Artemis and a massacre at the Tree of Life

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For example:

Artemis and a massacre at the Tree of Life

November 1, 2018  By Gregory Nagy

2018.11.01 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. On October 27, 2018, eleven men and women were killed, and more were injured, at the Tree of Life Synagogue in the city of Pittsburgh. It was widely reported about the massacre that the man who had opened fire on his victims was at the same time shouting his hatred for Jews, and that this hate was fueled by anger over the help offered by members of Tree of Life to fellow humans—in this case, to those suffering from the misery of dispossession. It was also widely reported that the words disseminated on "social media platforms" by the indicted shooter showed his anger and hatred toward immigrants and, by extension, toward those who tried to help them. What troubles me deeply, and I am hardly alone, is that these words of anger and hatred match closely the words of politicians who incite anger and hatred. What troubles me even more deeply, however, is that some public thinkers will try to rationalize such incitement by claiming that all politicians, "on both sides," incite anger and hatred. I simply cannot live with myself if I do not speak up, right now, against this kind of rationalization. In speaking up, however, I will use words that are not mine: instead, they come from the ancient world of Greek civilization. Resounding in my heart are words crafted by the Athenian poet Aeschylus in conveying the essence of Artemis, the goddess who helps the helpless.

§1. The time is early spring, 458 BCE. The place is Athens. The occasion is the Festival of Dionysus, god of theater. The drama is the Agamemnon, composed and directed by Aeschylus. State Poet of Athens. In modern editions of the drama, the relevant words about the goddess Artemis can be found in the context of lines 104–159 as originally sung and danced by an ensemble known in Greek as the khoros or 'chorus'. In these lines, we read that Artemis is angry, very angry, at an act of evil. And she hates evil. She viscerally hates it. The goddess is angry that Agamemnon the king will kill his own daughter, Iphigeneia, by performing a perverted human sacrifice. And she hates this act of killing.

§2. Here my working translation of lines 104–159:
κόριος εὖ θραύζει οἱ δαίμονες τόνος αὐλίν τοιχών ἔτει τηθὲν καταπείνει. Εἰ γὰρ θεόθεν καταπείνει, η.pyplot. 

 Greeks had never been afraid of [a man] who is a genuinely good.

 motion, will capture the city of Priam as its prey, and, at the ground level of that city's spoken, speaking the language of omens already underway, [they were the same,] and this is the way [she = the goddess Artemis] is full of good intentions [euphrōn], the beautiful [kalē] one, toward the tender cubs of vicious lions, and though she takes delight in an epiphany near the palace, on the right hand—the kind that naturally creates quarrel after quarrel, resulting in vengeance, and the kind that shows no fear of any man [who is a house] hand that holds the spear. They [had come down from the air and] were roosting in a most

 The wise seer [mantis] of the army, seeing that the two warlike sons of Atreus were twins in character, the decoys of the army and [they were the same,] and this is the way [houtō] he spoke, speaking the language of omens [teraein]: "In due time this expedition, set in motion, will capture the city of Priam as its prey, and, at the ground level of that city's towered walls, all the plentiful herbs of the community [οἱ διδυμοί] will be ravaged most violently by fate [Μοῖρα]. The only thing to guard against is this: may it not happen that some resentment [agá] sent by the gods may cloud over and ruin the mighty bit forged for Troy's mouth by the army. I say this because she, in her pity, is angry. I mean, holy [hagná] Artemis. She is angry [ἀξιόμαχος] at the winged hunting dogs of her father [Zeus], for they are sacrificing [thuein] a miserable frightened thing, together with her offspring that were ready to be born, before she has brought them forth. She [Artemis] has a loathing for the feast of the eagles."

 Sing the song of lament for Linus, for Linus sing it, but let the victory belong to whatever is genuinely good. Then the wise seer [mantis] of the army, seeing that the two warlike sons of Atreus were twins in character, the decoys of the army and [they were the same,] and this is the way [houtō] he spoke, speaking the language of omens [teraein]: "In due time this expedition, set in motion, will capture the city of Priam as its prey, and, at the ground level of that city's towered walls, all the plentiful herbs of the community [οἱ διδυμοί] will be ravaged most violently by fate [Μοῖρα]. The only thing to guard against is this: may it not happen that some resentment [agá] sent by the gods may cloud over and ruin the mighty bit forged for Troy's mouth by the army. I say this because she, in her pity, is angry. I mean, holy [hagná] Artemis. She is angry [ἀξιόμαχος] at the winged hunting dogs of her father [Zeus], for they are sacrificing [thuein] a miserable frightened thing, together with her offspring that were ready to be born, before she has brought them forth. She [Artemis] has a loathing for the feast of the eagles."

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husband]. I say this because there is something that has stayed behind here at home: it is something terrifying, which keeps coming back again and again. It is a treacherous keeper of the household. It is an anger [mēnis] that remembers, and it comes with punishment for whatever happened to a child. Such dire things did Kalkhas proclaim, speaking the language of omens. But the omens, signaled by the birds seen during the expedition, came also with big benefits for the palaces of the kings. I connect what is sounded out in these omens with what I say:

Sing the song of lament for Linus, for Linus sing it, but let victory belong to whatever is genuinely good.

Aeschylus Agamemnon 104–159

§3. Some interpreters have been tempted to think that Artemis here condones the killing of Iphigeneia by Agamemnon, since this human sacrifice will be the act that prompts the goddess, who controls the winds, to allow these winds to propel the armada of Agamemnon to sail off to Troy. But this line of thinking is driven by the assumption that the wish of Agamemnon to sail to Troy was a good one. The saying applies here: be careful what you wish for. As it turns out, the wish of the king to sail with his Achaeans to Troy was a bad one, since the extreme cruelty inflicted by his Achaeans on the helpless victims who survived the war after the capture of Troy would become a future evil—matching the past evil, which was the extreme cruelty of killing an earlier helpless victim, Iphigeneia. The future evil of wanton cruelty at Troy is latent, but the past evil, the killing of Iphigeneia, is already overt. And the anger of Artemis is then transformed into the anger of Clytemnestra, mother of Iphigeneia and wife of Agamemnon. This transformed anger will result ultimately in the violent death of Agamemnon himself after he comes back home from Troy.

§4. In H24H16§14–25, I interpret some relevant details about the winds that ultimately conducted Agamemnon to Troy. If these winds, controlled by the goddess Artemis, had already been blowing in the direction of a sea voyage to Troy, then there would have been no need to sacrifice Iphigeneia in the first place. But Agamemnon wished for the winds to blow in the direction of Troy, even at the cost of his daughter's life. And so Artemis, as the goddess who controls the winds, let it happen. But she was angry about it, and that anger was all part of the cosmic scheme that ultimately destroyed Agamemnon.

§5. As we see in lines 104–159, those who do evil against the helpless will incur the anger of Artemis, and such evil is symbolized in a vision of predatory birds devouring a pregnant rabbit. The goddess hates such cruelty because, as a divinity, she is the patroness of the helpless. The seer who interprets this vision understands that Artemis is angry and that she hates the meaning of what she sees. But the seer himself does not yet fully understand that Agamemnon and Menelaos, the predatory leaders of the Achaeans, will do evil after they capture Troy.

§6. It is morally just for the divinity to be angry, to hate. That is because she is angry at evil, and she hates evil. In support of this formulation, beyond what I have formulated here, I cite two essential essays: one by Gloria Ferrari Pinney (Ferrari 1997, especially pp. 27–28) and the other by Casey Dué Hackney (Dué 2005, especially pp. 8–13).

§7. So, if Artemis can be seen as a model for humans, then surely humans too may be allowed to be angry at evil and to hate evil. For a human to be angry and to hate is evil only if the human who is angry and who hates is evil as well. That is why I speak out against an attitude of moral indifference. It is morally indefensible to hold back on condemning anger and hatred that is driven by evil. It is mere rationalization to say that "the other side" can be angry and can hate as well. What matters is really this: which side is evil and which side is not?

Bibliography


Tags: Aeschylus, Agamemnon, Artemis, chorus, Clytemnestra, Iphigeneia, khoros, Tree of Life, Trojan War

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