

ORESTES

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Orestes (in Aeschylus' *Eumenides*, from the *Oresteia*) Emotional

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.

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 Bougureau, 1862.

Illustrative moments

1 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.'

2 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...'

3 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.

4 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.

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

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?