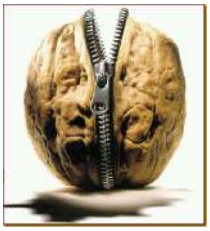

Agamemnon: In A Nutshell

Agamemnon is the first play in a trilogy of tragedies by Aeschylus entitled the *Oresteia*. (The second two parts are called *Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides*.) When we say it is part of a trilogy, we don't mean like nowadays, when some blockbuster movie makes a ton of money, prompting studio executives to crank out a couple of sequels. In the heyday of Greek tragedy, all three parts of a trilogy were performed back-to-back…to-back, on a single day. Sometimes, these would be followed by a fourth play, called a satyr play, which would provide a goofy contrast. Each series of plays would usually be linked by some overarching story and set of themes; the *Oresteia*, which talks about a cycle of revenge within three generations of a single family, is no exception.

The *Oresteia* was first performed in Athens at the Festival of the god Dionysus in 458 B.C. At this festival, tragedies were always performed as part of a contest pitting poet against poet; you'll be pleased to know that, with the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus took home first-place.

So, that trophy must have meant Aeschylus was set for life, right? Well, yes, but Aeschylus was already a very established playwright, and an old man, by the time he won this victory. Aeschylus was born around 525 B.C. in Eleusis, a small town not far from Athens. Eleusis was considered part of Athenian territory, and so Aeschylus was born an Athenian citizen; his family came from the nobility. According to legend, when Aeschylus was a young man, he worked in a vineyard. One day, when he dosed off, the god Dionysus appeared to him in a dream and said, "Hey, Aeschylus! You should become a writer of tragedies." Then Aeschylus supposedly woke up and said, "Word." We at Shmoop can't vouch for this story, but we do know that Aeschylus began writing plays in the 490s B.C.

The guy was no shrinking violet, however, and when the Persians made war on the Greeks, Aeschylus fought alongside his fellow Athenians at the battle of Marathon. When the Persians invaded Greece a second time ten years later, Aeschylus fought again, this time participating in the sea battle at Salamis, a decisive victory for the Greeks. According to one ancient source, Aeschylus was so proud of defending his country that his epitaph (which he wrote himself, of course) made no mention of his career as a playwright, instead boasting of his courage in battle against the Persians.

Aeschylus's epitaph makes a great story, but, at the time of his death, the guy's prowess as a writer of tragedies probably went without saying. In between those two battles against the Persians, Aeschylus won the annual tragedy contest for the first time in 484 B.C. He was top of the heap for a good time after that, in part because he completely revolutionized his art form. According to Aristotle, before Aeschylus came along, tragedies only featured one actor and a chorus; Aeschylus was the first person to add a second actor. Thus, you could say that Aeschylus invented dramatic dialogue, making him the originator of all subsequent theater, movies, and TV. Not too shabby.

But then, in 468, Aeschylus was given a run for his money by a young upstart named Sophocles, who actually won first prize in his first year competing. Two millennia before the epic battle between the Gillette Mach 3, Schick Quattro, and Gillette Fusion lines of safety razors, Sophocles soon unveiled his new secret weapon: a THIRD ACTOR. (Whoa!) Aeschylus knew a good thing when he

saw it, though, and in no time he was working three-actor scenes into his own tragedies, including those of the *Oresteia*. Aeschylus's trick was that he would keep the third actor silent for long periods of time, making him (all Greek actors were male) speak only at climactic moments. The character of Cassandra in *Agamemnon* fits this pattern.

Written near the end of his life, and incorporating his own innovations and those of Sophocles, *Agamemnon* and the rest of the *Oresteia* make up Aeschylus's greatest achievement. It is no coincidence that these plays were revived and re-performed after Aeschylus's death, a rare honor in ancient Athens. Fortunately for us, they continue to be read and performed today.

Why Should I Care?

What is it about scary movies that makes them irresistible? Why do we enjoy that feeling of slowly increasing tension, like a knot in the pit of our stomach? What is it about the sudden jolt, when the killer finally appears, that keeps us coming back for more? If you don't know, that's OK: we don't either. But we all know the feeling, and that's why we think you're going to enjoy Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, the original horror movie, in which the tension doesn't let up until the final terrifying conclusion. (Also, like a typical modern horror movie, the ending leaves the door open for a sequel.) But here's the thing. Instead of focusing on the fate of a bunch of teenagers holed up in a cottage in the woods, *Agamemnon* tells the story of a great and powerful man, brought low by a combination of fate and his own evil deeds. Because the killer is also morally ambiguous, Aeschylus's play actually uses its terrifying elements to explore profound themes about Fate and Free Will, the human capacity to learn, and, above all the nature of Justice.