Life Lessons from Aeschylus' *The Oresteia*

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Among the many great works of Greek plays and tragedies, only one trilogy survives—*The Oresteia* by Aeschylus. Aeschylus lived from 525 to 456 B.C., was born of a noble family, and is thought to have fought in the Persian Wars, including at the famous Battle of Marathon. *The Oresteia*, comprised of *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*, tells the story of the tragedy of the royal family of Argos—most principally the death of Agamemnon and the vengeance which follows within the family.

Agamemnon

In *Agamemnon*, the play begins as the watchman and the chorus wait for news from the Trojan War, a famous war in Greek literature told most prominently in Homer's *The Iliad,* written approximately three centuries before Aeschylus. The war began when Paris of Troy takes Helen, the wife of Menelaus, back with him to Troy. Menelaus then gathers the forces of the Greek city-states, including his brother Agamemnon, to go attack Troy and retrieve Helen. In the early lines of *The Oresteia,* news comes that the war is over and Agamemnon is returning home a victorious hero. Waiting for him is his wife Clytaemnestra, who welcomes him home with crimson tapestries spread along the floor to lead him to the palace doors.

Let the red stream flow and bear him home

To the home he never hoped to see—Justice,

Lead him in! (902-903)

But these crimson tapestries betray an ominous note as Clytaemnestra continues:

Leave all the rest to me.

The spirit within me never yields to sleep.

We will set things right, with the god's help.

We will do whatever Fate requires. (903-905)

Agamemnon initially hesitates at this welcome:

Never cross my path with robes and draw the lightning.

Never—only the gods deserve the pomps of honour

And the stiff brocades of fame. To walk on them…

I am human, and it makes my pulses stir

With dread. (914-917)

He does, however, follow Clytaemnestra to the palace. Agamemnon has also brought home a concubine, the seer Cassandra, and she sees through Clytaemnestra's plans. Clytaemnestra, rather than welcoming her husband home with honor, intends to murder him and Cassandra.

One of her reasons sits at the background of the narrative, one that Aeschylus' audience would have known well. In order to secure fair winds for his trip to Troy, Agamemnon had previously sacrificed his and Clytaemnestra's daughter, Iphigeneia. After killing both Cassandra and Agamemnon, the chorus accuses Clytaemnestra of having been driven insane, but she defends herself by referencing Iphigeneia:

And now you sentence me?—

You banish me from the city, curses breathing

Down my neck? But he—

Name one charge you brought against him then.

He thought no more of it [sacrificing Iphigeneia] than killing a beast,

And his flocks were rich, teeming in their fleece,

But he sacrificed his own child, our daughter,

The agony I labored into love

To charm away the savage winds of Thrace. (1436-1444)

Clytaemnestra's motives, however, are not quite as clear cut as one may think. Yes, Agamemnon had sacrificed their child. Yes, he had returned with a concubine. But Clytaemnestra had a lover as well, Aegisthus, who had his own reasons for Agamemnon's death,[1] although Clytaemnestra is portrayed as the mastermind and aggressor in this play in a way unlike nearly all others.[2] Her words end the play and provide further suggestion that her motives may lie more in line with her lust for power than her vengeance on Agamemnon for the death of their daughter:

Let them howl—they're impotent. You and I have power now.

We will set the house in order once and for all. (1707-1708)

With *Agamemnon* ended, the stage is set for *The Libation Bearers.*

The Libation Bearers

Clytaemnestra's words of confidence are premature, however, as one remains who might take vengeance on the death of Agamemnon—their son, Orestes. Several years have passed when Orestes, spurred on by Apollo, returns to Argos to exact vengeance on his mother and Aegisthus for their murder of his father, Agamemnon. Orestes finds his sister, Electra, at the grave of their father, bringing him libations at the request of her mother to try to stop her bad dreams. The chorus joins them and encourages them to exact revenge.

Powers of destiny, mighty queens of Fate!—

By the will of Zeus your will be done,

[1]Aegisthus had reason for revenge on account of how Agamemnon's father, Atreus, had mistreated Aegisthus' father, Thyestes.

[2]More on this difference later.

Press on to the end now,

Justice turns the wheel.

'Word for word, curse for curse

Be born now,' Justice thunders,

Hungry for retribution,

'stroke for bloody stroke be paid.

The one who acts must suffer.'

Three generations strong the word resounds. (312-321)

With the urging of the Chorus and upon learning of Clytaemnestra's dreams of a snake that had nursed from her and then turned to kill her, Orestes says, "I turn serpent, I kill her. So the vision says" (536-537). Despite these reasons, Orestes still dreads to kill his mother, but Pylades, the companion with which Orestes had traveled back to Argos, reminds him of the word of Apollo and the oracle at Delphi.

What of the future? What of the Prophet God Apollo,

The Delphic voice, the faith and oaths we swear?

Make all mankind your enemy, not the gods. (887-889)

With this advice, Orestes is finally committed to his task, and he follows through on his plan and slays both his mother, Clytaemnestra, and her lover, Aegisthus. Yet despite the prompting of Apollo, the interpretation of his mother's dreams, and the encouragement of the chorus, as soon as the deed is done the chorus says:

Oh the dreadful work…

Death calls and she is gone.

But oh, for you, the survivor,

Suffering is just about to bloom. (1001-1004)

The Libation Bearers ends, as did *Agamemnon*, with a royal death and the threat of vengeance yet to come.

The Eumenides

Whereas *The Libation Bearers* begins with Orestes returning to enact vengeance, *The Eumenides* has an even more terrifying scene as The Furies, dark spirits of the underground, are spurred on by Clytaemnestra's ghost and pursue Orestes as he flees to Delphi to consult Apollo. Orestes arrives at the temple of Apollo to pray, and Apollo responds:

No, I will never fail you, through to the end

Your guardian standing by your side or worlds away!

I will show no mercy to your enemies! …

I persuaded you to take your mother's life. (67-69, 87)

Apollo puts The Furies into a deep sleep, but the Ghost of Clytaemnestra wakes them to renew their chase with vigor. To protect Orestes, Apollo sends him to the Acropolis of Athens to consult Athena. After a conversation with The Furies, Athena convinces them to allow the court at the Areopagus to try the case. Despite agreeing to this arrangement, the leader of The Furies says, "Talk on, talk on. But if I lose the trial I will return in force to crush the land" (734-735). Soon after, just before the vote, Athena claims that she will cast her lot for Orestes, meaning that if the lots are equal, then he will go free (750). Upon receiving the count Athena exclaims: "The man goes free, cleared of the charge of blood. The lots are equal" (767). After losing the case, The Furies repeat two speeches in their anger. The first begins "You, you younger gods!—you have ridden down the ancient laws, wrenched them from my grasp…" (792-793//820-821). The second repeated speech begins "But for me to suffer such disgrace…" (847//879). Both speeches demonstrate the anger and sense of injustice that The Furies feel at Orestes' acquittal. In an amazing turn, however, Athena offers The Furies a place of honor in Athens as opposed to their current positions under the earth, and they accept. The play, and thus the entire trilogy, ends with the Women of the City praising Athena and The Furies:

You great good Furies, bless the land with kindly hearts,

You Awesome Spirits, come—exult in the blazing torch,

Exultant in our fires, journey on.

Cry, cry in triumph, carry on the dancing on and on!

This peace between Athena's people and their guests

Must never end. All-seeing Zeus and Fate embrace,

Down they come to urge our union on—

Cry, cry, in triumph, carry on the dancing on and on! (1050-1057)

Analysis

The Oresteia endures as a Great Book because of its timeless exploration of issues such as revenge and justice, as well as the fascinating portrayal of a multi-faceted Clytaemnestra. In our short time today, we will briefly explore these themes in *The Oresteia* and how we as Christians might respond in light of the message of this book and, more importantly, the teaching of Scripture.

Revenge

The narrative of *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers* reads almost like a modern-day mafia-family blood feud. One death leads to a cycle of violence that presumably only ends when all on one side of the skirmish have been eliminated. Setting aside for the moment Clytaemnestra's other motives for killing Agamemnon, she claims that his death is deserved because he sacrificed Iphigenia. Orestes, however, believes he must avenge the death of his father by killing his mother. With no one left, we might expect the feud to end, but in good Greek fashion Clytaemnestra's ghost from the Underworld stirs up The Furies to enact her revenge. This vengeful approach to conflict was common in the ancient world. Nearly 1000 years before the setting of the story, Hammurabi, King of Babylon (1792-1750BC), wrote in his code: "an eye for

an eye; a tooth for a tooth." Even the Old Testament world is filled with similar commands of for equal judgment (Exod 21:24-25; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21). Yet when we reach the New Testament, Jesus has a very different word for his followers. In Matthew 5:38-39 Jesus says, "You have heard that it was said, 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist the one who is evil."

The reason why vengeance is unnecessary is because it belongs properly to the Lord. In Romans 12:17-21 Paul writes:

> Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.[3]

Paul quotes here from Deuteronomy 32:35, and verse 36 in that original context helps give a more complete picture. Moses writes:

> Vengeance is mine, and recompense,
> for the time when their foot shall slip;
> for the day of their calamity is at hand,
> and their doom comes swiftly.'
> For the Lord will vindicate his people
> and have compassion on his servants,
> when he sees that their power is gone
> and there is none remaining, bond or free.

God has a day planned when He will avenge His people and vindicate them in His compassion. That the Law provided for "an eye for an eye" type judgment was not an open invitation for taking vengeance into one's own hands. Rather, it was a legal word that aimed at equity in judgment, not self-appointed revenge. Justice involved following God's prescribed commands, not open vengeance and bloodlust. With Jesus' words in the New Testament, we see that the primary concern is loving our enemy. Second to loving our enemy is trusting in God's just judgment and vengeance in the future.

Justice

Our human tendency, as exemplified in *The Oresteia*, is to take matters of justice into our own hands and repay violence with violence. In a world devoid of Christ, such pseudo-justice might seem initially appropriate. But even the world of *The Oresteia* recognizes that unrestrained vengeance cannot be sustained in a civilized, thriving society. The answer presented by *The*

[3]Scripture references are from the English Standard Version, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001).

Oresteia is the establishment of a jury of citizens in the Areopagus. Joseph McMahon articulates this notion well in positing that "what Athena is seeking is the establishment of a legal order which will be capable of dealing with the murky moral situations which the current order treats with such single-minded brutality."[4] This jury is divinely appointed by Athena, yet even she is willing to submit to its decision. She does cast a vote for Orestes' acquittal, but it is only as a tiebreaking vote. Aeschylus seems to be advocating for the principles of democracy to extend to the execution of justice as opposed to the whims of the gods or the vengeance of man.

The Oresteia masterfully sets before its readers deep questions of justice and provides an alternative to the destructive nature of revenge. As readers, then, we are urged to see democracy, and justice by a jury of peers, as the best means of establishing a flourishing society.

As Christians, we can accept democracy as a valuable form of government, but we also recognize that true justice can only be fully secured by God in the life to come. Nevertheless, we are commissioned by God, as Athena commissioned the jurors in Athens, to work for a just society as well as we can in the present. As Judith Fletcher asserts in her essay "Polyphony to Silence: The Jurors of the Oresteia," one of the key features of justice in *The Eumenides* is that "divine justice combines with human deliberation—it does not override it."[5] Though God, or in the case of the play, Athena, has the power to override human action, He works through human action to bring about many of His purposes in the present.

These ideas fit the revelation of Scripture well. God reveals Himself as a God merciful and gracious, but also One who will not leave the guilty unpunished (Exod 34:6-7). But God also executes justice through human agency. One of the more notable passages that demonstrates this biblical theme is Psalm 72, which says:

> Give the king your justice, O God,
>
> and your righteousness to the royal son!
>
> May he judge your people with righteousness,
>
> and your poor with justice! (Psa 72:1-2)

The Psalmist prays that God will grant His own justice to the king so that the king can rule with righteousness and justice. The straightforward message is that human justice, though executed by human deliberation, is rooted first in God's own justice. If we will be just, we must model the justice of God.

Charity

The final lesson is one that does not immediately rise to the surface, but a careful reading yields, I think, the virtue of charity. One of the more fascinating literary aspects of *The Oresteia* is the radically different story it tells from *The Odyssey* regarding the death of Agamemnon. In

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[4]Joseph H. McMahon, "The Case for Clytemnestra," *Women's Studies* 16 (1989): 449.

[5]Judith Fletcher, "Polyphony to Silence: The Jurors of the Oresteia," *College Literature: A Journal of Critical Literary Studies* 41.2 (Spring 2014): 57.

Homer's *Odyssey*, several different passages relate the death of Agamemnon, and Aegisthus is the one identified as the mastermind behind the plot to kill Agamemnon. For example, in Book I Aegisthus is identified as the one who "murdered the warlord coming home from Troy" (I.42).[6] In Book III Aegisthus is said to have "hatched the king's horrendous death" and is identified as "cunning" and "murderous" (III.2220, 224). Only a few lines later Athena speaks to Telemachus and says Agamemnon was "killed by Aegisthus' cunning—by his own wife" (III.268). Aegisthus is then presented as lying in wait for Agamemnon's departure so that he could lure and entice Clytaemnestra, who in Homer's account remains for a time faithful to her husband before finally succumbing to Aegisthus' advances (III.300-313). Moreover, Aegisthus "hatched his vicious work at home" before Orestes returns to kill "that cunning, murderous Aegisthus" (III.343, 347-348). When Odysseus goes to the underworld and meets Agamemnon, even Agamemnon attributes his death to Aegisthus, saying "Aegisthus hatched my doom and my destruction, he killed me, he with my own accursed wife" (XI.462-463). Although Clytaemnestra is twice mentioned as an accomplice, Aegisthus remains the mastermind, initiator, and executor of the plot.

In *The Oresteia,* however, Clytaemnestra is the mastermind and active executor of the plot. In another surviving Greek poem, Pindar's *Pythian* 11, Clytaemnestra is likewise set forth as the bloodthirsty mastermind.[7] Although there is some debate on the date of Pindar's *Pythian,* most scholars think it precedes *The Oresteia*. However, even if Aeschylus is not the one to change the story, he does choose to follow Pindar and elaborate on the narrative in a way that sets Clytaemnestra as the villain of the story.[8] This decision is significant, but it is not altogether clear the nature of this significance. For example, Rachel Wolfe argues that Aeschylus' intention by casting Clytaemnestra as the villain is to highlight the "threat of rule by women."[9] Wolfe argues that Clytaemnestra is a bad wife in *The Odyssey*, a threat to her family in Pindar's *Pythian*, but a threat to all of society in *The Oresteia*.[10] Wolfe asserts that Aeschylus is trying to preserve the "system of male-headed households" in the relatively new Athenian democracy, thus he casts the villainous Clytaemnestra as representative of the dangers of female rule.[11] This argument, however, does not take adequate account of the female (albeit supernatural) influence on the institution of the Athenian democracy in *The Oresteia*. If Aeschylus desired to show the dangers of female rule, then it seems unlikely that the female goddess Athena and the female Furies would play the prominent role in the institution of the democracy. A more likely conclusion is that Clytaemnestra is portrayed as the villain so that the central issue is the

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[6]All references from *The Odyssey* are from Homer, *The Odyssey,* trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1996).

[7]Rachel M. E. Wolfe, "Woman, Tyrant, Mother, Murderess: An Exploration of the Mythic Character of Clytemnestra in All Her Forms," *Women's Studies* 38 (2009): 697.

[8]Ibid., 698.

[9]Ibid., 702.

[10]Ibid., 702-703.

[11]Ibid., 703.

contrast between the justice of a jury and the vengeance of the family blood feud. If the primary murderer of Agamemnon were Aegisthus, then Agamemnon's death would seem to be more closely linked with Aegisthus' revenge for his father, Thyestes, rather than Clytaemnestra's revenge for Iphigeneia. Admittedly, Clytaemnestra's motives are more complex, so tyrannical rule and a lust for power cannot be ignored; nevertheless, such issues still point to the justice of the jury as a central theme over the debate about male and female roles.

Certainly many different points could be drawn from Aeschylus' treatment of Clytaemnestra, but I want us to focus on one of the more general, yet helpful, aspects, namely that people are far more complex than they initially appear. The multi-faceted portrayal of Clytaemnestra's character in Greek literature demonstrates the complex web of emotions, motives, and decisions that mark all of us, not simply Clytaemnestra. Our world today is marked by reaction—the rapid advances in television, the internet, and now social media platforms makes an overwhelming amount of information available in an incredibly short time. It also means everyone has a voice, and unfortunately everyone seems to think that voice is worth hearing. One of the more common problems we face is jumping to conclusions based on motivations that we project on others. The complexity of Clytaemnestra's character should remind us to pause and listen. Many could hear Clytaemnestra's claims about the death of Iphigeneia and blindly acquit her of Agamemnon's murder. Others, seeing how murdering her husband gave her power, may hastily see her as a power-hungry tyrant. Clytaemnestra's character, however, is too complex for such single-minded reactions, and this proves a lesson for our modern culture.

As Christians, we should be all the more careful that we not project motivations on others based on their actions. Instead, we should take pains to know them well, hear their thoughts, feelings, motives, and intentions from their own mouths, and only then respond, but even then with grace, kindness, and love. In short, we should demonstrate charity. In the midst of the bloodshed that characterizes much of *The Oresteia,* Athena embodies these characteristics well. She does not stand in immediate judgment of either Orestes or The Furies. She calmly speaks to The Furies, offering them a different, and better, life. Such behavior has a profound impact on The Furies who say: "Your magic is working…I can feel the hate, the fury slip away" (*The Eumenides,* 908-909). And with this, we are back to the themes of revenge and justice. One day God's justice will come in full, so our job in the present is, much like Athena's, charity: care for the oppressed, show love to our enemies, and seek justice and human flourishing in our societies.

Conclusion

The lessons of *The Oresteia* are many, and our exploration has only scratched the surface. But the beauty of this enduring work is that we can enjoy its beauty, wrestle with its truth, and live out much of its goodness. Despite its description of evil acts, *The Oresteia* decisively speaks against such acts and promotes justice and charity instead of vengeance. These are lessons we need as much today as 2500 years ago, so I heartily recommend to you that you pick this work up for yourself and immerse yourself in a world quite unlike our own in many ways, but a world that struggles with the same things we do today.