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The house of Atreus in ancient Greece

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University of the Pacific

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THE HOUSE OF ATREUS IN ANCIENT GREECE

A Thesis
Presented to
the Faculty of the Department of Speech
College of the Pacific

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Shirley Arlita Hewitt
August 1959
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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM AND THE LEGEND

Legends started when and where man began to search for the meaning and strive for understanding of his world and the people in it. Sometimes these legends came about as a result of man's attempts to explain nature, but in other instances they began with bits of history that were passed on by word of mouth until they became a part of a tradition and were finally recorded in the literature of a people. As man developed conscience and started to establish standards for moral, ethical behavior, he re-interpreted these basic stories to express what seemed to him to be significant to all men. These early legends have stayed alive generation after generation in accordance with their adaptability to the changes that have occurred in the structure of society.

I. THE PROBLEM

Statement of the problem. It was the purpose of this study (1) to discover the similarities and dissimilarities in three ancient Greek plays that used the legend of the house of Atreus as the basis for their plots; (2) to discover how these similarities and dissimilarities illustrate separate points of view concerning man, the universe
and man's place in that universe; and (3) to discover what relationship if any exists between the points of view expressed and the particular moment in history at which each playwright wrote.

The plays considered were the *Oresteia*, a trilogy by Aeschylus first presented about 458 B.C.; *Electra* by Sophocles; probably presented first sometime before 413 B.C.; and *Electra* by Euripides, first presented in 413 B.C. Since the purpose of the study was to compare ideas and points of view expressed by the three great tragic dramatists of Greece, no attempt was made to justify the plays selected as works of art nor their authors as master craftsmen. However, in cases where translators disagree or left out portions of the manuscript which seemed to be mistakes in copying or lapses in artistry on the part of the playwright, the investigator adopted the attitude expressed by H. D. F. Kitto:

> If you will trust the dramatist, if you will consider the form of his play patiently and with some imagination as being probably the best possible expression of what he meant, you will be giving yourself the best chance to appreciating what impact he was hoping to make on the audience for which he was writing.¹

All the plays were read in translation, but where more than one translation was available at least two translations

were read, one literal and one poetic; in some cases as many as three were read in an effort to insure accuracy.

**Importance of the study.** On the surface there seemed little justification for adding another discussion of the three great Greek writers of tragedy; however, research revealed no detailed comparison and contrast in English of the treatment of the Atreus legend in all the plays considered; also, the investigator joined with Gilbert Murray in his comment,

> The few very great books of the world, the books which at the end of over two thousand years have still the power to stir our pulses with their beauty and inspire our minds with the validity of their thought, have a special value for humanity and must not be allowed to die, yet they will die unless generation after generation, they are studied, loved and reinterpreted.²

Through the detailed comparison of these ancient plays in relation to historic events the "validity of thought" with its "special value for humanity" could be tested. These men, who are widely separated from the modern world in time and mode of life, expressed ideas, as they adapted the ancient legend of the house of Atreus for the audiences of their day, that rose above their particular time and philosophy to present ideas the world still finds significant.

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The plan of the thesis. Since each of the three playwrights was considered separately in relation to the historical events that occurred during his lifetime and in relation to the intellectual climate of his time, a chronological order seemed appropriate. The succeeding chapters were used to present a sketch of the times, an account of the current ideas that seemed to have had the greatest influence on the individual poet's thinking, and a detailed account of the play written by the poet under discussion. The detailed account of the play was used in an effort to give the reader something of the feeling engendered by the play as a whole creation. The detailed account of each play individually seemed the best way to sustain the feeling of each play yet enable constant and sometimes minute consideration of variations in the use of the legend and variations between each poet's treatment of the legend. As each event was viewed in relation to the individual poet's total effort and compared with the corresponding event of the other plays, each poet's emphasis could be accurately ascertained. Too often a part that has been separated from the whole is open to misinterpretation.

The final chapter was used to draw together those ideas that seemed most significant in terms of each poet's contribution to thought. The significance of their contribution to modern man could be found at almost any religious service held today.
II. THE LEGEND

In the Iliad. Some of the characters of the plays first appear in Homer's Iliad. There is no mention of the curse that enveloped the house of Pelops, the curse that has fascinated playwrights and their audiences down through the ages, for in the Iliad the scepter is passed peacefully from Pelops to Atreus and from Atreus to Thyestes and finally to Agamemnon. The Iliad does contribute the picture of a royal, majestic Agamemnon, the same kingly figure that appears in Aeschylus' drama. There is only brief mention of Agamemnon's home, a fortress-palace at Mycenae.

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3Charles M. Gayley (ed.), Classic Myths in English Literature (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1911), p. 126 indicates that the curse began with Tantalus, King of Phrygia. Tantalus, son of Jupiter, had been received at the table of the gods, but through conceit and ingratitude he betrayed the secrets of the gods and tried to disprove their omniscience by attempting to deceive them into eating the roasted flesh of his own son Pelops. The gods were not deceived; Pelops was restored to life; and Tantalus was thrust into the bowels of the earth. Richard C. Jebb (trans.), Electra (Part VI of Sophocles the Plays and Fragments, 7 parts; Cambridge: at the University Press, 1924), p. 74 cites a version placing the origin in an incident involving King Oenomaus who offered his daughter, Hippodameia, to the suitor who could defeat him in a chariot race. The penalty of failure was death. Pelops offered to compete. Hippodameia or Pelops persuaded Myrtillus, the king's charioteer, to betray Oenomaus. So Pelops won the race, but Myrtillus insulted Hippodameia, and Pelops threw him into the sea for his trouble; as he sank he invoked a curse on the house of Pelops.


5Ibid., p. 63.
where his wife Clytemnestra, his daughters, Chrysothemis, Laodice, and Iphianassa, and his son Crestes, who is just a child, wait for his return.  

In the Odyssey. The Odyssey tells how Aegisthus, first cousin to Agamemnon, went to Clytemnestra while Agamemnon fought at Troy, wooed her and took her to his home. When Agamemnon returned from Troy, Aegisthus lured the king to his home to celebrate the victorious return; once there Aegisthus slew Agamemnon. Clytemnestra though obviously in sympathy with the crime did not really take part in it. Later in the Odyssey the soul of Agamemnon tells how Clytemnestra slew Cassandra, but Aegisthus slew Agamemnon without help.  

The young Crestes fled to return eight years later to slay Aegisthus. Clytemnestra died at the same time, and although the text does not tell how, the implication is that she died by her own hand. From the point of view of

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6 Ibid., p. 185.


8 Ibid., pp. 58-59.

9 Ibid., pp. 169-70.

10 Ibid., p. 37.
the *Odyssey*, Orestes' deed was nothing more than a simple act of retribution.

**Other influences.** The *Cypria*, one of the Cyclic epics credited to Slasinus of Cyprus in 776 B.C. added the sacrifice of Iphigeneia to the cumulative story, thus providing additional motive for Clytemnestra's behavior. In another epic, the *Nostoi* by Agias of Troezen, Clytemnestra helped Aegisthus in the murder and Pylades was introduced as Orestes' aid.\(^{11}\) The *Orestia* of Stesichorus was popular in Athens in the fifth century B.C. The most notable changes made by Stesichorus were that he had Clytemnestra kill Agamemnon by inflicting blows about the head with an axe, that he introduced a nurse, Laodameia, to save the child Orestes from Clytemnestra, and that Electra appears as a central character.\(^{12}\)

The final necessary element was added to the legend with the rise of influence of the Delphic priesthood. The aspect of the religion of Apollo that ultimately transformed the primitive legend of Orestes was the aspect that

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\(^{11}\) Jebb, *op. cit.* p. xii.

\(^{12}\) *Ibid.*, pp. xviii-xix. Jebb suggests that Stesichorus might have adapted the character Electra from an earlier lyric poet named Xanthus who said that Electra, originally Laodice, was so named because she was so long unmarried.
related to blood-guilt. It was during this time that the Greeks became acutely aware of the degrees of moral guilt. Formerly if a man received a divine mandate to avenge the death of a kinsman he could hope for nothing more than to be hounded to death by the supernatural Erinyes who sought revenge for every crime within the family unless he killed the kinsman's murderer. But Apollo, the god of light and purity, could determine the degree of guilt and empowered his servants to administer rites under certain circumstances whereby a defiled person might be absolved of stain, thus providing a kind of justice.

As Aeschylus knew the legend. The legend as Aeschylus probably knew it when he wrote his trilogy, might be summarized in the following manner. Long before the Trojan war, Atreus and Thyestes, sons of Pelops, both claimed the throne of Argos. It was agreed that whichever one could show a divine sign should become king. When a lamb with golden fleece appeared in the flocks of Atreus, his wife, Aerope, gave it to Thyestes her lover.¹³ Atreus,

¹³Gilbert Murray (trans.) Electra (In Five Plays of Euripides. New York: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 91. This story is looked on as the story of the first sin of the entire world. After the theft of the lamb, all the world changed and became the poor place that it is now. Evidently the magic lamb was brought by Pan from the gods and given to Atreus as a special sign of his right to rule as king. Thyestes and Aerope who stole the lamb and claimed the right to rule committed the first sin that turned good to evil and love to hate.
for revenge, threw Aerope into the sea, and in the great palace at Argos slew the children of Thyestes, his brother, and served their flesh to their father at a royal banquet. Thyestes and his only remaining son, Aegisthus, fled from the palace swearing vengeance on Atreus and his two sons, Menelaus and Agamemnon.

In the years that followed, the sons of Atreus married sisters Helen and Clytemnestra. It was Helen who, yielding to the might of Venus, went with Paris to Troy thus setting the scene for the Trojan War. Agamemnon was among the Greek heroes who went with his brother to battle the Trojans for Helen's return. But on the way to Troy, while the fleet lay idle at Aulis, Agamemnon, following the decree of an oracle, was prevailed upon by his forces to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to Artemis so that the ships that had been becalmed might sail for Troy. Hearing of this deed, Clytemnestra, his wife, vowed vengeance. She gave her infant son, Orestes into the care of the King of Phocis, and in the palace at Argos nursed her consuming hate as she waited for Agamemnon's return.

Hate brought the queen and Aegisthus, sole survivor of Atreus' treachery, together; they became lovers as well as plotters in crime. It is with this story as background that the playwrights of the ages worked out the themes of doom and revenge that purged the house of Atreus.
CHAPTER II

AESCHYLUS AND THE HOUSE OF ATREUS

I. THE TIMES

The first steps toward democracy. Less than one hundred years before the birth of Aeschylus, his ancestors took the first steps from the savage clan as the unit of society into the city-state which led finally, by the time of Aeschylus' death, to complete democracy. The members of the clans, who were the aristocracy, traced their descendants back through the mythical heroes and in some cases even to the gods. These fiercely proud aristocrats were the ones who united Attica under a single government in the seventh century B.C. A money economy had been introduced, and peasants who borrowed money giving themselves as security often found that they had lost their land and their freedom as well. In 594 B.C., Solon, one of the aristocracy, tried to bring about a reform by canceling some debts and laying down rules for the borrowing of money that made it impossible for a debtor to become the slave of his creditor. But it was not until 561 B.C. when, after the third attempt, Peisistratus finally established himself as a tyrant, that the machinery of government instituted by Solon was really secure.
Peisistratus was not the typical tyrant, for in addition to maintaining the reforms already instituted for the benefit of the peasants, he gave small holdings of land to many peasants. Since many of the aristocracy had been killed or exiled during the struggle to gain supremacy, Peisistratus was in the enviable position of being able to dispose of their land. He encouraged the farmers to produce wine and oil, and although this put an end to their self sufficiency since they had to import wheat, the land was better suited to the other crops and much of the extreme poverty was alleviated.

As a further bid for popularity, Peisistratus established the cult of Dionysus in Athens. Dionysus, one of the younger gods, was a favorite of the common people since they had no ancestral family cult. It was only natural that the people would be drawn toward Dionysus, the god who was closest to those forces which most directly affected their existence. It was through the ancient rites to Dionysus that they sought to guarantee fertility, ensure a bountiful harvest, and control the forces of birth and death. In 534 B.C., just nine years before the birth of Aeschylus, the first state festival with the performance of a play took place.1

The rule of the aristocracy restored. After the death of Peisistratus, the Spartans, at the instigation of Cleisthenes, leader of an exiled clan, overthrew Hippias, Peisistratus' son. Hoping to establish a friendly and subservient government, the Spartans restored the rule of the aristocracy. The aristocrats, distressed by the number of men of less than noble birth who had become citizens, started a purge for the purpose of restoring purity. This, naturally, was a most unpopular plan, and Cleisthenes used its unpopularity to gain personal power for himself by "taking the people into partnership." Under his leadership the Athenians overthrew the government the Spartans had tried to set up and demanded the right to choose their own leaders. Cleisthenes affirmed his partnership of the people by framing a new constitution. The new constitution established a complicated organization which limited the influence of the great clans and assured the position of the more recently enfranchised citizens. Although the government was still in the hands of the moneyed, from this point on Athens was unquestionably a democracy.

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The reforms of Cleisthenes. There were two outstanding results of the reforms of Cleisthenes. The first was a tremendous burst of energy and enthusiasm. Fifteen years later at the battle of Marathon, it was this energy and enthusiasm that enabled them to demonstrate to their world that a free citizen's infantry with nothing but the law above its head was far superior to the regular troops of Persia, subjects of an absolute king. The second outstanding result of the reforms was that it was possible for a citizen of less than noble birth to hold high office. Had this not been true Themistocles, a man of humble birth, would not have been in a position to persuade the Athenians to build the strongest fleet in Greece. It was this fleet that defeated the Persians at Salamis ten years after Marathon.

Persia defeated. The victory over Persia marked the end of an epoch for Athens. She had established herself as the military equal of Sparta, the traditional leader of the Greek states, and since the Spartans declined to become sailors, Athens became supreme in the league of

3Sparta was dedicated to the supremacy of the aristocracy, and they wished to avoid the dangers of possible corruption from what they considered the inferior mentality of other Greeks which would be the inevitable result of long absences from home.
maritime states which was formed as protection against Persia. Athens was by far the most powerful city in the league, and it was only a matter of time before the league became her empire. It was a time of tremendous vitality and expansion, economically, geographically, and socially: Piraeus, their Mediterranean Sea port, had become second only to Carthage; they had driven the Persians out of Thrace and the cities of Ionia and subjugated their reluctant allies; and the tributes they collected went in part to pay for the social changes they made at home. The Athenians built a society which has intrigued the world ever since.

The Athenian society was based on the unquestioned validity of custom and the law, a law which was over all individuals, low and high. In 462 B.C., twenty years after the battle of Salmis and four years before the Oresteia of Aeschylus was produced, the power of the ancient council of the Areopagus was reduced. This reform marked another step toward complete democracy, since it effectively

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controlled the power and influence of the aristocracy. The Areopagus had been composed of ex-archons who held office for life; the reform provided that men be elected by lot, and the council ceased to be a collection of "elder statesmen." Although the aristocracy bitterly opposed the reform and even murdered the leader of the democratic party, the reform held; and the principal concern of the Areopagus was limited to the hearing of homicide cases.\(^5\)

Pericles came to power immediately after the reform of the Areopagus. It was during his thirty years in power that he introduced the idea of pay for public services which enabled even the poor to hold office. By 456 B.C., the year of Aeschylus' death, all citizens were qualified to hold offices of state.

II. AESCHYLUS (525 B.C.–456 B.C.)

THE MAN AND HIS IDEAS

His life. Aeschylus was born in Eleusis of a noble and probably wealthy family. His life span covered the overthrow of the tyrants, the victories over Persia, and the founding of the Athenian Empire, as well as the

realization of full democracy for Athens. It is probable
that Aeschylus was inclined to regard the world as a place
where the better cause might be expected to prevail.

Little about the personal life of Aeschylus is
known, but he was in the prime of life at the time of the
battles of Marathon and Salamis. It is probable that he
fought in both, for it is the common victory over the
Persians that is mentioned in his epitaph. While it is
not possible to give a daily account of the happenings in
the life of Aeschylus, it is known that he visited Sicily
twice. The first visit, around 470 B.C., was at the invita-
tion of Hiero, King of Syracuse. There were a number of
stories current at the time to explain his retirement from
Athens. One said that he had been unnerved by the collapse
of the wooden benches during one of his plays; another said
it was because he had been defeated in a competition to
write an epitaph for those who fell at Marathon; still
another said it was chagrin over a dramatic victory
Sophocles won at his expense. A fourth story said that he

6"Aeschylus, son of Euphorion, an Athenian, lies
here; of his tried valour the grove of Marathon could speak,
or the long-haired Mede who knew it well." Ibid., p. 232.

7Gilbert Norwood, Greek Tragedy (London: Methuen
was exiled on pain of death for having divulged the Eleusinian Mysteries in one of his plays. His life was in danger until he proved that he had never been initiated. It may have been that the information was so generally known that Aeschylus did not realize that it was secret. The second visit was made after he had won the prize for the Oresteia. He never returned from Sicily; the story was that while he was sitting on a hillside, an eagle flying with a tortoise in its claws, dropped the tortoise on the poet's head and killed him.

The thought of the times. The facts about Aeschylus' life are meager but much more can be said about the ideas that must have influenced his thinking. Society had just emerged from the clan where there was little or no feeling of individuality; each person was irrevocably connected with all those of the same blood. Responsibility was collective so that punishment for sins might be exacted from any or all members of any generation of a clan. As the unit of society changed from clan to community, the idea of contamination of the whole through the actions of the

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9 Norwood, op. cit., p. 11.
individual persisted long enough to have a marked influence on the plays of Aeschylus and even those of Sophocles. Blood-guilt and the family's sacred duty of vengeance were by no means dead issues, even though the rise to prominence of the worship of Apollo had provided rites of purification from shed blood. There were, however, no rites of purification for one who had shed a kinsman's blood.

Another idea that influenced Greek thought was the idea that there is a "golden mean" in nature. This principle of the mean was the fundamental philosophy of the Pythagoreans whose patron god was Apollo. Closely associated with Pythagorean theology was the Orphic cult who worshipped Dionysus. This fusion may be attributed to the fact that Apollo shared a shrine with the younger god.\footnote{Jane Ellen Harrison, \textit{Themis} (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1927), p. 443.} The Orphic cult of holiness was almost entirely ritualistic, and while they were content to renounce the world, the Pythagoreans had an elaborate code of social and moral conduct. Orphism had drawn its following from the politically unorganized peasantry while the Pythagoreans represented a more elite, politically active group, men of money, merchants who may have fused with the Orphic group.
as a possible means of thwarting the hereditary landowning oligarchy.\textsuperscript{11} Both of these groups were connected with Eleusis, home of the Mysteries, which consisted mainly in ritual but involved no general doctrine.\textsuperscript{12} Since Eleusis was the birthplace of Aeschylus it seems certain that he was familiar with all of these ideas.

There were four elements involved in Greek religion. First, there was the Olympian hierarchy headed by Zeus which was the object of the state religion in Athens and elsewhere. The second element was the worship of earth powers. The third element was the concept of Fate, a vague, impersonal force incomprehensible in terms of morality. And fourth there was a great yearning for holiness which resulted from a feeling that sin polluted the soul not merely the hands of the wrongdoer. Aeschylus sought to purify and unify the beliefs of his fellows through his plays.\textsuperscript{13}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11}Thomson, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 212 states that Aeschylus was a Pythagorean and a democrat, but since authorities disagree, and he does not substantiate the statement, it is perhaps unwise to accept the statement without reservation.
\item \textsuperscript{12}Lucas, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 53 states that the Mysteries were said to reveal a certain picture of the world beyond the grave.
\item \textsuperscript{13}Norwood, \textit{op. cit.}, pp. 130-31.
\end{itemize}
Aeschylus belonged to a period in which literature and philosophy were not yet separate; he chose to express himself through the use of mythology.

Objectively regarded, myths are symbols of reality. It follows that to the primitive mind the symbol and the reality are indistinguishable. Since the stories of the gods were considered true, if they failed to satisfy a progressively higher moral standard, the solution was sought in a more profound interpretation rather than a rejection of the legend which, within the framework of customary belief, seemed to allow injustice.

Aeschylus wrote then in a period of military triumph, economic prosperity, and unparalleled freedom for the individual. He was free "to live out the life of his own spirit," and his generation untroubled as it was by doubts about traditional values was prepared to consider his interpretations.

III. THE Oresteia

The last trilogy that Aeschylus wrote was probably the Oresteia; it is the only example of a whole trilogy that has survived. Even though each play of the series is

\[1^4\] Thomson, op. cit., p. 276.

\[1^5\] Lucas, op. cit., p. 57.
complete in itself, the feeling of the trilogy viewed together is one of close unity such as one might find in the three act play of the modern theatre.

Aeschylus was extremely interested in the problems of the world, and his drama is based on human will and moral conscience as man struggles to justify himself in terms of the universal law of Dike, Ananke, Hybris and the like. Aeschylus used the gods to symbolize world order, and as in the case of the Oresteia, the order is shown in evolution.\(^{16}\) The conflict of the gods is shown through the human conflict in the house of Atreus; by the end of the trilogy the conflict is resolved into a unified world order. Zeus has become the lord of all powers who derive their prerogatives from him.\(^ {17}\) Through the association with Zeus the laws of the universe take on a moral tendency, and man's striving for righteousness finds vindication as faith affirms that he will punish the guilty and reward the good.\(^ {18}\) Aeschylus


\(^{17}\) This is true of all deities, of course, but specifically the Furies give up their traditional moral functions as spirits that require vengeance for all deeds against the family to become the spirits of fertility.

\(^{18}\) Norwood, op. cit., p. 131.
was perhaps the last writer of his time to make a serious attempt to describe the universe as just and reasonable in terms of the traditional mythology.

The Agamemnon. The first play of the series is the Agamemnon. There are few actual events in the Agamemnon, but the significance of the events that do occur are so overwhelming that the audience would need a great deal of emotional preparation. This preparation is accomplished by the dialogue and the songs of the Chorus; but the Chorus does much more than this since the major portion of their speaking is concerned with the significance of what has happened or what is about to happen. The action when it finally does come, comes in a rush. The characters are symbols of pride and catastrophe set on a path that can lead only to destruction and chaos.

The scene is laid in front of the palace of Agamemnon in Argos. There are statues of gods and altars prepared for sacrifice. It is night; on the roof of the palace the audience can see a watchman. As he speaks, the audience learns that he has been stationed there to watch for the signal-fire that will announce to Clytemnestra the outcome of the battle at Troy. Aeschylus tells his audience almost immediately that the Clytemnestra of this play is no ordinary woman for he has the Watchman describe
her as, "She in whose woman's breast beats heart of man."19

He goes on to bemoan the fact that all is not well here; there is a "woe" that broods upon the house, a house no longer guided by honor.

He sees the beacon light; there are three lights; Agamemnon has been successful, and Troy has fallen. He leaves to tell Clytemnestra the glad news as the Chorus of Argive Elders enters. During their song Clytemnestra appears in the background lighting the sacrificial fires at the altars.

The Elders begin their song with an account of the events that preceded the war. They tell the audience that it has been ten years since Agamemnon and Menelaus, whom they compare to two birds whose home has been defiled, set out for Troy at the command of Zeus, who was the guardian of the hearth and board, "to buy back Helen in war and blood."

But let Apollo from the sky.
Or Pan or Zeus, but hear the cry,

Of birds from whom their home is torn--
On those who wrought the rapine fell,
Heaven send the vengeful fiends of hell. 20


20 Ibid., p. 169.
They see the altar-fires burning and ask Clytemnestra for an explanation, but she does not answer. Their speech emphasizes the multiplicity of the gods just as the preceding quotation does.

Each god who doth our city guard
And keep o'er Argos watch and ward
From heaven above, from earth below—
The mighty lords who rule the skies,
The market's lesser deities,
To each and all the altar glow.21

The confusion and seeming turmoil of the heavens is parallel to the feeling of unrest projected by the Chorus. The world and heaven both seem to be ruled by a committee, a committee that indulges in independent action without too much regard for unity.

Since the Elders do not receive an answer from Clytemnestra, and it is almost as if the burning of the altar-fires reminds them, they begin an account of the omen that appeared as the Greeks prepared for war and of how the prophet interpreted it. Two eagles appeared devouring a hare in the last stages of pregnancy. The eagles were the king, Agamemnon and Menelaus, and the hare was Troy, destined to fall in the tenth year, just as the hare was to have been delivered in the tenth month. It is interesting to note that the roles have been reversed, that the birds,

21Ibid., p. 170.
Agamemnon and Menelaus, whose home was destroyed when Helen was stolen, are now the oppressors of an innocent victim. The prophecy indicated that the end would be well but "crossed with evil too."

Artemis, angered by the eagle's feast, will demand a sacrifice, "a curse unhallowed sacrifice." The traditional reason for Artemis' anger was that Agamemnon had killed one of her stags, but this story could not suit Aeschylus' purpose for two reasons. First, because the hare more aptly symbolizes Troy and, second, that for Aeschylus the real reason for Artemis' anger is not something that Agamemnon has done already but something he is about to do, wage war for a wanton woman.  

The prophecy ended on a note they did not understand then, nor do they understand it now.

At home there tarries like a lurking snake,
Biding its time, a wrath unreconciled,
A wiley watchet, passionate to slake,
In blood, resentment for a murdered child.  

The dramatic tension has begun to mount. Aeschylus used a technique that can be effective only when the audience knows more than the characters involved.

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22 Kitto, op. cit., p. 4.

23 Morshead, op. cit., p. 172.
The Elders express the hope that the results of past actions will be "fair." They move on then to what amounts to the thesis of the whole trilogy.

Zeus -- if to The Unknown
That name of many names seems good--
Zeus, upon Thee I call.

He that was Lord of old,
In full-blown pride of place and valour bold,
Hath fallen and is gone, even as the old tale told!
And he that next held sway,
By stronger grasp o'erthrown
Hath pass'd away!
And whose now shall bid the triumph-chant arise
To Zeus, and Zeus alone;
He shall be found the truly wise.
'Tis Zeus alone who shows the perfect way
Of knowledge: He hath ruled,
Men shall learn wisdom by affliction schooled.24

The verse begins with reference to the concept of the "Third Saviour."25 First came Uranus, who was all battle and brute strength. The second was Cronus, who overthrew Uranus in a wrestling match and cast him into oblivion. The third is Zeus,26 who was not like his predecessors, who could only strike and be stricken, for Zeus

24 Ibid., p. 173.

25 Gilbert Murray, Aeschylus the Creator of Tragedy (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1940), p. 84, cites the idea as coming directly from the Year-cults. First is the existing year, god or king, the life of the world blooming. Then comes the enemy who is the Second, the cold, the drought, or the reaper, who slays the First and leaves the world dead, without hope. The Third then is the new Spring or Savior who rescues the world from death.

26 Norwood, op. cit., p. 127.
could think. Because he could think, Zeus could learn by experience, by suffering, and consequently could save the world. Zeus learned of a strength that is greater than physical strength; it is a strength that comes through suffering and ends in wisdom, "the perfect way." Under the rule of Uranus and Cronus suffering had led to nothing, but Zeus established the law that out of suffering comes understanding. In so doing he opened the way for man to become wise.  

27 It is this concept of a Zeus who could grow and develop that Aeschylus presented in his Prometheus.  

28 The purpose of the Oresteia, then, is to show man's growth through suffering to a kind of wisdom.

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27 Kitto, op. cit., p. 81.

28 Prometheus helped Zeus to defeat the Titans. Then Zeus, in consolidating his empire, decided to destroy mankind and create a new race. Prometheus, out of love for men, saved them from destruction and gave them the gift of fire which he had stolen from Heaven. Zeus, in anger, chained him to a rock and caused him to endure many tortures through the years. Prometheus foretold the overthrow of Zeus by his own son, and, when Prometheus refused to reveal the whole fatal secret, Zeus visited even more terrible tortures on him. Hercules finally reconciled Prometheus to Zeus, who promised to release the Titan on hearing the secret of this fatal marriage. For Aeschylus there was a progress in the history of Heaven, just as there is progress in the civilization of the world. Zeus learned his lesson that the rule of might divorced from wisdom can lead only to chaos and destruction. Prometheus accepted the authority of Zeus and became a local Attic deity and Zeus in some mysterious way assimilated the eternal wisdom which Prometheus symbolized.
In the next antistrophe the Elders take up the story of the events leading up to the war. Agamemnon, obeying the prophesied will of Zeus, commanded the Grecian fleet to collect at Aulis and prepare for war. Artemis becalmed the fleet and, through a seer, demanded that Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia before she would allow the winds to blow. This, then, was the sacrifice referred to earlier.

Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia and in so doing started on a path which must inevitably lead to his destruction, through the wrath that his actions would create. With this monstrous act he had committed himself to an unrighteous war; he had branded himself as a man of blood who shed his own daughter’s blood that he might go on with "a war for one false woman’s sake," a war that must involve the destruction of countless innocent lives. The Chorus gives a detailed account of how Agamemnon, "lusting for war," sealed his daughter’s lips that she might not utter a curse against the house of Atreus and then brought down the sacrificial blade. They close with the hope that however dark the story of the house may be, the future may be bright.

They turn to Clytemnestra, who has left the altars and come forward. The Leader of the Chorus asks her the occasion for lighting the altar-fires, and she tells them
that Troy has fallen that day. They, naturally, are incredulous, and she explains how the message came by the beacon fire. They are convinced but beg her to repeat the tale. Instead she describes the probable activities at Troy and includes a warning against any act of \textit{hybris} that could bring destruction upon them even before they reach home:

\begin{quote}
Yet let them reverence well the city's gods, 
The lords of Troy, tho' fallen, and her shrines; 
So shall the spoilers not in turn be spoiled. 
Yea, let no craving for forbidden gain
Bid conquerors yield before the darts of greed.\textsuperscript{29}
\end{quote}

Clytemnestra exits into the palace, and the Chorus sings a song of praise to Zeus. Then they enter into a contemplation of sin which leads them to consider the acts of Paris when he stole Helen from Menelaus. They turn then to the bitter consequences that have followed these acts:

\begin{quote}
War's money-changer, giving dust for gold 
Sends back, to hearts that held them dear, 
Scant ash of warriors, wept with many a tear, 
Light to the hand, but heavy to the soul; 
\textbf{\ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots \ldots} 
The death of honour, rolled in dust and blood, 
Slain for a woman's sin, a false wife's shame! 
Such muttered words of bitter mood 
Rise against those who went forth to reclaim;\textsuperscript{30}
\end{quote}

Aeschylus emphasizes again the unjust nature of the cause of the war and for the first time points to the resentment felt by the people toward the war-lords who ordered all

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{29}Morshead, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 178. 
\textsuperscript{30}\textit{Ibid.}, pp. 181-82. 
\end{quote}
this bloodshed. So the attention of the audience has been skillfully shifted from Paris, who, swollen with excessive prosperity, trampled on inviolate sanctities, to the rancor felt by the common people. The Elders conclude with a prayer that they may be permitted to lead the middle life, neither conquerors or slaves. The sentiment expressed is reminiscent of the Pythagorean golden mean and reflects Aeschylus' sense of the evil of war for the conqueror as well as the conquered. "On him that doeth it shall be done."

Several days are assumed to have passed. A Herald, the advance messenger from Agamemnon, enters to announce that Agamemnon and his force have just landed. He greets his native land and bids the Chorus prepare to welcome Agamemnon in a manner that befits

Him whose right hand hewed down the towers of Troy
With the great axe of Zeus who righteth wrong--
And smote the plain, smote down to nothingness
Each altar, every shrine; and far and wide
Dies from the whole land's face its offspring fair.31

Agamemnon has added another crime to the list; this time the crime is a crime against the gods. The desecration of the altars and shrines of Troy draws the net of vengeance more tightly about him. The Herald finishes the speech with an account of the fate of Paris.

31Ibid., p. 184.
The Leader of the Chorus greets the Herald, and they exchange amenities. The Herald tells briefly and very generally of the miseries of war. He gives the impression that even he felt the price of victory was too high, but he brushes it aside as he rejoices that the deed is done and they are home at last.

The Leader directs the Herald to Clytemnestra, but at this moment she comes out of the palace and begins speaking. She tells the Herald that she already knows what his message is. She dismisses him abruptly, telling him that she will hear the details from Agamemnon, then withdraws into the palace. The Leader detains the Herald long enough to ask about Menelaus and to learn that a storm had separated the fleet and that no one knows the fate of Menelaus and his force.

The Herald departs and the Chorus once more muses on the sins of Paris.

Zeus tarries, but avenges still
The husband's wrong, the household's stain!
He, the hearth's lord, brooks not to see
Its outraged hospitality.

And bloody recompense repays--
Rent flesh of kine, its talons tare:
A mighty beast, that slays, and slays,
And mars with blood the household fair,
A god-sent pest invincible,
A minister of fate and hell.32

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32 Ibid., pp. 190-91.
But this time the parallel between the acts of Paris and the acts of Agamemnon are overwhelming. And so it is seen that though Agamemnon acted as a "minister of fate" ordained by Zeus to secure justice, it became a "justice" enacted in blood through hybris, and, therefore, a justice which must entail a similar justice on him who executed it.

The Chorus starts to attribute the woes they have just spoken of to the old idea that the gods were jealous of a man that was too much blessed, too prosperous, too happy and would send him and his children great sorrow. But Aeschylus shifts to a new interpretation as he has them say:

Alone, alone, I deem far otherwise;
Not bliss nor wealth it is, but impious deed,
From which that after-growth of ill doth use!
Woe springs from wrong, the plant is like the seed—
While Right, in honour's house, doth its own likeness breed.33

Aeschylus wished to make it clear to his audience that Agamemnon's destruction was brought about not because he was wealthy and successful but because he had sinned. It is on the man who is successful and unjust that retribution descends; sooner or later "lot checks lot" allowing nothing to have more than its due share.34

33 Ibid., pp. 191-92.
34 This passage is much disputed and is left out of many translations. For a complete discussion see Kitto, op. cit., p. 26.
Agamemnon is seen riding in a chariot and accompanied by a great procession. Cassandra, Agamemnon's prize of war, his concubine, follows in another chariot. The Chorus sings its welcome, but it is not of joy unmixed for they say that all who welcome him may not be true friends.

Agamemnon makes a rather stiff and pompous speech, first a tribute to the gods, a description of the utter ruin of Troy, and then a comment to the Elders attributing the muttering of some of his people to envy of his position. As he prepares to enter the palace, Clytemnestra followed by maidens bearing crimson robes enters from the palace and begins an effusive welcoming speech. She speaks first of her great love for Agamemnon and of the mental anguish she endured in his absence. Next she makes haste to explain the absence of Orestes as a move to protect the boy from possible harm in his father's absence. She launches again into a description of herself as the faithful wife, the "watch-dog of a fold," and ends on a note charged with double meaning.

With such salute I bid my husband hail!  
Nor heaven be wroth therewith! for long and hard  
I bore that ire of old.  
Sweet lord, step forth,  
Step from thy car, I pray -- nay, not on earth  
Plant the proud foot, 0 king, that trod down Troy!  
Women! why tarry ye, whose task it is  
To spread your monarch's path with tapestry?  
Swift, swift, with purple strew his passage fair,  
That justice lead him to a home, at last  
He scarcely looked to see.
For what remains,
Zeal unsubdued by sleep shall nerve my hand
To work as right and as the gods command.\textsuperscript{35}

To an audience that knew what was coming, as they all did, the effect of this dramatic irony must have been powerful. For Agamemnon to walk upon the tapestries Clytemnestra had spread for him would symbolize to the Greeks an overt act of pride and arrogance, an honour reserved for the gods alone. Clytemnestra's purpose, of course, is to lure him into an act which will symbolize the sin he is about to expiate. Agamemnon refuses to walk on the embroidered robes at first, but with a little effort, she convinces him to yield to her will. He bids the slaves unbind his sandals, but before he steps down, he prays briefly, "Let none among the gods look down with jealous eye on me," and then, one more final insult to Clytemnestra, he calls her attention to Cassandra, and he bids her be gentle to Cassandra, "the prize and flower of all we won." He descends from the chariot and moves toward the palace. Clytemnestra gives another speech full of double meaning, vibrant with tension, which ends

"Zeus, Zeus, Fulfilment's lord! my vows fulfil,
And whatsoever it be, work forth thy will!"\textsuperscript{36}

\textsuperscript{35}Morshead, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 196.

\textsuperscript{36}Ibid., p. 199.
She follows Agamemnon into the palace.

The Chorus sings a song heavy with foreboding. They recall the old blood-guilt theme; from all other woes there is some release, the ship may be saved from a storm by parting with some of the freight, the famine-stricken field is saved by the new year's yield

But blood of man once spilled,
Once at his feet shed forth, and darkening the plain,--
Nor chant nor charm can call it back again. 37

And so the Chorus has its turn at double meaning.

Clytemnestra comes out of the palace and speaks to Cassandra, who has remained motionless in her chariot. Clytemnestra orders her to descend from the chariot and come into the palace and share in the sacrificial duties within. As if not hearing, Cassandra sits motionless while the Leader of the Chorus and Clytemnestra attempt to persuade her to enter the palace. Clytemnestra thinks at first that she must not understand the language and then, at last, deciding that she is mad, re-enters the palace without her.

After Clytemnestra is gone Cassandra begins to speak. It is a long speech which is broken here and there by short speeches by the Chorus and their Leader, as they sometimes understand her prophecies and sometimes lose the thread. Tradition has it that Cassandra was beloved of Apollo and he

37Ibid., p. 200.
gave her the gift of prophecy, but she tricked him and married another. Apollo, in his wrath, cursed his gift so that her prophecies would seem false to all who listened. She begins her speech with an appeal to Apollo that ends in her naming him "Destroyer." Then her prophecy begins with a reference to the palace, this "home cursed of God! . . . spattered o'er with human blood, the reeking floor." She tells of the grisly feast prepared by Atreus for Thyestes which the Chorus understands, but as she tells of

... another crime--
Worse than the storied woe of olden time,
Curless, abhorred . . .
A shaming death, for those that should be dear!

and bemoans the fact that "he [Urestes] that should help" is far away in a foreign land, they cease to grasp her meaning. She goes on to describe in detail Agamemnon's murder by Clytemnæstra, building in intensity as she refers to the deed as

a net, a snare of hell,
Set by her hand -- herself a snare more fell!
A wedded wife she slays her lord,
Helped by another hand39
Ye powers, whose hate
Of Atreus' home no blood can satiate
Raise the wild cry above the sacrifice abhorred!40

38vide, p. 9.
39She is referring to Aegisthus, only surviving son of Thyestes, and Clytemnæstra's lover.
40Morshead, op. cit., pp. 203-204.
Even the sacrificial blood rites of Apollo could not cleanse the murderer of the shed blood of his own kinsman. Cassandra is telling them, if only they could understand, that no amount of shed-blood can ever still the curse that haunts the house; it must come about in another way. The words "sacrifice abhorred" recall another sacrifice, the sacrifice of Iphigenia, which set the whole process in motion, a process which for Agamemnon could end only in the kind of death he himself had meted out. But she cannot make the Elders understand and at last begins to prepare herself for her own fate, death by the "double-biting sword." She tries once more in a calmer voice to make them understand. She tells them that because she was false to Apollo, he has made her seem a false prophet to all. She refers again to the evil past of the house of Atreus and to the crime that even now Clytemnestra "moving like Ate" is about to commit. Still unable to make herself clear, she tells again of her own death.

Lo, how the woman-thing, the lioness
Couched with the wolf -- her noble mate afar--
Will slay me, slave forlorn! . . . .

Aeschylus has made it abundantly clear that Clytemnestra and Clytemnestra alone, in direct variance with the legend, is responsible for these deeds.

\[\text{Ibid.}, \text{p. } 209.\]
Cassandra removes the "wands" and "wreaths" that proclaimed her a prophetess; she speaks of the distant future, when the acts of vengeance committed today shall, in their turn, be avenged.

Yet shall the gods have heed of me who die
For by their will shall one requite my doom.
He, to avenge his father's blood outpoured,
Shall smite and slay with matricidal hand.
Ay, he shall come -- tho' far away he roam,
A bandished wanderer in a stranger's land--

Called home to vengeance by his father's fall:
Thus have the high gods sworn, and shall fulfil. 42

Resigned at last, she enters the palace even though the very smell revolts her. Cassandra, caught in a web not of her own making, is the symbol of a suffering humanity waiting for a Dike that will be more bearable. Aeschylus has given the audience an example of man progressing through suffering toward wisdom. Cassandra sees the march of events, events she views with a lofty indignation for their seeming injustice, but she has yet to understand the significance, the ultimate plan.

The Chorus sings a short song after Cassandra has gone into the palace; then the voice of Agamemnon is heard crying out in mortal anguish. The Elders cannot decide what to do; one would call for help, others would themselves act swiftly but know not how; they finally decide to wait

until they know what has really happened. Clytemnestra enters; she is smeared with blood and the body of Agamemnon, swathed in a long robe, can be seen.\(^3\) She proclaims her deed as one deserving praise. The Chorus would drive her out, but she taunts them as "just men" who had no voice when Agamemnon took his daughter's life. She warns them that if their threats continue, they may learn humility later. They point out that Fate, not they, prepares her lot for her, and she tells them that she does not expect to be afraid as long as she has Aegisthus with her, for he is as loyal as Agamemnon was false to her. It seems then that at least part of her motive involved her jealousy of Cassandra; injured pride played some part in her crime.

The Elders lapse into a song bemoaning the loss of their king. They berate Clytemnestra again for her "impious deed" and then ask who will perform the burial rites. She tells them that the deed was hers alone and his burial rites will be hers; Agamemnon's only mourner shall be Iphigenia as she springs to his side in Hades. The Elders are horrified that the normal burial rites are to be denied

\(^3\)The details of Agamemnon's murder are accurate in every detail, for tradition states that he was killed in his bath, wrapped in a long, heavily embroidered crimson robe and that he had previously walked on a very long, crimson embroidered robe. Murray, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 234.
and prophesy that "none can wrench from off the home of sin the clinging grasp of fate." Clytemnestra prays that this act of hers will put an end to the "blood lust," to the "inborn frenzy" of the house. Clytemnestra's vengeance can be seen on three levels. On the moral, religious level, Clytemnestra looks on herself as an incarnation of the curse that envelopes the house of Atreus; she is the embodiment of the blood-vengeance idea that calls for blood to cleanse blood. On another level she has avenged for society the slaughter of the innocent sons of the Greeks and Trojans in an unrighteous war. On a personal level she has avenged the death of Iphigenia and punished Agamemnon, who had already convicted himself of arrogance and sacrilege.

At this point Aegisthus and his armed attendants enter. With swaggering insolence he proclaims himself the planner of the "rightful vengeance." The Leader proclaims their scorn of him and warns him that the people in their wrath may stone him. Aegisthus threatens them with measures to induce submission. They call him a coward because he neither fought at Troy nor felled the blow that killed Agamemnon but depended on a woman's hand, and warn that Orestes will come to slay them both. The Leader of the Chorus gives the word to start a battle, but Clytemnestra stops them. All the exaltation of the vengeance is gone from Clytemnestra; she begins to fear that this was only
another senseless, sordid crime, and, harrassed and depressed, she pleads for peace. She sends the Elders home and, soothing Aegisthus' ruffled pride, assured him that together they "will rule the palace and will order all things well," as she and Aegisthus move toward the palace, and the Chorus sullenly withdraws.

The whole thing might end here, but man has more to learn; actually from the standpoint of the trilogy only the setting of the scene has been accomplished; the events that follow in the wake of the Agamemnon are the events that have true significance for man, significance that can lead to wisdom. The world of moral violence presented has ended in social and political violence, a violence involving even the gods.

The Choephoroi. (The second play of the trilogy is The Choephoroi or The Libation Bearers. This play deals with Orestes' vengeance. It must be remembered that Orestes' vengeance is a vengeance that took place at a time when the blood feud took the place of law. His act is not an act of passion but a grievous duty performed to save the honor of the injured dead. The Greeks would have looked on his failure to perform this duty not as charity toward the murderer but as lack of pity for the murderer's victim. To Orestes, the avenger, the charge could only mean that he
must live in hardship and constant danger, forsaking all
pleasures in life until he had brought down the triumphant
wrongdoer. The outcome of the play is inevitable. The
interest is derived from discovering how the deed will be
accomplished.

The play opens by the tomb of Agamemnon near the
palace in Argos. Orestes and Pylades, a friend, enter
dressed as travelers. Orestes, placing two locks of his
hair at the tomb as a sign of mourning unfulfilled, begins
a prayer to Hermes that Agamemnon may hear of his grief.
The prayer is interrupted when he sees a group of women
with Electra bearing libations and coming toward the tomb;
with a hasty plea directed to Zeus that he be allowed to
avenge his father's murder, he and Pylades withdraw.

The Chorus enters singing that they bring libations
for the dead from the royal palace and at the command of
someone highly placed. Clytemnestra has had an evil dream
and the seers have told her that it is the reflection of the
ire of the dead against their slayers. Clytemnestra has

\[^{14}\text{Ibid.}, p. 196.\]

\[^{15}\text{The Greeks believed that the souls of men foully
done to death became spirits of vengeance that found no peace
within their tomb. They pursue their murderers and terrify
them with horrid dreams. These same spirits as Erinyes
affect even their nearest of kin with both mental and physi-
cal torture if they fail to enact the sacred vengeance.
Herbert W. Smyth, }\text{Aeschylean Tragedy} \text{(Berkeley: University
of California Press, 192\textsuperscript{+}), p. 180.}\]
sent them out in an effort to pacify the spirit "Lest one crime bring another." But the Chorus points out the futility of her gesture when they say,

I'll is the very word to speak, for none can ransom or atone
For blood once shed and darkening the plain.

The lines are reminiscent of the lines of the Chorus of Elders from the *Agamemnon* after Agamemnon has gone into the palace with Clytemnestra.

The song of the Chorus ends as they point out that as slaves, innocent victims of Troy and numb with hidden pain, they can only restrain the spirit's bitter hate, wailing the monarch's fruitless fate. Electra speaks; full of doubt, she asks the Chorus to advise her, for she is unwilling to make the offering in her mother's name, loath to pour them on the earth without words or reverence, and hesitant to pray for "Full recompense--of ills for acts malign." In a dialogue the Leader leads her to a decision, and she offers the libations praying not for vengeance but for a way that she and Crestes may "rule thine halls again," and for herself, "a purer soul than is my mother's, a more

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2. *vide*, p. 33.
stainless hand. As the prayer continues she becomes more forceful until she actually prays for the slayer's death. With the act of pronouncing the curse Electra has reluctantly given herself over to the Atê that haunts the house of Atreus, and it is this reluctance that emphasizes her gentle nature as it throws her into direct contrast with Clytemnestra.

As Electra is about to leave the tomb she notices the locks of hair. She, in dialogue with the Leader of the Chorus, remarks how like hers the hair is; as they discover footprints that match her own and then others, Orestes and Pylades enter suddenly. Orestes declares himself as the answer to her prayers. Electra is not convinced that he is Orestes until he calls her attention to a robe she herself had woven for him. After Electra has assured herself that it is really Orestes, they speak confidently and, with a kind of fervor, of the time when the honor of their "race" shall be restored. The Leader cautions them to be more careful so as to escape detection, but Orestes tells her he cannot fail for he has come at Apollo's command, a command he dare not ignore lest he suffer a grisly death.

alone and exiled. Orestes goes on to say that the god's command is only one of three reasons that he must do the deed; the second reason is the deep grief he feels for his father, and the third is so that those who showed such valor at Troy "be not left slaves to two and each a woman." Here again is the insulting reference to a womanly Aegisthus.

After Orestes' declaration of purpose, Orestes, Electra, and the Chorus gather around the tomb, and, speaking alternately, begin a kind of incantation in which they evoke the gods and the spirit of Agamemnon to assist them in their vengeance. The ritual ends as Electra refers to the inborn curse that haunts the house, the "staunchless wound!" Orestes assures her that it shall be staunched, "by kindred hand." Under the irresistible force of the curse Electra has become a second Clytemnestra and Orestes the divinely appointed purifier.

Orestes asks why his mother sent offerings to the tomb, and the Leader of the Chorus tells him of the queen's dream. She dreamt she bore a serpent, and suckling it, it bit her. Orestes sees himself as the serpent and determines that it is he that must slay her. He makes his plan

\[\text{Ibid.}, \ p. \ 240.\]
for accomplishing the slayings. He and Pylades will pretend to be Phonicians, gain entrance to the palace as suppliants, and once within the palace, "The fury of the house shall drain once more a deep third draught of rich unmingle blood." Orestes bids Electra return to the palace to see that everything is ready for the fulfillment of the plan; he asks silence from the Chorus; then with one final plea for aid from Hermes he, Pylades, and Electra leave.

The Chorus remains and sings of the passionate crimes of women, and the crime at "the summit and crown of all crimes" was the crime that destroyed Troy. The song ends on a forceful note as they express their confidence in the universal law:

But justice hath planted the anvil and Destiny forgeth the sword
That shall smite in her chosen time; by her is the child restored;
And, darkly devising, the Fiend of the house,
world-cursed, will repay
The price of the blood of the slain, that was shed in the bygone day.50

Marriage is the foundation of civilized society, and any crime against the marriage vows threatens the whole of society. Clytemnestra by her crime has delivered the house to an alien plunderer and consequently the city to a tyrant.

50Ibid., p. 251.
Electra and Orestes in praying for restoration to their rightful place are praying for a renewal of order in the state of Argos as well as in the house of its King.

The scene is now before the palace, and Orestes and Pylades enter dressed as travelers. Orestes knocks at the gate and tells the slave that he has news for the queen or "someone who holds authority." Clytemnestra comes out of the palace, and Orestes tells her that a stranger asked him to bring the news of Orestes' death. Her lament is very brief and ends with a reference to the "exulting wrong" that afflicts the house which, with Orestes' death, will still abide. Clytemnestra directs the slave to take Orestes and Pylades to the guest quarters, and she goes back into the palace to tell Aegisthus what has happened.

The Chorus sings briefly and guardedly about the coming vengeance. The nurse enters from the palace weeping. Clytemnestra has sent her to bring Aegisthus back that he may hear the news from the strangers. The nurse completes the picture of a completely ruthless Clytemnestra when she describes how Clytemnestra told the slaves of Orestes' death as "she hid beneath the glance of fictive grief laughter for what is wrought--." In contrast she expresses her own deep grief as she reminisces about Orestes' infancy when she cared for and comforted him. She composes herself and starts off to summon Aegisthus,
but the Leader of the Chorus stops her to ask if Clytemnestra in her message has told Aegisthus to bring back henchmen. The Nurse replies that she has; evidently Clytemnestra was not completely taken in by Orestes' story. The Leader persuades the Nurse to go with pretended joy to tell Aegisthus to come quickly and alone for the news is good.

After the Nurse leaves, the Chorus prays to Zeus to aid Orestes to prevail, "to see this house once more restored," and "hail the commonwealth restored!" Here again the two elements are bound together, a home desecrated and the city-state defiled by tyranny.

Aegisthus enters and questions the Leader of the Chorus, but she tells him to go within and hear the news for himself. He enters the palace and the Chorus again invokes the gods for the cause of justice. A loud cry is heard and an attendant rushes in announcing Aegisthus' murder. Clytemnestra hearing the noise enters, and the attendant tells her, "the dead are come to slay the living." Clytemnestra calls for "the axe that slew my lord of old," for she would meet what she recognizes as the embodiment of the curse here. But before she can get the axe Orestes, his sword dripping with blood, enters; Pylades is with him. He tells Clytemnestra that he has come for her. She cautions him to fear to strike his own
mother, but Pylades reminds him of Apollo's command and advises him, "Choose thou the hate of all men, not of gods." Orestes, his moment of hesitation over, urges her into Aegisthus' side, that she may die by him she loves. She pleads her cause, but Orestes counters every charge. She warns him of the vengeful bounds from hell that will accompany her dying curse, but he reminds her that to spare her would be to call down upon himself his father's curse. Defeated, she recalls the prophetic dream that opened the day, and they go within.

The Chorus recalls the vengeance visited on Troy and rejoices that all pollution has been driven from the house and with it "freedom's light hath come." It is a hymn of deliverance. As the hymn ends the central doors of the palace open showing Orestes standing over the corpses of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra, his sword in one hand and the robe that ensnared Agamemnon in the other. Orestes

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51 Ibid., p. 260.

52 Thomson, op. cit., p. 274, describes a ceremony of one of the mystical religions in which an image is laid on a couch and mourned. After the feigned lamentations a light is brought in, the mourners are anointed as the priest whispers, "take courage, mystics, for our God is saved; Deliverance from evil is yours." Visually the two scenes are strikingly similar; it is the circumstance that enforces the contrast.
reviews his mother's crimes, and the Chorus warns that the tale has not ended; the victory has been swept away by honor and disaster:

Alas, that none of mortal men
Can pass his life, untouched by pain!
Behold, one woe is here—
Another loometh near. 53

Orestes feels himself slipping into madness, but he collects his thoughts enough to proclaim his deed a just one, done at the command of Apollo who has promised him absolution of guilt. Seeking protection at Apollo's shrine, Orestes flees from his vision of his mother's Furies.

The play closes as the Chorus chants of the "storm of woe" that beats on the house of Atreus. First was the ghastly feast served to Thyestes; next the murder of Agamemnon;

And now the offspring of the race
Stands in the third, the saviour's place,
To save—or to consume?
O whither, ere it be fulfilled,
Ere its fierce blast be hushed and stillled,
Shall blow the wind of doom? 54

So man has learned that the rule of the vendetta is not justice. Orestes in purifying the House has taken the

54 Ibid., p. 267.
pollution on himself. But Orestes' crime is different than the ones that preceded it; his is a vengeance enacted at the behest of heaven and not with ferocity or angry passion.

The reference to the Third Savior re-emphasizes the various levels of interpretation of the trilogy. On a personal level, Orestes has cleansed his house, for even if the Furies hound him to death the curse will have been laid to rest. On the level of society, order has been restored. On the moral spiritual level, the issue has yet to be decided; suffering humanity, as symbolized by Orestes has yet to learn "the perfect way." Even as Zeus, the third saviour, through suffering gained wisdom; so man through suffering will find "the perfect way."

The Eumenides. The third play of the trilogy is The Eumenides. The purpose of this final play of the trilogy is to answer the question posed by the Chorus at the end of The Choephoroi. Was Orestes' act an act "to save—or to consume"; where does this blind retribution end?

The scene is laid before the temple of Apollo at Delphi. A Priestess utters a long prayer to the gods and then enters the temple. She returns in great fear after a short time and describes the scene within; Orestes is at the central altar with the bloody sword still held in his hand, and all around him sleeping are the Furies that pursue him. The Priestess leaves, and the central doors open revealing
the scene she has described with Apollo and Hermes at the innermost shrines. Apollo speaks to Orestes telling him that he will never desert him. Apollo instructs Orestes to flee to Athens and clasp the "ancient image" of Athena in his arms; there they will meet judges and contrive for Orestes' deliverance. Apollo tells Orestes that he must hurry, for even the gods cannot long subdue the Furies in slumber as they are now. Apollo, Hermes, and Orestes go out. As they leave the ghost of Clytemnestra rises and wakens the Furies abusing them for their slumber while her murder goes unavenged. The ghost sinks as the Furies begin to rouse from their slumber.

The Furies berate Apollo for having aided Orestes in his escape, and Apollo entering from the inner shrine orders them out of the temple. He tells them they belong to a different time and a different place, a stage of civilization that gouges eyes, lops off heads, and impales men so that the land is filled with the agonized moaning of tortured men. The speech is an expression of indignation against the uncontrolled, incarnate passion for avenging the sufferer and smiting the wicked, a passion which will not let the victim rest even in death.

The Leader of the Furies states the case against Orestes and Apollo. The Leader contends the matricide must be avenged since it involved shedding kinsman's blood,
and that Clytemnestra's crime could not involve the Furies' wrath since it did not shed kindred blood. Apollo tells them he is in the right and will not change his stand. The Furies go out in pursuit of Orestes, and Apollo enters the temple.

The scene changes to Athens, at the Temple of Athena on the Acropolis. Orestes is seen clinging to the statue of Athena which stands in the center. Orestes speaks asking her judgment of him for acts performed at the behest of Apollo. The Furies enter, accuse him, and tell him how they would punish his deed. Orestes points out that he is no stranger to miseries and pain, but that he is pure as the deed was done at Apollo's command; Apollo who, with "death of swine," did cleanse him of guilt. Now Orestes asks Athena for her aid. The Furies declare that no one can help him, and they begin a binding chant. They form a magic circle from which Orestes cannot pass.

In the midst of the chant Athena enters, proclaims herself, and asks who the Furies are. They declare themselves as avenging spirits. Athena by treating the Furies courteously persuades them to abide by her decision. Then she asks Orestes to state his case. When she has heard the circumstances of his crime, Athena declares that the matter is too great for her to decide; therefore, she prepares to establish the Court of the Areopagus to hear
the case and reach a decision. Athena withdraws and the Furies declare that the ancient laws will all be undone if Orestes goes free; gone will be the fear that stays the murderer's hand.

Athena re-enters with twelve Athenian citizens followed by a large crowd and announces that these twelve men, with all the city as witness, shall judge the cause. Apollo enters, and declares himself as a witness for Orestes. Athena gives the Furies the first chance to speak. Under the questioning of the Furies, Orestes admits that he slew his mother but under the command of Apollo's oracle. When the question of Orestes' kinship to his mother arises Apollo takes over the proof. He advances the Pythagorean doctrine of paternity.55

Not the true parent is the woman's womb
That bears the child; she doth but nurse the seed
New-sown: the male is parent; she for him,
As stranger for a stranger, hoards the germ
Of life, unless the god its promise blight.
And proof hereof before you will I set.
Birth may from fathers, without mothers, be;
See at your side a witness of the same,
Athena, daughter of Olympian Zeus,
Never within the darkness of the womb

55 Thomson, op. cit., p. 287. This was a familiar doctrine at Athens in the fifth century and though it was resisted by the more advanced democrats, Athenian citizens would be prepared to see the doctrine either vindicated or challenged.
Fostered not fashioned, but a bud more bright
Than any goddess in her breast might bear. 56

Seen in the light of social history this feud between the Erinys and Apollo is the symbol of the conflict between tribal custom and the reorganization of the law of homicide brought about during the rule of the aristocracy. Apollo by declaring that his actions have followed the decree of Zeus suggests that, on another level, this feud symbolizes the deeper discord in the heavens as Zeus seeks to reduce independent action and bring unity to the universe.

When Apollo finishes his speech Athena calls for a verdict, but first she gives the twelve Athenians their charge which is to do no unjust thing and to let no man live uncurbed by law nor curbed by tyranny. As each of the twelve judges come forward to the urns of decision, the Leader of the Furies and Apollo speaking alternately plead their individual cause, Apollo for reasoned justice, the Furies for a counting of the cost. At last Athena declares that in case of a tie the right to add the final vote is hers and that she will award it to Orestes' cause.

and for reasons of her parentage. Athena has taken her stand for order and authority, a reasoned Dike against blind automatic punishment. Athena counts the votes and proclaims the verdict; "half the votes condemn him, half set free!" Neither side was right, for each ignored one of the two essential elements. Apollo in his zeal to vindicate order overlooked the necessity of the instinctive fear and reverence which deters men from acts of violence. The Erinys, "daughters of the night," spirits of blind vengeance, had not even considered the necessity of stability in the social structure.

Crestes offers a prayer of thanks for his deliverance, and he and Apollo depart. The Furies prepare to wreak vengeance on Athens for the decision of the court. Athena points out to them that the balanced vote proved that their cause had merit and that they were in no way dishonored, for it was a democratic decision showing the will of Zeus, "agent of parley." Then she offers them a "holy sanctuary" here in Athens. They ignore her offer and continue their tirade. With great patience and calm she continues to offer them a place of honor to substitute for the one of

57 Thomson, op. cit., p. 286. Thomson takes this decision of Athena to mean that Aeschylus, at least at the end of his life, was opposed to the advanced policy of the radical democrats.
dread they have held. At last she promises that "no house shall prosper without grace of thine," and they accept her offer, an act which symbolizes their conversion from blind action to the acceptance of reasonable persuasion.

After the Furies, now the Eumenides, and Athena rejoice in their contract, Athena begins the procession downward into the cave under the Areopagus. They are accompanied by women and children, and they all chant joyously.

With the establishment of the court and the disappearance of the Furies amidst popular rejoicing Aeschylus has told a story that symbolizes man's social progress as the accumulated deposits of the primitive tribe and the privilege of the aristocracy are resolved in democracy. It is a story dark and painful as it begins, that ends in the brilliance of the Athens of the poet's own day.

*Some conclusions.* The world has in the *Oresteia* the poetic record of the social and religious growth of an

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58Ibid., p. 291. Historically the court of the Areopagus which Aeschylus represents Athena as establishing at the inauguration of democracy was an ancient institution, going back to the primitive monarchy. It began originally as a council of chiefs. Norwood, *op. cit.*, p. 116, suggests that Aeschylus wished to impress upon his countrymen the sacredness of the ancient court, whose powers had just recently been curtailed by the popular party, by representing it as having been established by Athena.
inspired people, a record that begins in the darkness of antiquity and ends in their moment of exaltation. Looking at the trilogy from the standpoint of ritual, the structure reflects the seasons of nature. In the *Agamemnon* the whole pageantry of nature is shown as a background to the conflict. The image of the *Choephoroi* is less lavish, more somber with its emphasis on the supernatural, the monsters of the deep. But by the end of the *Eumenides* the bright colours have returned when the maledictions of the Furies in a kind of metamorphosis become gentle breezes and increased fertility. This is "the tragic pattern" in which life leads to death, pride to downfall, or sin to retribution. So in the *Oresteia* the movements of nature are seen as they parallel the concept of the Third Saviour. Agamemnon, the first part of the year, is slain by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, symbolizing winter with the resultant decay and ruin; but the Third Saviour in the person of Orestes delivers the world from the darkness and decay, represented by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, and prepares the way for new life.

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60 Murray, *Aeschylus the Creator of Tragedy, op. cit.*, pp. 81-82.
From the standpoint of human social progress the trilogy depicts the growth of civilization through a long and painful struggle to the place where man has within his hands the means of avoiding both anarchy and despotism by combining freedom and order under the Court. Orestes' case was the test case. Within the framework of the Oresteia the social and political struggle of mankind is shown. It is a struggle that comes out of the chaos caused by man as he seeks to satisfy the ancient law of dikē: that wrong must and will be avenged, and the law that hybris breeds hybris and must inevitably lead to ruin. The struggle ends in security or at least the possibility of security because man through the court can satisfy the law of dikē without infringing on the law of hybris. Mankind can look forward from this point on to a reasoned justice.

Just as the Oresteia can be interpreted in terms of ancient Greek ritual and in terms of the history of human progress, the trilogy can also be interpreted in terms of spiritual growth. The "Alleluia" first raised by Clytemnestra in answer to the Watchman's news is heard by Cassandra as the Furies echo it from the house top; the cry is raised again by Clytemnestra over Agamemnon's dead body and then by Orestes' friends over her own body; each time it carried with it a load of woe; it is heard again at the close of The Eumenides, a cry joyously unrestrained,
and it signifies that the spirit of man has passed through suffering into true and lasting joy even as Zeus has decreed. The trilogy ends then with the conception of a godhead in which both Zeus and Fate in some mysterious way are fused and through whose just and merciful wisdom man too, through suffering, can achieve wisdom. There is then an existence in Heaven of a will or an understanding that is supreme even over the law.

Clearly the Oresteia is no ordinary drama; it is a profoundly religious drama that spoke to all segments of the audience for which it was written, to the simple worker of the soil whose prosperity was dependent on the seasons of the year, to the citizens imbued with democratic fervor, to the philosopher who within the framework of traditional belief sought order, meaning, significance in man's relationship to the universe. The significance of the trilogy for the modern world comes as one realizes that the true catharsis arises as from the violent horror of the events of the play one begins to understand, which is not always possible in day to day living, why they have occurred, and if not so much as that at least that they have not happened by chance and without significance. Man still, through painful searching of his soul in relation to his acts, seeks and finds wisdom.

CHAPTER III

SOPHOCLES AND THE HOUSE OF ATHENS

I. THE TIMES

Sophocles was born just thirty years after Aeschylus. When Athens celebrated the victories over the Persians at Salamis and Plataea, Sophocles was only sixteen, and it was he who was chosen to lead the choir of boys that sang the pean at that celebration. The years that followed these final defeats of the Persians were years in which Athens enjoyed the fruits of rich tributes from abroad and a stable government at home. This was the last period in which the aristocracy was supreme; their unquestioned supremacy came to an end forever when Pericles began his thirty years' dominance; Sophocles was about thirty-six years old. It was Athens's economic security as mistress of the Aegean and her progress toward good government and ordered justice, which Aeschylus expounded in his *Oresteia*, that

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1 Pericles saw the achievement of good government, the Court of the Aeropagus, as a work of compromise, the "discovery of the golden mean." He points to Athenians as being equal before the law yet rewarded for excellence, as loving beauty, without sacrificing simplicity, and pursuing wisdom without loss of strength. Henry Dale (trans.), *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, by Thucydides (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1891), pp. 111-17.
provided her with the freedom and leisure to indulge in the burst of intellectual and spiritual probing about the middle of the century which has intrigued the world ever since.

**Life in Athens.** Late in the sixth century B.C. such subjects as the nature and origin of the physical world, which has previously been settled by authoritative rulings or ignored, began to be investigated and became the object of much speculative thought. This movement was able to grow and prosper first because of the increase of leisure and a natural curiosity, and second because there was greater access to the accumulated knowledge in Babylonia and Egypt. But more important probably than either of those reasons is the fact that despite the great respect and reverence with which the Greeks looked on the law, that great code, written and unwritten, that encompassed so many aspects of Greek life from custom and religious ritual to the concepts of good and evil. The Greek religion had no creed or dogma and consequently had no influential priestly orders that might exert an

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2John T. Sheppard, *Aeschylus and Sophocles Their Work and Influence* (New York: Longmans, Green and Company, 1927), p. 44. Sheppard quotes Pericles as saying that Athenians respect the laws and the magistrates, but above all, "those laws which are proved for the redress of injury and those unwritten laws the breach of which is thought to be disgraceful."
organized repressive influence. The individual was left free to pick and choose among the various ideas that were current. In many minds the fact that something had been accepted by tradition or revelation and probably met with divine approval did not exempt its examination in the light of reason and logic.

The intellectual activity of the fifth century is associated with the sophists who traveled from place to place taking students for pay and thereby satisfying the demand for higher education. Certainly the sophists were responsible for the spreading of knowledge, but their activity would not have been possible without the original thinking of the Ionian philosopher although the line between sophist and philosopher could not always be drawn very clearly. Anaxagoras was a philosopher who came to Athens about the time of the rise to power of Pericles and concerned himself principally with the sun and stars. There is no evidence that he concerned himself with the ethical questions discussed by the sophists, but he did discover the true explanation of eclipses and in the process hinted broadly that there were no gods but rather only one motivating force nous.3 It was this theory that

caused him to flee from Athens after having been convicted of impiety.\(^4\) However, Protagoras, who drew up the constitution for the Athenian colony at Thurii and contributed much original thought, is considered a sophist because, unlike Anaxagoras, he had to earn his living.

Perhaps the most outstanding thing about the age was the complete freedom of choice; even among the professionals there was not a uniformity of choice. But the doctrine that was most characteristic of the age was the doctrine of the relativity of values which Protagoras expressed in his statement, "Of all things the measure is Man, of the things that are, and of the things that are not, that they are not."\(^5\) This denial by Protagoras of objective standards, and the fact that there was great variety in social and religious observances, made way for the most significant controversy of the age: the law, custom, convention as opposed to nature.

\(^4\)Donald W. Lucas, *The Greek Tragic Poets* (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1952), p. 108. Lucas advances the theory that the incident occurred "as much as a political attack on Pericles as a defence of orthodoxy."

The inevitable result of any controversy between the man made laws of convention and the laws of nature is the expression of such extreme views as are expressed by a fragment from the writings of the sophist Antiphon, who became known a generation after Protagoras:

Justice, then, is not to transgress that which is the law of the city in which one is a citizen. A man therefore can best conduct himself in harmony with justice, if when in the company of witnesses he upholds the laws, and when alone without witnesses he upholds the edicts of nature. For the edicts of the laws are imposed artificially, but those of nature are compulsory. And the edicts of the laws are arrived at by consent, not by natural growth, whereas those of nature are not a matter of consent.

So, if the man who transgresses the legal code evades those who have agreed to these edicts, he avoids both disgrace and penalty; otherwise not. But if a man violates against possibility any of the laws which are implanted in nature, even if he evades all men's detection, the ill is no less, and even if all see, it is no greater. For he is not hurt on account of an opinion, but because of truth. . . . And the advantages laid down by the laws are chains upon nature, but those laid down by nature are free. So that the things which hurt, according to true reasoning, do not benefit nature more than those which delight; and things which grieve are not more advantageous than those which please; for things truly advantageous must not really harm, but must benefit. . . .

That such a view was held by some Athenians is certain, but since the statement appears out of context it cannot surely

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be said to represent Antiphon's personal view. Perhaps the real importance of the expression of such views is that the ordinary men found in these ideas a justification for the countless little immoralities and self-indulgences their appetites suggested. The inevitable consequence of applying Protagoras' denial of objective standard, well intentioned, as it may have been, to the art of rhetoric was that it led to the obvious learning of rhetorical tricks in order to disguise weak cases without regard to anything but plausibility. But from these explorations came the discovery of a scientific method.7

Sophocles, then, grew up in a city that was full of exuberance and self confidence, confidence in its physical strength, military prowess, confidence in its government which gave its citizens security and unparalleled freedom, and confidence in its reputation as a place of artistic beauty and the center of philosophic thought. But by the last half of the age the gods of Olympus had slowly become figureheads. The more men looked for a satisfying justice in the world, the closer they came to the realization that man not the gods must take the responsibility for ordered justice. It was the struggle to resolve the concept of man

as a fully responsible moral agent with the inexplicable evil of the world that caused disorder. If the new ideas that the Athenians found so stimulating questioned traditional values then the wise man introduced order into his own spirit in a daily life that exemplified order, taste, and balance, *sophrosyne*. It was this delicate balance that Sophocles' life seemed to exemplify.

II. SOPHOCLES (495 B.C. - 405 B.C.)

THE MAN AND HIS IDEAS

His life. When Sophocles was dead men called him happy, "for he lived a long life, made many beautiful tragedies, and in the end, died without suffering any evil," so said the poet Pluynichus in *The Muses*. To the Greeks he was the most fortunate of mortals, for he had realized the idea of *avete*; that is he had achieved a kind excellence—physical, intellectual, and spiritual. He was rich and successful, was given many honors, and died before the fall of his beloved city.

Sophocles was born at Colonus in Attica, near Athens. His father was a wealthy and respected merchant, which gave Sophocles entrance to the best social circles. He was well educated and carefully trained in music by the great musician, Lampros. His physical grace was so outstanding that at sixteen he was chosen to lead the choir
of boys who sang to celebrate the victory of Salamis. After twelve more years of study and training in music he was ready to compete at the festival against Aeschylus, and he won the prize. Feeling ran so high that the decision was entrusted to the Athenian board of judges rather than choosing the judges by lot as was the custom. During his lifetime Sophocles wrote one hundred plays; eighteen of them won first place and the others were never lower than second place. He was an accomplished artist, and he had what few artists receive in their lifetime, acclaim and recognition in his own age.

Sophocles was something of a public figure as well as a poet and actor, even though he never displayed any pronounced political convictions. He was twice elected to the Board of Generals, a group that administered civil

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9 Early in his career he acted in his plays, but was forced to give it up because his voice failed.

10 Cedric H. Whitman, Sophocles (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1951), p. 13. Whitman states that Sophocles associated equally with Cimon, who represented the conservative element in Athenian government and Pericles, who was, of course, the democratic leader.
and military affairs in Athens, and was even a director of the Treasury Department for a time. He was associated with the introduction of the worship of Asclepius, the god of healing, at Athens. It was Sophocles who was chosen to house Epidaurus, representative of the god Asclepius presumably in the form of a snake, who came to purify the city after a plague about 430 B.C.\textsuperscript{11} Socially Sophocles was very much in demand; his friends were Aeschylus and Euripides, his fellow playwrights, Cimon and Pericles political leaders, Herodotus and Thucydides historians, and Phidias the great sculptor; his remarks became public property. To his contemporaries his gentleness and even temper made his life seem to be the very model of serenity, the pious system of life or \textit{sophrosyne} which means in part self restraint.

Sophocles was further honored by his countrymen for they chose him to dedicate a chapel to Heracles. His countrymen so cherished Sophocles as the very epitome of what was noble that after his death they gave him the honorary name of Dexion, the Entertainer or Host, and brought yearly sacrifices to his tomb.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 11.
In spite of the fact that Sophocles' life was dotted with acts of obvious piety, little can be said about his real spiritual beliefs, for it is well known that this sort of piety among the Greeks was a function of citizenship and the social obligation of the financially able. Whitman said in comparison of Euripides and Sophocles, Euripides

... said in public what everybody thought was true, but it should not have been said in public. If Sophocles sometimes said things which were almost as bad, he said them much more subtly, and they went unnoticed. ... Sophocles' heart was anywhere but on his sleeve, and his countrymen naturally and sympathetically assumed it was in the right place.¹²

Looking at the plays of Sophocles perhaps somewhere in the inconsistency between what the chorus says as it expresses current public opinion and the actions of the tragic hero lies the key to the knowledge of Sophocles' own moral judgments. One must look deeper than the surface events of Sophocles' life to be able to understand how, shortly before his death, this man, whose life others considered the perfect justification of human existence, could say,

Not to be born is, past all prizing best; but when a man hath seen the light, this is next best by far, that with all speed he should go thither, whence he hath come.¹³

¹²Ibid., p. 5.

¹³Gassner, op. cit., p. 42, citing Sophocles.
Perhaps the spiritual and intellectual revolution that characterized the age had more impact on Sophocles' life than his contemporaries realized. Certainly the experience of having lived that last part of his life in a city ravaged by plague and engaged in a war he must have realized the city could not win, must have left its mark. Sophocles died in 405 B.C. just a few months after the death of Euripides; it was not many months more before Athens fell before the military might of Sparta.

III. SOPHOCLES' ELECTRA

The first question that comes to mind when Sophocles' Electra and Aeschylus Oresteia are viewed side by side is why Sophocles abandoned the trilogy. The shift in emphasis is responsible for the shift in form; Aeschylus has placed the emphasis on cosmic justice, but Sophocles has placed the emphasis on human morality. In Sophocles' play human responsibility fills both the foreground and the background; man is responsible to himself as the repository of the ideas of justice and morality. It must be remembered that Sophocles never intended to supplant Aeschylus' masterpiece or to "correct" it in any way. Aeschylus wrote a trilogy which in grand outline shows the workings of an internal law which is full of mystery and terror, a trilogy that involves a murder and a matricide which leads to
reasoned justice; but Sophocles wrote a play not about matricide, but about the individual and his behavior in the face of great evil.

The play. The play begins in front of the palace of Agamemnon. It is morning, the sun is bright, and the birds are beginning to sing. The Paedagogus accompanied by Orestes and Pylades enter. The Paedagogus speaks to Orestes pointing out places of historic and religious importance. At last he points out the palace, "the house of the Pelopidae there, so often stained with bloodshed"; this reference serves to remind the audience of the long chain of crime that has haunted the house. The speech serves also to tell the audience it was Electra who gave Orestes into the Paedagogus' keeping to be raised to become the avenger of his murdered father, rather than Clytemnestra who sent him into exile as in the Choephoroi. The speech closes as he calls Orestes and Pylades to the business at hand that they may lay their plans before the people of the house begin the day and make note of their arrival.


15Vide, pp. 5, 8.
Orestes answers the Paedagogus with a few words of praise. Then he tells his two companions that he consulted Apollo's oracle and was advised to come by "stealth" and without "aid of arms" to "snatch the righteous vengeance"; there are none of the elaborate threats or admonitions such as are used in the Choephoroi. Having done as the oracle directed, Orestes outlines the plan for his companions. The Paedagogus, who is least likely to be recognized, is to enter the palace and tell them that Orestes has perished by a fatal accident as he was hurled from his chariot at the Pythian games. Meanwhile Orestes and Pylades are to go to Aamemnon's tomb to give "drink offerings and the luxuriant tribute of severed hair" and to bring back the urn that is supposed to contain Orestes' ashes; they had secreted the urn in the brushwood earlier. Orestes ends his speech with a plea directed to the gods to "send me not dishonoured from the land, but grant that I may rule over my possessions, and restore my house!"

There is an echo from the Choephoroi here as Sophocles' Orestes, as is true with Aeschylus' Orestes, makes a plea for the restoration of order in the land.  

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16 Jebb, op. cit., p. 17.

17 Vide, p. 45.
A cry from Electra, who is in the palace, is heard. Orestes would like to stay and hear her lament, but the Paedagogus urges him to go immediately so that the plan may begin to work. The Paedagogus goes out to the left, and Orestes and Pylades go out to the right as Electra enters, chanting. This opening scene has carried none of the dark foreboding that is found in the Choephoroi. It must be remembered that Apollo is the god of light and truth; perhaps the bright, sunny, almost cheerful quality of the scene is symbolic of Apollo's presence and is a subtle benediction on the whole enterprise.

Electra begins her chant by bemoaning the fact she alone still mourns for her murdered father. Then she compares her grief to the grief of the nightingale which is the type of grief that is inconsolable because it is faithful. She ends her lament by calling on all the gods, spirits of the nether world, and especially the Furies, who take notice of murder and a bed dishonored, to help her avenge her father and to send Orestes as her strength is waning.

As Electra finishes her lament the Chorus enters. They are a group made up of free women from outside the palace as opposed to the Trojan slaves from the palace who make up the Chorus in the *Choephoroi*. It is important to remember that the Chorus in Sophocles' plays does not represent the author's views but is instead like the other actors. Its comments and judgments lead to conclusions that are no more valid than those of any of the other characters. In the *Electra* the Chorus represents the attitudes of the general public. The Chorus expresses their sympathy for Electra's cause but entreat her to cease her excessive lamentations that bring her not deliverance from evils but only increase her misery. She tells the Chorus that she knows they have come to soothe her woes, but her mourning is a task she cannot leave undone. She, in turn, entreats them to leave her, for she has chosen Niobe who weeps forever in her rocky tomb as the pattern for her mourning: "Foolish is the child who forgets a parents' love".

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20Niobe, Pelops' sister, boasted persistently about the superiority of her birth, marriage, and offspring. The gods for punishment killed her six sons and six daughters and her husband. They turned her to stone and, in a whirlwind, bore her to her native mountain. She remains a mass of rock from which a trickling stream flows, the symbol of her everlasting grief. William J. Smith and Walter Miller (trans.), *The Iliad of Homer* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1945), p. 532.
piteous death."21

The Chorus tries to placate Electra with the thought that after all she is not the only one who shares the common sorrow; she should not bear her grief less calmly than her sisters and her brother. Besides Zeus is still in heaven; Time will eventually make life smooth. But Electra will not be comforted, and she tells them of the misery of her position in the palace:

Nay, the best part of life hath passed away from me in hopelessness, and I have no strength left; I, who am pining away without children,—whom no loving champion shields,—but, like some despised alien, I serve in the halls of my father, clad in this mean garb, and standing, at a meagre board.22

Aeschylus' Electra speaks of being a virtual slave, what she actually meant was that she had been disinherited, but Sophocles' Electra has actually suffered physically as well as mentally; she is literally a slave. The Chorus recalls the murder of Agamemnon where, "guile was the plotter, lust the slayer, dread parents of a dreadful shape; whether it was mortal that wrought therein, or god."23 The Chorus at least seems to have some doubt as to the existence of divine, cosmic justice. Electra takes up the cry and

21 Jebb, op. cit., p. 27.
22 Ibid., pp. 33, 35.
23 Ibid., pp. 35, 37.
bemoans "that bitter day" and "the hands of twain, who took my life captive by treachery, who doomed me to woe!" Her cry fades into a plea that those who have done such deeds receive suffering in requital and sorrow from their stolen splendor. For Electra, as for any Greek woman, to be without husband and children was a fearful deprivation; without a husband she cannot fulfill her proper function as a woman and without children there will be no one to tend her old age or remember her after her death.

The Chorus advises her to say no more, for it is her own attitude that causes much of her misery. She begs them to stop their efforts to comfort her, for her conduct has been "forced by dread causes," she cannot change her nature. Right and wrong are so real to her that the sight of a scandalous maladjustment between the two cannot be borne. To her moral principles are realities, and her deep feelings of moral fitness and personal integrity prompt her actions; she can make no compromise with evil:

For if the hapless dead is to lie in dust and nothingness, while the slayers pay not with blood for blood, all regard for man, all fear of heaven, will vanish from the earth.\(^2\)

The Chorus, realizing that they cannot dissuade her agree to follow her. Then Electra sums up the case against

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\(^2\) Ibid., p. 41.
Clytemnestra and Aegisthus: Aegisthus sits on Agamemnon's throne, wearing the robes he wore and pouring libations on the hearth where he was slain; each night the murderer sleeps "in our father's bed at our wretched mother's side"; and Clytemnestra, "exulting in her deeds," celebrates monthly the day of Agamemnon's death by dance and song and sacrifice of sheep to the gods; in addition to these impieties the evil pair upbraid Electra for having spirited Orestes away and promise her her "due reward."

Electra ends the speech by reaffirming her actions:

In such a case, then, friends, there is no room for moderation or for reverence; in sooth, the stress of ills leaves no choice but to follow evil ways. 25

For the vindication of righteousness then, Electra is forced into irreligious and immodest behavior; circumstances have thwarted her natural instincts of modesty and piety. She has established the validity of excess. The inclusion of speeches such as this one shows the effect that the general interest in the art of persuasion and the set debate had even on the plays of the times.

Since the Chorus has accepted Electra's position the Leader asks her how it is that she can speak so freely. Electra tells them that Aegisthus is away. They talk about

25 Ibid., p. 49.
the possibility of Crestes' arrival; then the Leader sees Chrysothemis, Electra's sister, coming out of the palace with "sepulchral gifts."

Chrysothemis, richly dressed, enters from the palace and speaks to Electra asking her to give up these "vain indulgences in idle wrath." Chrysothemis tells Electra that had she the strength she would support Electra's cause, for it is on the side of right; but to live in freedom she must obey. Electra berates her for her weak will and for her attempt "to turn thy sister from her deed." For Electra the price of compromise is too great, for it calls for betrayal. Chrysothemis tells Electra that if she had not heard that Aegisthus and Clytemnestra plan to send Electra far away and leave her locked up in a dungeon because she will not quit her dreary chant, she would not have mentioned the matter. Electra tells Chrysothemis that even in the face of imprisonment she cannot cease her lamentations. Chrysothemis points out to her that it is foolish "to fall by folly," but Electra declares that to desist would be cowardice. Chrysothemis sees that the argument is futile, and prepares to go on her errand which is to take funeral libations to the tomb of Agamemnon at the request of Clytemnestra. As Electra questions her sister she learns that Clytemnestra has had a troubling dream: Agamemnon appeared beside her, and taking his sceptre,
planted it at the hearth; from the sceptre a fruitful bough sprang upward, and the whole land was overshadowed. Sophocles has changed the imagery of the dream from a snake to a tree; both Stesichorus and Aeschylus use the snake image.²⁶ Sophocles, for his purpose, needs a more subtle less violent image.²⁷

Electra tells Chrysothemis to let none of the things from Clytemnestra touch their father's tomb but to throw them to the winds or bury them so that when their mother dies she may "find these treasures laid up for her below"; for neither custom nor piety would allow the bringing of such gifts from a "hateful wife":

Think now if it is likely that the dead in the tomb should take these honours kindly at her hand, who ruthlessly slew him, like a foeman, and mangled him, and for ablution, wiped off the blood-stains on his head?²⁸ Canst thou believe that these things which

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²⁶The snake is the symbol of treachery and of violence to a mother, for young snakes were believed to gnaw a passage through the womb. John Bech Powell (trans.), Herodotus (Oxford: at the Clarendon Press, 1949), pp. 249-50.

²⁷Bowra, op. cit., pp. 223-24. Bowra feels the use of the snake image makes Orestes enact vengeance in "too odious a spirit."

²⁸The Greeks believed that dismembering the corpse prevented the spirit of the victim from taking natural vengeance on his murdered. Clytemnestra wiped the blood spots from her axe upon Agamemnon's head thereby symbolically transferring her guilt to him. Herbert W. Smyth, Aeschylean Tragedy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1924), p. 181.
though bringest will absolve her of the murder?
It is not possible. No cast these things aside...29

Electra urges Chrysothemis to cut a lock of her own hair and place it on their father's tomb with one Electra has cut from her own head and pray that he will send his spirit to aid them and that Orestes will come "to set his foot upon his foes in victorious might." Electra concludes her argument by telling Chrysothemis that she thinks their father's spirit had a part in sending Clytemnestra "these appalling dreams." The Leader of the Chorus joins Electra in urging Chrysothemis to foil Clytemnestra's plan. Chrysothemis agrees to carry out Electra's suggestions if they will keep silent as to her purpose; then she departs.

The purpose of this first third of the play has been to define Electra's position in relation to the past and the present and her relation to the people that make up her world. The play thus far is a series of vivid contrasts; even the reader feels the emotional impact of these contrasts. The murder that brings Orestes to the scene is for him a matter of hearsay, history; his training has prepared him to write the last chapter of that history. His purpose is the vindication of abstract right; he seems to be

almost free of emotional involvement. Electra by contrast acts out of intimate knowledge, intensely personal feelings; the murder for her is a real and loathsome memory. The dawn which seems to place a blessing on Orestes' plan is for Electra just release from another night of tears. The scene between Electra and the Chorus reveals Electra as she seems to herself, while the scene with Chrysothemis reveals her as she must look to the world, stubborn, insanely rebellious, and bent on self destruction. Electra has a truly noble soul for in adversity she has chosen that adversity in preference to a course less lofty but more comfortable. Her life is an example of tragic themosyne which is the vital necessity of the soul to function even if that functioning cannot be realized in external action, "even if it must function only upon itself and to its own ever-increasing pain."30

After Chrysothemis has gone the Chorus sings of its confidence that Agamemnon's murder will soon be avenged. The song ends with a reference to the ancient curse on the house. Sophocles uses the version that tells of the ancient chariot race Pelops won by treachery which led eventually to the curse on his house.31

30Whitman, op. cit., p. 166.

31vide, p. 5.
As the Chorus finishes its song Clytemnestra enters from the palace and speaks to Electra. It is a whining, complaining speech which reveals her as a mean, base individual who is ready to stoop to anything to maintain the doubtful security of her position. She tries to justify herself to Electra, but her arguments lack force and conviction. When she begins to speak she upbraids Electra for having passed the palace gates and then admits that she cannot control Electra's movements when Aegisthus is not there to enforce her decisions. She refers to Electra's attitude to her and then begins a kind of formal argument to try to justify herself to Electra: first she admits having slain Agamemnon but claims that justice was her partner, for of all the Greeks he was the only one "who had the heart to sacrifice thy sister to the gods--he, the father." Clytemnestra goes on to charge that Agamemnon had sacrificed Iphigenia not to please the warriors, but to shield his brother Menelaus whose two children might better have been sacrificed having come from the mother who caused the conflict. She condemns Agamemnon as "a callous and perverse parent" and ends up cautioning Electra to be sure that her own judgment is just before placing blame.

32 Jebb, op. cit., p. 77.
Electra protests that she has done nothing to provoke her mother's outburst, but asks permission to declare the case for her father and her sister. Clytemnestra gives her permission and Electra's speech that follows is another example that shows the influence of the emphasis on the art of persuasion so popular in Sophocles' day. The two speeches viewed together take on the characteristics of a set debate. Electra rejects Clytemnestra's claim that the deed was a just one and lays the counter charge that Clytemnestra was "drawn on to it by the wooing of a base man." Electra denies that Agamemnon slew Iphigenia for Menelaus' sake and advances the story that Artemis angered because Agamemnon had boastfully shot one of her stags stayed the winds at Aulis thus making it impossible for the fleet to sail either homeward or to Troy; it was to release the fleet that she was sacrificed. Having justified her rejection of Clytemnestra's deed as just, Electra proceeds to turn Clytemnestra's own argument against her:

33 *Ibid.*, p. 83. Electra is, of course, referring to Aegisthus. Her accusation reminds one of a speech made by the Chorus earlier; *Vide*, p. 76.

34 No attempt has been made to ennable the motives of Artemis as was done in the *Oresteia*, *Vide*, p. 25.
... grant that the motive of his deed was to benefit his brother;—was that a reason for his dying by thy hand? Under what law? ... if we are to take blood for blood, thou wouldst be the first to die, didst thou meet with thy desert. 35

Electra moves on now to her mother's last charge, that of disloyalty on Electra's part. Electra begins with a list of Clytemnestra's "shameless deeds" which she lists as follows: the fact that she lives with Aegisthus, who helped in the slaying of Agamemnon, and that she has borne children to him, and prefers them to her earlier born. In the last few lines Electra uses her mother's denunciation of her as a tool to justify her own course:

Oftentimes hast thou charged me with rearing him [Crestes] to punish thy crime; and I would have done so, if I could, thou mayst be sure:—for that matter, denounce me to all, as disloyal, if thou wilt, or petulant, or impudent; for if I am accomplished in such ways, methinks I am no unworthy child of thee. 36

Children tend to emulate their parents; the base deeds of Clytemnestra cause Electra to be base and to wish for her mother's death. The fact that some of Electra's arguments could be turned against her is unimportant; for the moment she is convincing; and Clytemnestra, routed from her pretended logic, resorts to name calling. Electra returns to her previous argument: "I know that my behavior is

35Jebb, op. cit., p. 85.
36Ibid., p. 89.
unseemly, and becomes me ill . . . for base deeds are taught by base."37 The wrangling continues until Clytemnestra tells her to "hush thy clamour" so that she can make a sacrifice to Apollo. Electra acquiesces and Clytemnestra begins her prayer to Apollo.

If the audience had any shred of sympathy for Clytemnestra, which is doubtful even at this point, she destroys it completely by the thoroughly unscrupulous and selfish nature of her prayer. She asks first for "deliverance" from her present fears then turns to the matter of her troubled dream:

That vision which I saw last night in doubtful dreams— if it hath come for my good, grant . . . that it be fulfilled; but if for harm, then let it recoil upon my foes. And if any are plotting to hurl me by treachery from the high estate which now is mine, permit them not; rather vouchsafe that, still living thus unscathed, I may bear sway over the house of the Atreidae38 and this realm. . . . For the rest, though I be silent, I deem that thou a god, must know it; all things, surely, are seen by the sons of Zeus.39

The prayer has completed Sophocles' picture of a fear ridden, self-indulgent, cowardly murderess who has lost all sense

37Ibid., p. 91.

38It is interesting to note that this is the only place with the exception of the last line of the play where the house is referred to as the house of Atreus; in other places the house is referred to as the house of Pelops, who was the father of Atreus.

39Jebb, op. cit., pp. 93, 95.
of decency. The scene itself is another contrast, contrast in character and contrast in the concept of freedom; for it is the enslaved Electra who is really free, and it is the queen, trapped in her own bestiality, who is enslaved by her fear of retribution. "Human life, even in its utmost splendor and struggle, hangs on the edge of an abyss."\(^{40}\) Sophocles' Clytemnestra bears no resemblance to the vibrant, independent woman, that dares to think and feel like a man, who sweeps across the scenes of Aeschylus' Oresteia. Aeschylus' almost gentle Electra never meets her mother in front of the audience; she would have been reduced to dust by the sheer power and strength of her mother's character. Perhaps Aeschylus' Electra comes somewhere in between Sophocles' Electra and his Chrysothemis.

The Paedagogus enters as Clytemnestra finishes her prayer to Apollo. The Paedagogus, after some preliminary questions that establish this as the palace of Aegisthus and the woman of queenly aspect "as his wife Clytemnestra," tells Clytemnestra that he is "Phanoteus the Phocian, on a weighty mission,"\(^{41}\) the sum of which is that "Orestes is

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\(^{40}\)Gassner, op. cit., p. 42, citing Sophocles.

\(^{41}\)Jebb, op. cit., p. 97.
The announcement was brief, terse, and came without preparation; it affects Electra like a physical blow, and she cries out, "Oh, miserable that I am! I am lost this day!" In answer to Clytemnestra's question he repeats the message with the same abruptness; Electra cries out again as if a second blow had been struck.

Clytemnestra tells Electra to go about her own concerns and then presses the Paedagogus for the details of Orestes' death.

The speech that follows is typical of the traditional Messenger's or Herald's speech that graces Greek tragedy. The only thing that keeps it from being truly typical, of course, is that it is all a magnificent lie.

The Paedagogus begins by telling of the people's admiration for Orestes, of his many deeds and triumphs, and of the many prizes he bore away. Then the Paedagogus gives a detailed description of the chariot race in which Orestes was supposed to have met his death. He ends the story by telling Clytemnestra that the people burned the noble body, unrecognizable as it was, on a pyre and that "chosen men of

\[^{42}\text{Ibid.}\]

\[^{43}\text{Ibid.}\]
Phoeis are bringing in a small urn of bronze the sad dust of that mighty form, to find due burial in his father-land.\textsuperscript{44} The speech is beautifully done; even knowing that the story is not really true, one cannot help being caught up in the drama of the Paedagogus\textquotesingle tale; it has great emotional impact. Even Clytemnestra is a little stunned as for the first time she really reacts to the situation:

\begin{quote}
O Zeus, what shall I call these tidings,--glad tidings? Or dire, but gainful? 'Tis a bitter lot, when mine own calamities make the safety of my life.
\end{quote}

There is a strange power in motherhood; a mother may be wronged, but she never learns to hate her child.\textsuperscript{45}

But Clytemnestra\textquotesingle s feelings of maternal grief are short lived, for in her next speech she begins to make the same recriminations against Crestes that she has made against Electra, and she expresses relief that now she can pass her days in peace.

There follows a short exchange between Electra and Clytemnestra, but this time Clytemnestra is the victor; it seems to her almost as though Apollo has answered her prayer. Clytemnestra takes the Paedagogus into the

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., p. 111.
\textsuperscript{45}Ibid., p. 113.
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palace and leaves Electra "to make loud lament for herself and for her friends."\textsuperscript{146}

Electra pauses briefly to comment sarcastically on Clytemnestra's grief before she begins the burden of her own lament. She is utterly alone and desolate; her hopes are dashed; no longer can she wait for an avenger, a deliverer to save her from her unhappy lot. She resolves that she will not enter the palace but will lie down by the gates, and if they slay her, she would welcome it; for life is pain; she desires life no more.

The Chorus and Electra begin to chant responsively. The Chorus refers to prince Amphiaras, who met his death by the treachery of his wife; with his dying wish he urged his son, Alcmaeon, to avenge him on his faithless wife. After some delay Alcmaeon did return to Greece and slay his mother.\textsuperscript{147} But Electra points out to the Chorus that she has no champion for her cause; she has not even the comfort of a hope that an avenger will come. The subject of the chanting changes to the piteous nature of Orestes' death.

\textsuperscript{146}Ibid., p. 117.

\textsuperscript{147}It is interesting to note that according to tradition Alcmaeon, suffered the same fate Orestes suffered in the Oresteia, that is, he was pursued by his mother's Furies. Charles M. Gayley (ed.), \textit{Classic Myths in English Literature} (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1911), p. 276.
Chrysothemis enters, full of excitement, and joyfully announces that "Orestes is with us." Electra accuses her of madness, and even when Chrysothemis declares that she has seen proof, she gives no credit to Chrysothemis' report. Chrysothemis describes the scene at Agamemnon's tomb: "streams of milk had lately flowed from the top of the mound . . . his sepulchre was encircled with garlands . . . and on the mound's edge I saw a lock of hair, freshly severed." Chrysothemis argues that Orestes is the only one who could have done these things: she had just arrived; Electra cannot leave the house even to worship the gods without peril; and their mother's heart is not inclined to do such deeds. She urges Electra to join her in celebration of the joyous news, but Electra tells her that a messenger who is in the palace has brought news of Orestes' death.

Electra explains the gifts at the sepulchre as having been brought by someone in memory of Orestes. Chrysothemis readily accepts the news of Orestes' death and Electra's explanation of the gifts; her expression of grief is more like disappointment when compared to Electra's

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48 Jebb, op. cit., p. 125.

49 Ibid., p. 127.
feeling. Orestes' death means that she cannot hope to improve her lot, but it will not affect the physical comfort of her life. Nevertheless, Chrysothemis' spirits have reached their lowest ebb, and it is at this point that Electra begins her overtures to Chrysothemis by suggesting that there is something that she herself can do to improve her lot. Electra warns her that it will require bravery, that "nothing succeeds without toil." Chrysothemis eagerly agrees to help with all her power as she catches some of the excitement from Electra's intensity. Electra appeals to her to aid in the slaying of Aegisthus, their father's murderer. It is significant that Electra mentions only Aegisthus to Chrysothemis; it does not seem probable in view of later events that Electra really intended to let her mother escape, but in speaking to Chrysothemis it was a very clever and diplomatic omission. Electra reminds Chrysothemis of the bleakness of her future, a future without inheritance or marriage; for Aegisthus would never take the chance that children might spring up to work for his destruction. Electra rushes on to tell her what their future will bring if Aegisthus is slain; not only will they win praise for their piety from the spirits of their

50 Ibid., p. 133.
father and brother, but even strangers shall deem them worthy of love, even of reverence; they shall be honored at festivals; and shall find worthy bridals, for noble natures draw the gaze of all:

Come, dear sister, hearken! Work with thy sire, share the burden of thy brother, win rest from woes for me and for thyself,—mindful of this, that an ignoble life brings thame upon the noble.51

But Electra does not win Chrysothemis to her side, for Chrysothemis cannot forsake her prudent course for one fraught with danger and probable disaster. Electra accepts Chrysothemis' decision but declares that she cannot leave the deed undone and, therefore, ust do it herself. They exchange a few more words, but neither can see the other's point of view and Chrysothemis goes into the palace.

This play by Sophocles has reached its climax as the tragic themosyne in Electra reaches its climax in her resolution to act externally. Orestes' death to Electra means even greater sacrifice, greater adherence to her cause. Now there is no further hope of salvation from the outside world. Electra finds the means to salvation from within her own noble soul. This is not a play about Orestes' vengeance, it is a play about Electra's endurance.

51 Ibid., p. 137.
the human spirit as it finds the strength to bear the
burden of its own moral will travels through time to a kind
of universality that can perhaps be called the divine in
man.

The Chorus sings a message to be carried to
Agamemnon "beneath the earth." They sing of the virtue of
Electra, humbled under a tyrant's hand yet noble for
observance of nature's laws, for piety toward Zeus. Their
song ends with a plea that her cause may prevail.

When the Chorus has finished its song, Orestes enters
with Pylades and two attendants; one carries a funeral urn.
Orestes speaks to the Leader of the Chorus and in answer to
his questions hears that this is indeed the home of
Aegisthus and that Electra can announce them to the palace.
Orestes asks Electra to announce them. She asks if they
bring the visible proofs of Orestes' death; he tells her
that the small urn "holds his dust." Electra implores him
to let her hold the urn if indeed it contains Orestes.
Orestes consents and the urn is placed in her hands.
Electra begins a long and poignant lament. She remembers
him as the "radiant" child, whom she nursed, caring for
him with loving care, more than his mother gave; she alone
of all the house was his nurse. She grieves that her
"loving hands" did not prepare his body for the funeral
rites. She longs to join him in the grave, for "the dead
have rest from pain."

Orestes, moved by Electra's grief, can no longer restrain himself, and in conversation which tends to heighten the suspense, he reveals his true identity to her after he has assured himself that the Chorus is friendly to Electra's cause. He identifies himself by showing her a signet that had been their father's. She accepts the signet as ample proof and joyously announces his identity to the Chorus. Electra is exultant in her joy; she is as one transformed, but Orestes cautions her that silence will better serve their purpose. Orestes calls her back to the deeds that must be accomplished before they can safely "exult in freedom." He urges her to resume her lament that their mother may not read their secret from her face. Electra is more calm now; she assurs him that she will not in any way reveal what for the moment should be secret:

... command me as thou wilt; for, had I been alone, I should have achieved one of two things,--a noble deliverance, or a noble death."

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52 Ibid., p. 159.
53 Ibid., p. 175.
54 Ibid., p. 177.
Orestes has not been able to join Electra in her pain and suffering, for it is out of the realm of his experience; but they can join together in their strength and triumph. It is almost as if Orestes is an extension of Electra's own soul; as the urn with its contents symbolizes the depths of Electra's anguish, Orestes symbolizes her triumph.

Orestes warns Electra that he hears someone preparing to leave the palace. Electra, addressing Orestes and Pylades, directs them to the palace in a manner suitable for the roles they have assumed; but it is only the Paedagogus who promptly scolds them for their behavior which surely would have given them away had he not been within to screen their actions. He urges them on to the accomplishment of the deed as everything within is ready for the successful achievement of their end. Electra asks the identity of the Paedagogus, and she and Orestes indulge in a little guessing game which serves to build suspense for the scene that is to follow. Electra finally discovers that the Paedagogus is indeed the trusted servant into whose keeping she had placed Orestes. She greets him affectionately as one who seems like a father to her. The Paedagogus tells them all that there will be time enough for reminiscences; the time is ripe for action, for Clytemnestra is alone and their task will be accomplished more easily now than later when the foes may be more numerous.
Orestes with a word to "his father's gods, who keep these gates," enters the palace with Pylades and followed by the Paedagogus.

Electra remains and offers a prayer to Apollo. She remembers herself to him as one who has often come to his altar with such gifts as it was within her power to give:

And now, ... with such vows as I can make, I pray thee, I supplicate, I implore, grant us thy benignant aid in these designs, and show men how impiety is rewarded by the gods.

It is not just Electra's salvation that is involved here; it is the moral salvation of all men: to keep other men from thinking that sin prospers, Clytemnestra must be punished.

After her prayer, Electra enters the palace and the Chorus sings. The song is very short and refers to the events that are about to take place within the palace:

Even now the pursuers of dark guilt have passed beneath yon roof, the hounds which none may flee.

The champion of the spirits infernal is ushered with stealthy feet into the house, the ancestral palace of his sire; and Hermes ... leads him forward, even to the end, and delays no more.

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55 Ibid., p. 183.
56 Ibid., pp. 183, 185.
57 The Furies are traditionally referred to as hounds.
To the Chorus at least Electra and Orestes have become the instruments of the gods. Certainly Electra's behavior in relation to Clytemnestra and Aegisthus has been a kind of relentless pursuit; never has she let them forget, but stands as a living reminder of their crime, there constantly to prick the bubble of their rationalizations, the ever present accuser. Even her arguments have some of the same kind of intensity found in the arguments of the Furies in the Eumenides.

As the Chorus finishes its song, Electra enters from the palace; she tells them that the men are about to do the deed. Clytemnestra is decking the urn for burial, and Orestes and Pylades stand close beside her. Electra has come out to watch for Aegisthus. Clytemnestra cries out from within as she discovers the intent of the men; she calls again for Aegisthus and then for mercy. Each time she calls Electra answers in stern, unyielding terms. Clytemnestra cries that she has been struck, and Electra calls for them to strike again if they can. Clytemnestra gives one last cry, and Electra wishes that it were Aegisthus' last cry as well.

The Chorus reiterates the thought that the avengers are the instruments of the spirits of revenge:

The curses are at work; the buried live; blood flows for blood, drained from the slayers by those who died of yore. Then Orestes and Pylades enter.
Behold, they come! That red hand reeks with sacrifice to Ares; nor can I blame the deed.60

In certain cases homicide was considered a holy obligation. Proclamation against the murderer was made in the marketplace by his family, whose duty it was to join in the prosecution. The trials for murder held at Athens began with each sides' taking an oath in the name of the Erinyes, or Furies; each of the three days was sacred to one of the Furies, and the person who won acquittal made sacrifices to them.61

Electra asks Orestes if all is well, and he answers, "All is well within the house, if Apollo's oracle spoke well."62 Some critics take this statement by Orestes as an indication that Sophocles doubted the wisdom of Orestes' case.63

59Area means Slayer, Avenger, the Curse. However, Homer in the Iliad represents Area as the insatiable warrior; impelled by rage and lust of violence, he exults in the noise of battle, revels in the horror of carnage. Where the fight is the thickest, there he rushes in without hesitation, without question as to which side is right. Smith and Miller, op. cit., pp. 113, 456.

60Jebb, op. cit., p. 189.

61Aeschylus uses Orestes' case to show through the acquittal of the gods that murder can be just. Sophocles is not trying to justify the validity of the deed; Aeschylus had already done that most eloquently; consequently, Sophocles has taken the justification as accepted fact.

deed; however, it must be remembered that the Apollo's oracle in this play spoke only about how the deed should be accomplished, that is, secretly and without aid of armed force. It would seem then that Orestes is wondering what the arrival of Aegisthus will bring; if he arrives with armed guard and discovers the body of Clytemnestra, victory will be difficult; but if he arrives alone and unguarded, then truly "Apollo's oracle spake well."

No sooner has Orestes announced that his mother is dead than the Chorus sees Aegisthus approaching. Electra and the Chorus urge Orestes and Pylades to withdraw to the palace. They exit as Orestes assures the others that Aegisthus' death shall be accomplished. Electra stays to delay him and to put him off guard if necessary.

Aegisthus enters and questions Electra; the exchange of questions and answers is quite short, but the double meaning of Electra's answers is electrifying. Her parting shot is as subtle as it is forceful, "No loyalty is lacking on my part; time hath taught me the prudence of concord with the stronger."63 The central doors of the palace are thrown open. A shrouded corpse can be seen with Orestes and Pylades standing near it. Aegisthus bids them remove

63Ibid., p. 195.
the covering from the face, but Orestes declines on the grounds that it would not be fitting for him to do so that it is an act more suitable for Aegisthus. As he moves to remove the cloth he tells Electra to call Clytemnestra to him. He removes the cloth, is amazed at the sight he beholds, and then realizes that it is Orestes with whom he speaks. Aegisthus asks to plead his case but Electra urges Orestes to complete the deed, for his words cannot change his fate:

... slay him forthwith, and cast his corpse to the creatures from whom such as he should have burial, far from our sight! To me, nothing but this can make amends for the woes of the past. 64

Critics disagree as to the interpretation of this line; some seem to think that Electra is denying Aegisthus the right of burial; it seems to be more consistent with the line as well as with the character of Electra, as defined by Sophocles, to assume that she means simply that he is to be buried without respect or reverence, his body untended by loving hands, without funeral rites, away from their sight, and perhaps by slaves or servants of one kind or another. At any rate Orestes tells Aegisthus to go into the palace. Aegisthus answers that if the deed is a worthy one he should strike here in the light rather than seek the

64 Ibid., pp. 199, 201.
darkness. Orestes tells him he will die where Agamemnon died. Aegisthus' retort is another line on which critics place undue importance:

Is this dwelling doomed to see all woes of Pelops' line, now, and in time to come?  

Some critics take this speech to indicate, in spite of the lack of any substantiating remarks, that Sophocles' Orestes is destined to pursuit by the Furies as Aeschylus' Orestes is; but under Attic law it was not an offence to kill a man taken in adultery, and the fact that neither Clytemnestra nor Aegisthus attempt to call down a curse upon the avengers would seem to indicate that even the victims are not convinced of the injustice of their fate.

When Orestes prophesies Aegisthus' death in answer to his question, Aegisthus comments that Orestes has a prophetic skill his father did not have. The reference to Agamemnon brings Aegisthus' position as an adulterer and corrupter of the house sharply to the foreground. Orestes, tired of the delay, drives Aegisthus into the palace as he says:

... I must not spare thee any bitterness of death. And well it were if this judgment came straightway upon

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65 Ibid., p. 201.

all who dealt in lawless deeds, even the judgment of the sword; so should not wickedness abound. 67

Here in Orestes' last speech praise for punishment as a deterrent to crime is found. The Chorus closes the play as is traditional, but with just one sentence,

O house of Atreus, through how many sufferings has though come forth at last in freedom, crowned with good by this day's enterprise! 68

There is no dissenting voice; the play ends on a note of unclouded victory with the triumph of moral principle over evil, of nature over convention. Time has proven which course is the way of wisdom.

Some conclusions. Sophocles is perhaps the most subtle of the three great Greek tragedians; of the three he is the most conscious artist. His masterful use of the Greek language has been compared to Racine's use of French. Sophocles' passions are veiled in a subtle elegance, and it is perhaps this very subtlety that is responsible for the variety of interpretations critics have placed on his work and particularly on his Electra. The pronouncements take in the full range of contradictions. John T. Sheppard expresses the classicist's point of view in his comments:

67 Jebb, op. cit., pp. 201, 203.

68 Ibid.
The Electra is, I think, the darkest of all the Greek tragedies. It is also one of the noblest. The art which reckons with the ultimate tragic possibilities, helps us to live. . . .

... Sophocles is reinterpreting once more the religion which bids us know ourselves, and shun excess. . . .

... Sophocles knew well enough that such revenge as that planned by Electra is worse than useless. It is part of Electra's tragedy that she does not know it. . . .

The renowned German critic Wilamowitz advances the theory that Sophocles' Electra is not intended to be anything but a conscious work of art and that it carries with it no particular moral significance. In regard to Sophocles' personal philosophy Wilamowitz goes on to say that Sophocles recognized that the gods might not be exactly just but that they were powerful which was enough to keep Sophocles serene and respectful.

Kitto expresses the opinion that Sophocles' Electra is simply another way of saying the same thing that Aeschylus says in the Oresteia:

69 Sheppard, op. cit., p. 68.
70 Ibid., p. 70.
71 Ibid., p. 63.
72 Whitman, op. cit., p. 30, citing Wilamowitz.
There is one general difference between the two pairs. He is referring to the Oresteia and Prometeia of Aeschylus and the Electra and the Tyrannis of Sophocles, and it is a fundamental one: we may provisionally put it thus, that Aeschylus is dynamic, Sophocles static. . . . Aeschylus too, being Greek, has this same conviction that there are fundamental, unchanging laws; . . . he is concerned with the growth of human society within this unalterable framework.

And perhaps it is this temptation to read some of the Oresteia into Sophocles' Electra that has caused the confusion. The difficulties in interpretation arise from the failure to recognize that Sophocles' play is not about the working out of the law of Dikē but is about how human beings shall conduct themselves in the midst of great evil and corruption. There is nothing in the actual text of the play to support Bowra's comment on the conclusion of the Electra:

Yet an act so bloody, and fearful as this (the slaying of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus), can hardly lead at once to peace and satisfaction. The wound inflicted by it will take time to heal; some adjustment is necessary before Orestes and Electra can take their place in the company of other men.

Sophocles was not concerned with the possibilities that Orestes and Electra might feel remorse; the question he


74Bowra, op. cit., p. 256.
posed was answered when Electra triumphed.

Perhaps Weinstock comes closer than most with the assertion that Sophocles' message is one of "responsibility for the present." The statement is too general and owes its particular character to the philosophy of Existentialism to which Weinstock adheres.75 Although the statement cannot be accepted as an adequate summary of the play's intent, Electra's character certainly supports such a claim. Perhaps the key to an adequate interpretation of Sophocles' Electra lies in an understanding of the Greek term sophrosyne. The word was originally the motto of the Delphic Oracle and meant simply "Know Thyself," "Remember that you are mortal, not a god." As the Greeks applied this motto to their lives it came to mean modesty, restrained and moderate behavior, or the fulfillment of all human hopes and thoughts within the rigid framework of one's birth and conventional morality. Electra freely admits on more than one occasion that her behavior is excessive and lacks the proper modesty; she rejects sophrosyne as a course suitable only for those who desire safety more than moral action. Chrysothemis moves within the code of sophrosyne, but Electra proudly breaks the code and adheres

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75 Whitman, op. cit., p. 27, citing Weinstock.
to the moral principle with which it conflicts. It is Electra's course that is vindicated by the outcome of the play.

Whitman in his thoughtful discussion of the Electra suggests that perhaps Sophocles is inferring that the world should be full of Electras, who adhere strictly to moral principle; but he rejects the idea as one that is too dreary. If all the world had the same kind of moral integrity that Electra illustrates, there would be no crime in the world. If Electra had died in the process of vindicating the moral principle then truly one could say the prospect of such a world is depressing to say the least, but she does not die; nothing in the lines of the play indicates that the avengers are or will be anything but joyously triumphant. Considering Sophocles' age, an age in which religion and morality were called into question, it is not inconceivable that Sophocles could be calling for a moral awakening.

There is one point on which all authorities agree, and that is that Sophocles had a great deal of traditional support for his stand on the murders of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus:

Sophocles seems to say to his audience, "I give you, modified for drama, the story that Homer tells; put yourselves at the Homeric stand-point; regard the
act of Orestes under the light in which the *Odyssey* presents it." ... 76

... If we may judge by the few remains of Stesichorus' *Oresteia*, he dealt with the story in a spirit which celebrated the triumph of the oppressed over their oppressors. ... 77

... The nearest parallel to Sophocles' treatment is Pindar's. ... 78

... Sophocles, though he differed from Aeschylus, stood in the main stream of tradition when he omitted the Furies and treated the murders as simple justice. ... 79

It would seem that Sophocles deliberately chose to use the epic viewpoint, first because matricide was not to be the issue in his play and second because he wished to avoid too close an identification with Aeschylus' great masterpiece the *Oresteia*. Sophocles even chose to refer to Pelops rather than to Atreus, his son, as the one who was responsible for the curse on the house.

Aeschylus and Sophocles come together as artists and philosophers, philosophers who give to their audiences the results of their thinking rather than the process by which they arrived at their decisions. Both playwrights use the gods as an integral part of their plays, Aeschylus

76 Jebb, *op. cit.* , p. xli.
78 Ibid., p. 260.
by the actual physical presence of the gods as characters in the action, and Sophocles by a kind of subtle presence within the human characters and in the very atmosphere. The playwrights differ in purpose: Aeschylus depicts growth that leads to unity and wisdom; Sophocles depicts endurance that transcends time and circumstance to triumph. They differ in technique: Aeschylus uses the trilogy to provide a grand sweep, and spectacular grandeur; Sophocles uses a single play to provide a subtle portrayal of codes of behavior in contrast, clothed in an elegance of expression. Regardless of the points of difference noted both playwrights provided for their separate audiences a religious experience especially suited to the specific moment in history. Aeschylus' Oresteia emphasizes unity, world order, social growth; Sophocles' Electra emphasizes the validity of a firm standard of moral integrity.

80Wilamowitz's view that Sophocles' Electra is simply a beautifully executed work of art without religious significance cannot be accepted if for no other reason than if the play had not had religious significance for the Greeks, it would not have been appropriate to the occasion for which it was produced.
EURIPIDES AND THE HOUSE OF ATREUS

I. THE TIMES

Euripides was born just fifteen years after Sophocles. Most authorities place his birth on the day of the battle of Salamis. Gilbert Murray prefers an earlier date, 484 B.C., partly on the grounds that custom made the birth dates of men who became great coincide with the closest event of national or social importance.¹ At any rate, Euripides lived at the same time, essentially, that Sophocles lived.

As has been pointed out earlier, the age of Sophocles and Euripides was a time of great intellectual activity. All the thinkers of Greece of the time were examining the laws and customs of their day to find out what really depended on nature and what was the mere artifice of man. Within fifty years the populace of Attica was transformed from illiterate peasants ruled by superstition to men who, almost without exception, could read and write and who were awakening to the idea that there

were greater things about men than they had known. The victory over Persia suggested to the peasant for the first time, that perhaps it really was better to die than to be a slave, that perhaps it was better to face death not only for his own home but for the home of the people in the next village, as different as their customs might be, when the cause is for a common humanity. And as they looked around and saw that some causes were greater they noticed that some men were greater, greater not because of wealth, physical strength, or noble birth, but because of sophia which was a combination of wisdom and virtue, areté. With the recognition of this difference in men, all men then sought to learn, to make themselves wise. This was the time when Athens was looked on as "the Saviour of the Hellenic world."  

The Peloponnesian League. After the Persian war the Peloponnesian League was formed with Athens at the head. As time went on Athens' "allies" refused to serve or tried to withdraw from the alliance, but one by one they were forced into compulsory subjection, and the "League"

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became an empire. Athens could not maintain her rule by force, and by 445 B.C. she had to resign herself to the loss of supremacy over the cities of central Greece.

Pericles, a great and noble minded statesman, who achieved many fine ends for the people of Athens, failed to build a free League based on representation of all the members. Although in some places neighboring villages had worked out a system of international councils, the idea was a new one. It is probable that Pericles did not fully realize what Athens had come to until 431 B.C. when the war with the Peloponnesian League led by Sparta broke out. He used these words before the assembly in defense of his rejection of the League's ultimatum:

... Nor should you suppose that you are struggling to escape one evil only, slavery instead of freedom; but to avoid loss of dominion also, and danger from the animosities which you have incurred in your exercise of that dominion. And from this it is no longer possible for you to retire; if through fear at the present time anyone is for so playing the honest man in quiet. For you now hold it as tyranny, which it seems wrong to have assumed, but dangerous to give up.

The death of Pericles. In 429 B.C., a victim of the plague that ravished Athens, Pericles died.

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Thucydides described him as a man of great talents, incorruptible morals, independent spirit, and great strength of character. Going on to speak of his relation to Athens Thucydides said:

... And so, though in name it was a democracy, in fact it was a government administered by the first man. Whereas those who came after being more on a level with each other, and each grasping to become first, had recourse to devoting [not only their speeches, but even their measures,] to the humors of the people... 

Pericles had told the Athenians before his death that if they kept up their navy, refrained from further conquest, and protected the city they could have the advantage in the war.

**Athens after Pericles.** The demagogues that followed Pericles went contrary to his advice as they struggled for power and private gain. All Greece was gradually corrupted and embittered by the long war. This was was particularly harmful, for it was more than the struggle between two foreign powers; it was a struggle between two principles of government: oligarchy and democracy. In almost all the cities in the Athenian alliance there were those discontented rich citizens who were anxious to overthrow the constitution, slaughter the mob and ally themselves with

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Sparta. In many other cities there were masses of poor citizens who, having experienced some of the freedoms provided by democratic doctrine, were equally anxious for a chance to slaughter the ruling group. It was the secret civil strife that lay behind the open war that led to the extreme degradation of character as more and more people turned to desperate expedients to satisfy desperate needs.

It was a time of mighty and terrible vengeances, a time when sane, reasonable arguments were turned to defend and solicit actions of terrible brutality. It was a time that produced men like Cleon who in defence of the punishment of Mytilene could use the same arguments advanced by Pericles when the war began:

On many occasions before this have I been convinced that a democracy is incapable of maintaining dominion over others, and I am so more than ever from your present change of purpose respecting the Mytilenaens. For owing to your daily freedom from fear, and plotting against each other, you entertain the same views toward your allies also. And you do not reflect, in whatever case you may either have made a mistake through being persuaded by their words, or may have given way to pity, that you show such weakness to your own peril, and at the same time to gain no gratitude from your allies; not considering that it is a tyrannical dominion which you hold, and over men who are plotting against you, . . . .

you should not rescind your former resolutions, nor
err through three things, the most inexpedient for
empire, namely, pity, delight in oratory, and
lenity. . . .

And it was a time of arch traitors. Alcibiades was
probably the master of the art of treachery; to his con-
temporaries he was like a chameleon, and by the end of his
career he had grown to be the very type to symbolize the
evil of the times.

Alcibiades as a young man was hailed by many as the
man destined to save Athens, and indeed for a time it
must have seemed so. He was of noble birth, a nephew of
Pericles, famous for his charmingly insolent manner, a
brilliant soldier, and an astute politician. He was a
pupil of the philosophers and an especially intimate
friend of Socrates. Alcibiades was elected to be a
general at a very early age, and in 420 B.C. he succeeded
in organizing a Philo-Athenian League within the

5Ibid., pp. 178-79, 182. The decree had called for
the slaying of the entire male population of military age
and the selling of the women and children into slavery.
Fortunately when the matter was reconsidered by the assem-
bly, Cleon's arguments did not prevail and the massacre
was prevented.

6Socrates recognized in Alcibiades a man of rare
intellectual talents. Socrates frequently urged the
younger man to abandon his frivolous pursuits in favor of
more serious study. No doubt the fact that Alcibiades
became such a thorough traitor to Athens played its part
in the final condemnation of Socrates by Athens.
Peloponnese. In celebration of the completion of the alliance, Euripides sent his _Andromache_ to Argos for production in the same spirit in which Pindar used to send a new song to compliment a foreign king.

Also in 420 B.C. there was an observance of the Olympian Festival, the greatest of all the Pan-Hellenic Games. The Festival carried with it a religious truce. Alcibiades managed to get Sparta barred from the Festival, a great blow to her prestige, by bringing about her conviction of violating the truce. Alcibiades subsequently entered himself as a competitor and won a whole series of prizes. Plutarch, in his _Life of Alcibiades_, mentions that Euripides was believed to have written a victory ode for Alcibiades on that occasion. Such grandiose treatment of a personal victory would have fit in with the known character of Alcibiades, and if Euripides did consent

7The formation of this League was an old Athenian policy used to check Sparta. The nucleus of the new league was Argos, Elis, and Mantinea; they were city states that had been visited by Themistocles right after the Persian wars, and they had set up democracies after the Athenian plan.

8Gilbert Murray, _op. cit._, p. 110.

to write the ode for a personal victory, it must have been because he felt that here at last was a man great enough to accomplish the longed for peace. But peace was not the true policy of Alcibiades, for it was he who incited the Athenians to make the attack on Sicily.

By the winter of 416 B.C. Athens had begun to fear and hate Alcibiades. He was accused of defacing and mutilating some sacred images and was brought back from the campaign against Sicily to face charges. He escaped and fled to Sparta where he counseled them in the war against Athens. By 405 B.C. the only question left to be asked about Alcibiades was whether he was more dangerous to the city as one of their leaders or as an enemy exile.

Just as Alcibiades was the symbol of the evil chicanery that characterized the times, the Athenian subjection of the island of Melos symbolized for two people

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10 There were many in Sparta who hated Alcibiades for his acts against Sparta, but he soon won most of the populace to his side by his ready adaptation to the Spartan life and by his well planned persuasions. He was known to conclude his defense at Sparta by saying, "Of course all sensible men know what democracy is, and I better than most, from personal experience; but there is nothing new to be said about acknowledged insanity." Dale, *op. cit.*, pp. 436-37.
at least, Euripides and Thucydides,\(^{11}\) the moral depths to which the Athenian war party had sunk. The Athenians, heavily armed, went to Melos. There the Athenian ambassadors demanded that the Melians abandon their neutral position and join the Athenian alliance, not because they had wealth, power, or advantageous military position, but because their neutrality constituted a bad example to the other "allies."\(^{12}\) The Melians refused an Athenian alliance and the Athenians attack. Thucydides ended the account rather cryptically:

\[\ldots\] they surrendered at discretion to the Athenians; who put to death all the Melian adults they took, and made slaves of the children and women. As for the country; they afterward sent out five hundred colonists, and inhabited it themselves.\(^{13}\)

The Athenians then had ruthlessly subdued a little island of no economic, political, or military importance. And the same winter they made preparations to sail against Sicily; it was this expedition that eventually spelled the doom of Athens.

\(^{11}\)Euripides produced The Trojan Women just after the events on Melos. The play paints the Greeks in a very unfavorable light and even represents Athena as having turned against them. Thucydides took twenty-six consecutive chapters to describe the conquest of Melos which was an event of small military importance and no political consequence.

\(^{12}\)Dale, op. cit., pp. 367-75.

\(^{13}\)Ibid., p. 376.
The ideal had failed; the Athenian democracy which in its conception was to represent a free, highly civilized people seeking "wisdom" in an atmosphere free from superstition and oppression, a people who in turn would work for the freedom of others had itself become an oppressive tyranny. What seemed to have happened was that because of the democratic enthusiasm of the sophistic movement in Athens, the common people were strongly in power, but the moral lessons of the Enlightenment had not had time to really penetrate; consequently, under the pressure of war, and with the old rites and taboos somewhat shaken by the same sophistic movement that had put the common man so firmly in power, the people were rightened. In their fear they turned back to the old ways of superstition, and it was the same fear that made them cruel. All that they really retained from the period of enlightenment was a kind of boldness. They had voted for Pericles because he made them feel proud of being an Athenian, but when they went back to their farms they probably went right back to practicing the old cruel agricultural magic,¹ʰ beating their slaves and their wives,

¹ʰOn certain holy days farmers would perform certain traditional sacrifices to ensure the welfare of the fields. These sacrifices might entail tearing a small beast to pieces or driving it into a fire.
and hating the strangers a few miles off because their customs were a little different.

Under the leadership of such men as Cleon the people of Athens forgot the teachings of Anaxagoras: a whole army perished because it refused to move during the eclipse of the "divine" moon. Books were burned: Protagoras was exiled and his treatise on the gods burned. The people cared not to listen to philosophers, decent, thoughtful people, but turned instead to those who reflected their own fierce bitterness and fear.

II. EURIPIDES (480 B.C.—406 B.C.)

THE MAN AND HIS IDEAS

The early years. Euripides was born in Phlya about six miles from Athens. In his time it was celebrated for its temples. There were three temples, Demeter Anesidora or Earth, Upsender of Gifts, Dionysus of the Blossom and the Dread Virgins, and most important the temple of Erôs or love. The temple of Erôs was a survival of the old tribal society when fertility of the fields was not differentiated from human fertility; all boys as they reached maturity were made to go through certain ordeals and initiations; by Euripides' day they had become mystical doctrines.
Euripides was the son of Mnesarchus and Cleito. Mnesarchus was a merchant. Euripides' mother, Cleito, was reportedly of very high birth; for some reason no one seems to be able to explain she was often derisively called a green grocer by Euripides' contemporaries. As a youth from one of the first families he was a cup-bearer to a guild of dancers who danced at the altar of the Delian Apollo. He was also a Firebearer to the Apollo of Cape Zoster, and in that capacity he carried a torch in the procession each year that met the Delian Spollo at Cape Coster and escorted him from Delos to Athens.15

It was during the childhood of Euripides that the temple to Athena was rebuilt on the Acropolis and the festivals were restored throughout Attica. He may have watched the paintings of Themistocles, scenes from the Persian War, being put in the temples at Phlya; he may even have watched Polygnotios whose pictures of scenes from the siege of Troy and other legendary history decorated the walls of the Acropolis. By the time Euripides had reached his teens Pericles had come to power. Themistocles had been banished, and Aristide and Miltiades, the other great heroes of the Persian War, were dead.

15 Murray, op. cit., pp. 35-36.
As was the custom, at eighteen he officially became an Ephesus or youth, and he was given a spear and shield and sent on police duty in the frontiers of Attica. At twenty he went into full military service.

Euripides had not found his life work. In response to an oracle's prediction that Euripides would win prizes his father had him trained as an athlete; and although he did win prizes in running and boxing, he did not continue his training. He also tried painting; some paintings found in the town of Megara are believed to be his.16 Some authorities feel that this training may account for the pictorial beauty found in his plays.

**Intellectual influences.** The youth of Euripides came at the peak of the intellectual awakening. The revolt of the Ionian cities against Persia had sent countless Ionian philosophers, poets, artists, and historians into Greece for refuge and particularly to Athens since the city had been their only ally in their revolt. Certainly Euripides was aware of all the leading ideas of the time. The names most frequently mentioned in connection with Euripides are Anaxagoras, Protagoras, Diogenes of Apollonia, and Socrates.

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The philosophy of Anaxagoras had a profound effect on almost all the thinking men of Athens. It is believed that Euripides wrote a play which is not now extant that described the philosophy of Anaxagoras. It was this philosophy that led to the concept of man as "the creature for whom the universe exists... the universe is on a large scale what man is on a small scale... The macrocosm cannot be less than the microcosm, or lack anything that the microcosm has." It was Anaxagoras' concept of Air and Aether that prompted Diogenes of Apollonia to develop his ideas of soul and immortality:

... men and all other animals live by means of air, which they breath in, and this for them is both Soul (Life) and Intelligence, as had been clearly demonstrated in this treatise; and if this is taken from (them), Intelligence also leaves them.  

17Kathleen Freeman, God, Man and State: Greek Concepts (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952), pp. 87-88.

18... for Air and Aether dominated all things, both being infinite. For these are the most important (elements) in the total mixture, both in number and in size." Kathleen Freeman (trans.), "Anaxagoras: On Natural Science," Frag. 1, Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers: A Complete Translation of the Fragments in Diels (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1952), p. 82.

And it seems to me that that which has Intelligence is that which is called Air by mankind; and further, that by this, all creatures are guided, and that it rules everything; for this in itself seems to me to be God and to reach everywhere and to arrange everything and to be in everything. . . . 20

And this (Element) itself is a body both everlasting and immortal; whereas of other things, some come into being and others pass away. 21

Perhaps these thoughts were the thoughts that prompted Euripides to write such lines as, "The mind in each of us is a God." But if Euripides was a disciple of either of these men he was an independent disciple. Certainly his ideas grew out of these philosophical speculations; his literal debt to Anaxagoras and Diogenes was perhaps small, but spiritually he owed them much for their example of a viewing nature and mankind with a liberal and discriminating attitude.

It is a generally accepted fact that Protagoras first read his treatise on the gods in the home of Euripides. This association plus the abundant evidence of an unorthodox view of the gods in Euripides' plays has fostered the impression that Protagoras had great influence on Euripides' thinking. Protagoras questioned the existence of the gods; Euripides questioned their validity. Euripides' insistence

20Ibid., Frag. 5, p. 88.
21Ibid., Frag. 7, p. 90.
on the eternal nature of moral values and distinctions would not have been compatible with the Protagorean maxim of "Man is the measure of all things" which emphasized the shifting nature of individual qualities.

As for Socrates, Aristophanes more than once linked Euripides with Socrates and even said that Socrates helped Euripides with his plays. Other reports say that Socrates attended the theatre only when Euripides' plays were produced. But the authority for such anecdotes is doubtful and such authorities as Decharme, Haigh, and D. W. Lucas feel that many ideas expressed by the characters in Euripides' plays would be incompatible with Socratic doctrine. However, it is dangerous to assume that the characters of a play represent the playwright's views. The discussion of the Electra will show traces of Socratic teaching.

It cannot be safely said that Euripides was anyone's disciple. He was an original thinker; consequently his

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thoughts are not an exact reflection of any one individual's views but rather the reflection of many views modified through the medium of his own experience. His personal philosophy was hammered out of the intense mental stimulation of the time and the harsh reality of first hand living.

The later years. Although there is no official record of Euripides' having held office in the government, his plays are full of direct reference to political events, a situation not usually found in Greek tragedy. When Euripides wrote about war, he wrote from very real personal experience; when Euripides was about forty-nine years old the Peloponnesian War broke out; he certainly must have seen much violent action in the eleven years of active military service that remained before his military obligation had been fulfilled. At sixty when he retired, he was not impressed with military glory, for he knew from first-hand experience that many humble lives had to be sacrificed to make one great warrior.

Little is known about Euripides' personal life although many rumors which cannot be authoritatively proved were circulated about him during his lifetime, and
they have followed him down through historical criticism.\textsuperscript{25}

It is known that he lived on the island of Salamis in a cave which had two openings and a beautiful view. As Gilbert Murray points out this was probably not as eccentric as it seems in the modern world, for a good cave very probably could have been more comfortable than many Greek homes.\textsuperscript{26} He was a lover of books and possessed one of the few libraries of his day. The last years of his life he lived with his books and a small group of friends. Authorities mention Mnesilochus, his wife's father, and Cephisophon, his servant or secretary, as members of his household. There is no authoritative evidence that Euripides had any difficulty with his wife; but his reputation as a woman-hater may have started from a rumor of some such trouble, and the realistic manner in which he treated the female characters in his plays only seemed to confirm the rumor. Actually all the female characters of his plays are treated with sympathy and understanding, and perhaps this is the very thing that created the picture of Euripides as a woman-hater. To the average Athenian, women who deviated from a symbolic "seen and not heard"

\\[\textsuperscript{25}\text{of the eleven comedies of Aristophanes now extant all mention Euripides, and three are largely devoted to him.}\]

\\[\textsuperscript{26}\text{Murray, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 28.}\]
position or who doubted any part of the conventional religion were rather wicked. It is small wonder that the women in Euripides' plays shocked the audience and that the playwright was considered an enemy of the sex.

In 412 B.C., just a year after Euripides' Electra was produced, the Peace Party came to power briefly. The expedition to Sicily had suffered a crushing defeat. It was singularly appropriate that Euripides was asked to write the epitaph for the Athenians that died in that conflict, for the story goes that some of the Athenians that had been captured and enslaved won their freedom by reciting parts of Euripides' works to their captors.

But the peace was shortlived; by the following year hostilities had resumed. Euripides' ideal of Athens as a place symbolizing law, justice, mercy, and the triumph of right over force had been shattered completely. So in 408 B.C., tired of the constant enmity of the comic poets, disillusioned by an Athens that had been false to her ideals, and disappointed by the increasing awareness that

27Gilbert Murray complains that the beauty is lost in translation but the epitaph literally translated reads, "These men won eight victories over the Syracreans, while the gods were still impartial." Epitaph quoted in Donald W. Lucas, The Greek Tragic Poets (Boston: The Beacon Press, 1952), p. 155.
all Athens bore a grudge against him, Euripides went into voluntary exile. Euripides accepted an invitation of the King of Macedonia to come to his court. The court in Macedonia became a kind of university in exile: Timotheus, the musician, Zeuris, the painter, and the historian, Thucydides had all taken refuge there before Euripides.

Euripides wrote a number of plays during his exile even though he lived only eighteen months after he left Athens. The story is that he was sitting alone in the woods. The king, unaware of Euripides' presence, turned his hunting dogs loose. The dogs came upon Euripides, attacked him viciously, and killed him. He was buried in Macedonia even though the Athenians, realizing too late their great loss, asked for the body of their poet. The Athenians did erect a cenotaph in his memory in Athens.

Despised by his age except for the small group of friends, Euripides came to be recognized in the fourth century as the true spirit of Hellas, and his friends wrote as his epitaph, "Euripides all Hellas for his monument hath won."  

28Ancient authorities say that he left Athens "in grief, because almost all in Athens were rejoicing over him," but they do not mention the injury that prompted the reaction.

They had spoken the truth, for in the fourth century, his plays were read and acted more than all the other tragic poets. Even the Delphic Oracle, of which he was sharply critical in many of his plays, ranked him "next to Socrates as the wisest of the Greeks."  

III. EURIPIDES' ELECTRA

Because the date of Sophocles' Electra is unknown there is some question as to whether Euripides' Electra was produced earlier or later than Sophocles' play; however, the general consensus of opinion is that Sophocles' Electra was produced before the Euripidean version. The fact is that the three plays have different things to say, and as the purposes vary, the plays themselves change. Aeschylus in his treatment of the Atreus legend shows progress through suffering to eventual wisdom and the establishment of public justice. Sophocles in his treatment of the Atreus legend shows through the tragic endurance of moral strength that order is achieved. Euripides seeks to show the reality that lies behind appearances, a more valid reality that goes beyond the prevailing moral code.

30 Lucas, op. cit., p. 156.

31 Gassner, loc. cit.
and theology. Euripides wrote his own drama; there was no more need for him to copy the earlier versions than there was need for Sophocles to copy Aeschylus.

The play. The scene differs greatly from both the Aeschylean and the Sophoclean versions; it is laid in front of a peasant's cottage in the mountains. A peasant enters from the cottage and speaks. His speech is a long one and begins as he hails Argos. He remembers Agamemnon and the battle of Troy and Agamemnon's return:

In far lands prospered he; but in his home
Died by his own wife Clytemnestra's guile.
And by Aegisthus' hand, Thyestes' son.\(^{32}\)

Euripides uses the account that appears in *The Odyssey* when he indicates that it was Aegisthus who wielded the weapon rather than Clytemnestra. The peasant goes on to tell how Aegisthus now reigns over the realm. He tells how Agamemnon's fosterer stole Orestes before Aegisthues could kill the child and gave him into the keeping of the King of Phocis. But Electra stayed behind, and when she grew to womanhood and "Hellas' princes" asked her hand, Aegisthus grew afraid that she might bear a son to avenge Agamemnon's death. Aegisthus would have slain Electra had not Clytemnestra dissuaded him. Aegisthus, by way of compromise, placed a price on Orestes' head. Of Electra's fate the peasant speaks at greater length:

But to me gives Electra, her to have
To wife--from Mycenaean fathers sprung
Am I, herein I may not be contemned;
Noble my blood as, but in this world's goods
I am poor, whereby men's high descent is marred,--

But never I--Cypris my witness is--
Have shamed her couch: a virgin is she yet.

If any name me fool, that I should take
A young maid to mine home, and touch her not,

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33 Vide, p. 6. Aeschylus and Sophocles portray Clytemnestra as having wielded the weapon.
Let him know that he meteth chastity
By his own soul's base measure—base as he.34

Here, in this character of the Peasant, free born but poor, and therefore powerless, Euripides presents a reality of high principles that rise above and beyond the current moral code to a level higher than the reality of physical appearances.

As the Peasant concludes his speech Electra enters from the cottage, a water-jar on her head, and speaks. She tells the audience that she is not forced through need to fetch the water as she is about to do, but that she does it to show heaven Aegisthus' tyranny and to wail to the sky for Agamemnon; for her own mother has cast her from home and, having borne other sons to Aegisthus, has deprived her and Orestes of their right. It is interesting to note a subtle difference here between the Euripides' version and those of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The characters of the older poets address their lamentations to the spirits of the nether world; the spirits of the dead and those gods who plead their cause come from a world within the earth. But in Euripides' version time and again the spirits seem to be placed in Aether that space beyond the

34Way, op. cit., p. 9. Certainly sentiment such as suggested by this speech could not have sprung from variations of the Protagorean philosophies as expressed by Antiphon. Vide, p. 65.
air; perhaps this view reflects in some measure the thought of Diogenes of Apollonia. 35

The Peasant chides Electra for doing any labor, but Electra tells him she does it out of gratitude for him. He bids her to carry the water if she wishes since the spring is not far and adds rather cryptically that though one talks of gods, no one gains a living without toil. They both exit.

Orestes and Pylades enter; Orestes is speaking to Pylades. The purpose of the speech is to tell the audience that he has come to Argos at the command of Apollo's oracle to avenge his father's death. He tells how he spent the night at his father's "unmarked" grave, weeping, giving offerings of shorn hair, and pouring "a slain sheep's blood" upon the grave. He will not venture far from the border for fear that someone will recognize him; but he will seek out his sister, whom he has heard is married, that she may help him with the vengeance. They hide themselves as Orestes sees Electra whom he assumes is a slave. Euripides' Orestes is a far cry from the purposeful young man found in both the Oresteia and Sophocles' Electra. This picture of Orestes, skulking by the border,

poised for flight, and lying in ambush for bondmaids, destroys all thoughts of him as the conventional conquering hero.

Electra re-enters making a long lament for the misery of her present condition, a life which offers no consolation since her father is dead, a death devised in a wife's "heart, Aegisthus' hand." Again Euripides emphasizes the earlier legend. Electra's thoughts turn to her brother, and she wonders about his fate. She calls on Zeus to send a redeemer, a champion of a father foully killed. She reviews the details of Agamemnon's death; the speech builds in emotional intensity, and the last lines are reflections of the violent hate she feels for her mother. The speech is vaguely reminiscent of the first lament made by Sophocles' Electra; the difference is a kind of violent turbulence that permeates the speech of Euripides' Electra.

As Electra ceases the Chorus enters; they have come to tell of a festival to be held in three days which every maid must attend. Electra tells them that she will not go but rather will continue her weeping; then she makes a reference to her shorn hair and the disarray of her attire saying that such an appearance does not befit a princess, daughter of Agamemnon. The Chorus reminds her that the festival is an important one; they offer to lend her clothes and jewels. They caution her that it is by honoring
the gods, showing them reverence, and offering them prayers instead of groans that her foes will be brought to their downfall. Electra counters saying that no god listens to a "wretch's cries," and again she contrasts the poverty of her life with the opulence of her mother's life. The bitterness that corrodes Electra's soul seems to stem from the contrast in the mode of living; Clytemnestra, a murderess and an adultress, lives in wealth and elegance while she lives here in poverty and want, exiled from her rightful inheritance.

Electra breaks off as she sees Orestes and Pylades come out of their hiding places. She tries to run from them, but Orestes stops her; she is terrified, and it is not until he tells her that he brings her news of her brother that she really regains her composure. Orestes questions her at some length about the state of affairs in Argos. The only thing new that the audience learns is that Aegisthus is not aware that Electra is in truth still a maiden. Even though Electra assures Orestes that the women of the Chorus are loyal friends, he does not reveal his true identity; instead Orestes asks her how Agamemnon's murderers might be slain. She answers that the deed can be accomplished by daring. He asks her if she could kill her mother, and she replies that she could do it with the same axe that killed her father.
Orestes, impressed by her firm resolve, expresses the wish that Orestes could hear her words, and she confesses that even if she saw him she would not know him; only the old friend that had spirited Orestes away to safety could recognize him. Still Orestes does not reveal himself, but asks instead how Agamemnon was buried. Translations vary as to Electra's answer; the more literal translations indicate that he was buried but without rites and mourning. This view seems consistent with Orestes' account of the sacrifices made at his father's grave. To the Greeks burial without the appropriate rites was a heinous crime; and Orestes is deeply moved by Electra's declaration; he asks her to tell the whole tale, joyless and piteous as it is. The Leader of the Chorus explains that living here far from the city, there is no knowledge of its sins, and she joins in Orestes' request. Electra begins her message to Orestes.

36 Way, op. cit., p. 31, translates the line, "Such tomb as he hath found, flung forth his halls!" Coleridge, op. cit., p. 75, translates the line, "Such burial as it was, after his body had been flung forth from the palace." Murray, Electra, op. cit., p. 21, translates, "What chance gave, my father had, cast out to rot in the sun." Murray's translation would seem to imply Agamemnon was denied burial. Actually the rest of the text denies this implication, but the line is so strong that it makes Electra's thinking seem even more distorted than it is.
It is interesting to note that here as well as in her earlier speeches she begins with an account of her miserable poverty and then contrasts it with magnificence of Clytemnestra's robes and the splendor of her dwelling surrounded as she is with Agamemnon's plunder from Troy. Again and again Euripides has emphasized the reality that lies behind the reality of appearances by which the world governs its actions; the mob submits to those whose physical prosperity gives them power. Electra turns from the account of her mother's position to an account of Aegisthus as the bloody usurper. Electra's next statement recalls the accusation Sophocles' Electra makes against her mother, but in Euripides' version it is Aegisthus who blatantly defiles Agamemnon's grave:

And Agamemnon's tomb is set at nought: Drink-offerings never yet nor myrtle-spray Had it, a grave all bare of ornament. Yea, with wine drunken, he, my mother's spouse-- Named of men "glorious"!--leaps upon the grave, And pelts with stones my father's monument;

In every case Euripides has given Clytemnestra the place behind Aegisthus. True she has helped Aegisthus, but in each case he was the doer she the follower, the aide. There is no trace of the fiercely dominant Clytemnestra of the

\[37\text{Vide, pp. 77-78.}\]
Orestes; no woman within whose "breast beats heart of man" is the Clytemnestra of Euripides' play.

Electra ends her speech with a plea for Orestes' return; her feeling is that even though he is young surely the son of such a "noble sire" can slay one man. The Leader of the Chorus tells Electra that her husband is approaching, and as the Peasant approaches he chides Electra for talking to the young strangers; he points out that such conduct is unseeming for a woman. Electra tells him that these are spies sent by Orestes to "mark" her wrongs. The Peasant greets them as friends sent from a loved one, and, biding the servants carry their gear into the house, offers them such "cheer" as his house affords. Adding that though he is poor he is no "churl at heart," he goes to open the doors to the cottage. Orestes, amazed, asks Electra if this is the man who keeps her "wedlock-secret." Electra, referring to herself as "the hapless one," replies that he is her husband. Orestes, surprised and impressed by the nobility of this man remarks that there is no sure test by which one may know another's worth:

Lo, there is no sure test for manhood's worth:
For mortal natures are confusion-fraught.
I have seen ere now a noble father's son
Proved nothing-worth, seen good sons of ill sires,
Starved leanness in a rich man's very soul,
And in a poor man's body a great heart.
Is plague-struck, schooling men to sin through need,
To prowess shall I turn me? -- who, that looks
On spears, can swear which spearman's heart is brave?
Leave Fortune's gifts to fall out as they will!
Lo, this man is not among Argives great,
Nor by a noble house's name exalted,
But one of the many -- proved a king of men!

Crestes closes the speech with an acceptance of the hospitality so graciously offered; then, revealing the meanness of his own soul, he wishes that it were Crestes leading them into more prosperous halls. This Electra, who is soured on life by the loss of privileges due a princess, and this Crestes, who has sneaked back from exile at the command of Apollo's oracle but without even a vague plan for carrying out the command, both look rather petty in contrast to the open nobility of the Peasant. Critics disagree as to the importance of the introduction of the character of the Peasant to the drama: Decharme concludes that the Peasant serves no purpose "except to furnish the poet an opportunity for one or two tirades against the presumptuous claims of nobility," Norwood tags him as

38Way, op. cit., p. 37.
39Paul Decharme, op. cit., pp. 239-40. Decharme contends that Euripides changed the locale of the play from the locale used by Aeschylus and then by Sophocles as an expedient employed to refurbish an old drama of vengeance. Since Decharme does not look beyond the story line he draws the conclusion that Euripides has introduced a character that "is of no service in the action."
"a delightfully sardonic character," who is in reality "worth fifty times his wife and her family put together";\(^4\) but Appleton comes closer to the mark as he suggests that the Peasant is a visible symbol representing "the nature of man as the ultimate sanction in ethics."\(^1\) In truth it is through the character of the Peasant in contrast with the other characters of the play that the purpose of the play finds expression.

Orestes and Pylades go into the cottage. As the Peasant returns to Electra's side she scolds him for having welcomed the strangers, so far above his station, knowing the poverty of his house. The Peasant tells her that if they are really as noble as they seem, they will content themselves with whatever the house affords. Electra is not convinced, and she sends him off to find the old servant who had saved Orestes. She instructs him to tell the servant the news the strangers have brought and to ask that he bring more food for the strangers. The Peasant

\(^{4}\) Gilbert Norwood, *Essays on Euripidean Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1954), p. 22. Norwood goes on to comment that "One resents his [the Peasant's] dismissal at the close with 'a lot of money.'" The significance of the Peasant seems to go deeper than this comment infers.

consents to go, but he urges her to go into the cottage immediately and reminds her that a woman, if she chooses, can find many things to make a feast. The Peasant leaves and Electra enters the cottage.

The Chorus sings of the battle of Troy, for the most part about Achilles and his armor. Except as it reminds the audience of Agamemnon as a great king, the song is of no importance to the action of the play. The song ends as the Chorus predicts that Clytemnestra soon shall "repay Death."

The old Servant enters and asks for Electra; she enters almost immediately, and he tells her that he has brought food for feasting. He tells her that on the way he had stopped at Agamemnon's grave, and as he offered his libation he saw on the grave a freshly slain "black-flecked ewe" and "severed locks" of mourner's hair. He asks her to go to the grave to compare her footprint with those that might be there. He feels that Orestes is the only one who would have left such offerings. But Electra does not accept his conclusion; she discounts each sign as being illogical and adds,

Not worthy a wise man, ancient, be thy words—
To think mine aweless brother would have come,
Fearing Aegisthus, hither secretly.42

42Way, op. cit., p. 147.
The real Orestes falls short of Electra's mental picture of her brother. Euripides' Electra dismisses the old man's "signs" just as Sophocles' Electra rejects her sister's proofs. The old Servant asks if there isn't some piece of weaving that she had done for Orestes that she might recognize, but she points out to him that Orestes could no longer wear anything she might have woven for him as a child. At this point Orestes and Pylades enter from the cottage. The old Servant is not convinced that these men that approach them are truly from Orestes. Orestes asks Electra who the old Servant is, and as they exchange questions and answers the old Servant studies Orestes carefully; at last he announces to Electra that the man that stands before him is Orestes: he has recognized Orestes by the "scar along his brow." Electra is convinced that this is indeed Orestes, and they embrace joyously.

Many critics feel the first part of this recognition scene is a direct criticism of the recognition scene in Aeschylus Choephoroi; however, Gilbert Murray maintains that the signs of recognition used by Aeschylus, the footprints and the locks of hair, were traditional, and the

fact that Sophocles uses the same signs in his *Electra* would seem to bear this out.\(^{44}\)

The Chorus sings a song of rejoicing for Orestes' arrival which turns into a kind of victory hymn. Sweet as the bliss of greeting is, Orestes breaks it off to ask the old Servant how he should requite his "father's slayer, and her that shows his guilty couch."\(^{45}\) He asks if there are any in Argos who would be his friends. What a different Orestes this is from the purposeful, determined young man drawn by Aeschylus and Sophocles. The old Servant tells Orestes that there are none to help him: the winning of his father's house and city lies in his own hand. There follows a long dialogue between Orestes and the old Servant during which the Servant in answer to Orestes' questions plans the murder of Aegisthus. It seems that Aegisthus is in a field nearby where he is preparing a feast and sacrifice to the Nymphs. Orestes is to pass along the road just at the hour of the sacrifice, and when Aegisthus sees strangers on the road, he will surely ask Orestes to join in the feast. Since Aegisthus

\(^{44}\)Gilbert Murray (trans.), *Electra*, op. cit., pp. 89-90.

\(^{45}\)Way, op. cit., p. 55.
is attended only by household slaves, Orestes will only need to wait his chance to strike. Clytemnestra has stayed behind at the palace to avoid the "taunt" of the people.

Electra interrupts the dialogue here to say that she will plan her mother's slaying. The old Servant is to go to Clytemnestra and tell her that Electra is the mother of a son born ten days ago. Electra feels sure that the news will bring her mother to the cottage, and once she has come to the cottage her death is certain.

Electra tells the old Servant to direct Orestes to the road where he will find Aegisthus and then to deliver her message to Clytemnestra. Orestes, Electra, and the old Servant begin a kind of incantation in which they call for aid from the gods and the spirit of Agamemnon. It is not a long chant for Electra is impatient lest the time should run out, and she urges Orestes to "play the man" and be about his deed; she warns him that if he fails to kill Aegisthus, she will kill herself by the "twain-edged" sword. Electra enters the cottage, and Orestes and Pylades exit with the old Servant.
The Chorus sings of the tale of the "Golden lamb" and as the Chorus finishes their song they hear "a great voice ... like earth-muffled thunder of Zeus," and they call Electra from the house. The Chorus tells her they have heard a death cry, from whom they know not; Electra fearing that Orestes has failed, would kill herself, but the Chorus restrains her. At this moment the Messenger enters and announces Orestes' triumph over Aegisthus. At first Electra is reluctant to believe that this is really a messenger from Orestes; she looks more closely and, having assured herself, bids him give them the details. The speech that follows is

46 Vide, p. 8, n. 13. Critics point to the last antistrophe of the song as an indication of Euripides' scepticism of the gods when the Chorus indicate a lack of credence that the theft of the "lamb" would cause Zeus to change the order of the heavens. The "golden lamb" is the constellation Areis, "The Ram." In the ninth and eighth centuries B.C. the vernal equinox was moving from the Bull into the Ram. The Bull was the special god of Babylon; the yielding of his place to Ram coincided with the decline of Babylon. The gradual advance of the Ram upset the calendar, made the seasons wrong, and since the fall of Babylon seemed to coincide with it, the world itself was upset. Murray, Electra, op. cit., p. 92. Euripides probably was not aware of this bit of ancient Astrology.

the traditional messenger's speech. Crestes and Pylades, posing as Thessalians on their way to Alpheus to sacrifice to Zeus, were invited by Aegisthus to share in the altar-feast as his guests. Aegisthus bid the servants bring water for his guests to cleanse their hands. Crestes explained that they had just purified themselves in "pure river-streams" and thus were ready for the sacrifice. Aegisthus made a prayer before the sacrifice whose intent recalls the prayer Sophocles' Clytemnestra made to Apollo shortly before her death. But no reference is made to a dream; both Aeschylus and Sophocles mention a frightening dream. Knowing of the Thessalians' skill in deftly quartering the slaughtered bull, Aegisthus asked Crestes to demonstrate his skill. As Aegisthus stooped to examine the "inwards," Crestes gave a mighty blow with a cleaver and killed him. The servants rushed to attack Crestes, but when he revealed himself as Crestes, son of Agamemnon, they turned to rejoicing. Euripides has made the slaying of Aegisthus a deed of guile and treachery.

When the Messenger concludes his speech, the Chorus and Electra sing alternately of the joyous victory.

If Crestes had washed with Aegisthus, he would have in reality become a guest, and then the slaying would have been a dishonorable act.
Electra brings out garlands to crown the conqueror's heads. Orestes and Pylades enter followed by attendants bearing Aegisthus' body. Electra greets them as glorious conquerors and presents to them the wreaths. Crestes gives Electra the body of Aegisthus to do with what she will:

... the dead man's self I bring to thee;
Whom, if thou wilt, for ravin of beasts cast forth,
Or for the children of the air to rend
Impale him on a stake; they bondsman now
So he, who heretofore was called thy lord. 49

Electra feels a moment of shame, but at Crestes' insistence she begins her reproach. She unleashes on the corpse all her pent up hate and contempt. She arraigns him first as being responsible for her ruin through the slaying of her father who had never wronged him. She calls his marriage to Clytemnestra base folly, first, because he could not expect that a wife who had been false to her lord could bless another, and, second, because he had not gained a crown but was known rather as the queen's husband: none took "account of him, but all of her." 50 She goes on to mark his flaunted wealth as having come to nothing:

'Tis character abideth, not possessions:

But wealth by vanity gotten, held of fools,
Takes to it wings; as a flower it fadeth soon.

49 Way, op. cit., p. 81.
50 Ibid., p. 85.
Perish, 0 blind to all for which at last, Felon convict, thou it punished, cartiff thou! Let none dream, though at starting he run well, That he outrunneth justice, ere he touch The very goal and reach the bourn of life.51 The anger spent, she turns from the body of this man she has contemptuously called "girlfaced."52 Orestes bids them carry the body into the cottage so that his mother will know nothing of Aegisthus' death until she herself is struck. Pylades and the attendants, carrying the body, go into the cottage.

Orestes and Electra catch sight of Clytemnestra and her retinue approaching in the distance. The contrast in the reactions of Orestes and Electra make the scene that follows emotionally vibrant. To Orestes their mother, bravely arrayed, comes rushing into the snare; to Electra she comes flaunting her wealth and position. The very sight of his mother seems to disorganize Orestes; he contemplates the murder of his mother with a kind of incredulity; surely a command that carries with it exile and the stain of a mother's blood could only have come from

51Ibid.

52Ibid. This picture of Aegisthus as womanlike seems to be part of the tradition since it is mentioned in all three treatments of the legend.
"a fiend in likeness of the god,"\textsuperscript{53} Apollo's oracle must have erred. Aflame once more with hate Electra rises in a triumphant burst to the task at hand which is to strengthen Orestes' purpose. She reasons that if Apollo errs then none are wise; no harm can come from avenging a father. She is successful with her final thrust: "Wilt thou turn craven--be no more a man?"\textsuperscript{54} At last resigned to what he must do, he goes into the cottage.

Clytemnestra enters in her chariot; she is accompanied by slave-maidens from Troy. The Chorus greets her with a kind of formal elegance, but the last line is charged with double meaning, "This, Queen, is the hour, even this!"\textsuperscript{55} Clytemnestra bids the bondwoman, whom she refers to as a slight compensation for the loss of her daughter Iphigenia, descend from the car and take her hand that she may alight more easily. Electra, with elaborate sarcasm, offers her hand, but Clytemnestra asks her not to trouble herself. Electra points out that she is after all

\textsuperscript{53}Way, \textit{op. cit.}, p. 89.

\textsuperscript{54}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{55}Ibid., p. 91.
but a slave and an exile from her father's home. From this point on the scene is very similar in structure to the corresponding scene in Sophocles' *Electra*, but the total effect of the scene is quite different. Sophocles uses the scene to emphasize the odiousness of Clytemnestra and concentrate the sympathies of the audience upon Electra; but Euripides uses the scene to emphasize the hard unyielding nature of Electra and to show Clytemnestra as one who might retreat and make amends if such a course could be safely accomplished. One wonders if Euripides saw a parallel in the position of Clytemnestra and that of Athens; having once embarked on tyranny there was no safe way to return, reverse the course.

Clytemnestra begins her speech in defense of her actions. Her argument runs that Agamemnon by guile and for a wanton woman slew her daughter

Had be, to avert Mycenae's overthrow,--
To exalt his house,--to save the children left--
Slain one for many, 'twere not past forgiving.58

56 Vide, pp. 82-85.

57 He had summoned Iphigenia to Aulis so that she might become the bride of Achilles.

58 Way, op. cit., p. 93.
But even then she would not have slain Agamemnon if he had not brought home Cassandra to share the "selfsame halls" and couch as hers; it was Agamemnon's example that prompted her to take a lover. She continues her argument, and by doing so weakens it: she points out that if it had been Menelaus who had been stolen and she had slain Crestes to restore her sister's husband, Agamemnon would most certainly have slain her. Clytemnestra ends her speech by inviting Electra to prove, if she can, that her father had not been justly killed.

Electra seeks assurance from Clytemnestra that no vengeance will be sought if she speaks freely, and Clytemnestra re-assures her. This exchange reminds one of a similar exchange in Sophocles' Electra, but here, with full knowledge of the fate that awaits Clytemnestra in the cottage, the effect is one of irony. Electra begins her rebuttal with a phrase that is an echo from the Choephoroi, "O Mother, that thou hadst a better heart!" Electra's claim is that in truth her mother is as wanton as was Helen, for no sooner had Agamemnon left than she began to preen and bedeck herself; she alone of all Greek women was

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59 Ibid., p. 95.
overjoyed when Troy seemed to triumph. But even if the sacrifice of Iphigenia (she ignores her mother's allusion to Cassandra), were the true motive, Electra charges that she and Orestes, having done no wrong should have been given their inheritance rather than using it to buy a paramour. And Aegisthus is not exiled for Orestes' sake nor slain to avenge the living death he dealt her by denying her a suitable marriage: Electra looks on her condition as a moral death. Electra concludes her argument saying:

...... yea, if blood
'Gainst blood in judgment rise, I and thy son, Orestes, must slay thee to avenge our sire:
For, if thy claim was just, this too is just.60

Clytemnestra is tired; argument is futile, and she answers Electra not with the childish peevishness of Sophocles' Clytemnestra, but with a philosophic understanding:

Child, still thy nature bids thee love thy sire,
'Tis ever thus: some cleave unto their father.
Some more the mother than the father love.
I pardon thee. In sooth, not all so glad
Am I, my child, for deeds that I have done.

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60 Ibid., p. 97.
61 Ibid.
But Electra will not let the matter rest, and asks Clytemnestra why she has not made restitution. Clytemnestra explains that concern for her own safety compels her to follow her present course. Finally, out of patience, Clytemnestra asks Electra why she summoned her. Electra asks her mother to make the necessary offerings for her newborn babe. Clytemnestra agrees to perform the rites, and, after directing her servants to lead the horses away until her service to the gods is done. She plans to go to Aegisthus who worships the Nymphs in the fields when the rite has been performed. She enters the cottage. Electra cautions her mother not to soil her robes as she passes within to offer there "the gods due sacrifice"; she utters one last spasm of hate and follows her mother.

The Chorus sings of the ruthless slaying of Agamemnon. The song ends as Clytemnestra's death cries are heard from within. The attitude of the Chorus changes as they express their sympathy for Clytemnestra's suffering even though she did "foully" murder Agamemnon. They see Orestes and Electra coming out of the cottage followed by attendants who carry the two corpses. The Chorus bemoans the overwhelming misery that has haunted this house generation after generation; this speech begins a responsive chant by Orestes, Electra, and the Chorus. The
horror of their deed has begun to sweep over Orestes and Electra. Orestes' opening speech recalls the ancient feeling that a murderer pollutes the very air; he can hope succor in no land and from no man. Electra's speech echoes the same thought; she can hope to find refuge in no land nor to be received by any lord in a "bridal-bower." The rest of the chant gives an account of the actual murder; the horror of their deed is to them past believing. Electra has actually helped to wield the sword; she is literally as well as figuratively a partner in the crime. Morally the slaying of her mother is solely her doing. At last Electra veils the bodies and expresses the hope that the curse on the house may end here. At this moment the Chorus sees the gods Castor and Pollux in mid air over the roof top.

Euripides' introduction of the gods here has been the subject of the widest critical comment:

The "divine" performance which terminate . . . the Electra seem to be nothing better than burlesque, and have long been favorite exercises for the derision of the poet's detractors.62

In the Electra, for example, the apparition of the Dioscuri produces, and is intended by Euripides, to produce, a moral satisfaction and peacefulness, to which, we are made to feel, the protagonists of the play have succeeded in winning their way through "life's fitful fever."  

The poet means to have them [The Dioscuri] inform us of everybody's fate.  

The appearance of the gods in Electra is so beautiful that no critics have yet tried to explain it away as nonsense; and the lesson of it so clear that its meaning is seldom denied.  

A careful examination of the lines of the play will reveal that this last portion of the play was neither thrown in to placate the crowd, nor just an easy way of ending a play the playwright had grown tired of writing. It is instead designed to further the purpose of the play and with the same care as is shown in other parts of the play.  

The appearance of Castor and Pollux is singularly appropriate since they are, according to legend, Clytemnestra's twin brothers. To suit Euripides' purpose in part they must express a moral judgment on the action of the play which Castor as spokesman does quite cryptically in commenting about the slaying of Clytemnestra,  

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63 Appleton, op. cit., p. 19.  
64 Decharme, op. cit., p. 267.  
65 Murray, Euripides and His Age, op. cit., p. 155.
She hath but justice; yet thou, thou hast sinned; And Phoebus--Phoebus--since he is my king, I am dumb. He is wise:--not wise his heast for thee! We must needs say "'Tis well." 66

The arrogant security of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra and the very human short-sightedness of Electra has been thrown into contrast with the eternal sanctions of moral right. The external criteria based on an outmoded moral code and theology leads only to error; everyone is in himself a witness to what is right. What Clytemnestra did was evil, but the deeds of Orestes and Electra were evil too; the conclusion of the play seems to infer the Socratic teaching that it is better to suffer evil than to do evil. Of all the characters of the play only the Peasant has established in his daily life a moral standard that rises above the external standard of his time and position, and he is the only one for whom the action of the play ends happily; he is to be given "a store of wealth." 67

It is true that Electra is ordained to marry Pylades, a marriage befitting her station, but she is to be parted from her brother forever and will be an exile from her father's halls. Orestes is ordained to suffer the


67Ibid., p. 113.
tortures described in the Eumenides of Aeschylus. Even after his acquittal he may not return to Argos but must instead found a city in Arcadia by the river Alpheus. To the Greek mind, a life in exile was one of the worst evils that could befall an individual.

Castor decrees that the people of Argos shall bury Aegisthus, and that Menelaus and Helen, who in truth was never in Troy but had been in Egypt the whole time, should bury Clytemnestra. The irony of depicting Helen as having been in Egypt while a devastating war raged for her sake at Troy is unmistakable.

Castor goes on to explain that though they cannot escape punishment for their deed it is Apollo who must bear the stain of the blood that was spilt. Though even the gods feel compassion for human misery, the decrees must be

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68 Vide, p. 51. Euripides indicates that the Court of Areopagus had been established earlier; however, he indicates that Orestes' case is the case that established the precedent of acquittal of the accused when a tie vote is cast.


70 Euripides uses the version of the legend that depicts Helen as true and faithful to Menelaus: actually Zeus sent "a phantom Helen" to Troy while the real Helen, always loyal, spent the war years in Egypt.
carried out. Orestes and Electra bid each other a reluctant and tearful farewell. And the Dioscuri explains that they must rush to Sicilian seas to save imperiled ships:

We help not them that work abomination;  
But, whoso loveth faith, and righteousness  
All his life long, to such we bring salvation,  
Bring them deliverance out of all distress.  
Let none dare then in wrong to be partaker,  
Neither to voyage with the doomed oath-breaker.  
I am a god: to men I publish this.71

Even as the play was being produced the ships were preparing to sail in conquest of Sicily. Many critics complain that this reference to current history was simply dragged in and bears little relevance to the play. But it seems more reasonable to assume that Euripides was making a plea to his audience to stop and consider the actions of the state. Euripides had been revolted by the massacre at Melos; he could only have looked at the attempted conquest of Sicily as the further betrayal of the Athenian ideal and as an act of injustice doomed to failure. Surely not even the most incompetent of playwrights would have ended his play on an irrelevant note! The introduction of the Dioscuri does more than provide a convenient way to tell the audience what will happen to the characters;

it provides Euripides with the means for emphasizing the necessity of looking beyond the eternal realities which are only appearance, to an inner reality for the basis of a moral, ethical standard.

Some conclusions. Euripides has in his Electra stripped the legend of all the heroic glamour that had surrounded it. Even the murder of Aegisthus carries with it the same kind of revulsion that a modern audience would feel toward a supposed hero who deliberately shot his adversary in the back. The circumstances of Orestes' murder of Aegisthus are not heroic; the plan, hatched by a less than noble mind, is carried out with guile and treachery even as a sneak might strike in the dark. As for the murder of Clytemnestra, Euripides leaves no doubt; the murder is an abomination and a denial of enlightened moral values in favor of unthinking orthodoxy. Euripides' Electra is not the tragedy of any one person, a representative hero, it is the tragedy of a society so taken up with worldly considerations that it is indifferent to the great and noble truths until it is too late: the final disaster can no longer be avoided.

Electra is grieved by the fate of her father, but the real thorn in her side is her poverty, and lack of position. Orestes, too, is grieved that his father has
not been properly honored, but his real concern is the regaining of his inheritance in a manner that will expose him to the least amount of danger. Aegisthus' only concern is the retention of his acquired wealth without regard to his own moral degradation. Clytemnestra would make amends, but her concern for herself and her own continued comfort outweighs her desire to see that her children are justly treated. So it is that Agamemnon's oppression against Iphigenia generated revenge and each successive oppression generated even greater revenge until at last the revenge is more horrible than the oppression. The final touch of bitter irony is added to the play when Euripides tells the audience that the event that triggered the whole chain of oppression and revenge, the abduction of Helen to Troy, was only an illusion, a phantom without substance or reality.

The play seems almost to parallel the spiritual, and political growth of Athens. Clytemnestra as the symbol of Athens is almost unmistakable; the oppressor has grown tired and would retreat but cannot risk retaliation. Could Euripides have missed the parallel? His reference to the Sicilian expedition indicates that he did not. He meant his play as a fearful warning, and it turned out to be a prophecy.
The thing that the modern reader must keep in mind is that the Sophoclean Electra and the Euripidean Electra are not just refurbished versions of the Oresteia. The points of similarity rest most clearly on the structures of the plays. In all three plays traces of the ritual origin of the festival can be found: the whole sequence of contest, tearing-asunder, messenger, lamentation, discovery, recognition, and resurrection which characterized the original presentations is, in varying degrees of subtlety, present.

All three playwrights were philosophers. Each had a message particularly suited to the period in history in which he lived, and each message was tuned to his individual view of the world. Aeschylus wrote when democracy was new and his Oresteia looks on Athens in the same manner as a sculptor envisions a noble statue. But Sophocles and Euripides produced their plays about the house of Atreus when the ideal of democracy had somehow failed to be realized; the mold had cracked, the statue was false to the vision. Sophocles says that through the strength of each part the vision may still be saved. Euripides says it has crumbled from within and the vision is fading in the face of a reality that can no longer be ignored.
CHAPTER V

IN CONCLUSION

One thing comes out clearly from all the rest, and that is that the three ancient poets considered here cannot be separated from the times in which they lived if they are to be thoroughly understood. Their lives were crowded with long military service, service in the jury courts, in political assembly, and as the lot might fall, in the Council. They escaped from a hard, sometimes brutal life to spend their moments of leisure with their artistic creations through which they expressed philosophies that were hammered out of their own thinking, fighting, and struggling for existence. It is small wonder that their musings rose above the considerations of individual suffering to depict the agony of humanity as it struggles painfully toward wisdom which is its salvation or to suggest standards that lead to moral salvation. Each of the three poets brought a message to his audience as he retold the story of the cursed house of Atreus. Had Athens really listened to her tragic poets her fate might have been different. It should never be forgotten that the ancient poets were a living, breathing part of the history of their times.
I. AESCHYLUS

Aeschylus wrote the *Oresteia* just two years before his death. This masterpiece came at the end of a long, rich life, a life filled with the joy of success. His world had made giant strides out of the abyss of human misery into an era that promised freedom, equality, prosperity for all. The great victories over Persia must have seemed like a proof of the wisdom and truth of Athenian principles of government. The atmosphere of the time might be compared to the tremendous feeling of well being and strength that the young adult feels when he is at the peak of physical and mental alertness. The time was so filled with the exuberance of success that no room was left for pessimism, and Aeschylus was a part of these successes: he was a courageous warrior, as his epitaph proclaims; he was recognized as an accomplished artist who won many prizes for his trilogies. Even his city had successfully reached what must have seemed an ideal of justice in government. In the *Oresteia* Aeschylus recorded the social progress of Athens; it was progress he himself had been privileged to observe within his own lifetime, and because he was a poet he chose to do the record in symbolic terms through the reinterpretation of the legend of the house of Atreus.

There is no question that a modern audience would
find the first two plays of the Oresteia, the Agamemnon and the Choephoroi, more interesting from the standpoint of dramatic entertainment than the final play, the Eumenides. However, when the trilogy is viewed as a whole it is obvious that the first two plays exist for the purpose of bringing about the solution presented in the last play. Not only from the standpoint of a structural whole, but from the standpoint of the real message of the trilogy the Agamemnon and the Choephoroi are just preparation for the Eumenides which culminates in the achievement of unity of all religious belief under the law, that great code written and unwritten which all Greeks held in highest reverence. The reverence for the law was the only really unifying force in Greek life.

It matters not whether Aeschylus' trilogy glorified the Areopagus because he was saddened that the more radical democrats had restricted its functions, or whether he glorified the Court at that particular time and with this particular legend as an indication of his agreement with a step toward greater individual freedom. Aeschylus had the same respect for the laws of Athens as Socrates displayed when he drank the hemlock rather than escape into exile as his friends urged him to do: Socrates did not accept the verdict against him as a just one, but he did accept his obligation as a citizen of Athens to submit to the law.
So Aeschylus saw in the law of Athens the means of bringing all the elements of Greek religion, the goddesses of fertility, the violent spirits of the underworld, the Olympians, and the concept of fate, into a glorious unity under Zeus and symbolized by the Court of the Areopagus.¹

II. SOPHOCLES

Sophocles wrote his Electra toward the end of his lifetime. He grew to maturity in an Athens which was the cultural center and undisputed military leader of the Greek world. His life symbolized for his countrymen the ideal of perfection in life: he was physically handsome, of noble birth, wealthy, intellectually acute, and a successful artist. During Sophocles’ youth Athens was free from fear of attack, free from economic problems, and free from any restrictions on intellectual explorations. Could such a place be less than the "best of all possible worlds."

¹Verrall maintains that Aeschylus’ suggestion that the Revered Ones (Semnae), who traditionally dwelt in a cavern near the Areopagus, and the Furies (Erinves) were the same was not founded on tradition; and the two groups were in fact so widely different that there was almost no point of contact. Aeschylus united the two forces and gave them a name from another source, the Eumenides. Arthur W. Verrall, Euripides the Rationalist (Cambridge: at the University Press, 1895), pp. 155-66.
But with the application of Protagoras' concept "Man is the measure of all things" to all areas of thinking it was inevitable that the foundation of society would tend to wobble. Protagoras was, of course, referring to man in general, but through interpretation individuals assumed the right to judge according to a shifting, purely individual standard. The Athenian world began to move away from the unity suggested by Aeschylus to a kind of chaos of individual standards often based on personal gain in comfort, pleasure, or power.

Sophocles was the living example of the Greek ideal of *sophrosyne*, self restraint, serenity. For him this pious system of life had worked; he could only assume that the system could work for others. If toward the end of his life, Sophocles saw the bright vision of an enlightened people begin to fade, he probably felt that it was not the system that was at fault but rather that it was the individuals who were at fault. His *Electra* carries with it a plea for the establishment of standards of moral integrity that do not yield in the face of any danger.

Athens had fallen into evil days when Sophocles wrote his *Electra*. The Peloponnesian War was raging, the city had been struck by plague, and little more than deceit and treachery could be expected from those in power.
Sophocles in his *Electra* was calling for a moral awakening; he was asking each individual to stand firm and resolute against all evil regardless of the personal cost. Perhaps Sophocles felt that such a moral awakening was the only hope of saving the glory of the Athens of his youth. Sophocles' *Electra* alone and unaided, upholds the cause of righteousness. She suffers physically as well as mentally, but this does not deter her from her course. When all hope for aid with her cause fails, she is willing to pursue the same course though it may, in all probability, mean her death. Her cause is vindicated by the conclusion of the play.

*Electra* is in herself a kind of embodiment of many of the phases of Greek religion: the fact that she is unwed amounts to a denial of her rights to fulfillment, rights that to ancient Greece were not far removed from the fertility of the soil; the fact that she dedicates her whole existence to seeking retribution for her father's murder, for she acts as an external conscience, resembles the dedication of the Furies to the punishment of crimes perpetrated against kinsmen; and the fact that Orestes, whose radiance identifies him as Apollo's agent, is little more than an extension of Electra as Sophocles draws him, provides the suggestion of the presence of the Olympians as a motivating force and completes the picture of all
elements of religion united in righteous action. Electra's steadfast, unyielding behavior in the face of evil is rewarded with the triumphant destruction of that evil. Electra through strict adherence to moral principle won her salvation. Sophocles must have seen the parallel between the situation Electra faced, surrounded as she was by her enemies and well-wishers who had neither the power nor the moral strength to aid her, and the situation Athens faced. He must have felt that Athens too could find salvation through strict adherence to moral principle.

III. EURIPIDES

The Electra was the last play by Euripides produced in Athens before his voluntary exile into Macedonia. The play came near the end of a long life that had been saddened by disillusionment. In view of the progress in intellectual and artistic development it is difficult to believe that the period of peace between the final victory over the Persian forces and the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, lasted only about fifty years. Euripides was born at the beginning of this period of peace and came to maturity when Athens was at the peak of intellectual, artistic, and individual freedom. But he was too young to escape actual personal experience in the most painful of all kinds of wars, civil war. He found himself surrounded
by men dedicated to personal gain and revenge. His last message to Athens before his exile was that one must expect to be wronged; revenge is worse than useless for it pollutes that which might have been noble; without peace, forgiveness, and generosity of spirit, a good life is impossible.

The characters of Euripides' *Electra* are symbols of the various elements in Athenian society. Electra represents that element that is dedicated to revenge, revenge motivated by the loss of position, wealth, and power. Aegisthus represents that element that seeks wealth, power, and position without regard for the personal moral degradation involved in its achievement and retention. Orestes represents that element which tradition calls heroic, but he can act only when the enemy is defenseless and unsuspecting; when moral questionings stay his hand, he will ignore his misgivings to keep up appearances and maintain his position.\(^2\) And Clytemnestra is the symbol of Athens; she has sinned, turned false to the ideals she claimed; personal comfort and well being are more important than justice to her. Clytemnestra's (Athens') surrender to base

\(^2\)He does not respond to Electra's pleas until she urges him to complete the vengeance or "be no more a man." *Vide*, p. 150.
materialism brought about her destruction.

In terms of religious symbolism Electra, representing the Furies, goddesses of revenge, and in reverse the Revered Ones, goddesses of fertility, and Orestes, representing Apollo, the Olympian god of wisdom and light, join forces to destroy Clytemnestra, representing Athens, who had succumbed to Aegisthus, representing materialism and the pleasures of the senses. Clytemnestra, and perhaps Athens, was destroyed from within by the very nature of the elements she tried to embrace. Only the Peasant, representing true nobility that rises above appearances, escapes without pain. Only the just can be truly triumphant.

IV. THE PLAYWRIGHTS COMPARED

Aeschylus, writing at the moment of triumph saw the Olympians under Zeus developing into a great moral force. The Oresteia records the development of this force and invites the citizens of Athens to join in the triumphant procession toward increased prosperity protected by justice.

When Sophocles wrote his Electra, the dream of a well ordered world governed justly had already begun to fade. The Electra expresses his conviction that it is the nobility of character attained by the individual that makes life worthwhile, regardless of how or when defeat might come.
Euripides was only fifteen years younger than Sophocles, but that fifteen years brought Euripides closer to the civil war that was to destroy Athens from within and without. The differences in personality and temperament would account for the great difference in the way Athens received the two poets. Sophocles was more subtle; if he disapproved of the behavior of some of his fellow citizens, he expressed it in a way that did not antagonize. But Euripides, dedicated as he was to the evaluation of the common code in the light of eternal moral standards, expressed his protests against the worldliness and indifference of the common citizen to those things which he as a philosopher and poet held to be most high with a direct forcefulness that could end only in the complete alienation of all those he criticized. He penetrated the surface realities of his times; and when he discovered the inner realities, most of the actions and ideals of the men around him proved base. Socrates reached the same level of thought, and they killed him; perhaps it was because Euripides was a poet and, therefore, expressed himself in terms of symbols that he escaped Socrates' fate though he did not escape the jeers of Athens nor the disillusionment of the realization that Athens, after all, was not the embodiment of all those things most high.
Each of these three great playwrights discussed the legend of the house of Atreus from a different point of view. The legend appears in their plays reinterpreted in the light of their individual observations of life and the meaning of life. The significance of their statements of moral fact came out of the thought of their day, but the truth and the universality of their statements can be demonstrated even today.

V. SOME MODERN APPLICATIONS

There is no doubt that the modern world is more complex than the world of Aeschylus. But the world has in its possession a great legal structure that can provide order and justice for all. It concerns itself not with the murder of individuals as did the Court of the Areopagus but with the murder of nations. The purpose of this court, the United Nations, can be fully realized only when individual forces learn to relinquish some of their ancient rights in favor of new rights, even as the Furies of the Oresteia relinquished their rights in return for more beneficent ones.

Perhaps it is not shooting too far from the mark to suggest that the moral fiber of today's citizens might well do with some strengthening. Individuals are not often faced with the enormity of evil which faced Electra, but
one wonders if union members who support union leaders whose corruption is public fact would respond to a like situation with the courage displayed by Sophocles' Electra. Too often individuals tend to compartmentalize their religious thinking so that the everyday chicanery of the business world, the bargaining for favor with influential men in government, and the thousands of petty corruptions that offer themselves to eager takers are passed off with a shrug, and those who deplore the practice are accused of "sour grapes."

In 1951, thirteen American educational institutions awarded Dr. Ralph Bunche as many honorary degrees; they were obviously delighted at the opportunity to pay tribute to a Negro. It is with instances like this that the public deludes itself into thinking that it is tolerant. But the wholesale refusal to integrate southern schools demonstrates that for many Americans appearances, at least in matters of race, determine the success or failure of the issue rather than the principle of human dignity. The physician is honored in the community, as he should be, but the garbage collector is depreciated even though the performance of his duties is probably just as important to

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the general health, well being, and comfort as is the work of the physician. Too often the success of an individual is judged by his position or by his possessions; Euripides would urge a deeper look to find the inner reality and discover true nobility.

One need not look far in American life to find evidences of a materialistic philosophy. Advertising, which is dedicated to the task of making more and more people want more and more things, has become a multi-billion dollar business. Installment buying puts many products within the reach of the average individual, and large companies have provided expense accounts for some employees which more often than not provide a more luxurious standard of living than their everyday life affords. The pressure to make more in order to buy more spirals, and unless the individual exercises control the things tend to dominate his life. To say that American life ignores intellectual and artistic pursuits would, of course, be unfair, but perhaps it would not be unfair to question the validity of a standard of values that allows indifference toward such a precious privilege as the right to vote.

It is as a nation looks at itself critically and evaluates its progress in terms of eternal values that it remains healthy and vigorous. Tomorrow belongs to those who dare to stand courageously for justice, moral integrity, and a moral code based on universal truth.
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