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Aischylos Against War and Savagery
Theater as a window into the world of the Greeks

By E.G. Vallianatos

“Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004.” Edited by Fiona Macintosh, Pantelis Michelakis, Edith Hall, and Oliver Taplin. Oxford University Press, 484 pages, \$ 125

On June 16, 2004, I was in Carnegie Hall in New York. I came at the invitation of Peter Tiboris, conductor of Manhattan Philharmonic, to attend the opera “Agamemnon.” I had not seen Peter since student days at the University of Wisconsin in the early 1970s. Now he was a famous conductor, directing the American premiere of Sergey Taneev’s opera, “Agamemnon.”

Despite the fact this was “Agamemnon” out of 19th century Russia’s “Oresteia,” it was a Greek “Agamemnon” that came through the Russian opera, with Russian singing by the Russian Chamber Chorus of New York and the reading in English of the speeches of the protagonists. Olympia Dukakis, the Greek American actress and opera singer, sang the words of Klytaimnestra, the explosive force in the “Agamemnon” play. Both Sergey Taneyev, 1856-1915, and Peter Tiboris made slight changes to the original text, but they left the integrity of the play intact.

Unfortunately, this had often not been the case with past performances of “Agamemnon,” as is shown in the scholarly book, “Agamemnon in Performance: 458 BC to AD 2004.”

“Agamemnon” is one of the three plays of “Oresteia,” the crowning achievement of Aischylos, who lived from 525 to 456 B.C. He was the proud and noble Athenian son of Eleusis, the sacred polis near Athens. The Persian invasion of Greece shaped his work and life. He fought against the Persians at the battle of Marathon in 490 B.C., and again in 480 B.C. at the battle of Salamis. His epitaph said the longhaired Persians would remember him, but made no mention of his plays. Aischylos almost single-handedly created the tragic theater of Athens. He wrote more than 90 plays, but only seven survived to our times.

Aischylos staged his “Oresteia” in 458 B.C. during the festival of Dionysos, the patron god of theater, freedom, wine, and rural life in Greece. Theater in Athens was a political school where citizens went to see and hear, out in the open, in the sunlight of the day, the reenactment of stories about the origins of Greek culture. Aischylos’ “Agamemnon” was Homeros’ Agamemnon, king of the rich-in-gold Mycenae and leading general in the Greeks’ war against Troy. Homeros’ “Iliad,” the world’s greatest epic poem, is about the Trojan War.

The “Iliad” was the model for Aischylos’ “Agamemnon,” which is why its message was dear to the Greeks who loved their country and knew their early history. Aischylos appealed to Greek patriotism. Aischylos urged the Greeks to fight for freedom, never to submit to slavery, believing it was better to die on your feet than live on your knees.

Agamemnon led the Greek armies to Troy to avenge the abduction of Helen by Paris, prince of Ilion or Troy. Helen was the daughter of Zeus and wife of the king of Sparte, Menelaos.

Agamemnon and Menelaos were children of Atreus, king of Argos. Atreus offended the gods by feasting his brother, Thyestes, with the flesh of his own children. Only Aigisthos, son of Thyestes, survived the massacre of his brothers by Atreus.

Agamemnon and Menelaos came out of a murderous family, a legacy that followed Agamemnon to the end. When he returned home after the end of the Trojan War, the citizens of Argos greeted him as a hero. However his wife Klytaimnestra and her lover Aigisthos murdered him to avenge Agamemnon’s sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia. Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter to appease goddess Artemis to allow the blowing of the winds for sailing of the Greek fleet to Troy.

The Trojan princess Cassandra, whom Agamemnon brought to Argos, sees through Klytaimnestra’s revenge. She was a priestess of Apollon and shared his insight into human affairs. She warned the elders of Argos the house breathed with murder. She said that men lust for power; they never have enough.

The message of Aischylos' "Agamemnon" / "Oresteia" is against war and savagery, especially among Greeks, allowing the healing and civilizing power of Greek civilization to do its work. This is especially relevant at this time of war and rising savagery.

The fate of "Agamemnon," and, therefore, the reception of Greek culture in the West, is documented in the illustrated and scholarly book, "Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004." The 39 images of this book relate to the theatrical performance of "Agamemnon." They range from ancient art depicting Agamemnon, Klytaimnestra, and Cassandra to posters and pictures from the performance of the play since the Renaissance.

Two-thirds of the 19 scholars who wrote this book are classicists. The rest have positions in departments of English, comparative literature, and theater studies. They include the editors: Pandelis Michelakis, who teaches classics at the University of Bristol; Edith Hall, professor of Greek cultural history at the University of Durham; Fiona Macintosh, senior research fellow at the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama and a faculty of St Cross College, Oxford; and Oliver Taplin, tutorial fellow at Magdalen College, Oxford. Twelve of the contributors are British. The others are French, Italian, Swiss, Russian, Australian and American.

Of the 19 chapters, one is a general overview of the performance of "Agamemnon," four examine the early history of its transmission, four look at the play in Germany and England; the Australian scholar writing the German chapter; four examine the problem of translating Aischylos, and six investigate the international fate of the play, especially in France, United States, Russia, and Switzerland. Because it is a product of a scholarly conference, the book is technical and somewhat difficult to read. The diversity of the contributors makes for a fascinating reading, however.

At the end of the book there's an extremely useful chronology of the "Agamemnon" / "Oresteia," referencing more than 750 works inspired largely by Aischylos. The data from this chronology is the beginning of a glance at the reception of Aischylos in different countries. Unfortunately, the author of this chronology, Amanda Wrigley, describes Greek Anatolia in 100-50 B.C. as Turkey, a country that did not exist even as Ottoman Empire for more than a millennium after that date.

From the chronology at the end of the book, I noted that “Agamemnon” returned to Greece after some 2,300 years of absence. Its first performance took place in Athens in November 1903. In the next 100 years the Greeks staged “Agamemnon” / the “Oresteia” another 42 times. Americans saw the play for the first time in 1895. From 1895 to 2004 “Agamemnon” or the “Oresteia” played in American theaters 217 times.

The chronology and the book are very useful in that they summarize when and how the West treated a masterpiece of Greek literature, a play that has been central in the intellectual life of the West, including its theatrical canon, for at least the last two centuries.

Pandelis Michelakis cites the account of exiled Emperor Napoleon reading “Agamemnon” to his faithful colleagues at St. Helena, in the South Atlantic in November 1816. Here was one of Europe’s greatest leaders going to Aischylos for consolation, perhaps reflecting his fall from power and seeking inspiration from the tragic fate of the Greek king Agamemnon.

“Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004” gives dozens of examples of the travail of “Agamemnon” in the West. The book shows the fleeting, often careless, handling of Aischylos’ “Agamemnon,” a seminal work presented and studied in the theaters, operas, and classrooms of the West since the text of Aischylos’ play appeared in print in the first half of the sixteenth century. In fact, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, the “Agamemnon” the Europeans misused -- calling the play “cold and atrocious,” “primitive, obscure, unbalanced, unnatural” -- was Seneca’s “Agamemnon,” not Aischylos’ (Chapters 3-4, 6). Seneca was influenced by Aischylos, but lived 600 years after Aischylos, during the first century of the Roman Empire.

During the last two centuries Westerners adapted Aischylos’ “Oresteia” to reflect their own unique concerns. They searched for their origins, erroneously thinking they were related to the Greeks (Chapters 6-16). The British, particularly in the 19th century, were obsessed with “origins and the evolutionary process.” And because the “Oresteia” evolved from bad to good, it received a favorable reception in Victorian England (Chapter 8).

American producers also tried to “explore” their neuroses of gender, gender conflict and identity through “Agamemnon.” They often did radical surgery to the Greek text in order to highlight gender conflict or to make

Klytaimnestra even more prominent than she is in the original play or to stress her “complexity or androgyny.”

The adaptations during the Vietnam War highlighted the violence of war. And the coming of the millennium, with all the anxieties of turning to a new century, sparked performances of “Agamemnon” that addressed hidden fears, including the dangers of advanced technology. “Oresteia” became the play of choice after the Moslem attack against the United States on September 11, 2001. Justice and revenge became the theme of the 2002 performance of “Oresteia” at Baylor University (chapter 17).

According to Pandelis Michelakis, Klytaimnestra’s killing of Agamemnon “has haunted the Western imagination’s pursuit of its past and identity.” But, in my opinion, behind these blurred visions of Greekness, Westerners are telling themselves they are superior to the Greeks, mocking them for not being “modern” enough (Chapter 6). With some exceptions, they exploited “Agamemnon” to test, attack, or support their own political or philosophical problems, rarely to learn from the Greek tradition.

Michelakis summarized the love and hate relationship between the people of the West and the Greeks, nay, the schizophrenic attitude of Westerners towards the Greeks. “Agamemnon,” he says, “has been seen variously as a paradigm of pre-modern Western culture, a mirror of modernity, and a vision of postmodernity. It has served as a reflection on the appeal, but also on the disintegration and reconstitution, of some of the most central tenets of modernity such as the ideals of progress, reason, and rationality.”

Chapters 1 and 12 describe the outstanding performance of “Agamemnon” in the Greek Theater of Syracuse in 1914. With that rare exception in the appreciation of the Greek vision and patriotism of Aischylos, the performance of “Agamemnon” became another piece for technical virtuosity or entertainment in the West.

Lorna Hardwick, a British expert on the reception of classical texts, describes this decline in cultural standards as the “performative slide,” where the translation effort has little to do with respecting the meaning of the original. Rather, the strategy of the producer of “Agamemnon” is governed by “performability” and “speakability.” That is, the translation becomes “adaptation” or “version” of the original. For example, the British producer

David Stuttard made an effort to Christianize Aischylos in his production of “Agamemnon” (Chapter 11).

There’s little doubt, therefore, the way the difficult Greek text has been translated is one of the greatest reasons why Westerners are still confused with the Greeks in general and Aischylos in particular (Chapter 11). According to Chapters 1 and 10, the first English and French translations of “Agamemnon” took place in the 1770s. Those and subsequent translations of “Agamemnon” tried to “update and modernize” Aischylos’ text and, by that hubris, they create a translation sometimes alien to the meaning and power of the original.

To conclude, I believe that European and American producers have been manipulating “Agamemnon” at will, now supporting this or that academic fad, or making a statement against violence or war. For example, according to the book’s chronology, there was a rush to “Agamemnon” in the United States after the Islamic attack on September 11, 2001, “Agamemnon” / the “Oresteia” being staged 33 times between September 2001 and September 2004.

Nevertheless, “Agamemnon” remains popular in the West. The play reflects the pale image of the illusions we have about our importance. Aischylos said that the fragility of culture is what breaks the heart. And, at a time of wars between civilizations, his message ought to be heeded.

I believe that reading “Agamemnon in Performance” is indispensable. It is a technically accurate and somber assessment of the efforts of the West, not always successful or artful, to understand the Greeks.

“Agamemnon in Performance” is a controversial, scholarly, difficult, but useful book.

E. G. Vallianatos is the author of “The Passion of the Greeks: Christianity and the Rape of the Hellenes” (Clock and Rose Press, 2006).