

***The Oresteia* by Aeschylus (Alan H. Sommerstein)**

The *Oresteia* is a work that I have studied, on and off, for the whole of my professional life, and in which I have never ceased to find new depths of creativity and perception. I could have written about its complex web of imagery, its amazing exploitation of limited theatrical resources, its daring theology, or the way it adapts an already ancient myth to plug it directly into topical issues crucial to Athens at the moment of its production in 458 BCE – to name only a few possibilities. I have chosen instead to focus on the thoughts it stirs – and was designed to stir – about some broader questions that were vital then and are still vital now.

First, briefly, an idea of what the *Oresteia* is and what it is about. It is formally a trilogy of dramas, but the links between them are so close that it is best regarded as a single play in three (or perhaps four) acts. King Agamemnon of Argos, returning home after his conquest and destruction of Troy, is murdered in his bath by his wife Clytaemestra, who has been carrying on an affair with Agamemnon's cousin Aegisthus. Both have past wrongs to avenge: Agamemnon had offered his daughter, Iphigeneia, as a human sacrifice to enable the fleet to sail for Troy, and his father, Atreus, had killed Aegisthus' two brothers and tricked their father, his own brother Thyestes, with whom he had a feud, into eating their flesh. Agamemnon's son, Orestes, had been banished as a child by his mother; on reaching manhood he returns and takes revenge for his father by killing both his mother and Aegisthus, as the god Apollo had ordered him to do on pain of the most terrible punishments. He is pursued all over Greece by his mother's avenging Furies, until Apollo instructs him to go to Athens, where he stands trial – the first murder trial ever held – and is acquitted, on a tied vote, by direction of the president of the court, the goddess Athena. The Furies are enraged, and threaten to cast a blight on Athens, but Athena persuades them instead to take up residence there, where they will in future receive worship as the "Awesome Goddesses".

Now to the issues. All statements made about the *Oresteia* have support in its text. I can't give the references here; I just invite you to read the trilogy (all of it) in any good translation (like Chris Collard's in *The World's Classics*, Oxford 2002).

The morality of war. The war against Troy is presented as a just war. The Trojan Paris had not only abducted Helen, but also taken with him a good deal of valuable property; Helen's husband Menelaus, and his brother Agamemnon, were fully entitled to punish him and his city for this, and it was the will of Zeus that they should. (To be

sure, Agamemnon and Menelaus also had earthier motives like glory, booty, and the consolidation of their hegemonic position in Greece, but ancient Greeks weren't as hung up as we sometimes are on purity of motive.) Nevertheless, it was wrong for them to go to war (and old and wise heads in Argos were saying so at the time): the war was certain to cause many Greek deaths (in the end, of 1000 ships that went to Troy, only one came home), and it brought little actual benefit to any Greek except Menelaus (who got his wife back) and Agamemnon (who got some plunder and also the Trojan princess Cassandra as his concubine).

So far, so dovish. But any discussion of the morality of war also had a topical edge. In 480 BCE Athens was engaged in the biggest war, or set of wars, in her history so far. She had been fighting Persia for over twenty years, latterly in order to take revenge for the Persian sack of Athens and burning of Greek temples in their invasion of 480, and had just sent an expedition to Egypt which was the biggest Greek armed force to fight on non-Greek soil since mythical times; and she had also recently engaged, by her own choice, in war within Greece, in alliance with Argos, against the powerful bloc headed by Sparta. In one twelve-month period she had lost nearly 2000 citizen soldiers and sailors, from a total population no greater than that of Iceland today. Were *these* wars justified, either ethically or pragmatically? Aeschylus seems to think they were. When the *Oresteia* reaches Athens, there are several fairly obvious allusions to these wars, and they all seem favourable. Three times Orestes, or Apollo on his behalf, promises the Athenians an eternal alliance with Argos. The Furies, after accepting a new home in Athens, praise the Athenians as "protectors of the altars of Greece" – altars that the Persians had desecrated – and say they are cherished by Zeus *and by Ares* (the god of war). Most strikingly, Athena, having expressed the wish that Athens may be spared the sufferings of civil strife, at once goes on "Let there be external war – and there will be plenty of it!" – and this is apparently meant to be taken as a blessing. If the Trojan War was bad, why are Athens' current wars good? We are not told; but there is some reason to suppose that the answer we are meant to give is "because the Athenian people, knowing the risks, voted for them" – whereas the Trojan War was launched by a decision of the leaders alone. Does that mean that a democracy can never be wrong? Or does it just mean that when a decision has been democratically taken by a community, it becomes the decision of the *whole* community and should be endorsed and acted on even by those who opposed it in debate? And is either of these propositions valid? These are questions we are still asking.

The rationale of punishment. During most of the *Oresteia*, all punishment is private revenge. When someone is grievously wronged, he, or his next of kin, with such allies as they can muster, takes violent retribution for the wrong, retribution which may fall on the wrongdoer, or his kin, or (as in the case of Troy) his entire community. This retribution then itself constitutes a wrong to be avenged in its turn, and so on and so on. Thus when Thyestes seduced the wife of his brother Atreus, Atreus took revenge, as we have seen, by causing him to eat the flesh of two of his sons; for which a third son, Aegisthus, took revenge by seducing the wife of Atreus' son Agamemnon, and later having a hand in Agamemnon's murder; for which Agamemnon's son took revenge by killing Aegisthus This process is summed up in the motto *drasanta pathein*, "he who does must suffer", a principle which, we are told, will remain valid as long as Zeus remains on his throne.

Only it doesn't, and Zeus himself is the agent of change, instructing Apollo to give protection to Orestes and ensure, if possible, that he does *not* suffer for the terrible thing he has done. The Furies, the goddesses of retribution, are, well, furious about this; but they don't just fume against it – they also argue. Until now, no one has thought it necessary to do this. They have merely said: this is what you did to my father, or my daughter, or whoever; therefore it is my right and duty to do likewise to you. Orestes specifically names "my great grief for my father" as one of the reasons that make him determined to kill his mother and Aegisthus. Nobody has yet suggested that such revenge does anyone any good, unless it be to appease anger, whether the anger of the avenger himself or of the previous victim's ghost. But the Furies bring a new perspective. If Orestes is not punished, they claim, everyone will feel free to commit all kinds of violence. Fear is an essential component of a good society; no one will respect justice if he feels he has nothing to fear. Almost the same words are later repeated by Athena when she establishes a new judicial tribunal, the Council of the Areopagus, for the trial and punishment of murder. Punishment has been taken out of the hands of individuals and made the responsibility of the state. Retribution has been set aside; deterrence rules.

I cannot count the number of times I have heard well-meaning people assert, or presuppose, that since the retributive instinct is irrational, since two wrongs don't make a right, therefore the only valid rationale for punishment is reform or rehabilitation – eliding deterrence entirely. Aeschylus, contrariwise, ignores rehabilitation. He is right. Of course we ought to do all we can, once offenders are in our hands, to turn them into good citizens. But what we do for this purpose is not punishment; it is education, a special kind of remedial education. And we must always bear in mind that there are

other offenders, or potential offenders, who are *not* in our hands, and be careful not to compromise the basic message of the penal system that crime does not pay. I once saw a flyer, probably produced by CND or an anarchist group, with the slogan "A world without fear". Such a world would be fearful indeed. Athena gets it better: "From these fearsome faces [of the Furies] I foresee great benefit for my citizens here."

The assimilation of threatening newcomers. Athena, coming home to Athens, finds Orestes and the Furies in her temple. The Furies have such a ghastly appearance – aged, festooned with snakes, their eyes dripping blood – that Athena comments on it to their faces, before reminding herself that one does not "speak ill of another when he has done no wrong". Both they and Orestes then ask Athena to be the judge of their dispute; she, knowing the Furies can be exceedingly nasty if they don't get their way, thinks that the Athenian people, who may suffer as a result, ought to have a say in the process, and sets up the Council of the Areopagus to give them one. The jury's vote is equally divided, and as Athena has already ruled that a tie is to be resolved in favour of the defendant, Orestes is acquitted. The Furies behave exactly as Athena had anticipated: they rage against the Athenians who have despised them, and the "younger gods" (Apollo and Athena) who have "ridden roughshod" over their rights and privileges, and threaten Athens with a poisonous blight that will destroy all vegetation and all animal and human fertility.

There would have been two wrong ways to deal with the danger the Furies represented to Athens. One would have been to appease them by abandoning Orestes to his fate. Athena had been given a speciously plausible opportunity to do this when the Furies offered Orestes a challenge to decide the case by a contest of oaths: they will swear that he killed his mother; will he swear that he didn't? Athena has already perceived that the real issue is not *whether* Orestes committed this act but *why*, and she will have none of the Furies' ploy: "You seem to be more concerned with the appearance than the reality of justice ... I say you must not use oaths to gain an unjust victory." She knows that this course of action will involve risks for Athens, but that will not frighten her into denying Orestes a fair trial.

The other wrong way would have been to try and expel the Furies by force, or worse. If Athena had wanted to do this, she would have been able to. She is the favourite daughter of Zeus, and she has access to the keys of the safe where he keeps his thunderbolts. She could have destroyed the Furies in an instant – and she lets them know as much. But, she adds at once, there is no need to do so. She asks them to stay

in Athens, where they will receive reverent worship, and in whose future greatness they will share. She gives a new meaning to the slogan *drasanta pathein* by applying it to reciprocity in *good* treatment:

Such is the choice that now I offer you,
To share this land most god-beloved of all,
Well doing and well done by and well honoured.

(I cannot so much as type these lines without tears coming to my eyes.) It takes her four honeyed speeches, while the Furies sound out their rage over and over again, but she persuades them in the end, and they accept permanent residence at Athens, on the terms that they will bless all Athenians who respect justice and destroy all who do not. The trilogy ends as they are escorted by Athena and her people to their new home in a procession that combines elements of two great annual processions in real-life Athens, one in honour of the Awesome Goddesses (the Furies' new name) and one in honour of Athena.

Whether we mere mortals will always be able to handle analogous situations as fairly and skilfully as Athena does is as uncertain today as it was in Aeschylus' time. But try we must, if and when such situations arise.