

ORESTEIA

Aeschylus

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Overview Aeschylus' play, *The Eumenidea (The Well Intentioned Ones)*, is part of the only remaining Greek trilogy, the *Oresteia*. That group of three plays, which deal with the homecoming of the Greek chieftain Agamemnon, from The Trojan War, was first performed in 458 B.C. at the city Dionysia; it won first prize. The third play, *The Eumenides*, concerns the aftermath of Orestes' revenge killing, which dominates the second play. With blood killing to expiate, the Furies have descended on Orestes; it is the job of the third play to establish a clearing, where justice can overcome brute revenge.

The Story

The *Oresteia* is the only intact trilogy left to us from ancient Greek tragedy, and thus our only evidence of the kind of whole literary power this genre can provide.

The narrative opens with the long awaited return of Agamemnon from the Trojan War, from which he returns as conquering hero, to his wife, Clytemnestra (and her lover Aegisthus). From the start of the play, when the night watchman spies the lights of the returning party, we feel a brooding tragedy settling over the palace. It is not long before Agamemnon enters—walking on a purple carpet, which his wife has spread to trap his pride—and arm in arm with his raving prophetess- girlfriend, Cassandra. We are multiply aware, from Clytemnestra and the anxiety-ridden chorus, that a terrible revenge is in the making, and that the roots of it lie in the murder of Iphigeneia, the daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, whom Agamemnon had sacrificed on the way to Troy, in order to energize the winds necessary to sail the fleet.

Not long after Agamemnon has walked the purple carpet, and entered the palace, we hear the desperate cries of the great leader, who has been stabbed to death in his bathtub. Before long a second cry is heard, the inner palace doors open, and Clytemnestra, flanked now by her regent lover, the new official king, appears in the doorway lording it over the corpse of Agamemnon. The chorus' worst fears have been realized.

In the second play of the trilogy, *The Libation Bearers*, Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, returns to the palace in Argos, where Clytemnestra and Aegisthus still rule. In disguise Orestes, who is traveling with his nephew Pylades, unites with his sister Electra, who has been consigned to virtual servitude in the palace; they make a revenge plan. As he leaves his sister, Orestes makes for the palace door, where he unexpectedly runs into Clytemnestra. Disguised, Orestes proclaims that he, Orestes, is dead. As Clytemnestra goes to inform Aegisthus, Orestes slips into the palace, murders Aegisthus, and, after hesitating, goes on to slaughter his mother. This is the point at which the Furies, those wild spirits who avenge murders, enter ready to take their own revenge of Odysseus. The theme of justice is about to overtake the theme of vengeance.

In the final play, *The Eumenides*, Aeschylus directs full attention to the topic of justice. From the outset of the play Orestes is beset by the madness brought on by the Furies, who are hell bent to make him pay for his crime. For a short time, while the exhausted Furies take a rest, Orestes flees to Athens, hoping for the support of Athena, but the ghost of Clytemnestra appears to check on the Furies, and finding them asleep whips them up to new fury. They assault Orestes. At this point, Athena intervenes to set up a citizen law court, at which some modern, no longer primitively vengeful, solution can be instituted for use in cases like that of Orestes. After the court has voted on the case of Orestes a tie results, and Athena steps in to cast the deciding vote, determining that Orestes will not receive the death penalty. Taming the Furies, changing their names to 'The Kindly Ones,' Athens proclaims the advent of a new reign of justice for her society—for mankind.

Reading Aeschylus: *Agamemnon; Libation Bearers; Eumenides*, trans. Fagles, N.Y., 1984.

Themes

Vengeance Clytemnestra is consumed by the desire for vengeance against her husband Agamemnon. Orestes feels the same desire for vengeance against his mother, who had murdered his father.

Retribution The furies are agents of retribution, called into action by unjust social actions, such as brutal murder—no matter how ‘justified.’

Justice By active intervention, Athena supports the cause of justice, in the question of murder. The Law Court of the Athenians, is purified of the iron pressure of vengeance and retribution.

Guilt Agamemnon is haunted by guilt for the murder of his daughter, Iphigeneia, and Clytemnestra makes him pay the full penalty for his guilt.

Characters

Agamemnon The leader of the Greek forces against Troy. He has sacrificed his daughter, Iphigeneia, in order to promote the powerful winds required for the Greek expedition. He pays the price for this sacrifice, in the first play.

Clytemnestra The embittered wife of Agamemnon, who has taken a regent lover, to replace her husband, and murders her husband upon his return to Argos.

Aegisthus The lover of Clytemnestra, and in Agamemnon’s absence the ruling monarch of Argos.

The Furies Spirits of vengeance in Greek religion. Athena transforms them into agents of justice and law and order.

MAIN CHARACTER

ORESTOS (Emotional)

Character Orestes is a filler character, in Greek mythography, and is used in different ways by different authors. In the *Odyssey* Orestes is held up to Telemachus as a noble precedent, who took arms against the harassing suitors of his mother. In Pindar he is an escapee from the wrath of his mother Clytemnestra, who wants to kill him. In Aeschylus’s version of the hero, he is primarily a passive, conflicted, and indeed hesitant matricide, whom Apollo and Athena must eventually purge from his blood letting guilt. His judicial exoneration is a freeing act for the entire polis.

Parallels Eugene O’Neill, in *Mourning becomes Electra* (1931), adapts the *Oresteia* into a painful family tragedy set in 20th century New England. Orin, O’Neill’s Orestes, is haunted to suicide by the dark role assigned him in the tragedy. The BBC, in a radio play performed in 2014, took full advantage of the aural concentration to make the *Eumenides* thrill us. In 2014 MacMillan Films presented the *Eumenides*, in an educational format designed to enhance understanding of the drama. There have been dozens of adaptations of the *Eumenides* (along with the other two plays) in twentieth century music, film, and radio. Painting, interestingly enough, provides one of the most forceful interpretations of the haunting of Orestes: ‘Orestes pursued,’ by William-Adolphe Bougereau, 1862.

Illustrative moments

Suppliant At the end of the *Libation Bearers*, the chorus of slave women wishes good luck to Orestes as they escort him offstage, pursued by the Furies. At the beginning of the *Eumenides*, the last play in the trilogy, we see Orestes as the doors open to the shrine of the Pythian prophetess of Delphi. Apollo and Hermes stand beside the fleeing matricide, to protect him, while beside him lie the sleeping Furies. Orestes is at once a suppliant, calling on Apollo, who has sponsored his matricide, to support him. ‘None can mistrust your power to do good, if you will.’

Contrite Orestes, on the defensive for a crime which he readily acknowledges, but for which he believes—as he says in the second play of the trilogy—he had justification, is taken over by the shepherding power of Apollo and Hermes, and transferred to the law court of the Areopagus in Athens. He appears clasping the feet of the statue of the goddess Athena, the legal authority of last resort. He begs her grace. He is full both of contrition and self-assurance. He is also exhausted, 'one blunted at last, and worn and battered...'

Hopeful Standing at the foot of Athena's statue, Orestes puts himself in the goddess' hands. 'I come, goddess...to keep watch here, and wait the issue of my trial.' Orestes is conscious of having played an essential role in the tragic destiny of his family; as both destined to kill, and symbolic of the need for an end to killing. Orestes does not work through a rich, reflective inner life, but expresses himself as a figure in an archaic and brutal nexus of fated actions. He can only hope the divine system will exonerate him.

Self-purifying Constantly swamped by the pursuing Furies, who want *their* revenge on him, Orestes speaks up to say that 'the stain of blood dulls now and fades upon my hand.' He is shifting into a legal abstract mode of considering his crime and its justification. 'I understand the many rules of absolution,' he says—to the Furies, to Athena whose knees he is embracing. He remembers that when the stain of blood was fresh, animal sacrifice was required to purge it; yet even then the purification aided, for none were injured by contact with Orestes.

Discussion questions

Orestes, at the end of the *Oresteia*, is purged of guilt. *How* is he purged, by the Furies or by the law-court on the Areopagus? If possible, compare the cleansing of Orestes with the 'purification' of Oedipus, at the end of the Theban trilogy of Sophocles.

Does Orestes grow in stature as the *Oresteia* develops? Does he gain some perspective on the murder he has been driven to commit, or is he overwhelmed by the attack of the Furies? How does he deal with his trial?

Are you convinced by the dramatic power of the trial, at the end of the *Eumenides*? Does the outcome of the trial lay a convincing foundation for the emergence of a new law code in Athens?