

CHAPTER 15

THE HOUSE OF ATREUS: AESCHYLUS'S ORESTEIA

MAIN POINTS

1. Aeschylus's Oresteia, the only surviving Greek trilogy, examines the courses and consequences of the murder of Agamemnon by his wife, Clytemnestra, and the subsequent dilemma facing their son Orestes.
2. Orestes affords the gods an opportunity to redefine the natures of justice and divinity.
3. The evolutionary change in the human and divine spheres is Aeschylus's main concern; this change will unite opposites.
4. As in the Prometheus trilogy, Aeschylus explores the Greek belief that the gods are not unchangeable but, instead, grow into ethical maturity with the passing of time.
5. The Oresteia shows the influence of human society on Zeus's moral evolution.
6. In the third part (the Eumenides), the Furies are transformed into protectors; thus a moral revolution has taken place, shifting from personal vendetta to the institution of the court of law.
7. Aeschylus gives his trilogy epic scope in time and place. The first play, the Agamemnon, opens in Argos shortly before Agamemnon's return from Troy. The second play, the Libation-Bearers, takes place after Orestes has returned from exile several years later. The third play, the Eumenides, features Orestes seeking purification at Delphi.
8. From Argos to Athens, the theme shifts from vengeance to justice and ethics; the climax is the transformation of the Furies into the Kindly Ones (Eumenides).
9. Aeschylus also created a satyr play based on an episode in the Odyssey: Menelaus's encounter with Proteus.
10. The chorus of the Agamemnon is composed of older citizens of Argos, reduced to onlookers, even when the Trojan princess Cassandra describes her visions of Agamemnon's impending murder.
11. The chorus of the Libation-Bearers are captive Trojan women honoring the slain Agamemnon and hating his queen.
12. The chorus of the Eumenides are the Furies, half-sisters of Aphrodite, ancient chthonic powers opposing the ouranic deities (sky-gods) of Olympus. The Furies punish crimes against blood kin.
13. The father of Agamemnon and Menelaus, Atreus, inherits a proclivity toward evil from his ancestor Tantalus, serving his son's dismembered body as food for the gods; the act is repeated by Atreus in a feud with his brother Thyestes.
14. Before leaving Argos for Troy, Agamemnon, responding to the pressures of his soldiers, sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia to the gods for a fair wind to Troy.
15. At the fall of Troy, Agamemnon desecrates the city's shrines and abducts the virgin priestess of Apollo, the princess Cassandra.
16. Apollo gave Cassandra clairvoyance, but when she rebuffed his attempts at seduction, he put the curse on her that nobody would believe her prophecies.
17. Before her own murder, Cassandra throws down her prophet's emblems, a victim of the brutality of both humans and gods.
18. The Agamemnon confronts Agamemnon with his wife, who has been ruling Argos in his absence; Clytemnestra dares her husband to commit hubris, taking on an honor reserved for the gods for himself by walking on the carpet-covered steps.

19. She kills him in the bath, taking credit for the regicide, since she believes herself to be an instrument of justice. Her lover, Aegisthus, takes no part in the killing.
20. In spite of apparently representing matriarchal rights in her grieving for Iphigenia, Clytemnestra shows no solidarity toward other women nor even any affection toward her younger daughter, Electra.
21. Clytemnestra is a strong female character of the trilogy, embodying the question for the Greek community of how to deal with a powerful and intelligent woman. The play suggests that such a woman cannot be trusted.
22. In the Libation-Bearers, Orestes has to decide whether to obey Apollo's order to avenge his father by slaying his mother, which means he would incur the wrath of the Furies, who will claim his life and his soul.
23. Orestes's friend Pylades repeats Apollo's command, and Orestes kills his mother; afterwards he feels anguish at seeing the Furies, which nobody else can see.
24. In the prologue of the Eumenides, the Pythia reminds us that a succession of earth goddesses presided at Delphi prior to Apollo, signifying a shift from chthonic to ouranic powers.
25. In the trial scene of the Eumenides, binary tensions become pronounced. Athene uses skills necessary to a human being resident in a civilized democracy to reconcile the opposing factions. Her rationality and political skill mediate the binary tensions that threaten disaster.
26. The female principle is identified with the forces of darkness, whereas the male powers for Aeschylus stand for clemency, light, and moderation.
27. This identification of the female principle reaches a peak when Apollo declares that a mother is merely an incubator for the seed that the father deposits in her; as an example he cites Athene, produced without the aid of a woman. Legally, only a male has parental status.
28. This identification also serves to associate Athene with the masculine principle, and accordingly, she sides with male authority.
29. Aeschylus's primary interest in the third play is the change of the Furies into benign beings, based on conditions set up throughout the play.
30. In the Oresteia, the opposing aspects of divinity, the Furies and the Olympians, are merged into a harmonious whole by a democratic act of persuasion, as the Furies become the Eumenides, the Kindly Ones. Transformed, these spirits now perform stabilizing social functions.
31. For Aeschylus the ancient Mycenaean legacy has evolved into a new concept of social justice that finds completion in the Athenian court of law. The trilogy celebrates the civic order of democratic Athens and the progress of the city beyond the stage of vendetta (blood feud) to the institution of a citizen court.
32. In the Eumenides, all the principal characters are used to illustrate polar opposites, mediated by Athene to achieve harmony; this use of myth lends itself to a structuralist interpretation. Transforming the potential destroyers of the state into benign guardians unites Dionysian energy with Apollonian intelligence. Descending to their subterranean grotto, the Eumenides function as the Dionysian id to Apollo's superego.
33. The intervention of Athene settles the self-perpetuating violence, which, without outside intervention, will likely destroy all concerned. The scene recalls her joint intervention with Zeus to end the violence after Odysseus's slaughter of the suitors.

NOTE: In the Eumenides, the ghost of Clytemnestra appears, reproaching the Furies for not being able to find Orestes and avenge her, and spurring them on to hunt

Orestes down. As Clytemnestra evoked matriarchal rights earlier, so, too, does this aspect of her carry elements of the Great Goddess, in the form of Hecate. Hecate is often depicted as the leader of the Wild Hunt, a phantom chase of riders and dogs (usually consisting of the souls of the dead) across the night skies. The myth of the Wild Hunt is known in many traditions from Malay to Celtic folklore; among the most well-known leaders of the Wild Hunt in European folklore are King Arthur and Odin.

PRIMARY TEXT SELECTION: Aeschylus, *The Agamemnon*, *The Libation-Bearers*, *The Eumenides*

KEY NAMES OF MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS MENTIONED:

Agamemnon, leader of the Greek army at Troy

Clytemnestra, his wife

Orestes, their son

Electra, their daughter

Iphigenia, their daughter, sacrificed at Aulis

Aegisthus, Clytemnestra's lover

Cassandra, a Trojan priestess, captured by Agamemnon

Atreus, the father of Agamemnon and Menelaus

Tantalus, their ancestor

Apollo

Furies (the Erinyes), nighttime spirits of vengeance

Eumenides, the Kindly Ones, the Furies after their transformation

KEY NAMES ASSOCIATED WITH THE TELLING/CRITICISM OF MYTHS:

Aeschylus (c. 525–456 B.C.)

Homer (eighth century B.C.)

Euripides (c. 485–406 B.C.)