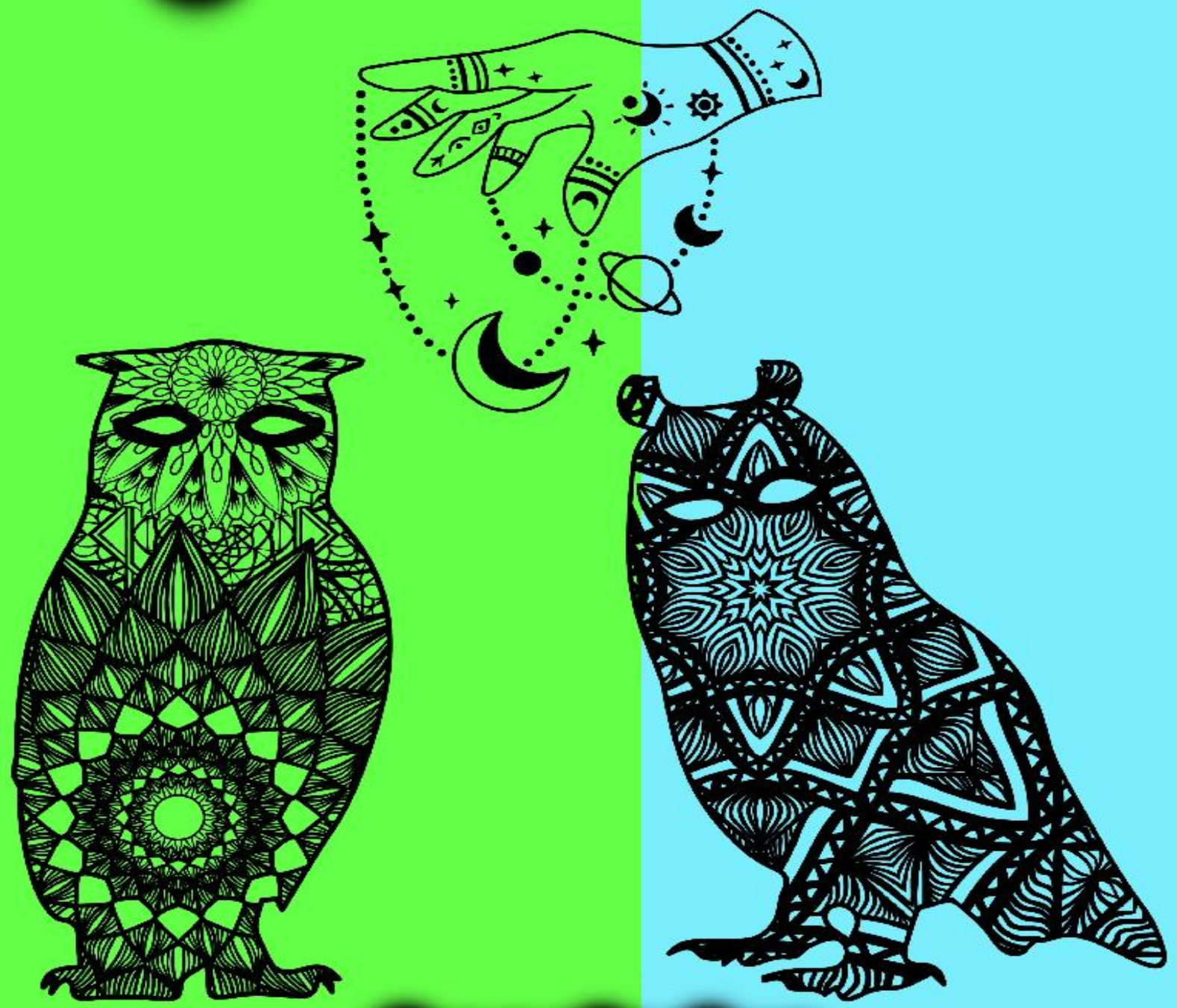
Agamemnon



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Preface

The sense of difficulty, and indeed of awe, with which a scholar approaches the task of translating the *Agamemnon* depends directly on its greatness as poetry. It is in part a matter of diction. The language of Aeschylus is an extraordinary thing, the syntax stiff and simple, the vocabulary obscure, unexpected, and steeped in splendour. Its peculiarities cannot be disregarded, or the translation will be false in character. Yet not Milton himself could produce in English the same great music, and a translator who should strive ambitiously to represent the complex effect of the original would clog his own powers of expression and strain his instrument to breaking. But, apart from the diction in this narrower sense, there is a quality of atmosphere surrounding the *Agamemnon* which seems almost to defy reproduction in another setting, because it depends in large measure on the position of the play in the historical development of Greek literature.

If we accept the view that all Art to some extent, and Greek tragedy in a very special degree, moves in its course of development from Religion to Entertainment, from a Service to a Performance, the *Agamemnon* seems to stand at a critical point where the balance of the two elements is near perfection. The drama has come fully to life, but the religion has not yet faded to a formality. The *Agamemnon* is not, like Aeschylus' *Suppliant Women*, a statue half-hewn out of the rock. It is a real play, showing clash of character and situation, suspense and movement, psychological depth and subtlety. Yet it still remains something more than a play. Its atmosphere is not quite of this world. In the long lyrics especially one feels that the guiding emotion is not the entertainer's wish to thrill an audience, not even perhaps the pure artist's wish to create beauty, but something deeper and more prophetic, a passionate contemplation and expression of truth; though of course the truth in question is something felt rather than stated, something that pervades life, an eternal and majestic rhythm like the movement of the stars.

Thus, if Longinus is right in defining Sublimity as "the ring, or resonance, of greatness of soul," one sees in part where the sublimity of the *Agamemnon* comes from. And it is worth noting that the faults which some critics have found in the play are in harmony with this conclusion. For the sublimity that is rooted in religion tolerates some faults and utterly refuses to tolerate others. The *Agamemnon* may be slow in getting to work; it may be stiff with antique conventions. It never approaches to being cheap or insincere or shallow or sentimental or showy. It never ceases to be genuinely a "criticism of life." The theme which it treats, for instance, is a great theme in its own right; it is not a made-up story ingeniously handled.

The trilogy of the *Oresteia*, of which this play is the first part, centres on the old and everlastingly unsolved problem of

The ancient blinded vengeance and the wrong that amendeth wrong. Every wrong is justly punished; yet, as the world goes, every punishment becomes a new wrong, calling for fresh vengeance. And more; every wrong turns out to be itself rooted in some wrong of old. It is never gratuitous, never untempted by the working of Peitho (Persuasion), never merely wicked. The *Oresteia* first shows the cycle of crime punished by crime which must be repunished, and then seeks for some gleam of escape, some breaking of the endless chain of "evil duty." In the old order of earth and heaven there was no such escape. Each blow called for the return blow and must do so *ad infinitum*. But, according to Aeschylus, there is a new Ruler now in heaven, one who has both sinned and suffered and thereby grown wise. He is Zeus the Third Power, Zeus the Saviour, and his gift to mankind is the ability through suffering to Learn (pp. 7 f.)

At the opening of the *Agamemnon* we find Clytemnestra alienated from her husband and secretly befriended with his ancestral enemy, Aigisthos. The air is heavy and throbbing with hate; hate which is evil but has its due cause. Agamemnon, obeying the prophet Calchas, when the fleet lay storm-bound at Aulis, had given his own daughter, Iphigenîa, as a human sacrifice. And if we ask how a sane man had consented to such an act, we are told of his gradual temptation; the deadly excuse offered by ancient superstition; and above all, the fact that he had already inwardly accepted the great whole of which this horror was a part. At the first outset of his expedition against Troy there had appeared an omen, the bloody sign of two eagles devouring a mother-hare with her unborn young.... The question was thus put to the Kings and their prophet: Did they or did they not accept the sign, and wish to be those Eagles? And they had answered Yes. They would have their vengeance, their full and extreme victory, and were ready to pay the price. The sign once accepted, the prophet recoils from the consequences which, in prophetic vision, he sees following therefrom: but the decision has been taken, and the long tale of cruelty rolls on, culminating in the triumphant sack of Troy, which itself becomes not an assertion of Justice but a whirlwind of godless destruction. And through all these doings of fierce beasts and angry men the unseen Pity has been alive and watching, the Artemis who "abhors the Eagles' feast," the "Apollo or Pan or Zeus" who hears the crying of the robbed vulture; nay, if even the Gods were deaf, the mere "wrong of the dead" at Troy might waken, groping for some retribution upon the "Slayer of Many Men" (pp. 15, 20).

If we ask why men are so blind, seeking their welfare thus through incessant evil, Aeschylus will tell us that the cause lies in the infection of old sin, old cruelty. There is no doubt somewhere a *[Greek: prôtarchos hAtê]*, a "first blind deed of wrong," but in practice every wrong is the result of another. And the Children of Atreus are steeped to the lips in

them. When the prophetess Cassandra, out of her first vague horror at the evil House, begins to grope towards some definite image, first and most haunting comes the sound of the weeping of two little children, murdered long ago, in a feud that was not theirs. From that point, more than any other, the Daemon or Genius of the House—more than its "Luck," a little less than its Guardian Angel—becomes an Alastor or embodied Curse, a "Red Slayer" which cries ever for peace and cleansing, but can seek them only in the same blind way, through vengeance, and, when that fails, then through more vengeance (p. 69). This awful conception of a race intent upon its own wrongs, and blindly groping towards the very terror it is trying to avoid, is typified, as it were, in the Cassandra story. That daughter of Priam was beloved by Apollo, who gave her the power of true prophecy. In some way that we know not, she broke her promise to the God; and, since his gift could not be recalled, he added to it the curse that, while she should always foresee and foretell the truth, none should believe her. The Cassandra scene is a creation beyond praise or criticism. The old scholiast speaks of the "pity and amazement" which it causes. The Elders who talk with her wish to believe, they try to understand, they are really convinced of Cassandra's powers. But the curse is too strong. The special thing which Cassandra tries again and again to say always eludes them, and they can raise no finger to prevent the disaster happening. And when it does happen they are, as they have described themselves, weak and very old, "dreams wandering in the daylight."

The characters of this play seem, in a sense, to arise out of the theme and consequently to have, amid all their dramatic solidity, a further significance which is almost symbolic. Cassandra is, as it were, the incarnation of that knowledge which Herodotus describes as the crown of sorrow, the knowledge which sees and warns and cannot help (Hdt. ix. 16). Agamemnon himself, the King of Kings, triumphant and doomed, is a symbol of pride and the fall of pride. We must not think of him as bad or specially cruel. The watchman loved him (ll. 34 f.), and the lamentations of the Elders over his death have a note of personal affection (pp. 66 ff.). But I suspect that Aeschylus, a believer in the mystic meaning of names, took the name Agamemnon to be a warning that [Greek: Aga mimnei], "the unseen Wrath abides." *Agâ*, of course, is not exactly wrath; it is more like Nemesis, the feeling that something is [Greek: agan], "too much," the condemnation of *Hubris* (pride or overgrowth) and of all things that are in excess. *Agâ* is sometimes called "the jealousy of God," but such a translation is not happy. It is not the jealousy, nor even the indignation, of a personal God, but the profound repudiation and reversal of Hubris which is the very law of the Cosmos. Through all the triumph of the conqueror, this *Agâ* abides.

The greatest and most human character of the whole play is Clytemnestra. She is conceived on the grand Aeschylean scale, a scale