

Aeschylus' Oresteia

Outline by John Protevi / Permission to reproduce granted for academic use
protevi@lsu.edu / <http://www.protevi.com/john/FH/PDF/Aeschylus.pdf>

1. The Usual Story
2. Historical-Political Interpretations
3. Feminist Interpretations
4. Further Reading

1. The Usual Story:

The *Oresteia* tells the story of the transformation from a tribal/family revenge cycle to state justice. It goes something like this: The house of Atreus is under a curse for ancient crimes, beginning with the patriarch, Pelops, but involving most notably Atreus's killing of his brother Thyestes's children and feeding them to him in a gruesome stew. Since Atreus had invited his brother over to feast under the guise of welcoming back the defeated party to a sovereignty dispute, he's guilty not only of spilling family blood, but, as if that weren't bad enough, he's also guilty of violating simple hospitality and over and above that, of violating hospitality to suppliants. Thyestes flees with the lone surviving child, the infant Aegisthus, who is presumably raised with only one aim in life, to avenge his slain siblings and disgraced father. He gets his chance, as we know, not against Atreus, but against his son, Agamemnon, who is himself guilty of family blood-spilling for sacrificing his daughter Iphigenia in order that the Greek host might sail to Troy in support of Atreus's other son, Agamemnon's brother Menelaus. Aegisthus connives with Clytemenstra, Agamemnon's wife, who hates Agamemnon because of Iphigenia's murder, to kill the great general on his return home from Troy. Agamemnon's son Orestes then enters the scene to avenge his father by killing his killers, his mother Clytemenstra and her lover Aegisthus. But no sooner does he accomplish this than he is set upon by the Furies, the ancient avengers of family blood.

To escape the Furies, Orestes appeals to Apollo, to whom he had appealed before his campaign against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, and who had granted him amnesty as it were for his crimes-to-be. Here we see another generational conflict over absolute power, this time in the divine register. The Furies are associated with the Titans, the ancient earth gods, who were overthrown by the Olympians, who were led by the sky god Zeus, and whose members include Apollo and Athena. [The conflict of earth and sky gods is an extremely important key in religious studies, especially in what's called 'comparative religion', a field of study analogous to 'comparative literature'.] Who is to have priority over this blood crime, the new gods, who have the ultimate weapon behind them, Zeus [Athena makes the threat explicit at *Eumenides* {Fagles trans} 836-38], or the old gods, who have always handled this sort of thing?

The answer, as we know, is that a human trial is to decide Orestes's guilt or innocence. This innovation by Athena removes justice from the family revenge cycle and places it in the hands of the community. That this founding act of civilization is a never-completed task is evident today in all the forces that appeal to family vengeance in the midst of our own justice system.

2. Historical-Political Interpretations

Let me mention a general point about the form of the regime, and then two specific ones, about the foreign and domestic policies of the democrats of Aeschylus' time.

A. Form of the regime, or tyranny/oligarchy vs. democracy: The "curse" on the house of Atreus represents the potential for intra- and inter-generational conflict that haunts any royal house in which the king is invested with sole control of vast resources. Such a "zero-sum game" in which there is only one winner who takes all and everyone else is the loser in the sense of having to take orders from the sole winner is simply a recipe for

violence. Now Aeschylus probably aimed this critique of the violence provoked by a winner-take-all system more at 6th century tyranny {or more pointedly, at the sort of exclusive small oligarchy contemporary 5th century Athenian aristocrats desired} than at Mycenaean kingship, about which he probably didn't know much with any certainty {it certainly has nothing much to do with the institution of *basileus* in the early polis, who had to negotiate with the council of elders}, but that doesn't detract from my point.

B. Democratic foreign policy. Aeschylus insists that the House of Atreus is from Argos rather than Sparta, as had been previously assumed in Greek myth. To understand the importance of this change, we should understand several points.

First, Argos and Sparta were enemies from time immemorial, so that any alliance with either side brought the immediate enmity of the other ['the friend of my enemy is my enemy, the enemy of my enemy is my friend' and so forth].

Second, in the early 460s Athens was, as always, politically divided between aristocrats and democrats, with the hoplite class in the middle but tending to democracy. The aristocrats tended to be Spartan sympathizers and were suspicious of Athenian involvement in the Aegean, since that lent power to the democrats according to the democracy / naval power connection you should be familiar with by now. Nonetheless, they were seduced by the riches of the Delian League and the opportunity it provided to fight their old enemy Persia, as evidenced by the career of the Athenian aristocrat and Spartan sympathizer Cimon.

The democrats, on the other hand, whole-heartedly favored the Aegean involvement, and therefore supported a peace with Persia [which officially came in 450] in order to avoid a 'two-front' conflict with Sparta, whom they thought would eventually take up arms against Athens to prevent their assuming an 'co-hegemony' with them based on an Aegean alliance of democratic cities. [This explains how Themistocles, the hero of Salamis, could end up in the Persian court: as an Athenian democrat, he hated the Spartans worse than the Persians.]

Now in 464 Sparta suffered an earthquake and the helots revolted. Cimon gathered 4000 Athenian hoplites and went to Sparta's aid in 462. The Spartans ignominiously sent him home however, which led the Athenians to ostracize Cimon in 461, thus eliminating the aristocrats's most effective leader and clearing the way for the democrats, who then consummated an alliance with Argos, sided with Megara against Corinth, and eventually entered into the so-called First Peloponnesian War. One of their first acts in the war was to build the Long Walls from Athens to the Piraeus, walls which will play an enormously important role in the next decades.

In this context (the *Oresteia* dates from 458), Aeschylus's insistence in Orestes's farewell speech (*Eumenides* 754-77) that Argos will never attack Athens but will instead always fight alongside her is often cited as strong evidence of Aeschylus's support for the democratic position in this crucial matter of Athenian foreign policy. The Argive alliance was only part of the democratic agenda, however; we now turn to one of their most controversial domestic policies, which is also echoed in the *Oresteia*, namely the restriction of the role of the Areopagus Council to that of homicide court.

C. Democratic domestic policy: By the 460s the Areopagus Council was a holdover aristocratic institution, dating to the early 7th century, but now under attack by the democrats. It was composed of ex-archons, and was resolutely anti-democratic in structure and sentiment. It had over the course of its long existence evolved a series of traditional oversight and judicial roles that gave it considerable power. In 462, with Cimon absent attempting to help the Spartans, the democratic leader Ephialtes initiated a reform that stripped it of all its old functions, *except that of homicide court*. He was assassinated for his troubles shortly thereafter, but was then succeeded by Pericles, the dominant figure of the mid-5th century who helped orchestrate Cimon's ostracism upon his return in 461.

The flattery of the Eumenides by Athena is thus often seen as Aeschylus's message to the aristocratic Areopagus: yes, your ancient roles are now severely restricted, but look how important your remaining roles

are! 'In complete honesty I promise you a place / of your own, deep hidden under ground that is yours by right / where you shall sit on shining chairs beside the hearth / to accept devotions offered by your citizens' (*Eumenides* 816 ff). That the aristocrats must remain content with what the democrats give them by virtue of *Realpolitik* is then easy to read behind Athena's threat at 836-38, which we have already mentioned: 'I have Zeus behind me. Do / we need to speak of that? I am the only god / who knows the keys to where his thunderbolts are locked.' As Aristotle says somewhere in the *Politics*, 'those who control the arms control the regime'.

The following simplified chart may be of help:

Democrats	Aristocrats
Naval power / Salamis	Land power / Marathon
Themistocles / Ephialtes / Pericles	Miltiades / Cimon
Pro-peace w/ Persia	Against peace w/ Persia
Pro-Argive alliance / Anti-Spartan	Pro-Spartan / Anti-Argive alliance
Restrict Areopagus Council powers	Retain traditional Areopagus Council powers

3. Feminist Interpretations

Some major targets of feminist analysis:

A. Entire structure of the trilogy is legitimation of patriarchy at all levels: human, mythic/heroic, divine. Defeat of the female and installation of patriarchy is triumph of reason, progress of civilization, etc

1. Human level: Clytemnestra as individual woman's rebellion punished by death; legitimation of contemporary Athenian misogyny and restriction of role of women.

2. Heroic: Defeat of Amazons: the Areopagus as site of defeat of the Amazons by Theseus at very founding of Athens is the heroic legitimation of contemporary Athenian patriarchy.

3. Divine: Defeat of Furies; taming and transformation of them into Eumenides. Celebration of forceful triumph of male-identified Olympian gods over female earth gods as divine sanction of contemporary Athenian patriarchy.

B. Monstrous role of Clytemnestra as demonization of court woman in democratic Athens. In Homer, Aegisthus is arguably more active and more central to death of Agamemnon. In Aeschylus he is a non-entity, while Clytemnestra assumes monstrous proportions. Some have seen this as indicative of a demonization of court women, a necessity in the move from an aristocratic to a democratic Athens: if the political class was to expand to include the urban masses, then the class difference between noble and commoner could no longer be politically crucial, and so noble women needed to be downgraded relative to commoner men. Some scholars have seen a similar structure in the demonization of *ancien régime* noble women [e.g., Marie Antoinette] by French Republicans.

C. Apollo's theory of paternity. Multiple metaphors: agriculturally, she is only garden plot for the development of the male seed; mythically, Athena sprang from Zeus alone; philosophically, the woman is just raw material to be molded by active male principle. Thus women are only a dangerous though necessary means for prolonging male lineage. The maternal material is to be mastered, so that the detour of the mother's matter does not break, but only provides the circumference of, the circle of the species. The material mother is only a sign, a relay, even a mirror for the formal self-reflection of the father in the son and the historical continuation of his name in the son. This teleological semenology of animal generation is literally a patri-archy, since the father, the one responsible for form and finality, is also the efficient cause, the source of the change, the *arché kineseôs*. The formal identity of father and child recuperates the exteriority of generation via numerical material/maternal

difference. Thus form dominates repetition in the political physics of the Aristotelian body politic, the circular and hylomorphic reproduction of the species.

4. Further Reading:

K.J. Dover, "The Political Aspect of Aeschylus's *Eumenides*." *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77 (1957), 230-37.

Anthony J. Podlecki, *The Political Background of Aeschylean Tragedy*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966.

GEM de Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1972, pp183-85.

Froma Zeitlin, "The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in the *Oresteia*." In *Modern Critical Interpretations of The Oresteia*. Edited by Harold Bloom. NY: Chelsea House, 1988.