troublingly relativistic modern secular concept of *inappropriate behaviour*.

This lack of fit is worth describing as a *trouble*, because, of course, of Aristotle's enormous influence. In my own case, I remember hearing at school how a proper tragedy was supposed to be about a hero destroyed by his Fatal Flaw, and seeing how that might (might) fit the case of Othello or Mark Anthony, but scratching my head over the question what Macbeth's Fatal Flaw was supposed to be, or how I was meant to see him as even beginning as a morally middling man when, fairly patently, Shakespeare makes him a corrupt figure from the very start—albeit at first a *secretly* corrupt one, the real state of whose soul is only evident to those of dangerously special, perhaps feminine, perceptiveness, such as the witches and his wife.

Another schematic thing that I was also told at school is the familiar doctrine that tragedy is all about value-conflict. This idea is not, so far as I can see, in the *Poetics*. It does

[3] W.C.Sellar and R.J.Yeatman, *1066 and All That: A Memorable History of England, comprising all the parts you can remember, including 103 Good Things, 5 Bad Kings and 2 Genuine Dates*. London: Methuen. Published in 1930, and still one of the funniest books in the English language.

[4] We should bear this requirement in mind when assessing Aristotle's remark that tragedy is about those who are better than us, comedy about those who are worse. This I think is *not* evidence of moralism. What Aristotle means, I take it, is that tragedy is about *our betters*, in the old-fashioned sense; the comparisons being made here are social, not moral.

seem, inchoately, to be part of what troubles Plato about his society's theology and drama in the *Republic* and *Euthyphro*. But I suspect that it was really neither Plato nor Aristotle but Hegel who made the value-conflict view of tragedy canonical, when he took up Plato's approach—or rather took it up into his own approach—in his famous reading of Sophocles' *Antigone*.[5]

Is tragedy, or drama, all about value-conflict? The doctrine looks vulnerable to a false-or-trivial dilemma. Dramas involve action—in classical Greek this is an analytic truth—and dramatically interesting action needs to have something more to it than the Kim-Il-Sung-esque "The enlightened utilitarian conceived his plan to promote utility, and then enacted it". (It is not the least of all possible objections to utilitarianism that it is so *boring*.) But if a drama could be made even of that bland and banal scenario, the drama would be all about the resistances that the enlightened utilitarian encountered. A good drama, like any good story, has a beginning, a muddle, and an end[6]; it opposes protagonists and *ant*agonists. And muddles and dramatic oppositions, by definition, involve forces that pull against each other. In this sense it is just trivial that drama involves value-conflict. In any stronger sense—for example the sense that Hegel had in mind, where Antigone and Creon, for instance, are mere tokens in a game of *Aufhebung*, bearing the labels Family Values and Civic Values respectively—the notion is surely false. Antigone certainly *has* values; but she *is* herself, not a value. And in any case Antigone understands something of *both* family and civic values, whereas Creon, for all his bluster, understands neither.

III

One famous instance of how profoundly Aristotle's formulaic account has influenced our thinking about tragedy, is a case where his influence has been more explicitly moralistic; or rather, perhaps, where his moralistic influence has combined with other moralistic influences such as Hegel's, in a way that I think has seriously misled even gifted modern commentators who are generally speaking as far away from moralism as it is possible to be. This is the story of Agamemnon at Aulis. In the remainder of this paper I shall consider the story, and some philosophical engagements (or refusals to engage) with it: first Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, in this section; then Bernard Williams, Eduard Fraenkel, and Martha Nussbaum, in section IV. Apart from any other reason for being interested in the case of Agamemnon at Aulis, I think Aeschylus' masterly treatment of this story serves to remind us just how long imaginative identification has been central to narrative art; and just how good narrative art can be at it.

In barest outline, the story is that Agamemnon and the Greek army are in their transport ships at Aulis, between the island of Euboea and the Boeotian mainland of Greece, awaiting a favourable wind to set sail to Troy and begin their war of vengeance against Paris, Priam, and their people for the abduction of Helen. But the goddess Artemis is angry, and sends adverse winds (*antipnoous*, Ag.148): and the priest Calchas announces that only a human sacrifice will end her anger, change the winds, and make the army's departure possible. King Agamemnon, with his brother Menelaus one of the two leaders of the Greek army, must sacrifice his daughter Iphigeneia, who has already been brought to Aulis for a possible marriage to Achilles. He hesitates; but then he kills her. (For something better than barest outline, see the Appendix to this paper, which gives a parallel text of *Agamemnon* lines 104–253, in the Greek and in my English translation. My English version of the whole play, and indeed of the rest of the Oresteia, is online at https://open.academia.edu/Sophiegrace.)

What Plato made of this story of Aeschylus', we do not strictly speaking know. Despite his extensive reference to Aeschylus in *Republic* II-III, as noted above, he never explicitly mentions the case of Aeschylus' Agamemnon. (In the whole of the *Republic* in fact, and so far as I know elsewhere in his works, Plato barely refers at all to any of the various Agamemnons in the Greek literary canon, though he does mention Palamedes' comic Agamemnon at *Republic* 522d, and (presumably)[7] Homer's at 620b.) But it is not hard to guess what Plato might have thought of Aeschylus' tale—if we leave aside Plato's obvious emotional undertow of ambivalence about drama, an undertow that surfaces most clearly in the apparently temporary recantation of the *Phaedrus*.[8] At least in the severe mood of his mature philosophy, Plato, like Socrates before him, must have seen the tale as a blasphemous, obscene farrago of voodoo and butchery. So we may surmise; though in truth we have no solid evidence, because Plato, as I noted above, has little or nothing to say about such stories. Evidently for him and for Socrates, the best philosophical response to them is to pass over them in (what I take to be a disdainful) silence. The nearest either of them gets to a direct response to such tragic material is, as Nussbaum points out (*Fragility* p.25), the *Euthyphro*.

[5] I have written about Hegel on the *Antigone* in "Socrates and Antigone: two ways not to be martyred", *Prudentia* 1999, but more conveniently online at academia.edu/sophiegrace. See also my "Autonomy in the *Antigone*", forthcoming in Ben Colburn, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of Autonomy*.

[6] A doctrine that can be found in the *Poetics*, if we conjoin 1450b3 and 1455b11.

[7] Paul Shorey, Loeb *Republic* volume 2 p.515, footnote c, thinks that the eagle into which the afterlife Agamemnon is transformed at 620b alludes to *Agamemnon* 114 ff. As often with Shorey, the conjecture seems less than compelling.

[8] On which see Nussbaum's fine paper in *Fragility*.

What Aristotle made of Agamemnon at Aulis is something about which we have no direct evidence either. But we do have one small wisp of indirect evidence, namely NE 3.1, 1110a26[9]:

> ἔνια δ᾽ ἴσως οὐκ ἔστιν ἀναγκασθῆναι, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον ἀποθανετέον παθόντι τὰ δεινότατα: καὶ γὰρ τὸν Εὐριπίδου Ἀλκμαίωνα γελοῖα φαίνεται τὰ ἀναγκάσαντα μητροκτονῆσαι.

> But some acts, perhaps, we cannot be forced to do, and ought rather to prefer to them death accompanied by the worst possible sufferings; thus, for instance, the things that "forced" Euripides' Alcmaeon to kill his mother seem ridiculous.

We no longer have the play of Euripides' to which Aristotle refers here; moreover Euripides wrote a number of plays called *Alcmaeon*, one of them, it seems, a comedy. But in the best-known version of the myth in question, what "forces" Alcmaeon to kill his mother Eriphyle is the threats of his dead father. Eriphyle tricks her husband Amphiaraus into going into a battle in which she knows he will be killed; Amphiaraus then appears to Alcmaeon in a dream and tells him to avenge his death by killing Eriphyle. What Amphiaraus threatens Alcmaeon with is this: he tells him that the cost of not killing her is that horrible torments will be visited on Alcmaeon for his impiety in not avenging his father. So Alcmaeon does kill her—and the cost of doing so turns out to be that he is pursued by the Erinyes for his impiety in killing his mother. More than one element in this narrative ought to sound pretty familiar to anyone who knows Aeschylus' *Choêphoroi*.

The inference seems clear. Aristotle would think (or possibly *Aristotle thinks:* maybe this is what he was getting at, when he issues this *obiter dictum* on Alcmaeon) that the threats that drive Orestes into avenging *his* father are equally γελοῖα. (Even if Aristotle's evident reverence for Aeschylus makes him less willing to use the word "ridiculous" of him than of his bugbear Euripides.)

Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates, then, all exemplify one obvious way for moralism to respond to Agamemnon at Aulis. This is simply to refuse to go along with the whole story, to reject the whole thing as horrible, irreligious, and bizarre.[10] Alternatively, moralistic readers can try to sanitise the story, to make it safe for moralism. And this, I will now argue, is what—perhaps surprisingly, and perhaps not entirely consciously—all three of Fraenkel, Williams, and Nussbaum do.

IV

Bernard Williams discusses Agamemnon at Aulis twice in his published works: in "Ethical consistency" (in his collection *Problems of the Self,* Cambridge UP 1973), and in his 1993 book *Shame and Necessity*, pp.132–135. At the point in "Ethical consistency" where Williams comes out with the example of Agamemnon, his concern is to illustrate his claim that the demands of ethical reality—in contrast with those of, say, scientific reality—can pull us irreconcilably in different directions at once. That is what Williams means by "tragic cases". He writes as follows:

> One peculiarity of tragic cases is that the notion of 'acting for the best' may very well lose its content. Agamemnon at Aulis may have said "may it be well" [εὖ γὰρ εἴη, *Agamemnon* 217] but he is neither convinced nor convincing. The agonies that a man will experience after acting in full consciousness of such a situation are not to be traced to a persistent doubt that he may not have chosen the better thing but, for instance, to a clear conviction that he has not done the better thing because there was no better thing to be done. It may on the other hand even be the case that by some not utterly irrational criteria of 'the better thing', he is convinced that he did do the better thing: rational men no doubt pointed out to Agamemnon his responsibilities as a commander, the many people involved, the considerations of honour and so forth. If he accepted all this and acted accordingly: it would seem a glib moralist who said, as some sort of criticism, that he must be irrational to lie awake at night having killed

[9] There is also Aristotle's remark, *Poetics* 1461a15-16, that the question whether something done in a drama was done "kalws e me kalws" depends, inter alia, on whether it was done to avert a greater evil or achieve a greater good. Banal moralism is not, unfortunately, altogether outside Aristotle's rhetorical range.

[10] Plutarch, *Life Of Themistocles* (13, 2): "But Themistocles was sacrificing alongside the admiral's trireme. There three prisoners of war were brought to him, of visage most beautiful to behold, conspicuously adorned with raiment and with gold. They were said to be the sons of Sandaucé, the King's sister, and Artaÿctus. When Euphrantides the seer caught sight of them, since at one and the same moment a great and glaring flame shot up from the sacrificial victims and a sneeze gave forth its good omen on the right, he clasped Themistocles by the hand and bade him consecrate the youths, and sacrifice them all to Dionysus Carnivorous, with prayers of supplication; for on this wise would the Hellenes have a saving victory. Themistocles was terrified, feeling that the word of the seer was monstrous and shocking; but the multitude, who, as is wont to be the case in great struggles and severe crises, looked for safety rather from unreasonable than from reasonable measures, invoked the god with one voice, dragged the prisoners to the altar, and compelled the fulfilment of the sacrifice, as the seer commanded. At any rate, this is what Phanias the Lesbian says, and he was a philosopher, and well acquainted with historical literature.".

This incident—if it happened at all, which has been doubted—was just before the Battle of Salamis in 480 BC. We know Aeschylus fought at Salamis. Was Aeschylus there when Themistocles performed this sacrifice? Was he thinking of it when he wrote the first choral ode of the Agamemnon (458 BC), about the sacrifice of Iphigeneia before the Greek fleet sailed to Troy?

> his daughter. And he lies awake, not because of a doubt, but because of a certainty. Some may say that the mythology of Agamemnon and his choice are nothing to us, because we do not move in a world in which irrational gods order men to kill their own children. But there is no need of irrational gods to give rise to tragic situations. (Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self* (CUP 1973) p.173).

The claim that Williams wants to make is that there can be "tragic situations" in which either "there is no better thing to be done"—all the available options are appalling. Or else there is a better thing than all the other options, but that better thing is a worse one too: better though it is, in some salient way it is also particularly appalling. Whatever one does, there will be—in a now-standard phrase—ineliminable agent-regret.

Given that this is Williams' claim, his choice of Agamemnon as an illustration of it has struck me as a weird choice from the moment I first read it as an undergraduate. From a modern point of view (come to that: from a Platonic or Aristotelian point of view), the obvious thing to say about Agamemnon is that his choice is structured by demands at least two of which are not real at all. If Agamemnon imagines—a modern might say—that he is under any kind of obligation to sail off to Troy, kill or rape and enslave the Trojans, and burn their city to the ground, then he is just wrong. So one of the pressures that sets up his supposed dilemma simply disappears. But again—the modern might add—if Agamemnon imagines that, in order to fulfil *that* obligation, he is under the *further* obligation that Calchas announces to him, to kill Iphigeneia in order to appease Artemis, then again he is just wrong. So there goes a second supposed pressure. It is tempting to conclude that Williams' example is indeed just weird, and weirdly unconvincing, because it is a "moral" conflict structured by demands two of which we might reasonably consider entirely illusory. Though even if they are not illusory, neither of these demands is obviously recognisable as a *moral* demand. (There is of course a third demand in the conflict too, the demand of parental obligations to a daughter, which is certainly not illusory, and which does look like what we call a moral demand. But one demand on its own creates no *conflict* of demands.)

Of this objection Williams is uncomfortably aware, as comes out at the close of his brief discussion of Agamemnon at Aulis. "There is no need of irrational gods to give rise to tragic situations," he says. But the natural retort to that is: "So why make your prime example of a tragic situation one that *does* involve irrational gods?".[11]

At any rate at the level of biography, there seems to be a fairly clear answer to this question. As an undergraduate at Balliol, Williams was a pupil of Eduard Fraenkel, the great Aeschylus scholar from Corpus. Here then is Fraenkel on Agamemnon at Aulis, in his magisterial two-volume edition *Aeschylus' Agamemnon* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1950, volume 1, pp.98–99):

> In the narrative of the chorus the climax is reached with the monologue of Agamemnon (206 ff.) and the comments attached to it (218 ff.). The king is faced with the alternative of two deadly evils. Whichever course he takes is bound to lead him to unbearable *hamartia.* After a violent struggle he resolves to sacrifice his daughter, fully aware that what he is doing is an unpardonable sin and will have to be atoned for. His fatal step puts him under the yoke of compulsion; there can be no way back; on and on he must go, and the end, he knows as well as the Elders, will be utter ruin. Aeschylus, by using unmistakable language (220-221 and ff., τόθεν τὸ παντότολμον φρονεῖν μετέγνω…) makes it clear that all the evil that is to befall Agamemnon has its first origin in his own voluntary decision… [this is a] tragic conflict… [Aeschylus wanted] a moral dilemma… to be the fountain-head of Agamemnon's fate.
>
> And again on p.121, Fraenkel adds:
>
> It is in merciless terms that Agamemnon describes, and implicitly condemns, what he is going to do. And yet he cannot avoid doing it.

Just as Williams (1929–2003) was a pupil of Fraenkel (1888–1970), so Fraenkel was a pupil of Franz Bücheler (1837–1908) and Bücheler in turn a pupil of Friedrich Ritschl (1806–1876). We can almost establish an academic lineage back to Hegel himself (1770–1831); but not quite, since so far as I know,[12] there was never a formal pupil-teacher connection between Ritschl and Hegel. (Though entertainingly enough, there *is* a connection with Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), who was also a pupil of Ritschl's. So Williams turns out to be Nietzsche's great-grand-nephew academically speaking, and perhaps in other ways too.)

But of course there is no need to find a direct connection with Hegel in order to be able to say what I think is plainly true anyway: as Fraenkel imagines him Agamemnon is already a Hegelian hero, caught through no fault of his own between two irreconcilable ethical imperatives. So he equally is as Williams imagines him. And both with Williams and with Fraenkel, "imagines" is the right word. Fraenkel pictures an Agamemnon

[11] Why not talk instead about, for instance, Sophie's choice? That particular case was not available when Williams wrote "Ethical consistency", as Styron's book was not published till 1979. But plenty of cases like it were. Or Williams could have contrived his own, as he did with "Jim and the Indians".

[12] Not that I've looked very hard (nor intend to). This information is all from Wikipedia.

facing a "violent struggle", a choice between "deadly evils" for either of which there will be a terrible price; Williams pictures a man in agonies who lies awake at night because of what he chose, and thought, rightly or wrongly, that he had no choice but to choose.

So my objection to Fraenkel's and Williams' readings of Agamemnon at Aulis cannot be that they eschew imaginative identification—as an Aristotle or Plato or Socrates might, reacting to Aeschylus' story by simply refusing, or finding themselves unable, to engage with it at all for moral reasons. To the contrary, both Fraenkel and Williams give us, albeit *en passant*, rich and interesting imaginative descriptions of how they see Agamemnon's plight as looking from Agamemnon's own perspective. My objection is rather that their imaginative identifications presuppose a misreading of Aeschylus. And theirs is a moralistic misreading, which quietly takes it first that the point about Agamemnon is that he is the subject of a moral dilemma in something like the schematic sense that Hegel meant, and secondly that, *as* subject of a Hegelian dilemma, Agamemnon must in some sense be free of guilt. He may be faced with no blame-free alternatives; but he is not to blame that that is his predicament. However he chooses at Aulis he will be at fault, because he is *caught*; yet it is not his fault that he is thus caught. At this second-order level, Agamemnon is an innocent. So we are still free to identify imaginatively with Agammenon without tripping any alarms for the moralistic; for we are still free to see him through the lens of the other schematism, Aristotle's, and to think of Agamemnon, though perhaps as no saint, still as essentially a *good man*, a suitable hero for a great tragedy. And so, indeed, Fraenkel explicitly accords Agamemnon the crucial Aristotelian honorific—he calls him a *megalopsychos:* Fraenkel 1950, II: 119, *ad* 202 ff.

I find myself, I confess, continually baffled by this soft spot for Agamemnon among classical commentators; even ones of the stature of Fraenkel. As Aeschylus presents Agamemnon, the moment he arrives on stage he displays rude abruptness to Clytaemestra, telling her her speech of welcome was too long; superstition, lack of resolution, and arrogance; not to mention the stunning tactlessness of showing up after 9 years away from his wife with his mad-barbarian-princess concubine in tow.

Indeed we might look beyond Aeschylus at this point, to Homer, whose picture of Agamemnon is I think pretty strongly normative for the rest of the tradition including Aeschylus. Homer too very clearly and consistently presents Agamemnon as a clumsy, tactless, oafish, greedy, cowardly, brutal, and rather stupid blowhard; though commentators seem to miss this too, in their eagerness to see "far-king Agamemnon" as some kind of ideal hero.

One striking example of Homer's negativity about Agamemnon comes in Iliad 8. We may take it in three points.

First, at *Iliad* 8.281–284 Agamemnon patronisingly says to Teucer:

> Τεῦκρε φίλη κεφαλή, Τελαμώνιε κοίρανε λαῶν
> βάλλ᾽ οὕτως, αἴ κέν τι φόως Δαναοῖσι γένηαι
> πατρί τε σῷ Τελαμῶνι, ὅ σ᾽ ἔτρεφε τυτθὸν ἐόντα,
> καί σε νόθον περ ἐόντα κομίσσατο ᾧ ἐνὶ οἴκῳ.
> "Teucer, my good man, you Telamon's son,
> leader of the troops—keep up this work!
> So doing, you bring light to all the Greeks
> and to old Telamon, he who brought you up
> in his own house, though illegitimate."

Why mention Teucer's illegitimacy here? The obvious answer is that Agamemnon has no good reason to; he's just too stupid to prevent himself from mentioning it.

Secondly, Agamemnon continues (8.286–291):

> σοὶ δ᾽ ἐγὼ ἐξερέω ὡς καὶ τετελεσμένον ἔσται:
> αἴ κέν μοι δώῃ Ζεύς τ᾽ αἰγίοχος καὶ Ἀθήνη
> Ἰλίου ἐξαλαπάξαι ἐϋκτίμενον πτολίεθρον,
> πρώτῳ τοι μετ᾽ ἐμὲ πρεσβήϊον ἐν χερὶ θήσω,
> ἢ τρίποδ᾽ ἠὲ δύω ἵππους αὐτοῖσιν ὄχεσφιν
> ἠὲ γυναῖχ᾽, ἥ κέν τοι ὁμὸν λέχος εἰσαναβαίνοι.
> "And I will tell you what will surely be:
> if goat-skin Zeus and Athene ever grant
> that we shall lay to waste this fine-built Troy,
> then you will get the first prize I award
> (after myself); a chariot, or a tripod,
> or a lissom concubine to fill your bed."

Agamemnon's greedy, lustful gloating here over the prospect of plunder and rape naturally recalls Achilles' unforgettable invective at *Iliad* 1.149–151:

> ὤ μοι ἀναιδείην ἐπιειμένε κερδαλεόφρον
> πῶς τίς τοι πρόφρων ἔπεσιν πείθηται Ἀχαιῶν
> ἢ ὁδὸν ἐλθέμεναι ἢ ἀνδράσιν ἶφι μάχεσθαι;
> "King clothed in shamelessness, in love with loot,
> how should a man like you keep the troops in line
> for sapping marches, or for mortal fights?"

But setting the gloating aside, and with it the hubris of this conditional promise to Teucer, just look at those two little words: μετ᾽ ἐμὲ, "after myself". Even in the act of promising something to a fellow warrior, Agamemnon still can't get over himself. (Homer does not stress this singularly stupid qualification by enjambing it, as my translation does. But then conversely, for obvious technical reasons, my translation doesn't manage to enjamb everything that he does enjamb. So I owe him one.)

Thirdly and finally, look ahead from this passage to 8.330: Αἴας δ᾽ οὐκ ἀμέλησε κασιγνήτοιο πεσόντος, "Aias did not neglect his fallen brother" (i.e. Teucer). By this point Teucer's continuing archery-sniping, as ordered by Agamemnon, has felled Hector's comrade and half-brother

Gorgythion, and provoked Hector into returning fire with a rock that hits and wounds Teucer. Yet it is not Agamemnon who tends to the fallen Teucer; it is Aias—Agamemnon has made himself prudently scarce. This is hardly the action of a *megalopsychos*.

As I say, Williams and his teacher Fraenkel take Agamemnon to be far more hero than he is, either in Homer or in Aeschylus, because their view of Aeschylus' play requires them to see Agamemnon as a hero to whom bad things are happening.

However, make these moralistic assumptions *quietly*. For a clear and precise diagnosis and discussion of the assumptions, it will help if there is someone who turns up the volume a bit: someone who gives them a more explicit defence. And there is, namely Martha Nussbaum (*Fragility* pp.33–35):

> No personal guilt of Agamemnon's has led him into this tragic predicament. The expedition was commanded by Zeus (*Ag*.55–62) to avenge the violation of a crime against hospitality… Agamemnon is fighting in a just cause, and a cause that he could not desert without the most serious impiety… Agamemnon's dilemma comes upon him as he is piously executing Zeus's command… If Agamemnon does not fulfil Artemis's condition, everyone, including Iphigeneia, will die. He will also be abandoning the expedition and, therefore, violating the command of Zeus… Both courses involve him in guilt… [up to this point Agamemnon, like Abraham, is] a good and… innocent man.

Small touches on the tiller can add up to send the ship of exegesis way off-course. There seems little or nothing wrong with Nussbaum's saying, for instance, that Agamemnon is not personally to blame for the tragic predicament he finds himself in. Yet cumulatively, the moves she makes here are enough to get her to the conclusion that Agamemnon at Aulis can seriously be compared with Abraham at Mount Moriah. I suppose this conclusion nicely brings us back, via a Kierkegaardian byway, to Hegel. Yet the conclusion, I submit, is *wildly* wrong. How did we get so swiftly onto these rocks?

Part of the problem is that Nussbaum, like Fraenkel and Williams, seems intent (whether consciously or subconsciously, I don't know) on seeing Agamemnon as in a Hegelian dilemma. This leads her like them to overstress the Agamemnon-is-innocent claim. Now it is true that we are given no reason by Aeschylus to think that it is *Agamemnon's fault* that he faces the choice he does face at Aulis, and it is true, as Williams points out at *Shame and Necessity* p.132 (here too following Fraenkel), that Aeschylus suppresses accounts of a precursor-offence on Agamemnon's part that he could have used. Be that as it may, Agamemnon's innocence is very far from being what Aeschylus emphasises. In Aeschylus' own text no one ever insists on Agamemnon's innocence except Agamemnon himself. And anyone in Aeschylus's audience would have been aware of the picture of Agamemnon that derives from Homer and others, as a brutal, overbearing, bullying warlord. Moreover, what we have in the *Agamemnon* up to the point of Agamemnon's crucial deliberating (and self-exculpating) speech, 206–217, is a picture of Agamemnon and Menelaus not as innocents, but as twin and inseparable forces of nature: dogs of war, pitiless eagles, bent irrevocably and remorselessly on a war of vengeance. (See e.g. 108 ff., 122 ff.) And what we have in the rest of the *Agamemnon* is not in any way about Agamemnon as an *innocent*. It is about Agamemnon as a warlord, an agent of terrible destruction—and it is about Agamemnon as so blinded by his own ἄτη that he cannot see what the Watchman, Calchas, Cassandra—and Clytaemestra—can all see: his coming doom.

For Agamemnon's ἄτη see e.g. the Watchman at 34–39:

> And may it be my master, when he comes,
> will clasp this hand with his love-hallowed hand.
> There's more, but I won't say it. The saying goes:
> "My tongue's become where the trampling oxen stand."
> You could ask the house. If this house had a mouth,
> this house would speak. I mean my words just so.
> They're dark to those in the dark: not to those in the know.

Or Calchas at 146–156:

> "And I invoke the healer, 150
> Paian, to persuade her
> to raise no lingering anti-winds
> that pin the fleet in port,
> to demand no second sacrifice,
> lawless, not to feast on,
> cogenerate with blood-feud sets man and wife at ill
> For a god-wrath is lurking there,
> fearful, resilient,
> a homemaker whose smile's a trap
> a child-avenging mind."
> So did Calchas prophesy,
> amid the usual blessings,
> fateful words upon the march,
> to the kings; and still…

Or Clytaemestra in the justly famous speech of 958 ff:

> There is the sea. What sun could burn it up?
> From cold dark depths I'll fetch your bright red stain;
> your life-warm dye will drench your kingly robes…

For Agamemnon as warlord and agent of destruction—and also, by the end of this passage, as doomed to destruction—see e.g. 420 ff.:

Hidden sorrow reveals itself in dreaming, *antistrophe 2* 420
delusion appears as delight in the emptied heart:
delusion, since at first light his wife's seeming
skips from his sleep-sight, unreachably apart.
And the empty ache at each army-family's hearth
is hidden too, behind eyes dried fresh from streaming 430
for the dear-faced husbands whom this war returns
as faceless ash in funerary urns.

A refiner's fire is Ares'; and he makes, *strophe 3*
from the counterpoise of spears in his furnace Troy,
a weeping soot that floats in heavy flakes 440
which, shipped in parcels home, cremates all joy.
Love rocks in anguish over it, commemorates
the fall-, the glory-sign of each dead boy.
Love breathes a question hidden from the State: 450
"He died to get Menelaus back his toy?"
Not even the sign of an urn returns to some:
their conqueror rots enclosed in the land he won.

The people's murmur's heavy with their blame; *antistrophe 3*
what Menelaus has cost them is their curse.
I sense a black night comes. For all these slain 460
sum to a fate-debt the all-seeing gods rehearse;
who pushes Justice aside from his path of gain,
the slow Furies drag him down through luck reversed
into helpless dark. The highest-daring fame
attracts Zeus' jealous lightning; not averts. 470
Enough just to live on, not to draw envy, for me,
neither captor of cities nor captured and slave to be.

Agamemnon is on an irreversible path to inexorable ruin: no image could tell us that more plainly than the purple woven way that Clytaemestra lays out for him on his return to her. (One of the first visual *coups de théâtre* known to us in the history of theatre; and still, perhaps, the greatest of them all.) But if we must speak naïvely of him as a figure who *stands for* something, it is hardly hapless innocence: in the *Agamemnon* there are no innocent characters, except the two women who get killed. He is the sacker of Troy and the rapist and enslaver of Cassandra.

If Agamemnon must stand for any one thing, then what he 'stands for', I propose, is *violation*. And indeed, if there is any one thing that the whole play is about, then violation is what the *Agamemnon* is about. The key contrast that drives the whole action is the contrast so apparent in the chorus from which I have just quoted, the contrast between peace—good rule, security, civilisation, home, family, *philia*—and, well, war. It is the contrast between the well-governed house and the disordered one with which the Watchman begins the play. It is the contrast between everything humans can build, and the nothing that is left when they choose, as Agamemnon does, to tear it all down. The pregnant hare too is a beautifully chosen image of this contrast. Helpless, soft, fugitive, she teems with life—until the eagles, those emblems of death, seize her and disembowel her. If the huntress Artemis is angry it is, apparently, at the unfairness of this contest; and Agamemnon against Iphigeneia too is no fair contest.

The *Agamemnon* is about violation; and it is about Agamemnon as the agent of violation. To see his cause as just and pious, as Fraenkel and Nussbaum and Williams all suggest, is wildly out of line with what Aeschylus' text actually tells us about him. It is not, for instance, true to say with Nussbaum, appealing to *Ag.*55–62, that "the expedition was

commanded by Zeus"[13]; not at any rate if that is meant to suggest that we should picture Agamemnon as someone "piously executing Zeus's command". True, Aeschylus does write (60–62) "Thus mighty Zeus the guest-friend (*xenios*) sent (*pempei*) the sons of Atreus against Paris". But first, this is as consistent with saying that Zeus Xenios explicitly commands Agamemnon and Menelaus to make holy war on Troy as it is with saying that those warlords *invoke Zeus Xenios* as their patron, by which I mean their propaganda pretext, for a war they choose to make because Menelaus has been insulted. The text is fully consistent with either reading; and the first is politically naïve.[14]

And secondly, we should read on:

Thus Zeus almighty sent the sons of Atreus, 60
Zeus guest-protector set them on Paris,
sent in pursuit of a multi-manned woman:
sent with them death-bouts and leaden-limbed strugglings,
sent strength of youths' knees snapped in the dust,
sent with them spear-shafts smashed in the onset,
sent these for Greeks and for Trojans alike.

That's how things stand. The Fates know no escape-clause.
Nor secret sacrifice, extra libation,
nor private gifts of quiet pleading tears 70
can bend their spite, their wrath wears out the years.

the individual and private injury that Menelaus suffers from Paris, and the public and universal calamity whereby he and Agamemnon avenge it.

In the *Agamemnon* the Trojan War is not a just war; it is just a war. Just a *war*, without the moralism, but with everything that war means; which is, above all, injustice. And Agamemnon is not a just warrior; he is just a warrior—a man of blood and havoc, and a violator. The Chorus get this: from one end of the play to the other, it is what they sing about. And we get it too; unless we are taught *not* to get it, by readers of the play who are bent on seeing Agamemnon as a Kierkegaardian or Hegelian hero.

The Chorus do not, it seems to me, share Nussbaum's faithful confidence in the justice of Agamemnon's war, *even if* that war has the patronage of a most powerful divinity behind it. What they see is, first, a war of terrible suffering and destruction, and secondly a war that is πολυάνορος ἀμφὶ γυναικὸς: *all for the sake of one loose woman* (62). For the Chorus throughout the play there is a recurring question about whether the whole war can possibly be worth it at all, given—excuse their misogyny—that it is *only about one girl*: we have already considered line 451, and compare the Chorus at 681–781. The war/peace contrast comes back here in modulated form: as the contrast between

What the first chorus of Aeschylus' play tells us, and tells us quite explicitly, is that one key step—perhaps *the* key step—in the process that makes Agamemnon into a violator is the sacrifice of Iphigeneia. *That* is the crucial point about the narrative of Agamemnon at Aulis: not primarily that he is in a dilemma—though no doubt he is, of a sort—but how he responds to that dilemma; not primarily his self-excusing speech τί τῶνδ' ἄνευ κακῶν—though that is important too—but what comes next. Which is this (Ag. 218–221):

ἐπεὶ δ' ἀνάγκας ἔδυ λέπαδνον
φρενὸς πνέων δυσσεβῆ τροπαίαν
220ἄναγνον ἀνίερον, τόθεν
τὸ παντότολμον φρονεῖν μετέγνω.

Literally: "When he put on the yoke-strap of necessity, breathing[15] an impious, unholy, unsanctified change of mind,

[13] And where Nussbaum gets the notion that if Agamemnon "does not fulfil Artemis's condition, everyone, including Iphigeneia, will die", I have no idea. Aulis (modern Paralia Avlidos) to Argos is about fifty miles. If the army get *really* hungry, they can always just walk home.

[14] And after all, at Ag.125 even the eagles who eat the pregnant hare are 'the senders of the force', *pompous archas.* Should we take this the natural way, as meaning merely "portents that set the expedition on its way"? Or are they too proclaiming a holy war, issuing a command that binds Agamemnon on pain of "the most serious impiety"?

For *Zeus xenios* again, see 362, towards the beginning of the obviously propagandistic and triumphalistic choral ode *W Zeu basileu kai Nyx philia.*

[15] *Pne*-root words for breathing, air, breath, wind are important in the first chorus of the *Agamemnon*: *katapneiei* "breathes inspiration" 105, *antipnoous* "against-blowing" 147, the marvellously onomatopoeic *empaiois tychaisi sympnewn* "blowing together with the fortunes that hit him" 187, *pnoiai* "winds" 192, *phrenos pnewn dyssebe tropaian* "breathing an unholy changefulness of mind" 219. There is also *pausanemou* "wind-stopping" at 214, and *pneontwn meizon e dikaiws* "puffing themselves up more than is just" 376.

then he came to recognise the thinking of all-daring." Or as I have put it in verse:

So with relief he gave it Necessity's name. *strophe 5*
Once necked in his yoke, though, we smelt off him something unclean,
something desanctified, something set free to defile; 220
new look in his face that said *All is permitted for me.*

Agamemnon here *puts on* "the yoke-strap of necessity": he *chooses* it, his putting it on is not something that happens to him, but an *action* that he performs. In Williams' words (S & N p.133):

> [Denys Page] simply misrepresents the text. Aeschylus does not say that Agamemnon submitted to necessity. The word ἔδυ… is a straightforward verb of action, which means (as Page himself elsewhere translates it) "put on", and Agamemnon is said to have put on the harness of necessity as someone puts on armour.

Now there is indeed, as many commentators (e.g. Nussbaum) have seen, something paradoxical about the idea that Agamemnon here should freely choose not to be free. But the paradox is deliberate, and it is Aeschylus's paradox. The point is that *Agamemnon is rationalising*. He is claiming that he *must* do something—kill Iphigeneia—that, in fact, he does not *have* to do at all. As indeed Clytaemestra points out after she has killed him (1415–17), there is something *routine* about his killing of Iphigeneia—as if she were just another lamb[16]—that makes it very far from being a specially forced action. The routine of sacrifice is familiar, except that it is his daughter he now kills; but Agamemnon oversteps the inhibition of that detail with horrifying ease.

"But isn't Agamemnon forced to do it by Calchas' prophecy?" The short answer to that, as every Athenian knew, is that if you don't like a prophet's divine word, it is usually possible either to ignore him, or else to get another. (Another divine word, or another prophet: or indeed both, if necessary.) Prophecy was (and is) a political business, and Aeschylus knew it: nearly all his references to Calchas are loaded with a sinister irony and with sarcastic hints of self-serving priestcraft. (Consider in particular 249, τέχναι δὲ Κάλχαντος οὐκ ἄκραντοι. Calchas is a man of schemes, a *schemer*. "Another way", when he suggests one, is "another *device*", ἄλλο μῆχαρ, 199.)

Agamemnon's choice to follow Calchas' augury at Aulis is just that, a choice. Perhaps Aeschylus intends us to notice the contrast with *Iliad* Book 1, where Calchas again prophesies something difficult for Agamemnon—and Agamemnon simply refuses to comply. Surely it is easier for Agamemnon to do what Calchas says and give up his trophy-slave Briseis, than it is for him to do what Calchas says and kill his own daughter. Yet the Agamemnon who rebuffs the easy command in the *Iliad* obeys the hard command in Aeschylus' play.

Agamemnon, as Aeschylus portrays him, is not *forced* to kill Iphigeneia at all; he rationalises that he is forced to, but he is not. As indeed the Chorus close-to-explicitly say (223–224): βροτοὺς θρασύνει γὰρ αἰσχρόμητιςτάλαινα παρακοπὰ πρωτοπήμων, "shamelessness of thinking makes mortals bold—wretched infatuation, source of primal sufferings".

And all this goes to explain why, once Agamemnon—freely—"puts on necessity's yoke-strap", the *soi-disant* witnesses who are the Chorus in the play immediately see a sinister and frightening change in him. He has stepped over the edge of the moral abyss; he has become someone for whom τὸ παντότολμον φρονεῖν—seeing nothing as unthinkable—has become easy and natural; he has lost all normal moral incapacity.[17] In short, he has made a decisive move from the condition of peace towards the condition of war; which is also the condition of the rapist or the violator.

Both Nussbaum and Williams, it seems to me, seriously misunderstand this change in Agamemnon. I think they misunderstand it because, bluntly, they just misread the text of *Agamemnon* 206–227.

Nussbaum (*Fragility* pp.35–36) is simpler to deal with, because (as Williams in effect remarks, S&N 134) she is too plainly driven simply by the desire to see Agamemnon in terms of the wider schematism of *Fragility*'s Williams-esque anti-utilitarian polemic, as merely eliminating the ought that he does not act on. "Agamemnon seems to have assumed, first, that if he decided right, the action chosen must be right; and second[ly], that if an action is right, it is appropriate to want it, even to be enthusiastic about it" (*Fragility* p.36). Here we are once more in Agamemnon-is-innocent territory, and once more I merely

[16] Comparisons between killings of humans and of animals are indeed, as Nussbaum insists (pp.32 ff.), pervasive in the *Agamemnon*. That does not justify Nussbaum in reading κτήνη πρόσθε τὰ δημιοπληθῆ "the people-plenty of herds before [Troy]" (Ag.129) as meaning that Calchas "predicts only that the army, in laying siege to Troy, will slaughter many herds of cattle before its walls", and erecting an exegetical puzzle on the basis of this reading: "No significant omen merely predicts a beef dinner". Indeed not; which is an excellent reason for not taking Calchas' words Nussbaum's way. When reading poetry, it is a good idea to be able to recognise a metaphor when you see one.

[17] Bernard Williams, "Moral incapacity", WIlliams 1993a.

remark that Aeschylus goes out of his way from one end of his play to the other to make that territory unavailable to us, and to get us to see Agamemnon, instead, as a violator (though certainly also a violator who is himself violated by *becoming* a violator, and who can, for instance, weep at what is happening).

As for Williams: in *Shame and Necessity* (p.134, cp. note 11, pp.208–210) Williams tells us that "it is entirely clear what happens" after the end of Agamemnon's speech at *Agamemnon* 206–217: "the father slaughters his daughter in a state of bloody rage". But this is not only not *entirely* clear; and not only not clear at all; it is not even what happens. Lines 218–227 contain no word that means "bloody", and only one word, παρακοπὰ, that even can mean anything like "rage"—though it can also mean what I translated it as meaning a moment ago, "infatuation". And as we have already seen, what the lines suggest overall is not that Agamemnon is somehow suddenly carried away in a frenzy of bloodlust. Rather—and just as Clytaemestra complains at 1415–17—what happens, perhaps even *clearly* happens, is that Agamemnon—once he has wiped away his tears—quite coolly and calmly proceeds to perform what is a perfectly normal propitiatory sacrifice in every respect except one—that it is the sacrifice of his daughter.

Anyway, what could it mean, psychologically or dramatically, for Agamemnon suddenly to drop into a rage like the one that Williams foists on him? And why would it happen? On Williams' misreading Agamemnon's behaviour simply becomes mystifying, as Williams himself obliquely admits: "This is not a text," he writes (134), "that invites us very far into psychological interpretation". On the contrary, it seems to me, these lines most assuredly do invite us to interpret Agamemnon's experience at the sacrificial altar of Aulis. But Aeschylus invites us to see him, not as suddenly filled with self-induced random rage, but as undergoing, more or less with open eyes, an icy-calm process of corruption.

In this part of the text, the only thing that Aeschylus has anyone say about any mental state anything like rage is that it is *themis* to wish for Iphigeneia's blood *orga(i) periorgô(i)*, "with over-passionate passion" (Ag.215–7; Agamemnon's words). But first, as Williams himself agrees (S&N 209), this does not have to be *Agamemnon*'s passion. With or without a textual conjecture that Williams rejects on the same page (contrast Sommerstein, who accepts it: Loeb *Oresteia* pp.26–27), it is possible to take it to be either the army's (as I translate it myself) or indeed no one's in particular. Saying that a feeling is *themis* is different from saying that anyone in particular has it, or should have it. Secondly, even if it is Agamemnon's own passion that he speaks of, a passion that you need to tell yourself it is *themis* to have does not sound like much of a passion. Certainly a "state of bloody rage" is not something that Agamemnon will be able to whip himself up into, simply by reflecting that it would be *themis* to be in that state.

How else could Williams read rage into this passage, as something that is not merely there, but entirely clearly there? I don't know. Maybe he is led astray by Lloyd-Jones (in *CQ* 1962), who correctly identifies *parakopa* (Ag.223) with *atê,* then translates both by "derangement". But this does not get us to rage either. *Atê* is like English "delusion": it can mean madness, but also blindness or misunderstanding. Cp. *Iliad* 19.91, where Homer's Agamemnon, apologising for his own *atê* in the quarrel with Achilles in Bk.1—which patently wasn't *madness*—makes a folk-etymology with *aatai,* "deceives".

But what this passage shows us, to repeat, is not so much a classic moral dilemma in Hegel's or Kierkegaard's or even William Styron's sense. There is of course a dilemma of a kind before Agamemnon, but it is not Aeschylus' main intention to display an innocent man facing an impossible dilemmatic choice and thereby incurring ineliminable agent-regret. It is to describe, in detail and from the inside, the psychological processes whereby someone becomes capable of extreme and horrifying evil. Maybe Agamemnon does feel ineliminable agent-regret; but given that his regret is about "needing" to sacrifice his daughter in order to keep going his war of pillage, there is an awkwardness about using him as an example of that phenomenon. Maybe Himmler felt ineliminable agent-regret too; we are still likely to see Himmler as an apter example of corruption than of regret. And the same applies to Agamemnon: the most that can be said of him, as an example of agent-regret, is that it just goes to show how corrupted he is, that *this* should be the content of his agent regret.

What Aeschylus shows us is how a man, who is a husband and a father as well as a king and warrior, can be—and very quickly—so taken over by his war-making role as to become the destroyer and enemy of everything that is involved in his family roles. What Aeschylus is showing us, in short, is how a man can become a violator. In this dramatic masterpiece his achievement, as we saw with Shakespeare's Macbeth and Richard III, is to draw us psychologically even into the experience of someone who is in the very throes of being irreversibly and irremediably corrupted.

V

The *Agamemnon* is then another case—and an outstanding one—of the power of narrative art to get us its audience inside all sorts of "views from somewhere": even into the head even of someone seriously evil. And much of the philosophical commentary on it that we have had has simply displayed the failure of ethics, as mostly done, to have anything corresponding to this power; and the persistence of the usual faults of moral philosophy, such as rationalism, impersonality, and moralism, even in those who like Williams and Nussbuam have taken good care to distance their practice of ethics from precisely those faults.

Appendix: Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 104–254

Greek text (Loeb, from Perseus.tufts.edu) with parallel translation by Sophie Grace Chappell.

<table>
<tr><td>κύριός εἰμι θροεῖν ὅδιον κράτος αἴσιον ἀνδρῶν
105ἐκτελέων:

ἔτι γὰρ θεόθεν καταπνεύει
πειθὼ μολπᾶν
ἀλκὰν σύμφυτος αἰών:

ὅπως Ἀχαι-
ῶν δίθρονον κράτος, Ἑλλάδος ἥβας
110ξύμφρονα ταγάν,
πέμπει σὺν δορὶ καὶ χερὶ πράκτορι

θούριος ὄρνις Τευκρίδ᾽ ἐπ᾽ αἶαν,
οἰωνῶν βασιλεὺς βασιλεῦσι νε-
115ῶν ὁ κελαινός, ὅ τ᾽ ἐξόπιν ἀργᾶς,
φανέντες ἴ-
κταρ μελάθρων χερὸς ἐκ δοριπάλτου
παμπρέπτοις ἐν ἕδραισιν,
βοσκόμενοι λαγίναν, ἐρικύμονα φέρματι γένναν,
120βλαβέντα λοισθίων δρόμων

αἴλινον αἴλινον εἰπέ, τὸ δ᾽ εὖ νικάτω</td><td>One thing I can still:
sing of the omen,
parting victory-omen
sent to our war-lords
Though age has grown old with me,
age still breathes divinely,
still sends the song-strength
the wingèd words
Here's how the two-throned
might of Achaia,
captains of Greek cadets
two grown to one end,
were set on the spear’s way,
the hand’s way of mighty deeds,
by an omen—two eagles—
against Troy and its land:
ship-kings shown sky-kings
plain, none could miss them,
right over the palace roof,
one black-tailed and one white:
on the well-omened side
catching a mother-hare
ripping her offspring unborn into sight
We sense the pain to come; say all come right</td></tr>
<tr><td>κεδνὸς δὲ στρατόμαντις ἰδὼν δύο λήμασι δισσοὺς
Ἀτρεΐδας μαχίμους ἐδάη λαγοδαίτας
πομπούς τ᾽ ἀρχάς:
125οὕτω δ᾽ εἶπε τεράζων:

‘χρόνῳ μὲν ἀγρεῖ
Πριάμου πόλιν ἅδε κέλευθος,
πάντα δὲ πύργων
κτήνη πρόσθε τὰ δημιοπληθῆ
130Μοῖρ᾽ ἀλαπάξει πρὸς τὸ βίαιον:

οἷον μή τις ἄγα θεόθεν κνεφά-
σῃ προτυπὲν στόμιον μέγα Τροίας
στρατωθέν.οἴκτῳ γὰρ ἐπί-
135φθονος Ἄρτεμις ἁγνὰ
πτανοῖσιν κυσὶ πατρὸς
αὐτότοκον πρὸ λόχου μογερὰν πτάκα θυομένοισιν
στυγεῖ δὲ δεῖπνον αἰετῶν.’
αἴλινον αἴλινον εἰπέ, τὸ δ᾽ εὖ νικάτω</td><td>Then Calchas diligent,
military diviner,
seeing the Atreids
twinned in their temper,
twinned in their war-love,
cast them as the eagles:
these two generals were the butchers of the hare
“In time this task-force
will take Priam's city,
in time all Troy's people
be herded there like cattle
by its burning towers
to be raped by their fates”—
he looked at the omen, saw this meaning there
“But how to avoid nemesis,
bitter gods' jealousy,
shadow on the army
sent to halter Troy?
Holy Artemis is watching,
she saw Zeus's winged hounds,
hated their butchery:
she pitied the embryos, the helpless shredded hare.”
We sense pain comes; we say well all will fare</td></tr>
</table>

140 ‘τόσον περ εὔφρων, καλά,	“Artemis, so merciful
δρόσοισι λεπτοῖς μαλερῶν λεόντων	to savage lions' little ones,
πάντων τ᾽ ἀγρονόμων φιλομάστοις	sweet to every suckling cub
θηρῶν ὀβρικάλοισι τερπνά,	wandering in the wilds,
τούτων αἴνει ξύμβολα κρᾶναι,	let these portents come to good
	since they fall auspicious-side,
145δεξιὰ μέν, κατάμομφα δὲ φάσματα στρουθῶν	pass over the sense of dread that we feel lurking still
ἰήιον δὲ καλέω Παιᾶνα,	And I invoke the healer,
	Paian, to persuade her
μή τινας ἀντιπνόους Δανα-	to raise no lingering anti-winds
οῖς χρονίας ἐχενῆδας ἀ-	that pin the fleet in port,
150πλοίας τεύξῃ,	to demand no second sacrifice,
σπευδομένα θυσίαν ἑτέραν ἄνομόν τιν᾽, ἄδαιτον	lawless, not to feast on,
	cogenerate with blood-feud
νεικέων τέκτονα σύμφυτον,	sets man and wife at ill
οὐ δεισήνορα. μίμνει γὰρ φοβερὰ παλίνορτος	For a god-wrath is lurking there,
155οἰκονόμος δολία μνάμων μῆνις τεκνόποινος.’	fearful, resilient,
τοιάδε Κάλχας ξὺν μεγάλοις ἀγαθοῖς ἀπέκλαγξεν	a homemaker whose smile's a trap
μόρσιμ᾽ ἀπ᾽ ὀρνίθων ὁδίων οἴκοις βασιλείοις:	a child-avenging mind.”
τοῖς δ᾽ ὁμόφωνον	So did Calchas prophesy,
	amid the usual blessings,
αἴλινον αἴλινον εἰπέ, τὸ δ᾽ εὖ νικάτω	fateful words upon the march,
	to the kings; and still
	we like him sense pain to come, say all go well, not ill
160 Ζεύς, ὅστις ποτ᾽ ἐστίν, εἰ τόδ᾽ αὐ-	Zeus—whoever Zeus may be—
τῷ φίλον κεκλημένῳ,	if “Zeus” is for mortals to sing—
τοῦτό νιν προσεννέπω	by Zeus' name will I call to him,
οὐκ ἔχω προσεικάσαι	seeing not even everything
πάντ᾽ ἐπισταθμώμενος	set in one scale counter-balances him
πλὴν Διός, εἰ τὸ μάταν ἀπὸ φροντίδος ἄχθος	set in the other; to Zeus must I sing
χρὴ βαλεῖν ἐτητύμως	if my false-conceiving mind's to be truly free
	of the empty senseless dread that encompasses me
οὐδ᾽ ὅστις πάροιθεν ἦν μέγας,	Nor whatever *ci-devant*
παμμάχῳ θράσει βρύων,	god broiling in all-warring might—
170οὐδὲ λέξεται πρὶν ὤν:	I will not even mention him
ὃς δ᾽ ἔπειτ᾽ ἔφυ, τρια-	nor his successor slight
κτῆρος οἴχεται τυχών	Zeus's forerunners are no match for him,
Ζῆνα δέ τις προφρόνως ἐπινίκια κλάζων 175τεύξεται φρενῶν τὸ πᾶν:	his arm puts them to flight
	The prudent mind awards Zeus victory:
	wisdom gives Zeus first place in piety
τὸν φρονεῖν βροτοὺς ὁδώ-	For Zeus's law is first in all the world
σαντα, τὸν πάθει μάθος	The law is this: *no wisdom without pain*
θέντα κυρίως ἔχειν	Slow process of the watching soul's unsleep
στάζει δ᾽ ἔν θ᾽ ὕπνῳ πρὸ καρδίας	distils tear-drip of threnody within;
180μνησιπήμων πόνος: καὶ παρ᾽ ἄ-	wanted or not by us, such wisdom's gained;
κοντας ἦλθε σωφρονεῖν	its score, its etch, its scar in us goes deep
δαιμόνων δέ που χάρις βίαιος	The grace of the gods, the bright powers set on high,
σέλμα σεμνὸν ἡμένων	is overpowering, sharp, involuntary
καὶ τόθ᾽ ἡγεμὼν ὁ πρέ-	The admiral sits there with his sails all furled,
185σβυς νεῶν Ἀχαιικῶν,	his ships becalmed. No Calchas bears his blame
μάντιν οὔτινα ψέγων,	Nothing to do but whistle across the still deep,
ἐμπαίοις τύχαισι συμπνέων,	to watch his army watch till they starve thin
εὖτ᾽ ἀπλοίᾳ κεναγγεῖ βαρύ-	So Agamemnon waits on Aulis' plain
νοντ᾽ Ἀχαιικὸς λεώς,	where the treacherous strait’s dark undersurges sweep
190Χαλκίδος πέραν ἔχων παλιρρόχ-	round the pride of Greece's fleet, trapped, stationary,
θοις ἐν Αὐλίδος τόποις:	round a thousand hulls of seasick infantry

πνοαὶ δ᾽ ἀπὸ Στρυμόνος μολοῦσαι	The ice-breath that breathes down from the Balkan north
κακόσχολοι νήστιδες δύσορμοι,	breeds bad idleness, worse settings-forth
βροτῶν ἄλαι, ναῶν τε καὶ	Desertions rot the men, mould rots the sails
95πεισμάτων ἀφειδεῖς,	And still the relentless north's tormenting gales
παλιμμήκη χρόνον τιθεῖσαι	nag and rub the place already raw
τρίβῳ κατέξαινον ἄν-	as Argos' flower's bleached to dead white straw
θος Ἀργείων:	Till Calchas recalls Artemis
ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ πικροῦ	the eagles and the leverets
χείματος ἄλλο μῆχαρ	till he tells the generals *there's another way*
200βριθύτερον πρόμοισιν	His words rush on the Atreids
μάντις ἔκλαγξεν προφέρων	his cure's worse than the weather-curse
Ἄρτεμιν, ὥστε χθόνα βάκ-	they stamp their war-staves, hide wet eyes, howl, pray
τροις ἐπικρούσαντας Ἀτρεί-	
δας δάκρυ μὴ κατασχεῖν:	
205ἄναξ δ᾽ ὁ πρέσβυς τότ᾽ εἶπε φωνῶν:	Silence. Then steps Agamemnon forth,
‘βαρεῖα μὲν κὴρ τὸ μὴ πιθέσθαι,	first of the blood, the elder by his birth
βαρεῖα δ᾽, εἰ τέκνον δαΐ-	“A hard thing this if our obedience fails;
ξω, δόμων ἄγαλμα,	no less hard for a father—for a trail
μιαίνων παρθενοσφάγοισιν	of a daughter’s blood—across the altar poured—
210ῥείθροις πατρῴους χέρας	tracked by my child-red hands for ever more—
πέλας βωμοῦ:	But tell me, what’s the *ill-free* course?
τί τῶνδ᾽ ἄνευ κακῶν,	I can’t turn deserter,
πῶς λιπόναυς γένωμαι	a general double-crossing troops he promised a bounty-day
ξυμμαχίας ἁμαρτών;	If virgin blood will stop the winds
παυσανέμου γὰρ θυσίας	they're bound to want to urge her blood
215παρθενίου θ᾽ αἵματος ὀρ-	May it be well. May it be well. *There is no other way.*”
γᾷ περιόργως ἐπιθυ-	
μεῖν θέμις. εὖ γὰρ εἴη.’	
ἐπεὶ δ᾽ ἀνάγκας ἔδυ λέπαδνον	So with relief he gave it Necessity’s name
φρενὸς πνέων δυσσεβῆ τροπαίαν	Once necked in his yoke, though, we smelt off him something unclean,
220ἄναγνον ἀνίερον, τόθεν	
τὸ παντότολμον φρονεῖν μετέγνω	something desanctified, something set free to defile;
βροτοὺς θρασύνει γὰρ αἰσχρόμητις	new look in his face that said *All is permitted for me*
τάλαινα παρακοπὰ πρωτοπήμων. ἔτλα δ᾽ οὖν	Bad wisdom sets us out of reach of shame,
225θυτὴρ γενέσθαι θυγατρός,	then traps us in the oldest snares of all
γυναικοποίνων πολέμων ἀρωγὰν	So he
καὶ προτέλεια ναῶν	sensed the barriers dissolve that kept him from killing his child,
	from butchering her to steel the Bride-War’s grip;
	he’d sacrifice her to give good speed to his ships
λιτὰς δὲ καὶ κληδόνας πατρῴους	Once trapped she wept, called on her father’s name,
παρ᾽ οὐδὲν αἰῶ τε παρθένειον	as if Iphigeneia’s maidish scream
230ἔθεντο φιλόμαχοι βραβῆς	could move his crew of genocidophiles,
φράσεν δ᾽ ἀόζοις πατὴρ μετ᾽ εὐχὰν	his entourage of death-squads; or move him
δίκαν χιμαίρας ὕπερθε βωμοῦ	He said the prayers, then had them lift her frame,
πέπλοισι περιπετῆ παντὶ θυμῷ προνωπῆ	thin as a goat-kid’s, dress splayed in un-seem,
235λαβεῖν ἀέρδην, στόματός	head lolling shocked, yet still a lovely child
τε καλλιπρῴρου φυλακᾷ κατασχεῖν	A silken cincture gagged her pale fine lips
φθόγγον ἀραῖον οἴκοις,	lest her last words reverse the spell for the ships,
βίᾳ χαλινῶν τ᾽ ἀναύδῳ μένει	lest her last words be a curse on her father's home
κρόκου βαφὰς δ᾽ ἐς πέδον χέουσα	Her saffron satin fell from her, a stream
240ἔβαλλ᾽ ἕκαστον θυτήρ-	of bright cloth flowing to the wet earth, while
ων ἀπ᾽ ὄμματος βέλει	her only weapon left, her dazed eyes’ gleam,
φιλοίκτῳ, πρέπουσά θ᾽ ὡς ἐν γραφαῖς, προσεννέπειν	shard-of-mirror-sharp, stabbed those hearts of stone
θέλουσ᾽, ἐπεὶ πολλάκις	She used to sing for her father’s parties. She now seemed
πατρὸς κατ᾽ ἀνδρῶνας εὐτραπέζους	to fight her gag for one last song: still the child
245ἔμελψεν, ἁγνᾷ δ᾽ ἀταύρωτος αὐδᾷ πατρὸς	too young for sex, little girl on Father’s hip,
φίλου τριτόσπονδον εὔ-	who performed so sweet at the third libation’s sip
ποτμον παιῶνα φίλως ἐτίμα—	

τὰ δ᾽ ἔνθεν οὔτ᾽ εἶδον οὔτ᾽ ἐννέπω:	And then? Unseen unthinkable unknown
τέχναι δὲ Κάλχαντος οὐκ ἄκραντοι	but Calchas does not scheme unenacted schemes
250Δίκα δὲ τοῖς μὲν παθοῦσ-	Justice weights her scales, sets you this trial:
ιν μαθεῖν ἐπιρρέπει:	*no wisdom without pain.* And all you dream,
τὸ μέλλον δ᾽, ἐπεὶ γένοιτ᾽, ἂν κλύοις:	your fragile futureness—best let it go,
πρὸ χαιρέτω:	best wait until you see, not hope unseen
ἴσον δὲ τῷ προστένειν	Clarity comes with time, and it dawns meanwhile
τορὸν γὰρ ἥξει σύνορθρον αὐγαῖς	

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Disclaimer At least some of this essay is classical scholarship. I am not a professional classical scholar, let alone a professional Aeschylus specialist. I am always happy to read more, and to take advice, from those who know more than me, about *what* more I should read. But I have not, as yet, read even one-hundredth of what has been written by the specialists on Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. *Veniam imploro.*

Declarations

Conflict of interest No conflicts of interest.

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