HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Themes in Aeschylus

FAMILY

Preface. The family is an invisible bond in ancient Greek society, always there defining and tweaking relationships between individuals, among groups, between city-states. Omnipresent as family is, in the evolution of civilized social life, it remains, in a sense, invisible, an hypothesis necessary to explain the human behavior we observe on all sides of it. In this mysterious form—very real, very hypothetical—the ancient Greek family quite naturally plays a decisive role in cultural development, and specifically on stage, where in tragedies and comedies the Greeks excelled at activating their deepest values. We look at several examples, in the work of Aeschylus, which lay bare the pulsing nature of the Greek family.

Agamemnon. Agamemnon's return to Mycenae with Cassandra, after the Fall of Troy, is a move amply forecast by the mythical tales of the House of Atreus, which from the outset predict, or is it more nearly 'state,' what will be the governing events in the bedoomed family of Atreus. Read from the angle of the present, the events of that House become beacons backward into history, while from the starting point of the origins, the dreadful tales of Atreus and Thyestes would be brightening up the future, and lighting the trail of sufferings that are destined to shadow the story of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. From either historical angle, from past and origins, or from future backward, the ominous skein of family relationships stretches invisibly and compellingly.

Libation Bearers. Families have their unique histories, which knit them together, and equip them with an invisible radar by which they find their ways back together. Shakespeare and the Greek dramatist shared deep understanding of the radar potent in family members 'sensing one another's presence; it would be hard to imagine a scenario in which this sensing was more vivid than in Electra's discoveries, of the half-hidden presence of her brother Orestes—as this long postponed reencounter is enacted in the *Libation Bearers* of Aeschylus, in the *Orestes* of Euripides, or in the E*lectra* of Sophocles.

Suppliants. *The Suppliants* opens on the hair breadth escape of the daughters of Danaus, from their Egyptian cousins, who are pursuing them for marriage. The girls are under the protection of their father, Danaus, who on their behalf is seeking refuge for them at the palace of the King of Argos, Pelasgus; Pelasgus is himself defending the girls by recourse to Athenian family law, in itself a human made update on the more primitive Egyptian law the women are attempting to leave behind. Behind the girls lie the lustful and erect cousins, that ardent family force, ahead of the girls lies the protection afforded by their father. Like all of us—The isolated Trojan Women in Euripides, the distraught court of Darius in *The Persians*, the suppliants of Euripides' play of that name—Aeschylus' Suppliants reach out to the family of man, as well as to the genetic family, for orientation and protection. The family of man, the human community, is that amorphous and loosely packaged concept we address through concepts like the WHO or the UN; it differs greatly from the genetic family, which touches us tensely at whatever distance, bringing forth, for good and bad, both our fine-tuned sensibilities and our anxiety toward what is both unknown and intimate.

Seven against Thebes. The intimacy, danger, and charm of the family could not be more dramatically illustrated than in Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes*. As the seven portals of the city of Thebes fill up with warriors, the audience turns breathless, awaiting the arrival of a final Argive at the last gate, and then realizing the tumultuous fate-stroke that is about to bring together the two brothers, Eteocles and Polyneices, in fatal combat. The fatality of genetic encounter, in real space-time, makes thrillingly evident the dark mystery of the family, in whose texture every pressure point is keenly felt.