

ORESTEIA

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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.

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.

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.