

The Eumenides

The Eumenides (the “Kindly Ones”) is the final play of the *Oresteia*, a trilogy written by the Athenian playwright Aeschylus dramatizing the legend of the blood-soaked House of Atreus.

The Context of *The Eumenides*

Mythological Background to the *Oresteia*

Atreus and his brother Thyestes are the sons of Pelops, King of Olympia, and his wife Hippodamia. To clear the way for their inheriting the throne of Olympia, the sons murder their half-brother Chrysippus. In retribution for this killing, their father banishes Atreus and Thyestes from Olympia. They take refuge in Mycenae, where they are installed as rulers at the behest of King Eurystheus, who is off fighting a war. Eurystheus had meant for the brothers’ rule to be temporary, but it becomes permanent when he is slain in battle.

Atreus, now King of Mycenae, vows to sacrifice his best lamb to Artemis. But when he discovers a priceless golden lamb in his flock, instead of offering it up to the goddess as he had sworn to do, he asks his wife Aerope to hide it. Unbeknownst to Atreus, Aerope has become Thyestes’ lover and she promptly gives the lamb to him. Thyestes then tricks Atreus into agreeing that whoever possesses the golden lamb should be king. No sooner is the agreement made than Thyestes produces the golden lamb and claims the throne.

Atreus seeks counsel from the Hermes. The god advises him to make the following proposal to Thyestes: that Atreus will never claim the throne of Mycenae unless and until the sun moves backward in the heavens. If such an event occurs, however, Thyestes must yield the throne to Atreus. When Thyestes agrees to this, Hermes calls upon Zeus to allow the miracle to take place. When Zeus grants the request and the sun moves backward in the sky, Thyestes is forced to give up the kingdom to Atreus. Upon retaking the throne, Atreus banishes Thyestes from Mycenae.

When Atreus eventually learns of the adultery of Thyestes and Aerope, he takes horrific revenge - - killing Thyestes' sons and cooking them, except for their hands and heads. He then invites his brother to a feast where Thyestes unwittingly eats his own sons’

flesh. When the meal is finished Atreus taunts Thyestes by showing him the hands and heads of the sons.

Intent on revenge, Thyestes is advised by an oracle that, if he were to have a son with his own daughter Pelopia, that son would kill Atreus. So Thyestes, in disguise, rapes Pelopia and she bares a son, Aegisthus. Consumed with shame, Pelopia abandons her newborn in the countryside where he is found by a shepherd and turned over to Atreus, who raises him as his own son. Only when Aegisthus reaches adulthood does he discover that Thyestes is his father and Atreus is his uncle. When he learns the truth, Aegisthus kills Atreus.

With Atreus disposed of, Thyestes becomes king of Mycenae and banishes Agamemnon and Menelaus, the sons of Atreus, to Sparta. There, King Tyndareus acknowledges the two brothers as royalty and, shortly afterwards, helps them return to Mycenae where Thyestes is overthrown and forced into exile and Agamemnon becomes king. King Tyndareus, as a pledge of good will and allegiance offers his two daughters in marriage: Clytemnestra to Agamemnon and Helen to Menelaus.

Upon the death of Tyndareus, Menelaus becomes King of Sparta. Subsequently, his wife Helen is seduced by Paris, a prince of Troy, who carries her off to that city where his father, Priam, rules as king. To avenge the dishonor and to reclaim Helen, Menelaus and Agamemnon assemble a large army and set sail to assault Troy. Before reaching that city, the fleet shelters in the port of Aulis where it is becalmed for a long period of time and the Greeks begin to grumble. Agamemnon realizes he must get the fleet moving again in order to save face and to maintain control of the army. Seeking divine help, he consults the goddess Artemis who tells him he must make a sacrifice to her and the victim must be his daughter Iphigenia. Desperate to get the expedition against Troy moving forward, Agamemnon slaughters his young daughter and, as predicted, the winds then become favorable. After sailing to Troy, the Greeks besiege and eventually sack the city, slaying King Priam's sons, Paris and Hector, in the process.

When Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra learns that her husband has murdered their daughter, she is enraged. She becomes Aegisthus's lover and plots with him to kill Agamemnon upon his return to Mycenae. The stage is now set for the first play in the *Oresteia* trilogy. The Greek audience would have been fully conversant with the mythic history of bitter personal betrayal and bloody intra-family revenge that forms the background of the tragedy

The First Play of the Trilogy, *Agamemnon*

When Agamemnon returns in triumph from Troy, bringing with him Cassandra, his concubine, Clytemnestra greets them both with feigned happiness. Shortly afterward, she and Aegisthus surprise and kill them both.

The Second Play of the Trilogy, *Choephoroe (The Libation Bearers)*

Aegisthus and Clytemnestra rule Mycenae jointly for seven years following Agamemnon's murder. At this point, Agamemnon's son Orestes returns to Mycenae, urged on by the god Apollo to avenge his father's death. Orestes meets with his sister Electra who also encourages him to seek vengeance. Pretending to be strangers bearing the news of Orestes' purported death, Orestes and his cousin Pylades gain entry to the royal palace and quickly kill Aegisthus. However, Clytemnestra recognizes her son and confronts him in an effort both to justify her slaying of Agamemnon and to seek mercy. Orestes hesitates and asks Pylades whether he should be merciful, but his cousin reminds him of his obligation to Apollo to avenge his father's murder and Orestes proceeds to kill his mother. The dying Clytemnestra falls to the ground beside the body of Aegisthus, creating a deathly tableau, like the fallen bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra seven years earlier.

The Final Play of the Trilogy: *The Eumenides (The Kindly Ones)*

Upon the killing of Clytemnestra, Orestes is immediately set upon by the Furies, female supernatural beings who act to avenge the spilling of family blood. The Furies, euphemistically called the Eumenides or "Kindly Ones", for fear of offending them, embody the ethic of avenging blood wrongs by the further shedding of blood. Under this world view, Orestes would be the natural person to seek revenge for his mother's slaying, were he not himself the murderer. Therefore, the Eumenides fill the role of avenger and relentlessly pursue Orestes, driving him almost to madness. Since, in killing his mother, Orestes was acting in obedience to the commands of Apollo, the god asks Athena to intervene. The goddess does so by founding the Court of the Areopagus in Athens and convening twelve citizens to sit in judgment of Orestes. At the conclusion of the trial, the jury's vote is split six for conviction to six for acquittal and Athena then casts the deciding vote - - for acquittal. The Furies are enraged that they have been displaced and their role usurped by a court of law. Athena mollifies them by inviting them to make Athens their home and become guardians of the city. When she assures them that, if they accept her invitation, they will be honored and adored by all Athenians, the Furies relent and agree to do as Athena wishes. Thus the cycle of

revenge and blood vendetta is broken - - formal courts of justice supported by the city state of Athens will supplant the endless cycle of killings by family members to avenge previous killings.

Analysis and Possible Discussions Points

Historical Accuracy

Aeschylus was a proud Athenian. In *The Eumenides*, it's Athena, the patron goddess of Athens, who transmutes the endless cycle of blood vengeance into justice through law by establishing a court where the members of the Athenian community sit in judgment of those who have spilt blood. In this regard, Aeschylus took some liberties in his depiction of the Court of Areopagus, since in reality its decisions were made by magistrates, not by citizen jurors. However, during the lifetime of Aeschylus, virtually all legal matters other than murder were tried before juries, comprised exclusively of male citizens, typically 500 in number.

The trial of Orestes, as depicted in the drama, is similar to how an Athenian court of that era would have conducted proceedings in a non-murder case.

Based on the text of *The Eumenides*:

How is the court created?

What aspects of the trial features?

Is there a prosecutor?

Who represents Orestes?

What is Apollo's role?

Orestes is the primary defendant. Are there other parties whose guilt or innocence is at issue?

What is the verdict of the Athenians who have been appointed judges of the court?

Why does Athena vote in favor of Orestes?

What do the Furies predict will be the result of their being relieved of the role of blood avengers?

As depicted in *The Eumenides*, do you think an Athenian legal trial was itself a form of drama?

Although the Oresteia is drenched in the blood of revenge killings, there are number of instances where the response to murder is not to kill the murderer, but instead to banish him.

For example, when Atreus and Thyestes kill their half-brother Chrysippus, their father banishes them from his kingdom rather than execute them.

And when Agamemnon and Menelaus return to Mycenae from Sparta and overthrow Thyestes, they banish him rather than having him executed, despite the fact that Thyestes' son, Aegisthus, killed their father

In other instances when executing the loser would be the most expedient resolution of a political power struggle, banishment is used rather than capital punishment.

For example, when Zeus performs the miracle of the sun moving backward in the sky and Thyestes is forced to give up the throne of Mycenae to Atreus, he is banished, not slain.

Likewise, when Atreus is killed by Thyestes's son Aegisthus, allowing Thyestes to become king of Mycenae, he banishes Agamemnon and Menelaus, the sons of Atreus, rather than having them done away with.

Why do you think banishment is the punishment inflicted in these situations rather than revenge killing?

The Form of Greek Tragedy

Greek tragedy of the classical period had recently evolved from religious ritual and, as *The Eumenides* shows, it featured gods, mythological personages, and a chorus that served as both a character participating in the dramatic action and a continuing

commentator on the unfolding tragedy. In addition, the actors and chorus in ancient Greek tragedy wore masks. As such, it stands in stark contrast to the tradition of realistic drama that Americans are most familiar with.

In a staging of *The Eumenides*, do you think these “non-realistic” features would enhance the drama’s impact?

Or do you think these features make the drama less accessible to 21st Century Americans?

Patriarchy

During the trial of Orestes, he demands to know why the Furies didn’t torment Clytemnestra for her killing of Agamemnon. They reply that their role is to avenge the killing of blood relatives and, while Agamemnon was Clytemnestra’s husband, he was not of her blood.

Apollo then interjects that, by the same reasoning, the Furies should not be hounding Orestes either, since women are merely the incubator of the male seed and, consequently, Orestes is not of Clytemnestra’s blood.

Under Apollo’s view of genetics, Iphigenia, the daughter who Agamemnon slaughtered, was his blood relative, yet no one in the drama questions why the Furies failed to torment Agamemnon.

Why do you think that is?

There are numerous references throughout the play to the ancient female deities of the earth being displaced by the male Olympian deities of the sky.

What do you make of that? Does the references to a divine regime change hint at some prehistoric transition from matriarchy to patriarchy?

The play dramatizes the rejection of the Furies’ regime of blood vengeance and its replacement by the rule of the law courts initiated by Athena and Apollo. Can Athena’s success in achieving this transition be seen as a triumph of the female principle?

Is the exoneration of Orestes for killing his mother and the triumph of Apollo and Athena over the Furies a celebration of Greek patriarchy?

In various ways, Aeschylus seems to use *The Eumenides* as a dramatic vehicle for glorifying Athenian culture and institutions.

Do you think this emphasis on the accomplishments of a particular Greek city state detracts from the tragedy?

The Eumenides, written over 2,400 years ago, describes the transition from family-enforced blood revenge to the rule of law enforced by the state. Aeschylus depicted that transition as occurring in his native city and we do know that Athens was governed by a democracy under the rule of law during much of the classical period.

Did state administered justice under the rule of law survive the Greek classical period?

Is such a system of justice the exception or the rule today?