**INTRODUCTION**

*The Oresteia* is the only example that survives of the sequences of three tragic plays that were common in the Greek theatre. It is also one of the earliest pieces of mature theatrical writing, and one of the most powerful tragic poems. The story spills over from consequence to consequence in play after play. Each of the plays has its own intervention of the gods, and its own proverbial wisdom. *The Oresteia* shows the fulfilment of a family curse and it ends with curse turned into blessing. It would not be hard to retranslate the story into the family saga from which it arose.

The towering figure of Clytemnestra has its roots in a typical convention of epic narrative, by which women in Norse saga as in Greek mythology cause the beginning of quarrels. Her sister Helen caused the Trojan war by her adultery; Nemesis also was her mother or her sister. It is tempting to trace the development of the story, but unwise, because several versions seem to have coexisted, and for centuries before Aeschylus Greek poets and painters felt free to improvise new features or new characters in every retelling of any story whatsoever. Every fresh retelling was a fresh creation. Only the ultimate religious background, the judging Zeus with his justice and omens and punishment, remained without much alteration. In spite of his democratic politics, and the moral strength, even the great moral beauty of some of his conceptions, Aeschylus was terribly conservative.

We are not really meant to know the origins of the curse, though every school textbook has its own version. The family of Atreus was famous for its curse, which worked itself out in every generation. Aeschylus traces it casually back at least to an obscure king called Pleisthenes, which means 'having the most strength', but there is no reason to suppose it began with him. Nor do we know as much as a modern audience expects to be told about sins and motives. In Homer's version of the story, Aegisthus had seduced the queen. The watchman on the tower at the beginning of *Agamemnon* surely derives from a line in Homer where Aegisthus hires a man to watch the sea from his own tower for the returning ships. Homer's *Agamemnon* left a poet like a court chaplain to look after the queen, but Aegisthus
put the poor man to starve to death on a desert island. I have always much regretted his disappearance from the saga, but he would not suit Aeschylus because he would distract attention from the simple and magnificent vengeance of the queen.

Is that an exaggeration? This is a tragedy, an intolerable and doomed conflict. It is not a battle between right and wrong. That is made clear by the long section of the Agamemnon where in language close to epic Aeschylus lays down the boundaries of his tragic poem. He has to do this, because otherwise his heavy accent on Clytemnestra would transform the whole story into a squalid sexual melodrama. An Athenian audience would not put up with a merely sexual motive at that time. So he sets up in our minds first of all the long extent of time, then the vast distance of the sea and its islands, and the night lit up by beacons. This is a play in which images are repeated with many variations until they take on great power. In general the images are simple, (light, hunting and so on), and the most sinister are the simple reversals of everyday and pleasant things. The Furies are a dinner-party roaming about out of hand, a kommos, or they are blood-relations, guests one can never get rid of, an ominous choir. Before anything at all actually happens in the Agamemnon, Aeschylus has made his audience remember many elements that give his story tragic dignity. Its background is the fall of Troy.

His poetry has a cumulative, single force. It comes to bear on Agamemnon’s death. But I do not believe it has any clear moral logic. Agamemnon has sacrificed his daughter to Artemis, when he sailed for Troy. He brings home Cassandra to be his mistress. He sacked Troy. He wanders on people like an Eastern king. I doubt whether one is meant to pry into any ultimate plan or attitude of the gods over all this. If it was wrong to sacrifice Iphigenia, why did Artemis make him do it? Because, as she revealed in the omen of the eagle tearing the pregnant hare, she was angry at Troy’s destruction? I consider this interpretation too precise and moralizing. Everything that happened was part of the curse, and the size of the tragedy was awe-inspiring.

It is worth asking oneself what a tragedy is. It is, or was for the Greeks, a poem acted out, in which one or more human characters came to grief, and the gods usually intervened. The stories were traditional heroic narratives, mostly about great kings and bygone days, though Aeschylus did also write tragedies about contemporary history. One can sense the tragic tone in epic poetry as early as the Iliad, and theatrical tragedies are not only an adaptation of epic poetry but a substitute for its performance. They have a similar economy of means, at least in the early fifth century. Music and choral dancing with lyrics chanted were an essential part of Greek tragedy: they determine the controlled nature, almost the musical nature, of theatrical time. The tragedy plays itself out not by the ticking of a clock (there were no mechanical clocks at that time) nor by the true movement of the sun, though they began very often by speaking of daybreak, and the performances were early, but in a time-scale controlled like music, with deliberate variations of pace. In this process lyric poetry played a vital part.

The chorus was not numerous. The stories we hear of fifty dancers, and exciting or spectacular stage effects, like the marginal note ‘Agamemnon enters in his chariot, his plunder borne before him by his entourage’, belong to a later theatrical revival in an age of decadence. The recent studies by Oliver Taplin have removed a vast growth of barnacles from our traditional understanding of Aeschylus and of all early productions of tragedy. Drama was simpler and more austere than we thought. It is also true that it was a popular religious celebration taken over by the Athenian state. Indeed it was a profound and disturbed mirror of an Athens in constant crisis of change. By concentrating attention on one hero and on moral consequences and on the judging gods, it automatically put the gods themselves in the dock, by presenting them to an audience of free citizens. The beginnings of that process are visible in the ironies of the Iliad. But in the Oresteia the attack on the gods had not advanced very far.

Aeschylus meant to provoke awe and horror. Since the conventions of his theatre are utterly strange to us — his music gone for ever, the devices of his language very foreign to our ears, and his singing and dancing chorus at best bizzare — though to him they were conventional, it follows that no modern production of the Oresteia ever works as it was meant to do. We do not even believe in his gods or seriously feel his problems or his patriotism. And our ideas of tragedy are unhappily affected by Aristotle and a long tradition of misinterpretations of Aristotle. The unities of time, place and action that he demanded are by no means a law to Aeschylus. Aristotle’s idea of the tragic fault that leads to trouble is another confusion. The word used to be translated as sin, but wrongly, then as
moral fault, wrongly again. The last play of *The Oresteia* ends happily: no fault or mistake occurs in it: the theme is good being brought out of evil, the establishment of law and the blessing of the gods.

The famous purging of the soul by terror and pity is a mistranslation. What Aristotle means is ridding oneself, as by excretion, of the excess of fear and anxiety one may normally feel. The word translated as ‘pity’ ought normally to mean pity, but Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* defines his meaning quite clearly. It is something neither the rich nor the destitute feel. It is a horror that an evil fate one sees someone else suffer might happen to oneself. It is not mercy or pity, but self-interested anxiety. He remarks that the educated are particularly prone to it. No doubt it is particularly the educated who fear to suffer the fate of Oedipus. Aristotle does not make as much sense as one might hope, and about the origins of tragedy his information does not seem to have been good.

The first audience would have known from the beginning, from the first day of the festival, what thrilling verse and what bold and simple handling of the story to expect, and they would have known that Agamemnon was doomed, that his son avenged him, and probably that somehow Orestes was purified. But the details of each play would surprise them constantly, the third being the most inventive. The strange management of the death of Agamemnon itself, with Cassandra in a prophetic fit and all the unreality of music, would have been a complete surprise, both as a coup de théâtre and as a new twist to an old story.

Cassandra chooses her death. Her last words before her long movement into the house make it plain that those who sacked Troy must suffer for it, and she too chooses to endure her death. She is innocent of course: her fate was the revenge of Apollo. She must know and tell the truth and never be believed until the moment of her death. Agamemnon dies tricked in his pride, but she dies clear-eyed in her despair. As my late friend and best of colleagues, Colin MacLeod, pointed out in a note on this passage, the contrast of action and suffering, and paying for one’s action by one’s death, come often into *The Oresteia*, but Cassandra has a pure heroism and a depth of despair no other character is given. ‘I will endure to die.’ She is, as he also noted, an outsider in the tragic story, and her own story, her own tragedy, exposes by contrast the tragedy of the others. Without

her one might feel a terrible lack of sympathy with the characters of this play.

The violence in *The Oresteia* has its origin in the gods and its mirror in their omens. It would also be fair to say it has a historical meaning. Troy burns, and the Agamemnon ends with the old men picking up stones against Agamemnon. Zeus, in one of the most awful and powerful of all Greek lyrics, is declared to be sovereign by violence. When the Furies are reformed, and given robes of purple or crimson, they still wear their old masks, and they are still to punish wrongdoing with violence. They complain that the young gods trample down the rights of the old, which is the same message as one must take from the lyrics about Zeus in the *Agamemnon*. The violent fiction of the death of Orestes, and the appalling dream of Clytaemnestra symbolize a violence that extends throughout the three plays. When the chorus of Furies put on their purple cloaks, the coloured cloth on which Agamemnon should never have trod is restored to the worship of violent gods.

The Furies are like terrible old women, and there is something in their character that resembles real old women, just as the old women in other plays about other stories have a certain touch of the Furies about them. In *The Oresteia* the three choruses are deliberately contrasted. First come the weak, shaking old men, then the women bearing offerings to the dead, and finally the hags with gorgon faces. The principal characters grow in stature from play to play. Agamemnon takes on true dignity only in death. His murderous queen undergoes an even more striking transformation in the second play. Orestes, from the banal heroic youth, through fear and action, and through transformation by anguish, becomes the embodiment of the curse: he becomes in a way holy, like the ‘afflicted of God’, and like Oedipus at Colonus, admittedly a far more majestic figure.

Some minor characters are interesting. Aegisthus appears only to be mocked in one play and murdered in another. He has very few lines, and his role is only to take a little of the intense limelight of responsibility from Clytaemnestra. The porter at the door and the watchman on the roof seem to have strayed out of Shakespeare. They are powerfully and almost light-heartedly sketched in a few lines. Their role is contrast, like that of the shepherd in *Oedipus*, so that even a single grumbling line from the porter serves to highlight the drama of Orestes’ arrival.
The watcher's speech is full of chiming music and wordplay. It is a firework display of poetry. The tragic theatre of the Greeks depended on language for every variation of tone, there being no facial expression, and also for narrative skill, there being no great or violent action done on stage. Aeschylus is one of the great masters of narrative verse.

The gods play their part openly only in the last play, though Orestes sees or imagines the Furies in the second, but there is no doubt about their presence and influence throughout The Oresteia. Apollo lives at Delphi, and Athena lives at Athens or visits there. It was a stroke of originality to bring Orestes to Athens, and only Apollo, the oracular adviser and purifier, could send him there, so Aeschylus had to have a scene at Delphi. More than one holy place in southern Greece claimed to have purified Orestes, and Athens was a new contender. To have him tried by law instead of ritually purified, and protected by the justice of the goddess (though her argument is amazingly rabbinic, suggesting that Aeschylus could find no real reason to sanction the murder) rather than by a king, was a bold innovation. The Athens of Aeschylus in fact is an idealized city, the creation of a poem like Shakespeare's poetic England. It is something like a myth in the dialogues of Plato. It is meant to illuminate and consecrate as well as to validate the rule of law that Ephialtes established in the fifth century.

The best explanation of the Furies that arise from murdered blood, is the impressive statement of an early philosopher that even if the Sun should over-run his limits, the Furies would certainly hunt him down. That must mean that the order of nature is universal and permanent, the rule of law on earth being its image and reflection. Wherever the order of nature is broken, by the murder of a husband unavenged or the murder of a mother by her son, what is being broken is both a ritual – a holy ceremony and social link – and a physical reality, and that order will be violently restored. What is enacted at the end of The Oresteia, and gives the sequence a momentum is the restoration of the order of nature. Apollo has an awful purity, and the process is in some way below him: it is earthly, and Aeschylus boldly links it with his myth of an ideal city. The breakdown was a murder that gave birth to a tyranny and much unnatural ill will. What is restored, in a play full of resonant words for kinship, is the social link. The guardians who guarantee it at Athens are the Furies. The blessing they offer is the reversal of a very ancient and long-lived formula of public cursing, which the audience will certainly have recognized. 'May the land bear you no fruit, may the sea bear you no ship, may your animals and women bear you no living offspring.' The order of nature is both moral and physical, but above all it is social.

Agamemnon dead was not ritually lamented by women, and Clytemnestra savagely mocked what attempt the chorus made. That was both a social and a religious breakdown. No doubt tragedy always tended to dramatize the dead and their lamentation, but the ceremony had very great importance for the Greeks, as the end of the Iliad sufficiently demonstrates, and as we know outside poetry from much historical evidence. The failure to bewail Agamemnon is one of the motive forces of the action of the second play. Electra and Orestes with the chorus do at last perform their lamentation. A better example could hardly be found of Greek dramatization of genuine rituals. The procession of the Furies and Athena's appearance with her servants are another. It has often been thought that the death of Agamemnon himself has a ritual quality: it is the travesty of a blood-sacrifice. The order of nature for the Greeks was reflected in and thought to depend on ritual order. The ceremony of Greek tragic drama is itself a ritual; every ritual dramatizes to some degree.

But to explore the origins of Greek drama and the ritual meaning it must once have had is a fatally intoxicating process, and in the end a waste of energy. We know too little of these matters. The tragic drama of Aeschylus was already an art form on which other secular or half-secular art forms had their influences. One must also with regret restrain oneself from any serious probing into Greek religion. We know too much about it, and the subject is too complicated: it cannot be fitted into the introduction to a play. But Aeschylus is certainly conservative in religion, in that he presents and dramatizes what is already there, and what his audience will recognize. Yet he deals high-handedly with the gods, and they enter like puppets into his moral compositions, just because he is a dramatist. All the same, his deep conservatism in tracing patterns and consequences is at the root of his dramatic art. He first presents the Furies and then manipulates them. He is able to do so because as the Eumenides, the Kindly Ones, their worship had a double aspect. They were hellish and they lived underground and they
punished, but also they could bless what they might blast, and fertility and prosperity were therefore in their gift.

The third play opens at Delphi, with a monologue of great poetic strength. It is a pity the opening speech of Orestes in the second play, which seems to have matched it, is in such rags and tatters. The first nine lines we have of that survive only by chance quotations that can be roughly fitted together. The monologue of the third play is sixty-three lines long. It is spoken by the Delphic prophetess. Her doctrine is traditional; it is a version of the Homeric hymn to Apollo. If one may apply the theological maxim *lex orandi lex credendi* (the rules of prayer are also rules of belief), then Aeschylus is the most old-fashioned of believers. But the poetry that embodied mythology had flourished in his day for two hundred years, and the influence of that poetry enters intimately even into the prayer of the Delphic prophetess. It is through her horrified eyes that we first see the chorus.

The dramatization of this play is extremely bold. The prophetess is followed by disdainful, pure Apollo and by Clytaemnestra's ghost. Hermes guides Orestes away. The scene of the ghost with the wailing Furies is as blood-curdling as anything in *Macbeth*: it implies a rather violent change of tone, indeed a deliberate contrast between Apollo's style and the murdered queen's and then again between the queen and the Furies. The prophetess and the ghost incidentally must be played by the same actor with a change of mask. I have the impression that changes of character like this are often disguised by a contrast of styles and voices. It is worth paying attention to the changes of tone in Aeschylus, but hard to do so through the medium of translation. But the change of scene to Athens in this play is more abrupt than any contrast of poetic style or movement of rhetoric. One must admit that Aeschylus manages it with extreme simplicity.

It is Apollo who plots and devises and explains himself: Zeus is too grand to be employed in that capacity. The will of Zeus and his justice are fulfilled: that is the stormcloud that broods over the *Agamemnon* and breaks with flashes of lightning in all three plays. But Zeus is not an all-providing god, he is at bottom a judge of disputes, particularly among gods in the *Iliad*, as the squire kings in Hesiod are judges of earthly disputes and Minos was the arbiter of all disputes among the dead. Athena in her dispute with the Furies, which comes soon after Apollo's, claims to obey Zeus, just as Apollo referred to his supreme authority. When Athena's moment of triumph has come, she refers it to Zeus. All the same, it must be said that we hear less of Zeus in this play than in the others. I think that is because Aeschylus was not quite prepared to commit the justice or the supreme power of Zeus to this difficult case; he enacts it among lesser gods. Zeus was more closely present at the death of Agamemnon and his son's revenge. I take it that the emphasis on new or young gods victorious by violence over the old in *The Oresteia* is a reflection of a new Athens.

It is no quibble to call *The Oresteia* a sequence of three tragic poems rather than verse dramas. The other day I heard Sir Stephen Spender say that now when he reads Shakespeare he has little sense of the line as a metrical unit, but he feels the flow and movement of the metre through the whole length of a play. If that is true of Shakespeare, as I believe that it is, then it must be still more true of the rhythms of Aeschylus, of the strong ground-rhythm of his lyrics and of all the subtle movements from tone to tone and metre to metre. Such things are understood by the ear, and in no other way. They are the reward of experience. But with a poet like Aeschylus one ought at least to be conscious that his powerful rhythms and changes of rhythm exist, even if one cannot now hear them in Greek as they were once pronounced. *The Oresteia* has alterations of rhythm like the changing rhythms of the sea; the entire sequence is a rhythmic unity. The rhythms are self-echoing, on a small scale as early as the watchman's speech broken by his double cry, and on a vast scale in the final play. The lyrics must certainly have carried musical echoes that are lost to us now. Metrical study can hardly recover them.

*The Oresteia* is a cascade of tragedies, a waterfall breaking on rocks. Unlike the one play melodramas of the Jacobean, the pace of tragic sufferings is here musically controlled. It is terribly real, and dramatically presented, but it has become a poem. That is why the Athens of the third play cannot be realistic, even though Aeschylus brings it home to men's business and bosoms by referring quite often to the real politics of his own time. This is both a tragic and a religious poem, with a strong underlying sense of a ritual, an appeasement. It is not about death and resurrection like an English mummer's play or perhaps an Athenian comedy, but about death and burial and lamentation and appeasement. After rereading it many times
one may come to think there are certain passages of verse for the sake of which all the rest exists. But read consecutively it has unique and cumulative power.

Because the progression of these tragedies happens as it were inside a poem, the lapse of time is never specific, and even the alteration of place passes as it would in a dream. First the herald and then Agamemnon appear in Greece swiftly after the first sighting of the beacon. The speech about fire signalling to fire is like something from the Homeric hymns: it already makes a mockery of unity of time and of place. In the second play of The Oresteia, the scene mysteriously shifts from Agamemnon’s grave to his palace. Aeschylus has made it clear that they are not close together, but by deliberately playing down the distance between them, he allows the grave to haunt the palace, to become one with it. Is this imperfect dramatization? Hardly so; it is simply the condition of poetry which Aeschylus has inherited, and which makes the impetus and ceremony of tragedy so strong, because lucidly as he constructs his plays, the drama never emerges from the poem: it is a poem.

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