



Artemis and a massacre at the Tree of Life

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Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone

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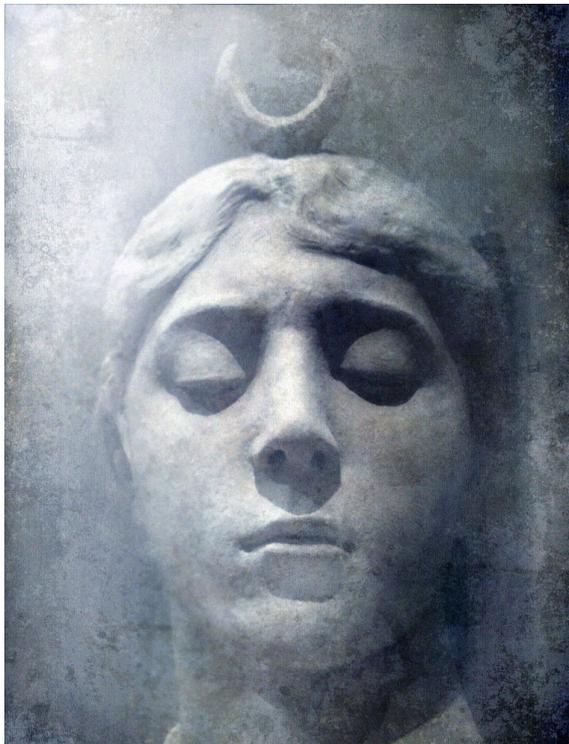
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Artemis and a massacre at the Tree of Life

November 1, 2018 By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy, H24H](#)Comments off [Edit This](#)

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.



Bust of Diana/Artemis (ca. 1882). Jean-Joseph-Alexandre Falguière (1831–1900). [Image](#) via Flickr under a [CC BY-NC 2.0](#) license.

§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 *choros* 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:

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Editor

Keith Stone
kstone@chs.harvard.edu

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|104 κύριός εἰμι θροεῖν ὄδιον κράτος αἴσιον ἀνδρῶν |105–106 ἔκτελέων· ἔτι γὰρ θεόθεν
 καταπνεύει |107 πειθῶ, μολπᾶν ἀλκάν, σύμφυτος αἰῶν·
 |108–109 ὄπως Ἀχαιῶν διθρονον κράτος, Ἑλλάδος ἦβας |110 ξύμφρονα ταγάν, |111 πέμπει
 σὺν δορὶ καὶ χερὶ πράκτορι |112–113 θούριος ὄρνις Τευκρίδ’ ἐπ’ αἶαν, |114–115 οἰωνῶν
 βασιλεὺς βασιλεῦσι νεῶν ὁ κελαινός, ὃ τ’ ἐξόπιν ἀργάς, |116–117 φανέντες ἵκταρ μελόθρων
 χερὸς ἐκ δοριπάλτου |118 παμπρέπτοις ἐν ἔδραιοι, |119 βοσκόμενοι λαγίνας ἐρικύμονα
 φέρματι γένναν, |120 βλαβέντα λοισθίων δρόμων. |121 αἴλινον αἴλινον εἶπέ, τὸ δ’ εὖ νικάτω.
 |122 κεδνός δὲ στρατόματις ἰδὼν δύο λήμασι δισοῦς
 |123–124 Ἀτρεΐδας μαχίμους ἐδάη λαγοδαίτας |125 πομπούς τ’ ἀρχάς· οὕτω δ’ εἶπε τεράζων·
 |126–127 “χρόνῳ μὲν ἀργεῖ Πριάμου πόλιν ἄδε κέλευθος, |128 πάντα δὲ πύργων |129 κτήνη
 πρόσθε τὰ δημοιπληθῆ |130 Μοῖρα λαπάξει πρὸς τὸ βίαιον· |131–133 οἶον μὴ τις ἄγα θεόθεν
 κνεφάση προτυπὲν στόμιον μέγα Τροίας |134 στρατωθέν. οἴκτῳ γὰρ ἐπίφθονος Ἄρτεμις
 ἀγνὰ |135 πτανοῖσιν κυσὶ πατρὸς |136–137 αὐτότοκον πρὸ λόχου μογερὰν πτάκα θυομένοισι·
 |138 στυγεῖ δὲ δεῖπνον αἰετῶν.” |139 αἴλινον αἴλινον εἶπέ, τὸ δ’ εὖ νικάτω. |140 “τόσον περ
 εὐφρων ἂ καλὰ, |141 δρόσοις ἀέπτοις μαλερῶν λεόντων |142 πάντων τ’ ἀγρονόμων
 φιλομάστοις |143 θηρῶν ὀβρικάλοισι τερπνὰ, |144 τούτων αἰτεῖ ξύμβολα κρᾶναι, |145 δεξιὰ
 μὲν κατάμομφα δὲ φάσματα. |146 ἰήιον δὲ καλέω Παιᾶνα, |147–149 μὴ τινας ἀντιπνόους
 Δαναοῖς χρονίας ἐχενῆδας ἀπλοίας |150–152 τεύξη σπευδομένα θυσίαν ἐτέραν, ἄνομόν τιν’,
 ἄδαιον,
 |153–154 νεικέων τέκτονα σύμφυτον, οὐ δεισήνορα. μῖμνε γὰρ φοβερὰ παλινότορος
 |155 οἰκονόμος δολία μνάμων μῆνις τεκνόποιος.” |156 τοιάδε Κάλχας ξὺν μεγάλοις ἀγαθοῖς
 ἀπέκλαγεν |157 μόρσιμ’ ἀπ’ ὀρνίθων ὀδίων οἴκοις βασιλείοις· |158 τοῖς δ’ ὁμόφωνον
 |159 αἴλινον αἴλινον εἶπέ, τὸ δ’ εὖ νικάτω.

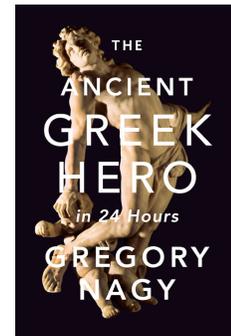
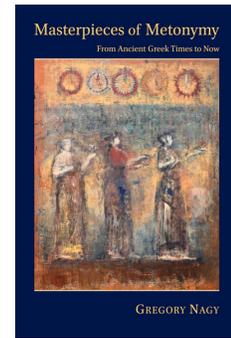
|104 I am authorized [kurios] to narrate the power [kratos] of men to set in motion an
 expedition. It is a predestined power, belonging to men |105 who are granted control
 [telos]. This [authority of mine to narrate] is because the life force, still vital within me, is
 taking its breath from the inspiration of the gods to give me the ability to make people
 believe, which is the strength of singing and dancing. It is all about the twin-throned power
 [kratos] of the Achaeans, |110 how this single-minded pair, in charge of all the young men
 of Hellas, was sent off, with spear and with avenging hand holding the spear. They were
 sent off against the land of the Teukroi, [Troy,] by an onrushing bird omen, and the omen
 was the king of birds—[two] birds appearing to the [two] kings of the ships. |115 One of
 them was black all over, while the other one was black, too, but it was white at the other
 end. They appeared [phainesthai] [in an epiphany] near the palace, on the right hand—the
 hand that holds the spear. They [had come down from the air and] were roosting in a most
 visible space, for all to see. And they were devouring a rabbit that was bursting with the
 vitality of offspring ready to be born. |120 She was caught in the moment of her very last
 effort to run away.

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, recognized the devourers of the rabbit and |125 the leaders of the
 expedition already underway, [that they were the same,] and this is the way [houtō] he
 spoke, speaking the language of omens [terazein]: “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 herds of the community |130 will be ravaged most violently
 by fate [Moirā]. The only thing to guard against is this: may it not happen that some
 resentment [agā] 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
 [hagnā] Artemis. She is angry |135 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 victory belong to whatever is
 genuinely good.

|140 “Though she [= the goddess Artemis] is full of good intentions [euphrōn], the
 beautiful [kalā] one, toward the tender cubs of vicious lions, and though she takes delight
 in the breast-loving young of all wild animals that roam the fields, she now demands that
 the symbols [sumbola] of these things be brought to fulfillment [krainein], I mean, the
 epiphanies [phasmata], |145 which are auspicious in a right-handed kind of way even if
 they are reprehensible. And I call upon Paeon, the healer, praying that she [Artemis] will
 not stop the sailing of ships, holding them back for a long time |150 by causing the winds
 to blow in the opposite direction for the Danaans [Achaeans]. She [Artemis] is urging a
 sacrifice of another kind, [a sinister one,] the kind that knows no law [nomos], the kind
 that is unsuited for feasting [dais] [on meat], the kind that naturally creates quarrel after
 quarrel, resulting in vengeance, and the kind that shows no fear of any man [who is a



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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. |¹⁵⁵ 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?

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