

Structure, Commentary, and Culture in Ancient Greek Drama

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By

Frederic Will

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PREFACE

The present book springs from doing pedagogy. For a couple of decades, I have been working in graduate-level online instruction in the Humanities. My first job in this line was with Mellen University, a risky and tricky effort to found a university by its own bootstraps. Mellen University was founded by Herbert Richardson, a brilliant and imaginative Professor of Religion at the University of Toronto and a bold theorist of Christian theology. (For the history of that enterprise with Herb, see my *Founding a University: Mellen—The First Years*, Lewiston, 2004.)

My second formative online university job was with what is now called The Humanities Institute, founded by Dr. Turhan Baykan and operative in California since 2018. The product of over a decade of preparatory planning and state-level accreditation in California and Arizona, it is also intended that this research institute will become a teaching institution on the graduate level. Partnered to it is the online *Encyclopedia of the Humanities*, to which a number of gifted specialists have contributed entries.

My own role has been contributing to the *Encyclopedia*, building curricula for the coming teaching institution, and helping search for accreditation. In the course of these efforts, I acquired considerable experience in curriculum building. As creating an online graduate program has everything to do with format and presentation, I developed the general discussion template which has proven to be style-shaping for a couple of my recent books, *Shakespeare: A Portable Guide to the Human Condition* and *Film and the Heat of Life*, both from Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Each of those books is substantially marked by the use of the online curriculum layout employed at Humanities Institute. There is accordingly close attention to paragraphing, thematic analysis, and even discussion questions, as well as to a conversational style. This kind of packaging, I hope, will prove an instrument of clarity and insight. One will soon observe, in the present book, how this congeries of experience-discovered teaching styles plays out in the present book, which is directed toward revivifying an ancient world at a time when we face our own very contemporary challenges—floods, plagues, wildfires in special abundance—as well as the Internet-driven challenge of learning availability and easy access to information. We live in a mind-world where taking chances has to be the norm.

The present effort consists of profiles of each of the surviving plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes: seven by Aeschylus, seven by Sophocles, nineteen by Euripides, and eleven by Aristophanes. The span of these dramas, covering as they do some three-quarters of the fifth century before Christ, gives us many windows onto the growth and development of ancient Greece at the time when it was most meaningful and richest in gifts. The Classical tradition was formed in the following centuries, and that tradition, which persists to our day, guarantees the continuing importance, for us, of the interactive material we are trying to keep available in the present text. With regard to the Classical tradition, it is of equal importance that it is incremental, that we make it as we think about it, and that we are by products of it while reflecting on it.

SUPPLEMENTARY READING LIST

The following list of fifty-one texts are offered as collateral reading. They provide pointers into the cultural world of Ancient Greek drama, religion, art, and philosophy, and may serve as pathways leading to and from the texts discussed in this volume.

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Oedipus the King

Sophocles. 'Oedipus the King.' In: *Oedipus the King and Antigone: Sophocles*. Translated by Peter. H. Arnott. Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1960.

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Sophocles. *Philoctetes*. Translated by Gregory McNamee. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 1986.

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Euripides. *Alcestis*. Translated by George Theodorides. Poetry in Translation, 2008.

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Euripides. *Hippolytos*. Translated by Robert Bagg. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992.

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Euripides. *Rhesos*. Translated by Richard Emil Braun. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Aristophanes*Knights and Peace*

Aristophanes. *The Complete Plays: The New Translations*. Translated by Paul Roche. New York, NY: New American Library, 2005.

AESCHYLUS

PERSIANS

472 BC

Characters

Atossa. The queen mother of the Persian Empire, widow of Darius and mother of Xerxes.

Messenger. A breathless Persian herald who returns from the naval battlefield at Salamis to report the dreadful defeat.

Ghost of Darius. At her husband's tomb, Atossa absorbs Darius' counsel as he moans at Xerxes' hubris in attempting to build a bridge across the Hellespont and attacking the Greeks at Salamis. This action instigated a naval battle which turned out to be a terrible loss for the Persians.

Xerxes. Son of Darius and leader of the Persian military. Defeated at the Battle of Salamis.

Chorus. Persian elders.

Story

This play opens at a fateful moment for the Persian Empire, which is awaiting news of the navy of Xerxes, the king's son and the military commander of the fleet. The Persian queen mother, Atossa, deeply anxious over the fate of her son's expedition, recounts to her court attendants a dream she has had that night; it portends badly. At this point a messenger enters the hall with the news that Xerxes' fleet has been devastated in a naval battle at Salamis. The messenger recounts the bloody denouement of the struggle, reports on the great men who have lost their lives, and states that Xerxes has escaped and is on his way back to Persia. When he arrives, Atossa is horrified by his ragged condition and the prospects for her ravaged nation. The remainder of the play (the last 150 lines) consists of an extensive choral dialogue between the defeated king and the chorus.

Themes

Waiting. This brief play of 1,070 lines (compared to the 1,500–2,000 lines of the average Greek tragedy and the 4,024 lines of Shakespeare's longest play, *Hamlet*)—opens with a chorus of anxious old men of Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. They are waiting for news from the Battle of

Salamis; their worry is only increased by Atossa's announcement that she has that very night been disturbed by an ominous dream concerning the plight of the navy. Every eye is watching for the arrival of a messenger bringing news of the battle.

Despair. When the messenger brings his dreadful news, all those present at the court are consumed with grief and desperation. King Xerxes himself soon arrives, along with witnesses to the ravages of this defeat; the chorus gives in to hopelessness.

Victory. The play is more complex than it seems. The play is not just an oratorio of loss. The messenger is a literalist, and includes, in his account of the battle, the 'On to Victory' chant sung by the Greek forces. We have to ask ourselves whether *Persians* is about sympathy for the losers (the enemy—the Persians) or about the unstoppable power of the Greeks. There is an ambiguity (or richness) permanently attached to the play. Herein lies the interest and genius of Aeschylus: He thinks on a level which includes and interrelates polarities.

Character Analysis: Atossa

Atossa is the main character, for it is to her trepidations and forebodings that we owe the sense of terror that pervades the play. Upon hearing rumors of that Xerxes' fleet has been defeated, the Queen senses that the entire expedition will fail. She is stunned by the messenger's report, and even more so when Xerxes unexpectedly returns in tatters. She is broken as she listens to Xerxes' account of the fighting, and incidentally reflects on the dire predictions delivered by her husband Darius in her dreams regarding future defeats lying *ahead* of the Persians.

Parallels. In his play *Frogs* (405 BC), Aristophanes mocks the lamentations of the (at that time) Attic indigenes, the Persians, making no effort to sympathize with them. The Persian chorus is derided for their helpless nostalgia, calling as they do for a return to the great old days of Darius, now hopelessly forgotten. Aeschylus' play, with its profuse dramatic effects and operatic staging, has reacquired currency on the modern stage and in the poetry of our era. At least two vigorous stage productions—both anti-war—have been adapted from the original play, and splendid passages of poetry have taken their flight from such brilliant and breathless language as the messenger's speech. (In the first section of *The Wasteland*, 'The Burial of the Dead,' T. S. Eliot's splendid line 'I had not thought Death had undone so many' is an echo of line 432 of the Messenger's account in *The Persians*.)

Illustrative Moments

Anxiety. Anxious for news of her son Xerxes, Atossa dominates the first half of the play. She shares her emotions with the equally frightened chorus of old men, and between them they whip up a mood of fear—which translates into a keen spectator fascination. Atossa is at her most menacing and obsessed as she recites the warnings passed onto her in her dreams by her dead husband Darius. Dream and waking seem to blend in her: She lives them simultaneously.

Shock. When Atossa sees the figure of Xerxes, tattered and ragged, returning from his defeat at Salamis, she is overcome by pity and dread. It is at this point, if ever, that it is clear Aeschylus wished to create a play about the horrors of war. It is the closest he comes to that preoccupation, which dominates the dramas of Euripides, particularly in *Hecuba* and the bloody drama of *Rhesus*.

Discussion Questions

The Athenian responsible for outfitting the chorus and performers in this early play of Aeschylus was Pericles, who was to become the most illustrious spokesperson for Athenian democracy during the Peloponnesian Wars. What do you know about the role of the *choregos*, which Pericles performed here? How did he acquire the assignment? What skills did he need in order to fulfill the assignment?

How does the *Persians* mesh with what we know of the two other plays in the trilogy to which it belonged? Although we can only conjecture on the nature of those two plays, what can we learn from the surviving fragments? The *Persians* seems to be the second in a trilogy devoted to the theme of divine retribution, a fittingly austere issue, no less assertive than the thinking of those Hebrew prophets—Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel—who thought of law as retribution. Does the present play provide evidence that the Athenian theater-going public could tolerate a drama which foregrounds the power and cruelty of the Greek forces? Can we do that today? Do we portray the cruelty of our forces in war? How about Abu Ghraib? How did the American public deal with those disclosures?

Thoughts

It has always struck me as grand that Aeschylus empathizes, here, with the queen of the enemy, who is lamenting the Persians' terrible loss. Does this mean that Aeschylus is capable of more than patriotic pathos, that he can reach out to the human condition and mourn for others? Could we do this today, even after two millennia of playing at the Golden Rule, or would we consider such empathy 'unpatriotic'? It seems Aeschylus was a natural

for thinking on a large human scale. He did so in *Prometheus Bound* and above all in the *Oresteia*, which cuts sharply through the local into the essential and timeless struggle around the replacement of terror with law.

Where the Greek culture-world deals with the universal, it also invites thought about the Greeks and their global proprioception. How did they live their position in the settled human world? Is there some truth to the notion that the Hellenes of the Classical world thought of themselves parochially? Especially with the growth of trade in the fifth century, the Greeks made themselves the dominant population of the eastern half of the Mediterranean. They were familiar with the coasts of Italy and Asia Minor. Figures such as Medea, groups such as the Phrygians (who appear in the background of several of Euripides' plays), and tribal throwbacks such as the Cyclops, whom Euripides makes central to a satyr play set at the foot of Mount Aetna in Sicily: all of these contact points were means of achieving and demonstrating Greek naval skill and cultural expansion, though of course it would not be until the reigns of Philip and Alexander that the extent of the inhabited world would begin to be understood.

Is there a relationship between thinking globally and thinking universally, as Aeschylus does in drama, or are those two very different types of extension—one noetic, one geographical? We will work at this question. It should tease out answers which will help us characterize the Hellenic mindset at its most productive stage. We can play the question by thinking of the issues posed by a writer such as Rabelais, whose world is a tumultuous microcosm of packed in myth and the raw flesh of sixteenth-century French history. He thinks his time and place along ultimately converging lines, where their meanings intersect.

SEVEN AGAINST THEBES

467 BC

Characters

Eteocles. Son of Oedipus and co-ruler of Thebes.

Antigone. Daughter of Oedipus.

Ismene. Daughter of Oedipus.

A Soldier.

A Messenger.

Chorus Leader.

Chorus. Theban women.

Story

The play opens with Eteocles, one of Oedipus' two sons, addressing the citizens of Thebes over the impending threat of an attacking army from Argos, led by his brother Polyneices. Aeschylus' original audience was abundantly familiar with the mythical material the play is based on. Upon his death, Oedipus, the father of Eteocles and Polyneices, as well as of Antigone and Ismene, cursed his kingdom by handing it over to his two sons, declaring that one of them would rule Thebes every other year. However, Eteocles has refused to step down, and so Polyneices has come to take Thebes, supported by seven powerful warriors from Argos. The plot of the play revolves around the struggle between the brothers, resulting in them killing each other. Their corpses are left on stage at the end, in a dark finale which can only be taken as a harsh warning against fratricide.

The greatest complexity of what might otherwise have been a drama of unmitigated loss rests in the identifications of the various warriors from Argos and Thebes who appear at the gates of Thebes to battle one another. The highest drama of the play convenes on the inevitable meeting of the two brothers themselves at the seventh gate. So dark and unproductive was this finale that the play itself was rewritten fifty years later to provide a new conclusion which would align with the conclusion of Sophocles' highly successful *Antigone*, which was created in the late 440s and which dealt with the same issue of fraught family relationships.

Themes

Fratricide. The struggle between the two brothers is built deeply into the mythological background of the play. Oedipus cursed his sons by fostering between them an everlasting rivalry, dangling before them the promise of short-lived power which lasted only a year at a time. Fratricide was the inevitable outcome of this solution.

Formality. Like Aeschylus' *Suppliants* and *Persians*, *Seven against Thebes* (admittedly, we can only draw limited conclusions from a single play in a trilogy) is bare of plot complexities and stark in its narrative formality. The theme is formality, strictness, *less is more*.

Geometry. Structure, both of narrative and of its enframing environment, is foremost here. The play is all about the tension built into the description of the seven gatekeepers, for each of whom the careful details of dress, emblems, and background are fastidiously sketched. By the time the two empty slots for the final gate combatants are filled and the volcanic encounter of the two brothers has begun, the geometrical patterning of the play is complete.

Character Analysis: Eteocles

Eteocles is the son of Oedipus and the brother of Polyneices. Upon his death Oedipus bequeathed the throne of Thebes to Eteocles and Polyneices, requiring them to share it on alternate years. Eteocles, the first of the brothers to ascend the throne, refused to relinquish power at the end of his first year. Of an autocratic nature, Eteocles promenades throughout the city to identify the enemy forces—the seven power-figures assigned by Polyneices to each of the seven major gates of Thebes. He also identifies Thebes' most brilliant warriors as they take their places from within the citadel. Eteocles dialogues with the chorus, explaining his strategic reasoning to them, then, like a showman manipulating his audience, building up to the seventh gate, at which, he discloses, he observes the Argive army posting his own brother, Polyneices. Eteocles builds his narrative to the point where he becomes the occupant of the gate where he will confront Polyneices. He folds himself up into his own narrative, for he will indeed be going home in a body bag, so to speak—as will his brother.

Observation. Eteocles peruses the posting of heavily armed heroes on both sides of the military conflict at the seven gates of Thebes. He explains in complex detail the name and background of each antagonist, paying careful attention to their backgrounds. Aeschylus observes characters observing, reacting; think of Atossa, all ears for the military news!

Surprise. Eteocles is surprised when, in recounting the assembled Argive warriors, he sees his own brother looming up to the seventh gate. He

immediately starts preparing himself to meet Polynices' attack. The draw of the fatal is irresistible—we know its nearing, glassy breath from *Suppliants* and *Persians*.

Parallels. *Seven against Thebes* seems not to have spawned the literary interpretations one might expect. There are no film productions based directly on the play, although it does figure in the Italian film *Rehearsal for War* (1998), in which theater rehearsals for Aeschylus' play exemplify the tragedy taking place outside the movie theater itself. In ancient Greek literature, however, the legendary material surrounding the lugubrious history of the city of Thebes, the fall of Oedipus, and the tragic outcomes for Oedipus' children, were as widely read, discussed, and interpreted as was the material of Homer's epics. Statius' *Thebaid* (90 AD), though lost, can be reconstructed in parts, and closely follows the narrative of Aeschylus' play, as does Euripides' *Suppliants*.

Discussion Questions

What kind of rewrite was added on to Aeschylus' play, fifty years after its composition? Why was the addition made? Can you fill out this interesting piece of literary history by discussing the way in which texts were published and made available to the public in fifth-century BC Athens? What was the status of the book distribution industry?

The present play was the third in a trilogy; only a few fragments survive of the other two volumes, although the trilogy was popular at its time. As literary detective, what would you do in order to reconstruct as much as possible of the context of *Seven against Thebes*?

What do you see as Aeschylus' own attitude in the present play? Is he a fatalist, acquiescent to destiny? Or does Eteocles prove to be a courageous leader whose ideals are worth following?

Thoughts

This play was of course the last in a trilogy—how could a play with this climactic a ritual and spatial conclusion not be *the* conclusion? The ritual of elimination is powerful and unwavering. We know precisely what is coming down, and yet, as the two brothers clash at the end, the intensity is fresh, if inevitable. Both *Persians* and *Suppliants* sustain a similar power of the impending—*Waiting for Godot*?—which, unlike Beckett's play, is clarified in the end.

Based on these three of his relatively early plays fate has left us, we will want to conclude that Aeschylus's imagination was one of unique power. Among his Greek peers, and more largely (among, at least, expansive Western literary imaginations), Aeschylus reaches to transcend,

to press the formative of mind as a going-beyond; he is a natural congener to Shelley, in the powers of literature, and in philosophic thought he will take us to peers like Hoelderlin or Schelling, whose initial *Standpunkt* is already on the far side of the phenomena.

SUPPLIANTS

463 BC

Characters

The Suppliants.

Danaos. The father of the Suppliants.

Spokesman. An Egyptian man.

Chorus. Egyptians.

Chorus. Argive Women.

Argive Soldiers.

Argive Spearmen.

Story

Suppliants is the first play in a tetralogy, often called the Danaid Tetralogy after Danaos, the father of the fifty girls whose arrival from Egypt to Greece makes up the chief action of this first play. The other two major plays in the tetralogy are *Egyptians* and *Daughters of Danaos*; there is also a satyr play, the *Amymone*, which provides comic energy in the midst of the high drama of flight and pursuit. The sequence was long thought to be Aeschylus' first work due to its seemingly archaic use of the Chorus at the beginning of the play, but papyrological discoveries in Egypt in the last century have made it clear that this is among his later works. It was composed slightly earlier than the *Oresteia* and 'more than ten years after the *Prometheus*, *Persians*, and *Seven Against Thebes*.' So difficult is the job of dating ancient texts, even starkly simple tales such as this play, which recounts the frenzied flight and pursuit, from Egypt to Greece, of fifty maidens of Argive descent in a desperate attempt to escape their suitors. In the end they succeed, thanks to the support of the Argive citizens.

Themes

Pursuit. The lustful Egyptian suitors of the Danaids are an unremitting snapshot of pursuit throughout the play. Their herald-representative arrives in Greece just a few steps ahead of these pursuing cousins, who claim these young women as their legal brides.

Family. Traditional family law is in the background of this entire play. By Greek law in general, widows were required to marry the cousins or

brothers of a deceased husband, with the purpose of keeping property in the family. The cousins of the Danaids insisted on this privilege, claiming the maidens as their rightful brides.

Character Analysis: The Suppliants

Though fifty in number, the suppliants must count as the main characters. They are in the spotlight of action, fleeing in desperation from their lustful Egyptian cousins. From the start, the suppliants—a type favored by all three major tragedians, especially Euripides—cling to the gods’ altars in Argos, counting on their own origins in that city to provide them security. It is the suppliants who invoke their forebear Io, who in the most ancient times attracted the lust of Zeus himself, and who was pursued by the gadfly jealousy of Hera, just as they are enduring the nasty pursuit of their cousins. It is the consciousness of the suppliants that prompts the entire frenzied action of the drama, with its eventual ‘happy ending’ of the Danaids securing the support of the citizens of Argos.

Parallels. A ground-breaking translation of the present play and a splendid theatrical adaptation deserve attention for the efforts they represent to build out from Aeschylus’ powerful *Suppliants*. (Translation and performance are in fact the chief means by which an inevitably fragmentary ancient Greek play can be brought out into a full new light.) A recent production of the play in Edinburgh (*The Suppliant Women*, trans. David Greig, 2016) provided a stunning choreographic play-out of the women’s predicament, with convincing moral attention to the injustice of the plight of immigrants. Theater of War Productions, founded in 2009, has been active in sponsoring social-awareness readings and performances of contemporarily relevant ancient plays, like Aeschylus’ *Suppliants*. The American poet and naturalist Janet Lembke created a free verse (and free-spirited) translation of Aeschylus’ *The Suppliants* (Oxford, 2009), a parallel to the deepest sensibilities of the Greek dramatist.

Illustrative Moments

Arrival. From the outset of the play we see the Suppliants ardently making their case to Pelasgus, that he should give them shelter, even if it means going to war with their Egyptian cousins.

Realization. In the midst of their travail, when they arrive in Argos the Suppliants reflect on their kinship with Io, from four generations prior, and her suffering—like their own—as she was harried by the lustful Zeus.

Argument. The maidens press their case to both Pelasgus and the women of Argos, and fill the air with threats of suicide—they will hang themselves from the altars unless they are guaranteed protection from their cousins.

Discussion Questions

The maidens are fleeing to Argos from Egypt. Did Greek law guarantee them security from their suitors? Why did they particularly dread the lustful pursuit by their suitors?

What was Pelasgus' reaction to the Suppliants' arrival in Argos? Was he sympathetic to their case, or afraid of war with the Egyptians? Did the Egyptians have any justification on their side? Has Aeschylus any sympathy for the Egyptians?

Why was the theme of 'supplication' so important in ancient Greek drama and society? Can an immigrant be a suppliant, and if so, have we, in the industrialized West today, any provision for immigrant supplication?

Thoughts

Suppliants, like the other surviving plays of Aeschylus, is a salient narrative—it jumps out over us. To view or do the play is to stand inside the current of flight, prayerfulness, supreme anxiety. (Everything rogative in us legitimately belongs to our response to the suppliants' condition.) Both in the *Persians* and in *Seven against Thebes*, as in *Suppliants*, there is a vector line that drives the energy of the play to the awaited and arriving news from Athens, to the rush of power toward a last gate of the city of Thebes, and toward the children of Danaos arriving from Egypt. Aeschylus masters the energy of his dramas, as we can see from the associated fragments remaining of the three trilogies we consider here.

THE ORESTEIA:
AGAMEMNON, LIBATION BEARERS, EUMENIDES
458 BC

Characters

Agamemnon. The leader of the Greek forces against Troy. He has sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia, in order to bring the powerful winds the Greek forces need for their expedition. He pays the price for this sacrifice in the first play of the *Oresteia*.

Clytemnestra. Agamemnon's embittered wife, who has taken a regent lover to replace her husband; she murders Agamemnon upon his return to Argos.

Aegisthus. Clytemnestra's lover, and in Agamemnon's absence the ruler of Argos.

The Furies. Spirits of vengeance in Greek religion. Athena transforms them into agents of justice, law, and order, though to what kind of inner conversion the followers of the Furies commit themselves is hard to describe.

Overview

The three plays in Aeschylus' trilogy the *Oresteia* deal with the homecoming of the Greek chieftain Agamemnon from the Trojan War and the subsequent murder, madness, and purification that follow for the son of Agamemnon and the Athenian people. The trilogy was first performed in 458 BC in the City Dionysia, where it won first prize.

The first play of the trilogy, *Agamemnon*, concerns Agamemnon's return from the Trojan War with his prophetess mistress Cassandra, and his murder at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. The second play concerns the arrival of Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra; he murders his mother. With blood killing to expiate, the Furies then descend on Orestes: It is the job of the third play to establish a clearing where justice can overcome brute revenge. *Eumenides* is the tale of reconciliation and law. Orestes is doomed to emerge as the force of order—*aus Schmerzen wird die neue Welt geboren*, as Novalis puts it.

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 no-holds-barred triumphalism with which *Agamemnon* concludes is anticipatable at every stage of development of the play.

The narrative opens with Agamemnon's long-awaited return from the Trojan War. 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 sense of 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-slave-mistress, 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 death of Iphigenia, the daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, whom Agamemnon sacrificed on the way to Troy in order to bring the winds necessary for the fleet to sail. The stark sense of the oncoming of disaster permeates the present trilogy, as it does the three earlier plays we have just discussed. There is always something ominous on the horizon of these plays.

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, lordling it over Agamemnon's corpse. The Chorus' worst fears have been realized.

In the second play of the trilogy, *Libation Bearers*, Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, returns to the palace in Argos, where Clytemnestra and Aegisthus still rule. Orestes, who is traveling in disguise with his nephew Pylades, unites with his sister Electra, who has been consigned to virtual servitude in the palace. The siblings plan their revenge. 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 on Odysseus. The theme of justice is about to overtake the theme of vengeance.

In the final play, *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 on making him pay for his

crime. For a short time, while the exhausted Furies rest, Orestes flees to Athens, hoping for the support of Athena, but the ghost of Clytemnestra appears to check on the Furies: finding them asleep, she whips them up to new fury. They assault Orestes. At this point, Athena intervenes to set up a citizen law court to institute a modern rather than primitively vengeful solution for Orestes' case (and others like it). The court votes on Orestes' case, resulting in a tie, so Athena steps in to cast the deciding vote. She determines that Orestes will not receive the death penalty. Taming the Furies and changing their names to 'the Kindly Ones' (the Eumenides), Athena proclaims the advent of a new reign of justice for her society—and for mankind.

Themes

Vengeance. Clytemnestra is consumed by the desire for vengeance against her husband Agamemnon. Orestes feels the same desire for vengeance against her for murdering his father. Until the turning point conclusion of the final play, the Furies feel that same kind of desire for vengeance on Orestes.

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. The implications are significant for the development of a personalized and philosophical consideration of the law.

Guilt. Agamemnon is haunted by guilt over sacrificing his daughter, Iphigenia, and Clytemnestra makes him pay the ultimate penalty for his action. The categories operative in our account of this drama—justice, retribution, guilt—indicate how closely the higher Hellenic value system intertwines with the deeper concerns of Judaism (cf. the thought of Philo Judaeus) and, later, with early Christian theology.

Character Analysis: Orestes

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 for taking up arms against the suitors harassing his mother. Pindar depicts him as 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 of his guilt over his bloodletting. His judicial exoneration is a freeing act for the entire polis and