

Aeschylus is primarily concerned with the nature of justice. In the trilogy *The Oresteia*, the Akhaians evolve from an older, more primitive autocratic form of justice, to a new concept of civil justice devised by Athena. He confronts the contrast between the old and new orders, the lives of the members of the House of Atreus, and the serious moral questions that Orestes' crime presents.

The case against Orestes is strong. The son admits to striking down his mother, in violation of the sacred tenant of kinship. "But I came back, my years of exile weathered-killed the one who bore me, I won't deny it, killed her in revenge." (*Eumenides* lines 476-478) This shows that Orestes was fully aware of the act he was committing, that he willfully committed it, and that he must suffer for it. The bond between mother and child was broken when Orestes murdered Clytaemnestra. Marriage, arguably, is a tenant of Zeus and the Olympians. In the old order of things, family is by blood only. A husband and wife have no blood relation, yet the son is of the same blood as his parents. The Furies right to vengeance cannot be dismissed.

Clytaemnestra is one who upheld the laws of the Furies. Agamemnon's murder of Iphigenia at Aulis was pure outrage. "Yes he had the heart to sacrifice his daughter, to bless the war..." (*Agamemnon* lines 222-223) Agamemnon killed his own blood relation in order to sail for Troy. This too, is a terrible crime, seemingly of the same weight as Orestes' act. Clytaemnestra believed she was justified in avenging her daughter, because her husband violated a sacred tenant of the old gods. "Here is Agamemnon, my husband made a corpse by this right hand-a masterpiece of justice. Done is done." (*Agamemnon* lines 1429-1431) This shows a clear morality behind Clytaemnestra's motives. She appears to have justification for her actions. The curse on the House of Atreus is fulfilled. In the last lines of *Agamemnon* the chorus foreshadows Orestes' return. Clytaemnestra responds by saying to her new husband, "We will set the house in order once for all." (*Agamemnon* lines 1708) The chorus's purpose for suggesting Orestes's return is to show that the house is not yet cleansed of the curse..

Like his mother, Orestes possesses what he believes to be a just motive for revenge. Unlike his mother, however, Orestes has reservations about killing. He does not wish to strike down his mother, but realises that he must. The defense of Orestes is rooted in the fact that Apollo ordered him to do so. Orestes trusts Apollo's guidance at his trial. "Apollo will never fail me, no, his tremendous power, his oracle charges me to see this trial through." (*Libation Bearers* lines 273-275) Orestes believes that he is justified in avenging his god-honoured father, who was so brutally murdered by his mother. This cycle of blood in the House of Atreus appears as if it will continue forever.

This cycle of violence leads the gods to search for a different solution. If the society of Greece is to progress to a higher civilisation, some other way must be found to resolve the conflict of moral questions. The ancient idea of vengeance doesn't properly apply here because both Clytaemnestra and Orestes acted in support of legitimate definitions of justice. The ancient gods support Clytaemnestra and her actions, while Zeus, by means of Apollo, supports Orestes. The clash between deities sets the stage for the emergence of a new form of justice-civil justice. The ancient law of retaliation, which states that blood must be paid for with more blood, is enforced by the Furies. This task was given to them by Destiny at the dawn of time. "...you'll give me blood for blood, you must!... Wither you alive, drag you down and there you pay, agony for mother-killing agony!" (*Eumenides* lines 262, 265) Their concept of justice is one where the law of retaliation is applied absolutely. They have no notion of compassion or understanding. They uphold the belief that regardless of circumstances, Orestes must be made to pay for his crime of matricide. The Furies represent something older and more sacred which Apollo and Zeus do not respect.

Athena's establishment of the court to try manslaughter is significant, because it provides a place for the citizens to decide about what moral elements will be

upheld in the Polis. The Eumenides is the battleground for the two competing moralities. The Furies invoke their rights as defenders of blood, and it is up to Orestes and Apollo to convince the jury that the son was just in his actions. The jury is expected to believe that Apollo's oracle is true—that Zeus himself ordained the act. The Chorus asks the question, "Can a son spill his mother's blood on the ground, then settle into his father's halls in Argos?" (Eumenides lines 661-662) A good answer to this question might have been to hypothetically reverse the question on Clytaemnestra—How quickly she settled into life after she cut down her lord. But, Apollo opts for the weaker, more arbitrary defense. His speech about how the father is the only true parent makes little sense. Even the all-male jury would take some offense to this argument.

Athena, however, initiates the ideal that the law be concerned not only with the forms of justice, as the Furies are passionate about, but with justice itself. The jurors must ask themselves whether Orestes was justified in committing matricide. Circumstances, motives and consequences must be taken into account at trial. Do they consider marriage as sacred as the law of kin? Is there a sacred bond between mother and son? Or only between father and son? Does Zeus's will override the ancient laws of the Furies? These are complicated moral questions that Athena asks the mortal jury to grapple with. Even Athena believes the issue too important for her to judge solely. "...by all rights not even I should decide a case of murder—murder whets passions." (Eumenides lines 486-487) She realises that if she were to mediate, the curse will never end. Perhaps she is suggesting that mortals must decide when the gods disagree. This is an important development because it shows the journey from the retributive justice in Agamemnon to the deliberative justice of Athena's tribunal.

The ultimate decision is ambiguous. The vote is tied for a reason—neither side puts forth a well argued analysis of Orestes' case. There is justice on both sides, and the jury realises this. Orestes is acquitted by Athena on arbitrary terms. She casts her vote for Orestes because she supports her father's Order, believing that there is a need for the establishment of a higher reasoning. One could also argue that she voted for acquittal because she is the god of war. She supported Agamemnon, the General, throughout the Trojan war and thus wished to favour his memory. She knows little of women, despite being female herself. Having settled the trial, Athena must also settle the anger of the Furies. She tactfully invites them to join Zeus's Order—something that is necessary if peace is to be made between the generations of immortals. She does not completely refute them, nor deny them their place in the world. "I will bear with your anger. You are older. The years have taught you more than I can know. But Zeus, I think, gave me some insight, too, that has its merits." (Eumenides lines 855-859) She asks the Furies to accept her offer of making their home Athens, and to endure as the upholders of the sacred bond of marriage. They accept her offer because it is wise and just. It transforms the Furies from destructive forces to beneficial ones.

This resolution ends the curse on the House of Atreus, as well as many of the differences between the old and new gods. Orestes is free to claim his city and the Furies have been given a place in Zeus' Order. The latter seems to be the emphasis of the trilogy because of the arbitrary decision on Orestes' case. The best possible justice has been realised in the decision. The new Apollonian concept of justice represents a higher level of understanding and civilisation. It may be argued that Clytaemnestra's death was left unavenged; that justice escaped her. Orestes' right to avenge the dishonorable death of his father was upheld by the court. The tribunal deemed Clytaemnestra's actions wrong and Orestes' just. With the establishment of Athena's judicial system, there is now a method to prosecute people like Clytaemnestra, such that the ancient blood-lust of vengeance doesn't take rule over issues of right and wrong.

