

Ashley Roy

Dr. Ellen Greene

HON 3993

1 November 2018

The Relationship Between Male Dominance and Justice in Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*

How thin is the line that distinguishes justice from vengeance? In the seemingly endless cycle of blood retribution, which crimes are deemed necessary and just, and which are considered blatantly immoral? These are just a few of the ethical questions explored in the works of Aeschylus, the ancient Greek tragedian who was captivated by the theme of *dike*, or 'justice'. In *The Oresteia*, the only full trilogy that has survived antiquity, Aeschylus tells the story of the curse that lies upon the house of Atreus, and, in doing so, tells the larger story of the rise of civilization out of disorder. By attaching varying degrees of severity to the blood crimes committed in this myth, Aeschylus traces the movement out of the dawn of a Mycenaean citadel and into the light of Athens, away from the reign of the chthonic, feminine deities called the Furies and towards the sovereignty of the Olympians. More importantly, though, Aeschylus establishes the movement away from chaos and into civilization as a direct result of the domination of male over female. This essay will examine the three interconnected crimes of *The Oresteia* which pit man against woman — Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia, Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon, and Orestes' matricide —, and, through an analysis of the language that Aeschylus employs to discuss the ethical weight of each crime as well as the blame which its perpetrator deserves, will build towards the following conclusion: According to Aeschylus, and, by extension, the dominant worldview of ancient Greek civilization, rational governance is directly linked with the subordination of women.

The first of the three blood crimes which Aeschylus evaluates, and the crime which serves as the foundation for the trilogy, is Agamemnon's sacrificial killing of his and Clytemnestra's daughter, Iphigenia. Agamemnon's choice to sacrifice his own daughter for the sake of his men not only foreshadows the trilogy's conclusion, which is based on the overt subordination of women, but also highlights the chaotic nature of the 'Old Order', the period before civilization in which blood crimes and vengeance ran rampant and the chthonic deities were sovereign. Although the action of Agamemnon's crime takes place before the start of the trilogy itself, the Chorus of Argive Elders describes its context in such great detail that the audience is still able to gauge the full extent of the cyclical bloodshed which Agamemnon perpetuates. The crime's context is the following: After an offense committed against her, the virgin goddess Artemis will not allow Agamemnon and his men to set sail for Troy unless Agamemnon offers her a virgin sacrifice, his daughter Iphigenia. And so Agamemnon finds himself in a lose-lose situation that pits *oikos* against *polis* and woman against man. Agamemnon, fully aware of the ethical dilemma which he faces, proclaims, "My fate is angry if I disobey these, but angry if I slaughter this child... What of these things goes now without disaster?" (2016-11). His words highlight the impossible problem of justice that exists prior to the resolution of the conflicting agendas of the Olympians and Furies. In other words, Agamemnon's sacrifice will be justified in the eyes of the Artemis and the rest of the Olympians, but will go against the mandates of the Furies, who uphold *dike* at its most primitive level, primarily within familial bonds.

In the face of this impossible choice, Agamemnon ultimately decides to go through with the sacrifice, declaring, "It is right. May all be well yet" (216). With these words, Agamemnon justifies his crime, just as the audience will later see Clytemnestra do. But Agamemnon's

understanding of justice, although arguably more evolved and less primitive than Clytemnestra's version of justice, is still flawed. For even though Agamemnon sees himself as an agent of justice, he is, in actuality, an agent of vengeance; his sole motive for the sacrifice is to enable his men to take revenge on Paris for stealing Helen away. Aeschylus in no way pardons Agamemnon for his crime, and he emphasizes the injustice of Agamemnon's sacrifice by having him walk upon sacred crimson tapestries which Clytemnestra has laid out for him, tapestries which serve as a visual representation of the liberal bloodshed which has already taken place and which will continue to take place within the House of Atreus. Agamemnon declares, "My feet crush crimson as I pass within the hall" (957), and so he tramples on what is sacred, on Justice itself. For this reason, Agamemnon very clearly belongs to the pre-civilized and matriarchal Old Order, and his crime represents the moral ambiguity that exists before the subjugation of the Furies.

Because of the cyclical nature of blood crimes and the fact that "the act of evil breeds others to follow" (758-9), Agamemnon's violation of justice must have consequences; and so the stage is set for the second crime of the trilogy, Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon. If Agamemnon's crime is an indication of the chaotic nature of the Old Order, then Clytemnestra's crime is the very embodiment of the dangerous surfeits of passion and emotion associated with the Old Order. Indeed, Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia unleashes an uncontrollable rage within Clytemnestra, and she must have her revenge. Like her husband, Clytemnestra finds herself in ethically ambiguous territory, with no safe way out. If she does not punish Agamemnon's crime for her daughter's sake, she will not live up to the mandates of the Furies; if she does murder her husband, however, she will do wrong in the eyes of the Olympians. Filled with passionate rage, Clytemnestra chooses the latter, and spends the next ten years of the Trojan

War plotting her husband's death in his absence. Unlike Agamemnon, who wavers back and forth in his decision to kill his daughter, Clytemnestra remains resolute in her decision to murder her husband. And when it finally comes time for her to take her revenge, she calls upon Zeus, the Olympian god most strongly associated with *dike*, in the following words: "Zeus, Zeus accomplisher, accomplish these my prayers. Let your mind bring these things to pass. It is your will" (973-4). These lines reveal that, like Agamemnon, Clytemnestra truly sees herself as an agent of justice, and is ultimately satisfied with the morality of the choice she makes. In fact, not only does Clytemnestra feel no remorse for her murder, but she is actually proud of it. After the deed has been done, Clytemnestra declares, "I struck him down" (1379). The pride and the satisfaction in her words are undeniable. She goes on to state that Agamemnon's murder is "the work of this right hand that struck in strength of righteousness" (1405-6), reiterating yet again the extent to which she believes she acts as an agent of justice.

Although Clytemnestra's crime elicits a little more pity from the audience than does Agamemnon's simply due to the fact that she is a mother grieving for her lost daughter, it is important to recognize that, despite this, in no way does Clytemnestra deserve the audience's full sympathy. It is worth noting here that Clytemnestra needlessly kills Agamemnon's concubine, Cassandra, for Cassandra's death does nothing to bring about the Justice which Clytemnestra claims to act in the name of. For this reason, among others, Aeschylus cannot sympathize with Clytemnestra for her crime. In fact, if Aeschylus had to side with either Agamemnon or Clytemnestra, he would more readily defend Agamemnon, and there is an important reason for this. By Aeschylus' judgement, which reflects the judgment of his society at large, a man who murders a woman deserves less blame than a woman who murders a man, and this is due solely to the misogynistic notion that men are the moral, intellectual, physical, and emotional superiors

to women. Aeschylus makes the fact that his condemnation of Clytemnestra is, in a larger sense, the condemnation of women by all men, clear in these lines that the Chorus directs to Clytemnestra: “You shall go homeless now, crushed with men’s bitterness” (1410-11). And so it does not matter that Agamemnon kills his own flesh and blood daughter whereas Clytemnestra merely kills her spouse; Clytemnestra’s crime is undeniably worse. Evidently, the end to this violent cycle of bloodshed, this “doom that shall never be done with” (1484), can only be achieved by defining Justice as a masculine concept, and by replacing the ‘feminine’ leanings towards passion and emotion with masculine leanings towards reason and rationality.

The third and final crime of *The Oresteia*, Orestes’ matricide, is just in the eyes of the Olympians but gravely unjust in the eyes of the Furies, and so it is only through the triumph of the former over the latter, and consequently of the masculine over the feminine, that Orestes is pardoned for his crime, and that the cycle of bloodshed finally reaches its end. The moment of Agamemnon’s murder at the hands of Clytemnestra is the last moment of darkness in the trilogy; from this moment onwards, culminating in the justice which Orestes brings about, matriarchal chaos steadily progresses into the light of the New Order: patriarchal civilization. After Agamemnon’s murder, Orestes must avenge his father’s death. The problem, though, is that doing so means he must commit the most taboo of crimes, since his father’s murderer is, of course, his own mother. At the intersection of the chthonic and Olympian agendas of *dike*, Orestes, unlike both of his parents, finds himself deeply tormented and incapable of making a decision on his own. And so, rather than creating his own *dike* and upholding it as absolute truth, Orestes calls upon higher powers to guide him: Zeus and Apollo. Orestes says, “Zeus, Zeus, gaze on all that we try to do” (246), and consults an oracle of Apollo, which advises him to kill his mother. Despite the magnitude of the crime which Apollo advises him to commit, Orestes

nevertheless places his complete trust in Apollo, saying, “Apollo’s oracle will not forsake me” (269-70). It is solely because Orestes calls upon a higher Justice that his crime is pardoned; Orestes is the only character in the trilogy whose crime is truly committed in the name of Justice. The Chorus recognizes Orestes’ role as a transitional character and the societal change that is taking place when it sings, “Power grows on the side of the children” (379). This line implies that a generational shift is occurring on both the human and divine levels; ancient is being replaced with young.

When Orestes does finally confront his mother, the words each character exchanges are highly revealing. While Clytemnestra pleads with Orestes to spare her life, Orestes does not allow himself to be swayed by emotion at all. The words which he speaks to Clytemnestra reveal just how logical and levelheaded he is as he prepares to carry out her murder — in between his mother’s desperate pleas, he speaks statements such as “It will be you who kill yourself. It will not be I” (923), and “You killed, and it was wrong. Now suffer wrong” (930). Orestes, with his extreme rationality, is the absolute embodiment of Justice. Moreover, unlike both of his parents, Orestes feels extreme remorse after his crime, and even atones for it. Clearly, his crime is not vengeance, but justice; not pleasure, but necessity. It is also important to note that, whereas Artemis drove Agamemnon to sacrifice Iphigenia and the Furies drove Clytemnestra to murder Agamemnon, Orestes is driven to action by a male, not a female, deity. This is significant, and is just one of the many ways in which the male is associated with Reason and Order. At the conclusion of the trilogy, Aeschylus resolves the conflict of *dike* with the *deus ex machina*; Athena herself comes down to rule in favor of Orestes. Lastly, in order for the problem of justice to be fully resolved, the Furies are changed into the Eumenides, or ‘The Kindly Ones’. All of their stereotypical feminine qualities (irrationality, vengeance, and so on) are replaced with

masculine qualities of rationality and true justice, and it is through this masculinization that civilization is able to come forth.

At the start of *The Oresteia*, society is in the hands of a woman, Clytemnestra, and this matriarchy is characterized by utter chaos. By the end of the trilogy, however, justice is restored and society becomes undeniably patriarchal. Over the course of the trilogy, emotion, impulsiveness, and passion are gradually subdued, and Reason and *dike* ultimately reign. Aeschylus' goal in presenting the movement from matriarchy to patriarchy as the movement from chaos to order is singular: He implies that without the leadership of men — which, of course, entails the subjugation of females — ordered civilization is not possible.

Works Cited

Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*. Edited by David Grene et al., Third Edition ed., The University of Chicago Press, 2013.