

# interpretation

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# AESCHYLUS' *ORESTEIA* AND THE ORIGINS OF POLITICAL LIFE

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[H]e who is unable to live in society, or who has no need because he is self-sufficient must be either a beast or god: he is no part of a polis.<sup>1</sup>

For Aristotle there is no man qua man except political man. Outside the polis man's humanity is necessarily transformed into bestiality or divinity. That man's sociality results from his in-between status is the assumption on which Aristotle builds his political teaching. However, it is an assumption that remains for the most part unexamined in the writings of Aristotle. It is in Greek tragedy rather than Greek philosophy that we find the most explicit consideration of the boundaries of political life. This paper will examine the origins and limits of political life as presented in the *Oresteia* by Aeschylus. Such an examination will show that tragedy provides the ultimate basis for both the spiritedness and moderation necessary for political life.

## I

*Agamemnon*, the first play of the trilogy, is set in a world characterized by violence. The abduction of Helen, the sacrifice of Iphigenia, and the long brutal Trojan War provide the background. The watchman offers hope that Agamemnon's return will restore order and signal an end to the violent past. But such hope is futile. Clytemnestra's intentions soon become clear. She kills Agamemnon, and the stream of blood continues to flow.

Clytemnestra's actions initially appear to be motivated by her desire to avenge the sacrifice of Iphigenia. She acts, in a manly way, to defend her home.<sup>2</sup> Clytemnestra believes that Agamemnon sacrificed their daughter in the service of his pride. He denied his private attachment to the family in order to act publicly. Clytemnestra's position is not without merit. The sacrifice of a daughter is a great price to pay for revenge against the kidnapper of a brother's wife. Both the claims of the immediate family and the claim of justice for a brother are no doubt legitimate, but when placed in opposition to each other the former seems far more natural and the latter more of a point of honor.

Aeschylus, however, presents a dimension to the sacrifice not understood by Clytemnestra. It is true that Agamemnon must sacrifice Iphigenia because of his pride, but his pride is characterized not by a denial of nature as much as by a denial of the gods. The gods were not angry because he was leaving his family to fight a war. Far from opposing his public action, they encouraged it. The goddess Artemis was angry because Agamemnon claimed to surpass even her in his skill with the bow. He failed to recognize the qualitative difference between the gods and himself.<sup>3</sup> Agamemnon sees the sacrifice of Iphigenia as anything but prideful and

self-serving. He “puts on the yoke strap of compulsion” and massacres the “pride of his house.”<sup>4</sup> His child is the foremost example of his pride, and her sacrifice can only represent an acceptance of necessity.

Clytemnestra sees only that Agamemnon has killed their daughter in order to pursue the glories of war. She takes her bearings from physical nature rather than from the gods. She therefore acts to avenge Agamemnon’s crime against nature. Yet her act is not simply a private one. Her rejection of Agamemnon cannot be understood in abstraction from her acceptance of Aegisthus. His sudden entrance late in the play must inform our view of previous events. Clytemnestra’s earlier “manliness” may not have been self-generated. In fact, Aegisthus claims that his own revenge for the crime of Agamemnon’s father is the motive of the murder. He merely used Clytemnestra as an instrument, for “deception was clearly the woman’s part.”<sup>5</sup> Thus Clytemnestra’s concerns fade with the entrance of Aegisthus. What appeared to be simply a private act of revenge is shown to have important political consequences. The act leads to the establishment of a tyranny.<sup>6</sup> Clytemnestra no longer speaks with the confidence of one in control. Instead she cautions the chorus to acquiesce and be content with the new order. “Such is the saying of a woman.”<sup>7</sup> Women lack the ability for independent action. The newly established tyranny can only be ended with the return of Orestes.

The *Libation Bearers* tells the story of Orestes’ return. In avenging the murder of her daughter, Clytemnestra has also killed the father of her son. Apollo tells Orestes that it is his duty to avenge his father’s death, but such revenge entails a fundamental problem. To avenge his father he must kill his mother. He has an equally strong blood tie to each parent. Nonetheless, Orestes does act in his father’s name. Several factors may have served to break the deadlock arising from Orestes’ dual parentage. His own maleness, in addition to the urging of Apollo, might have been sufficient. But also, unlike Electra, Orestes is concerned with the political dimension of the crime.<sup>8</sup> He does not wish to “leave the citizens of the most glorious city upon earth . . . subject to a pair of women.”<sup>9</sup> Thus Orestes acts and kills “the two tyrants . . . who killed [his] father.”<sup>10</sup> Yet his action does not end the flow of blood. Orestes has aroused the wrath of the Erinyes. We have yet to find an escape from the world of violence.

It is the *Eumenides* that offers the possibility of an escape. The Erinyes pursue Orestes in order to avenge his crime against nature. “It was because of evil that they were born.”<sup>11</sup> It is their duty to punish Orestes. The fulfillment of their duty, however, means the end of Orestes and his house. Their defense of nature would ultimately lead to the destruction of all life. The cycle of revenge would be, in principle, unending.

Apollo offers an alternative to Orestes. He purifies Orestes by means of animal rather than human sacrifice, and sends Orestes to Athena to seek a resolution of his conflict with the Erinyes.<sup>12</sup> Apollo thereby opens up the possibility that the claims of nature may be restrained by reason. Athena, the goddess of wisdom, may check the Erinyes.

Athena declines to rule in favor of a jury of her finest citizens. (She thereby suggests an even more radical alternative than that offered by Apollo. Divine wisdom might give way to human reason.) Each side presents its case to the jury. The Erinyes claim that should Orestes be vindicated "every man would find a way to act at his own caprice."<sup>13</sup> The Erinyes are a necessary, though limited, restraint on man. They did not seek to punish Clytemnestra, for she did not kill one of her own blood. The Erinyes deal only with the crimes men commit against nature. To kill one of your own blood is to deny your connection with nature. But as we have seen in Orestes' case, nature may present conflicting claims.

Apollo's defense of Orestes rests on the simplicity of nature. He argues that "she who is called the child's mother is not its begetter, but the nurse of the newly sown conception."<sup>14</sup> Athena, herself, is proof of this argument. The jury, however, is unable to decide the case. They are a human jury, and hence see a connection to both mothers and fathers. They see the claims of both nature and rational restraint. Their natures are split as are their votes.

Athena must decide the outcome. She does so in favor of Orestes. For she was not born of woman and "approves the male in all things."<sup>15</sup> Orestes and his house are saved. The claims of nature are restrained by reason. Athena's assertion has allowed man to avoid the path to inevitable destruction. She also suggests the possibility that men may exercise some control over their actions. She calls for a jury to rule the city for all time. "Neither anarchy nor despotism shall the citizens defend and respect."<sup>16</sup> Political life is possible, but only because of Athena's assertion of male supremacy, or the supremacy of reason. Without such an assertion the conflict would remain.

We should note an additional qualification. The play does not end with Orestes' acquittal. Athena does not simply enforce her will and discredit the Erinyes. They represent man's passionate side, the side that provides his most direct connection with nature. Their claims cannot be neglected. Athena persuades them to accept a new role. They will dwell in the earth and promote fertility. They will still serve to remind man of his natural origins, but they will do so in a positive rather than a negative manner. Nature isn't simply overcome. It is re-directed.

## II

Yet perhaps we should be suspicious of a tragedy with a happy ending. The resolution of man's conflicts, as presented by Aeschylus, may not be as simple or successful as it appears. Athena's assertion in favor of the male provides for the public to rule the private and for reason to rule passion. By allowing for such rule, men are released from the grip of natural necessity and given some measure of control over their lives. But we must ask if Aeschylus supplies an adequate basis for such rule.

Orestes is saved only by a denial of the female's role in procreation. The denial is justified by Athena's existence. But can Athena serve as a model for men?

There would be no problem if men were gods. Athena could not kill her mother since she had none. The complex origin of human conflict is transcended by divine simplicity. However, we have no example of a man not born of woman. We see only a goddess not born of a goddess. The jurors equal votes attest to man's complexity. They therefore call into question the efficacy of a divine solution to human problems.

The equal votes suggest a further problem with the play's resolution. Although Athena has established a jury of men, the jury does not rule. The men prove to be incapable of action. The jury scene is reminiscent of a comedy.<sup>17</sup> Men act as though they are in control of events that are obviously beyond their power. The failure of the jury is the most explicit example of the relative unimportance of human beings in the play. Man's conflicts may merely reflect the more important conflict between the young and old gods. It is Apollo, a young god, who tells Orestes to avenge his father's murder, and it is the Erinyes, old divinities, who seek to avenge Clytemnestra's death. Thus it would seem that the human conflict is ultimately subordinate to the conflict between the young and the old gods.

It is this divine conflict that provides the play's most explicit treatment of the problem of rule. Athena offers political rule to man as an alternative to violent conquest. Political rule allows man to overcome a bestial condition of continual bloodletting. But as we have seen, the establishment of such rule depends upon Athena's intervention. Political rule is not of human origin. It is a gift from the gods. However, this divine origin may be no less problematic than the more directly human resolution.

Among the gods, conflicts have traditionally been resolved by violence: Kronos castrated his father Uranus; Zeus bound his father Kronos.<sup>18</sup> Aeschylus seeks to obscure this violent and exclusive aspect of rule. Like the chorus of *Agamemnon*, he envisions a world where men are neither "sackers of cities" nor "captives of others."<sup>19</sup> Athena's treatment of the Erinyes at the end of the trilogy might even suggest the fulfillment of that vision.

But this final act of conciliation is not without problems. The conflict between the young and old gods has already been resolved. The young gods have gained preponderance by the beginning of the play. The Erinyes are, in fact, at the mercy of Athena. In the end their claims are recognized by Athena's pronouncement, rather than the establishment of an independent basis for their role. The "resolution" leads to a kind of exile. Like Clytemnestra at the end of *Agamemnon*, they choose, in womanly fashion, submission rather than a more violent form of conquest. We see no reason why Athena could not choose simply to disregard their claims in the future. Her concern with the Erinyes at the end of the play seems superfluous. It appears almost as an afterthought.

We may see an analogue to the divine problem of rule in the ancient human conflict that lies behind the events of the play. The trilogy begins in *media res*. In *Agamemnon* we are constantly reminded of the connection of current problems with past conflicts, particularly with the conflict between Atreus and Thyestes.

Given this connection, a truly happy ending would require that we be able to resolve the conflicting claims of the ancient quarrel.

According to Graves, Atreus became king because he possessed the sheep with the golden fleece. Thyestes, his brother, seduced the king's wife, Aerope, in order to obtain the sheep. In reprisal, Atreus killed all but one of Thyestes' children, cut them up, and fed them to him in a stew. The one child who escaped was Aegisthus, Clytemnestra's co-conspirator.<sup>20</sup>

There is no immediate danger of a similar problem arising in this play. Orestes has no brother. Yet the problem of rule among brothers represents the most radical political problem. As brothers, there is little to distinguish their claims. It would seem that they should share equally in their father's legacy. Athena's establishment of a democracy represents the attempt to deal with such equal political claims. But as we see, rule is ultimately indivisible. Democracy fails because it does not provide the requisite unity. This ancient conflict represents the most profound problem of the play. If it remains unresolved men are destined to live in a world characterized by violence or tyranny.

### III

In the final analysis, Aeschylus does hold out a legitimate hope for man, but the resolution is neither simple nor assured. In the first place, Aeschylus shows us not only Atreus and Thyestes, but also Agamemnon and Meneleus. Rather than seduce his brother's wife, Agamemnon joins in the fight against the abductor of Helen. Agamemnon and Meneleus even share the command of the Argive forces when faced with this common enemy. Their cooperation is an alternative to the ancient conflict. It is, in a way, the purpose of the play to justify and expand the grounds for that kind of cooperation.

Agamemnon and Meneleus provide only a beginning. They are still part of a world that is unable to reconcile its public and private concerns. There remains a fundamental conflict between the two spheres. The concerns of the warrior male are at odds with those of the weaver female.<sup>21</sup> Aeschylus attempts to develop a middle ground between the warrior and the weaver. Through a redefinition, the public will serve to reconcile warrior and weaver in such a way as to recognize the necessity and desirability of maintaining a sphere for each.

But we have suggested a fundamental flaw with the "political" solution of the play — its impotence. This impotence is overcome only by a denial of certain claims. The conflict between Atreus and Thyestes is resolved only by the death of Aegisthus and the end of his house. The conflict between maternal and paternal claims is resolved only by the abandonment of the mother's claim. In every case the bloodletting ends only by fiat.

But we should note that there is a difference between the revenge against Orestes and the other acts of vengeance. Without the intervention of the Erinyes, Orestes' act would have ended the bloodletting. The Erinyes pursuit of Orestes is unique in the course of events presented by Aeschylus. In all past acts of revenge a

human being has been directly responsible. Here the Erinyes take the form of something not unlike conscience. While they are personified in the play, their threat seems to be directed more to Orestes' psychological than physical well-being. Orestes cannot forget his crime against his natural origins. His mind keeps the crime alive. Thus one solution to Orestes' problem is a kind of forgetting.

Apollo may represent a model for Orestes. In the play Apollo's ascendance to the throne of prophecy is said to have been quite peaceful. In most other accounts his rise is by means of violence.<sup>22</sup> Aeschylus suggests that although violence is a part of the past, and in fact may be responsible for our current fortunes, we may act as if that violence had not occurred. The duplicity of nature led Orestes to the unnatural slaughter of his mother. He had no choice but to deny his mother or deny himself. His mother's act deprived him of his place in the world. His action was necessary to restore order to his world. Without such an act Orestes would have been left without family or city. He would have remained a permanent exile. Orestes cannot recognize both the necessity and the obscenity of his act and maintain his sanity. Yet forgetfulness, by itself, is only a partial solution to the problems of the play. Ultimately, it may be more appropriate to the problems raised by Aegisthus and Thyestes than to the more immediate problem of Orestes. It is easier to forget an ancient crime than the recent slaughter of one's father by one's mother. The example of Apollo is inadequate without the assertion of Athena. The final problem, the denial of the female, remains.

We have said that the apparent resolution of the conflict between male and female was unsatisfactory because it was divine rather than human. We should note, however, that even the divine resolution is more complex than it originally appears to be. While it is based on a denial of the female, the origin of that denial is the goddess Athena. Zeus has a child without the aid of a goddess, but the child is female. In fact, it is Athena who controls the outcome of the play. However, Athena appears to represent mainly male attributes — reason, assertiveness, and public-spiritedness. We are led to ask, In what sense is she feminine?

The answer arises in her treatment of the Erinyes. Athena's defense of Orestes would seem to undercut the basis for their claims. It is the form of Athena's rule that may finally provide a place for the feminine. For she is neither violent nor tyrannical. She rules by persuasion. It is the combination of forgetting and persuasion that allows for the happy ending. The violent past must be forgotten so that a new order can be founded.

This new order is made possible by the development of man's reason. At the beginning of the play man's knowledge was simply empirical. He could only react to the chaotic world perceived by his senses. Apollo's defense of Orestes relies on our forgetting the world as it appears to us. Order is found by an appeal to abstract argument rather than to the phenomena themselves. Thus reason is no longer passive. It does not simply have to accept the world it perceives. It may have a role in forming the world. However, we must remember that the abstraction cannot be complete. That is why Athena rules by persuasion rather than mere assertion. The

true resolution of male and female allows for the ordering of nature without the destruction of nature.

It is this resolution that makes democracy less problematic. By persuasion a leader may direct the demos. He can provide the unity necessary for rule, while maintaining the natural heterogeneity. The public now has elements of the formerly private softness and public hardness. Because of its union with the soft element, the hard element is in the service of maintaining, rather than homogenizing, the heterogeneous whole. The family will see more clearly its connection with the community. For it is through the convention of marriage that the daughter leaves her natural family in order to begin a new family of her own. The literal sacrifice of Iphigenia reflects the figurative sacrifice of the daughter that lies at the heart of the community.

Yet precisely because of its crucial role, the community is always in danger. It is always threatened by the jealousy of Clytemnestra or the pride of Agamemnon. The community is in some crucial respect artificial. Men must remember that its order is not simply legitimate. That is why Aeschylus' portrayal of human rule is comic. His comedy provides a soft reminder to men of their incompleteness. That is also the reason for the Erinyes' continued existence. They will no longer support man's violent destruction, but they may, instead, destroy him through sterility. Their existence points to the upper limits of man's nature. He has escaped bestiality, but he cannot assume divinity. Aeschylus points to the problem Sophocles will develop more fully in *Oedipus*. Men cannot deny their origins and still be able to live in this world.

Tragedy illuminates man's precarious position. It shows the limits within which his actions must fall, and that includes his highest act, political philosophy. Man's thought may take him to these limits, but, in a sense, only tragedy can indicate what lies beyond. In so doing it shows us the need for the spirited escape from nature and the limits to that spirit.

All references to the *Oresteia*, unless otherwise noted, will be to Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*, all translated with an introduction by Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

<sup>1</sup>*Politics*, Aristotle. Ernest Barker (Cambridge: Oxford University, 1969), p. 6

<sup>2</sup>The "manliness" of Clytemnestra is indicated in several ways. In the play's first reference to Clytemnestra the watchman speaks of a "woman's man-counseling heart" (*Agamemnon*, 11). Later, the chorus is reluctant to accept Clytemnestra's word regarding Agamemnon's safe return. At 487 they say "a woman's ordinance spreads far, traveling fast; but dying fast, a rumor voiced by a woman comes to nothing." But Clytemnestra's "rumor" proves to be true. As Clytemnestra says, her intelligence "is not that of a young girl" (*Agamemnon*, 276). Finally, when Agamemnon returns home, he observes the "unwomanly" character of Clytemnestra's behavior (*Agamemnon*, 940). As Hugh Lloyd-Jones explains, Clytemnestra should be seen in opposition to Penelope, the wife of Odysseus (*Agamemnon*, p. 1). Penelope sits at home weaving while she waits and hopes for the safe return of her husband. It is Penelope who is the purest example of the womanly. Ironically, it is such womanly concerns as home and family that Clytemnestra purports to defend by her plot against

Agamemnon. But since “it is not a woman’s part to desire contention” (*Agamemnon*, 940), she must reject the womanly if she is to contend, especially if she is to contend successfully with Agamemnon.

<sup>3</sup>According to the *Cypria* (Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*, [New York: Putnam, 1926], p. 493), Artemis sent the storm to Aulis, preventing Agamemnon’s departure, because of Agamemnon’s boast that he surpassed even Artemis in his skill with the bow.

<sup>4</sup>*Agamemnon*, 208.

<sup>5</sup>*Agamemnon*, 1636.

<sup>6</sup>We should remember that the original quarrel between Atreus and Thyestes was over the question of the rule. There was no distinction between public and private with regard to the ancient quarrel. Perhaps the ancient blurring of public and private points to the defining characteristic of tyranny. It is incompatible with distinctions between various spheres of action, and sees only one principle of action. Distinctions such as public and private suggest a kind of heterogeneity that is antithetical to tyranny.

<sup>7</sup>*Agamemnon*, 1661.

<sup>8</sup>The three reasons should not be seen in opposition to one another. They each indicate that side of man that seeks to transcend or overcome nature. They are the forces that move Agamemnon.

<sup>9</sup>*The Libation Bearers*, 303. Orestes’ description of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra may appear to contradict the earlier discussion of Clytemnestra’s manliness. Rather than a contradiction, I believe it is the final step in the development of our understanding of Agamemnon’s murder. We began with a manly Clytemnestra acting to defend her home. We then saw how Clytemnestra’s apparent manliness might merely be a cover for the man who was actually in control — Aegisthus. Orestes’ description may suggest that Aegisthus is no more manly than Clytemnestra. He is not a warrior. He hides behind a woman, and even allows her to commit the crime. While Clytemnestra acts like a man in the name of her home, Aegisthus acts like a woman in order to gain power. This confusion of male and female is another aspect of the confusion of public and private mentioned in note 6. This neuterization or homogenization leads to the destruction of the family (Agamemnon’s family), and the establishment of a tyranny. In other words, it leads to the end of both public and private spheres.

<sup>10</sup>*The Libation Bearers*, 972.

<sup>11</sup>*The Eumenides*, 71.

<sup>12</sup>This is important because it indicates an alternative to the continual bloodletting among men. We should see this sacrifice in opposition to the human sacrifices of the Trojan War— sacrifices that “knew no fire” (*Agamemnon*, 71). Fire is the symbol of man’s art, and it is the artless sacrifices of the war that characterize the Homeric world— a world filled with the violence of nature.

<sup>13</sup>*The Eumenides*, 495. Here I follow *Aeschylus I: Oresteia*, translated with an introduction by Richard Lattimore (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1953). A more literal reading would be “for this deed will harmonize all mortals with easy-handedness.”

<sup>14</sup>*The Eumenides*, 657.

<sup>15</sup>*The Eumenides*, 737.

<sup>16</sup>*The Eumenides*, 696.

<sup>17</sup>Anne Lebeck, *The Oresteia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 135.

<sup>18</sup>Robert Graves. *The Greek Myths* (New York: Braziller, 1959), I, 37-44.

<sup>19</sup>*Agamemnon*, 472.

<sup>20</sup>Graves, *The Greek Myths*, II, 43-48.

<sup>21</sup>In the course of the play we really see neither warrior nor weaver. As we have said in note 1, Clytemnestra is an obvious contrast to Penelope. Although Agamemnon was certainly a warrior, the Agamemnon we see is a man returning home, hoping to end his days in peace. Thus the play represents a merging of the two spheres.

The development of distinct spheres for public and private represents a move away from the violence and tyranny of the ancient world (see note 6). However, the problem of the play is that the two spheres, as originally constituted, are in opposition to one another. The man wants the glories of war, while the woman seeks a peaceful homelife. What is needed is a principle of reconciliation

between the two spheres. As Arlene Saxonhouse explains, the woman needs the protection of the public man, and the man needs the woman to provide warriors for the community. The *Oresteia* develops the possibility of a middle ground where the two spheres can meet without mutual destruction or dissolution.

For a further examination of warrior and weaver, see Arlene Saxonhouse, "Men, Women, War and Politics: Family and Polis in Euripides and Aristophanes," presented at the 1976 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association.

<sup>22</sup>Graves, *The Greek Myths*, I, 76-77.