History Today and Channel 4's guide to Aeschylus' tragedy

Today's ORESTEIA

THE STORY OF ORESTES

Channel 4 is presenting three programmes concerned with **The Oresteia.**

On Tuesday October 4th, at 6.30pm, there will be a special edition of the regular Channel 4 series **Today's History.** This will examine the issues of justice and vengeance which lie at the heart of **The Oresteia,** and will consider their continuing resonance throughout history.

On Saturday October 8th, at 8pm, Channel 4 presents a documentary film which shows the visit of the National Theatre Company to the ancient theatre of Epidaurus to perform their version of **The Oresteia.**

On Sunday October 9th, at 7.15pm, Channel 4 brings to the screen the full length version of the National Theatre's production of Aeschylus' trilogy, The Oresteia.

The text of the National Theatre's **Oresteia, The Oresteia.** The trilogy by Aeschylus in a version by Tony Harrison is published by Rex Collings. It is available at bookshops or directly from the National Theatre Bookshop, National Theatre, Upper Grand, London SE1.
Please enclose a cheque/postal order for £4 (inc. p&p).

Summary of The Oresteia

Agamemnon

The Watchman at king Agamemnon's palace in Argos sees the beacon announcing Troy's fall. The Chorus of Old Men present to the audience the background to the story.

Preceded by a Herald, Agamemnon arrives home after his 10-years' absence at the Trojan Wars. Queen Clytemnestra welcomes him and they enter the palace. Cassandra, his captive mistress, accurately foresees his murder there, and her own, but also enters the palace.

Clytemnestra reappears; and her lover, Aegisthus, answers the reproaches of the Chorus with threats.

Libation Bearers (Choephori)

Orestes; Agamemnon's son, returns from exile with his friend, Pylades, and dedicates a lock of his hair on his father's tomb. His sister Electra and the Chorus of Trojan Women come to offer libations at the tomb. Brother and sister, reunited, sweat to avenge their father's death, as directed by Apollo. Orestes and Pylades, disguised as strangers, enter Agamemnon's palace. Orestes first kills Aegisthus, and then Clytemnestra. Threated by the Furies, he goes to seek Apollo's help.

Furies (Eumenides)

Orestes takes refuge at Apollo's shrine. Apollo promises protection and sends him to seek justice from Athens. The Ghost of Clytemnestra rouses the Chorus of Furies to bring her murderer to justice.

At Athena's temple in Athens the goddess hears the pleas of both sides. The Chorus of Furies are enraged by the judgement. They threaten to blight the land; so Athena promises them a permanent dwelling and honour.

The Cast

The trilogy by Aeschylus in an English version by Tony Harrison.

Part I	**Agamemnon**
Part II	**Libation Bearers**
Part III	**Furies**

The Chorus

Sean Baker	also Priestess
David Bamber	
James Carter	also Agamemnon
Timothy Davies	also Pylades
Peter Dawson	
Philip Donaghy	also Clytemnestra
Roger Gartland	also Electra
James Hayes	also Nurse
Greg Hicks	also Orestes
Kenny Ireland	also Apollo
Alfred Lynch	also Aegisthus
John Normington	also Cassandra
Tony Robinson	also Servant
David Roper	also Watchman
Barrie Rutter	also Herald
Michael Thomas	also Athena

Designer	Jocelyn Herbert
Music	Harrison Birtwistle
Lighting	John Bury
Movement	Stuart Hopps

Directed and produced by Peter Hall.

Today's Orestia is edited by **Juliet Gardiner,** Editor of History Today.

HISTORY TODAY

MICHAEL KUSTOW

The Scream Behind the Mask

NOBBY CLARK

The Furies hound Orestes

You only have to examine the extraordinary press reviews of the National Theatre's production of Aeschylus' **The Oresteia** to see why Channel Four decided to take the bold – some would say foolhardy – step of bringing nearly four hours of Peter Hall's production, with its masked male actors, verse text, and violent blood-feud plot, to the screen. The **Times Literary Supplement** critic hailed it as 'the most important theatrical event for many years, and the best account of any Greek play that I have seen.' 'Irresistibly rewarding,' said **The Financial Times**; 'no one with the slightest interest in the serious theatre can afford to miss it.' 'Again and again one is startled and enthralled,' said the often phlegmatic **Daily Telegraph**. Yet so strange and unfamiliar were the language, the masks and the assumptions of Aeschylus' world that it took a little while for theatregoers to enter into the mood of the play, and like the Royal Shakespeare Company's **Nicholas Nickleby**, it had a gradual take-off.

But news of the production's hypnotic power and strange splendour soon spread by word of mouth, and by the time it ended its run at the Olivier Theatre in April 1982, the National Theatre's **Oresteia** had played sixty-five packed performances to close on 80,000 people. In June 1982, the company took it to the 15,000-seat amphitheatre at Epidaurus, the first British troupe to play a Greek tragedy in English at this famous festival of ancient Greek drama. And the production has been invited to Los Angeles in summer 1984 to perform at the Olympic Games arts festival.

What is there in this play, first performed in 458 BC, which makes it still speak so urgently to us today, and which has prompted Channel Four to devote no less than three programmes in one week to it – the performance itself, a documentary about the production's visit to Greece, and a special edition of **Today's History** exploring its contemporary relevance? And what is there about this particular production of Aeschylus' three-part tragedy that can grip an audience with such force, draw their emotions and provoke their thoughts so deeply, that against all odds – actors concealing their faces behind immobile carved masks, compressed language full of clashing consonants and resounding alliterations – it releases an intensity and a scale of drama which is rare on the small screen?

The play, as the scholar Oliver Taplin explains in the following article, deals with some of the most profound and enduring concerns of mankind. It shows us three stages of a blood-feud. Clytemnestra kills her husband Agamemnon, in revenge for his murder of their daughter; Orestes kills his mother Clytemnestra; Apollo and the Furies quarrel over the fate of Orestes. The causes of these crimes and retributions reach way back into the past. What makes this violent story live for us now is that, through the tangle of a family tragedy, Aeschylus is telling the history and legend of his own society, and laying bare the structure and foundations of any society. As James Fenton, **Sunday Times** drama critic, writes, in words that apply to so many intractable dilemmas of the world today, 'It becomes plain that, if a radical break is not made with the past, then the chain of curse and revenge will never be broken .... By the end of it, the issue to be resolved is the future of Athens: can the State live in prosperity and peace, or must it forever be plagued with ancient squabbles?'

Look round the world today at such 'squabbles', whether between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland, Moslems and Christians in Lebanon, Arabs and Israelis, Armenians and Turks ... the list could swell right up to the ultimate global settling of accounts that haunts our nightmares. Perhaps these rigid, stiff-faced figures with their masks and brass-beaten language are not so alien to our world of vendettas, terrorists, clan warfare and inter-tribal slaughter.

But it is not merely in the public arena that **The Oresteia** can still reach us. By linking family feuds with the violence of war, city and state, Aeschylus reminds us of the tentacles of emotion and instinct that come to birth in the family and radiate outwards into public actions. Long before Freud, family therapy or feminism, Aeschylus traced the fierce energies of love and hate, possession and jealousy, the deep drives which he expressed in the language of his time as the Furies. Their incorporation into a changed way of living together is the climax of the three plays, a way of acknowledging and making a place for the unruly powers within us, both psychological and political.

These are two of the reasons, alongside its powerful plot, vivid temperament, magnificent language and suspense, why Aeschylus' play still commands our attention. But what is it about the National Theatre production which brings it so alive, and won it such rare praise?

Like all the best productions of our National Theatre **The Oresteia** serves a classic text, breathes new life into it, restores it to the fullest meaning it can have for us now. It is part of the duty of a national theatre to be a kind of living museum, an animated library, of the great works of national and world drama, so that we have a continuity with the past that can help us understand the present and hold a perspective on the future. When our National Theatre deals with a theatrical masterpiece in another language, there is an opportunity for a fresh translation to be made, fashioned for the times and for the capacities and skills of the theatre company now. Tony Harrison, the poet whose translations of Molière's **Misanthrope** (with Alec McCowen) and Racine's **Phaedre** (with Diana Rigg) have already delighted theatregoers at the National, has provided just such a text, and his translation is the first great strength of this production of **The Oresteia**.

'This text is written to be performed, a rhythmic libretto for masks, music, and an all male company,' writes Harrison at the start of his version (published by Rex Collings at £3.50). To achieve this density and classical weight on which Aeschylus' contemporaries remarked, Tony Harrison went back to the most ancient roots of English verse, the four-beat line and alliteration of Anglo-Saxon poetry. He also took from

Anglo-Saxon the coining of portmanteau words, multiple nouns which pack together the meanings of two nouns to produce a third. So you'll find words like **bloodclan, doomgroom, bloodgrudge** and lines with a packed, muscular music like this:

Base battle-bronze battered gets
blackened and mottled
so a man's baseness gets clotted
with bloodguilt.

The pulse of such verse, varied and compounded with syncopations, becomes a powerful means of communication. When you hear it first, your ear may be bewildered by its richness (although you'll probably be made at home by its accents of Harrison's native Yorkshire). But allow the beat and pulse of the words to reach you, let the richness of gutturals and labials play through your ears, feel the waves of rhythm as you would jazz or African music, and you will reap a rich reward. Every now and then Tony Harrison's version overleaps time; it makes a two-thousand-year-old text as urgent as a news bulletin.

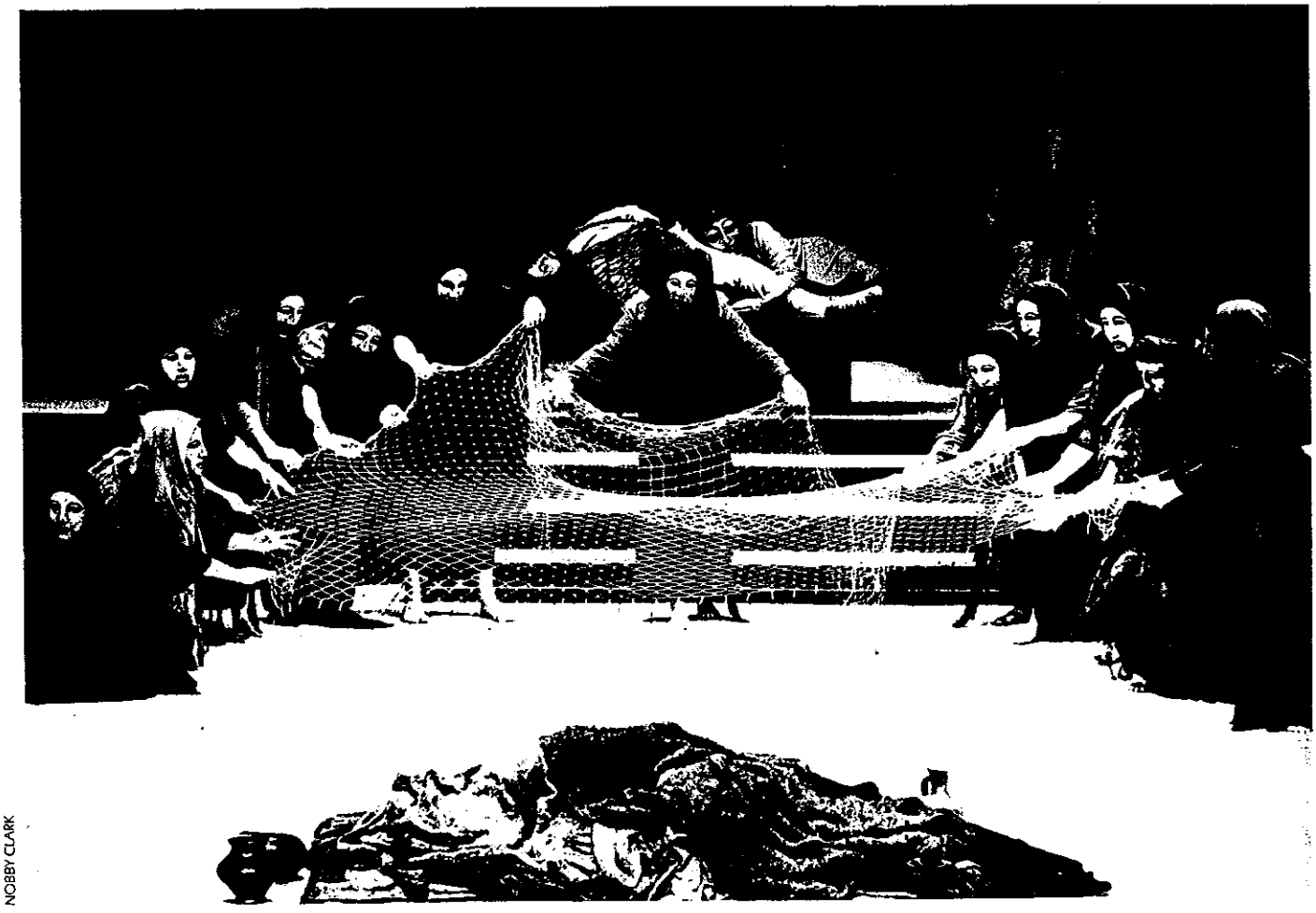
Give to war your men's fleshgold
and what are your returns?
kilos of cold clinkers packed
in army-issue urns

wives mothers sisters each one scans
with the dogtags on the amphorae
which grey ashes are my man's?

Closely allied to Harrison's text is the production's second great resource, Harrison Birtwistle's music. A fellow-Yorkshireman, Birtwistle wraps Harrison's words in a continuum of sound, produced by two antiphonal groups on either side of the stage: a large percussion group that paces the chorus, making a subterranean beat on which the words can slalom: and facing them, an instrumental quartet of three clarinets and a harp, cutting across the percussion to stress a climax, pin down an encounter, or literally – as in the piercing clarinet scream that heralds the appearance of the Furies – make you believe in something unearthly. Birtwistle, one of Britain's leading composers and Music Director of the National Theatre, coached the chorus himself, harnessing them to a metronomical exactitude that then released personal variations within the musical rules. His music, like Harrison's text, evolved with the workshop rehearsals.

The third, and to a television viewer perhaps the most unusual strength of this **Oresteia**, is its use of masks. The play is performed by fifteen men wearing a variety of masks, designed by Jocelyn Herbert with a strong simplicity that is the result of the same exploratory process that produced the text and the music. Viewers who are apprehensive at the prospect of several hours in the company of carved faces fixed in permanent expressions, with gaping holes for eyes and mouth, may well be astonished, not just at the variety of expression caught by the cameras as they cut rhythmically from one set of features to the next, but also by the intensity of the masks' impersonal power. Where most television acting domesticates personality and makes you intimate with the performer, these masked characters stand at a distance from the viewer, don't let us into their secrets. And yet the result is every bit as moving, though in quite a different way, from a tear-shaken Actors Studio performance of lifelike naturalism. It would be hard, for example, not to be moved deeply by the scene in which Orestes and Electra recognise each

Aegisthus and Clytemnestra lie dead as the chorus of Trojan women spread out the net in which Agamemnon had been trapped and killed.



NOBBY CLARK

other as brother and sister, in the second play of the trilogy; difficult not to read tremendous emotion on the faces of the chorus when they are told the Trojan War is over, even though their masks remain immobile.

Yet there is something more than emotion here. At the same time as we are drawn into the destinies of these characters, we are also forced, by the unchanging features of the masks, to stand back. And this double vision gives us the true classical perspective, in which the specific and the universal, the particular and the timeless, the close-up and the long-shot, are combined. It is above all because of the masks, and the extreme demands they make on actors in containing and shaping their emotions, that this story of murder, adultery, revenge and expiation can reverberate for us across the centuries.

It is this, to put it very bluntly, that marks the difference between The Oresteia and Dallas, a contemporary family saga which deals with apparently similar emotions.

But the equality of feeling and expression is a world apart. 'These actors do not feel, they tell,' says Peter Hall, who took his actors through the often alarming rehearsals, in which they faced the loss of perhaps their most precious resource: their face. 'If they emote in a mask, they shake. Yet they have to experience it, to tell it.'

It is often said today that art can no longer deal with the worst excesses of human behaviour which the twentieth century has revealed. 'After Auschwitz, no poetry,' a German critic wrote after the war. Perhaps The Oresteia, in its form as much as its content, has something to say about that too; for it deals with the kind of unchecked killing and catastrophe with which we have become all too familiar. Yet somehow it contains them, without reducing or dulling or sensationalising them. This must be because of its form, its classical constraints, of which Peter Hall and Tony Harrison, the architects of this production's words and images, are fully aware. Harrison, writing to Peter Hall after a run-through in September 1981, memorably summed it up:

> Regular rhythm, form in poetry, is like the mask; it enables you to go beyond the scream as a reaction to events that in the normal course of life would make you do just that. Our century is very much in need of it. All you have to do is part the lines or remove the mask and you have the scream right there, behind the door of the metal mask of the palace. I think Aeschylus is far bolder than any of us, and our brand of historical provincialism is that we think we are so much more permissively outspoken. The true direction of the mask is through areas of fire and blood we can scarcely bear. The mask keeps its eyes wide open when the axeblade falls, when the babies burn, when the city comes crashing into ash, when the bombs drop, when the world ends.'

The Oresteia may seem strange to you at first, but open yourself to its incantations, and you will find that poetry, music, and extreme action cohere within the masks to give you a memorable and powerful experience, one that meets the needs of our harsh times just as it carried Aeshylus' fierce story through to its precarious resolution in the birth of democracy.

Michael Kustow, Commissioning Editor Arts at Channel 4, was formerly Associate Director at the National Theatre of Great Britain.

Cassandra prophesies to the old men of Argos.

NOBBY CLARK

OLIVER TAPLIN

Why Greek Tragedy?

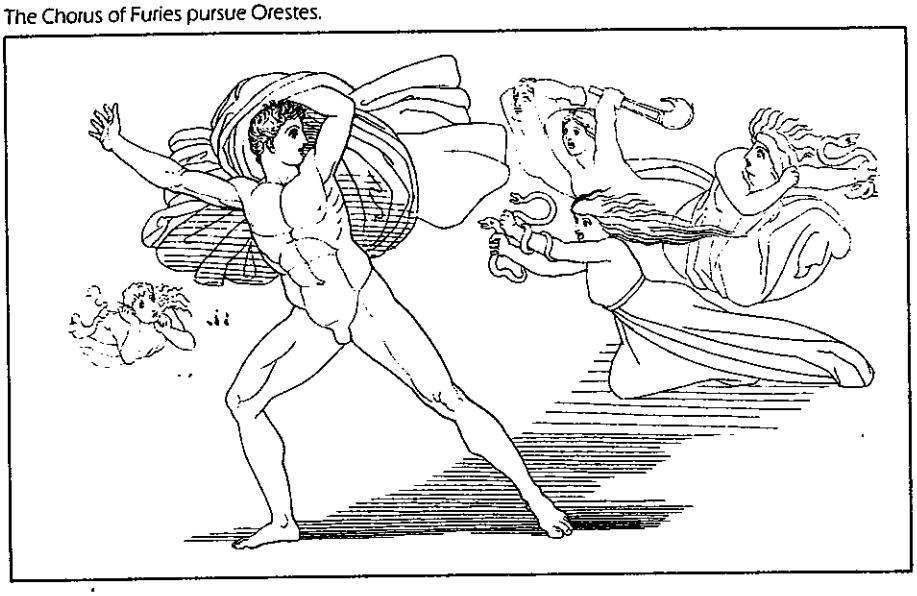
The Greeks invented tragedy in order to gain experiences which could not be had in any other way. They would gather in their thousands for whole days to watch and dwell on dramas of conflict and suffering that unfolded before their eyes. They were captivated by the poetry, spectacle and music. And once captivated they were moved, excited and disturbed, their thoughts provoked by the fortunes and misfortunes of others – not ordinary people like themselves, but kings and queens from the distant mythical past who looked and spoke and moved in a stranger, stronger style. So they faced violence and horrors, dreadful dilemmas, their deepest anxieties. And at the end of the day they went home, their own world still intact.

To judge by the experience of the great majority of the tens of thousands who went to see the National Theatre's production of The Oresteia in London in 1981 and 1982, Greek tragedy still has that power to grip and excite and disturb. This has something to do with the way that in the finest Greek tragedies the particular and the general – the unique and the constant – intersect, or interact. The people and events of the plot are solid and particular enough to capture attention, yet there is a persistent tendency towards the universal, the timeless. It is here that the chorus makes a large contribution, which is such a special feature of Greek tragedy, since their reflections and ideas are not tied down closely to the specific time and place of the play.

Thus in The Oresteia the gods, for example, are obviously important. But the emphasis is not so much on individual doctrines or cults as on the great questions of the light and dark sides of religion, and on the uneasy coexistence of free will and divine will. How far can we transfer guilt and responsibility for our actions onto 'the gods' or 'society' or 'fate'? The Oresteia is also profoundly political. Yet it is not concerned with the details of Athenian affairs in the mid-fifth century BC, but with the big issues of the relation of family and state, of freedom and the law, of the fundamentals of a just society. Again, the plot is about a particular set of family relations. Yet they capture our emotions and thoughts by their universality – the conflicts of marriage and parenthood, bed and blood, and of the potency of woman in a male-dominated world.

For the Greeks the drama of tragedy revealed experiences which could not be had in any other way. The National Theatre Oresteia shows that it can still do the same for us.

The Chorus of Furies pursue Orestes.



Clytemnestra stands over the slain body of Agamemnon as the chorus mourns.
Both engravings from **The Tragedies of Aeschylus** by John Flaxman, R.A.

What was the Oresteia?

IT was in about 500BC in Athens that what we would recognise as drama and theatre first took shape. There somehow came together two apparently diverse art-forms: scenes impersonated by actors were interwoven with poems performed by a group, the chorus. The combination produced some of the greatest tragedies ever made.

The new art form developed with incredible vigour for about 100 years (and then stagnated for the next 800). It produced three great 'world-class' dramatists: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. Aeschylus, a generation older than the other two, was born about 525 BC. It is likely that he was an active participant in the two most important historical events of his time, the defeat of the Persian invasions of Greece in 490 and 480 – turning points in the history of Europe. But clearly his main activity was composing tragedies – making the words and music, directing the acting and dance, even acting himself. In a career of over 40 years he composed some 66 tragedies, before his death in 456 BC.

Aeschylus produced the three closely connected plays that make up The Oresteia on a single day in the spring of 458 during the annual festival of the god Dionysus. They were performed by daylight in the huge open-air auditorium on the slope beneath the Acropolis at Athens. Gathered there was an audience of many thousands, including quite possibly over half of all the adult male citizens of the entire state of Attica.

The plot of The Oresteia is set in the distant past. Some 700 years earlier there had indeed been a great and prosperous civilisation in Greece – we know it as the Mycenaean Age – which had been followed by a dark age before the re-emergence of 'classical' Greece. But **The Oresteia** is not an historical reconstruction, nor does it follow any fixed account of real events. Within the outlines of traditional myth, Aeschylus freely shaped his dramatic material.

By and large the three plays tell their own story. It helps to have met the most important names in advance; but it is more important to have some idea of what to listen out for and what to look out for. It is the chief purpose of the following articles to supply a sort of map of the rich landscape which will be revealed by watching the National Theatre production of **The Oresteia**. This noting of landmarks is, however, a matter of themes and issues rather than of myth or history. For **The Oresteia** the battle of male and female is far more important than any single historical battle.

Twentieth-century productions of The Oresteia

The Greek National Theatre's production of **The Orestia** in Athens in 1932 with Katina Paxinou

F.C. Benson's production at the Coronet, Notting Hill, London, in 1905.

The performance directed in Paris by Jean Louis Barrault in 1955. The music for this production was by Pierre Boulez.
Peter Stein's production of **The Oresteia** in Berlin in 1980. Clytemnestra (played by Edith Clever) stands over mutilated bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra.
Inset: The Oresteia by Minos Volankis at the Old Vic, London in 1962. Ronald Lewis plays Orestes and Yvonne Mitchell is Electra in The Choephori.

OLIVER TAPLIN

Names in The Oresteia

Agamemnon and **Menelaus** were brothers, the two sons of **Atreus**, and they ruled at **Argos** in Greece. They married two sisters, **Clytemnestra** and **Helen**, both femmes fatales.

Paris was a son of **Priam** the king of Troy, a city in the East across the Aegean Sea (now in N.W. Turkey). On a visit to Greece Paris seduced Helen, the wife of his host Menelaus, and took her home. To punish this the two sons of Atreus raised a great army and beseiged Troy for ten years before breaking in and sacking the city. The first play of The Oresteia, Agamemnon begins during that very night, long-awaited, on which Agamemnon and the Greeks burn Troy.

A long and bloody war all for one woman. How good an achievement is that for Agamemnon? And that is not all that might be held against him. When he set off for Troy ten years before, he killed his own daughter **Iphigenia** as a sacrifice to get a favourable wind. We soon hear about that from the chorus of old men of Argos. Clytemnestra, the mother, waits at home for revenge. Adding insult to injury, it seems, Agamemnon brings home **Cassandra**, a daughter of Priam, as his loot from Troy. She is a prophetess who can see past and future, and she makes us aware of another skeleton in the cupboard of the royal palace at Argos. A generation before, Atreus' wife had been seduced by her husband's brother **Thyestes**. In revenge Atreus killed Thyestes' children and served them to their father to eat. When he realised this Thyestes put his curse on the whole family. In her vision Cassandra sees **Curses** (or Furies) sitting on the palace – another reason why Agamemnon must die.

Only one of Thyestes' children escaped, **Aegisthus**. He is now a grown man, and has become the lover of Clytemnestra. He too waits at Argos for revenge on Agamemnon.

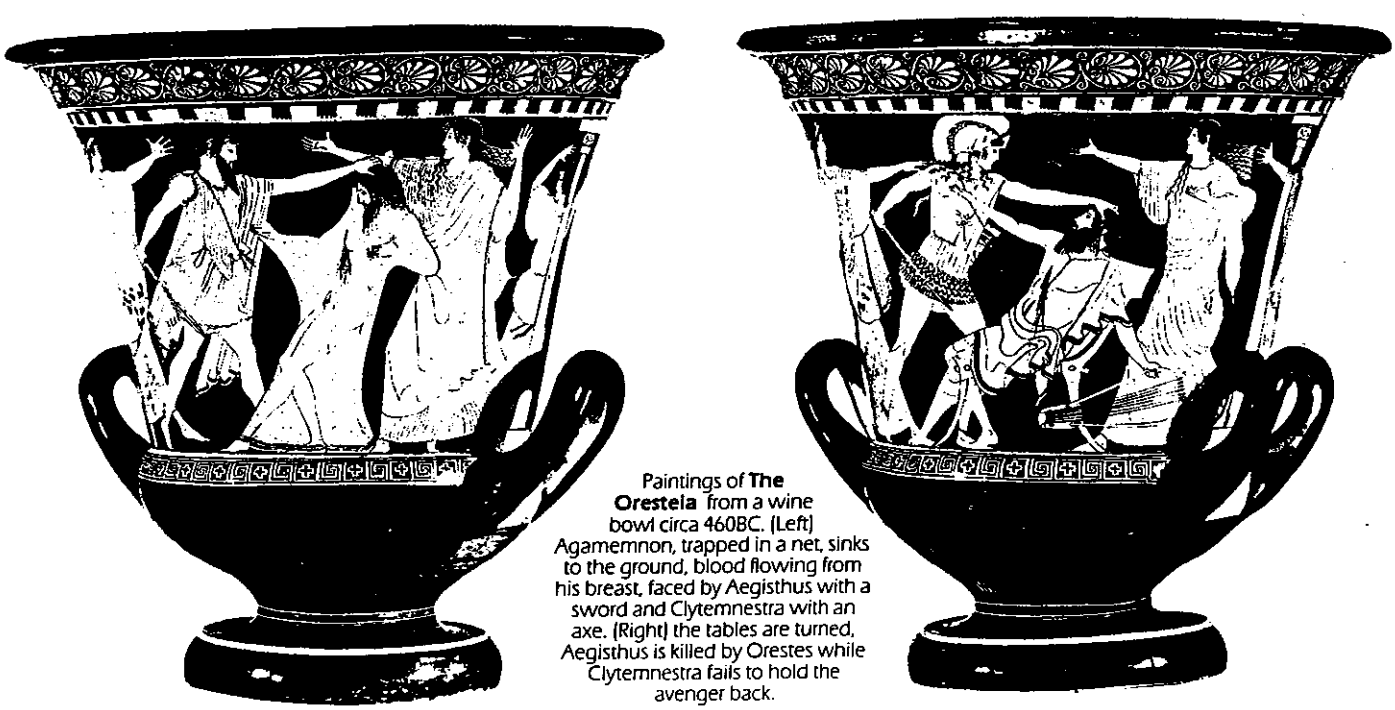
At the time of Agamemnon the other two children of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon (besides the eldest, Iphigenia) are still young. They are a girl, **Electra**, and a boy, **Orestes**, who has been sent away to stay with the king of Phocis, a part of Greece (near Delphi) several days' journey from Argos. At the end of the first play the old men of the chorus look forward to Orestes' return as a man to deal with Aegisthus. The doer must suffer, 'killers get killed'.

The second play of The Oresteia begins with that return of Orestes some years later, along with his friend **Pylades**, prince of Phocis. The first place they visit is the tomb of Orestes' murdered father. The play is called in Greek Choephori which means 'women carrying libations', since the chorus is made up of slave women (from Troy in the National Theatre version) who come with Electra to pour offerings (libations) at Agamemnon's tomb.

There are no more new names needed to appreciate Choephori until near the end, and even then these new characters are seen only by Orestes and no one else: they are the **Furies** or **Curses** or **Erinyes** or **Eumenides** – they have no proper name. In the third play of the trilogy, Eumenides, these weird gods or demons will become visible to everyone since they are the chorus. The Furies are summoned by Clytemnestra's dying curses to persecute Orestes, to drive him to madness and destruction. They are daughters of night, and they live in the darkness beneath the earth.

The Furies are not like the familiar Greek gods, the 'family' who live an eternal life of sunbathed ease on **Mount Olympus**, presided over by **Zeus**. While these Olympians were the most important supernatural powers for the Greeks, they also revered other darker, older, non-Olympian gods, including the Furies. It would be wrong to assume that the dark old gods are evil – they have the power to bless as well as blight – or that the young Olympians are necessarily beneficent – they can harm mankind no less than help, and in ways that are difficult to understand.

Two of the Olympian gods, children of Zeus, appear on stage in Eumenides; and they are seen at two



Paintings of **The Oresteia** from a wine bowl circa 460BC. (Left) Agamemnon, trapped in a net, sinks to the ground, blood flowing from his breast, faced by Aegisthus with a sword and Clytemnestra with an axe. (Right) the tables are turned, Aegisthus is killed by Orestes while Clytemnestra fails to hold the avenger back.

of their special 'homes' among men. The play begins at **Delphi**, the shrine of **Apollo**, where Orestes has taken refuge after fleeing from Argos. Apollo supports and protects Orestes, but he has not the power to dismiss or destroy the 'mother's blood-grudges', the Furies. Orestes has to flee again, and the scene changes to **Athens**, the favourite city of **Athena**, daughter of Zeus without a mother.

Athens was, of course, Aeschylus' own city, the city where drama first took shape. The Oresteia was created for the citizens of Athens in 458 BC. It is the ancestors of the audience, the citizens of the far-off mythical past, whom Athena brings into The Oresteia as arbitrators to decide the fate of Orestes. On a hill right by the Acropolis, the **Areopagus**, she founds the first court ever to try a charge of murder. So the trial is set up – Apollo v. the Furies, marriage v. motherhood, male v. female, bed-bond v. blood-bond – with the prototype citizens of Athens as jury. The trilogy ends not with Orestes or the royal house at Argos, but with the city of Athens and its relationship with the powers of the dark and fearful, the female and fertile. And behind and above the conflict remains Zeus. As Athena puts it

> The Zeus of debates and assemblies presided
> turning a battle to a debate about blessings...

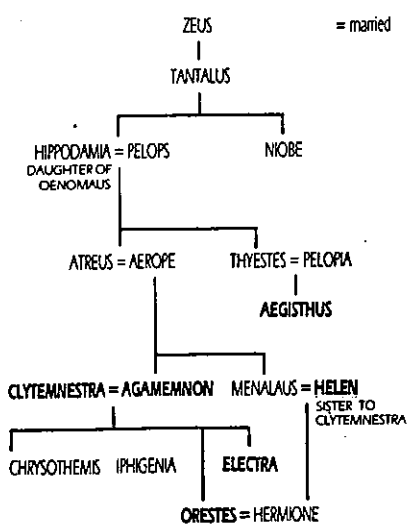
NOBBY CLARK

Chorus of the old Men of Argos.

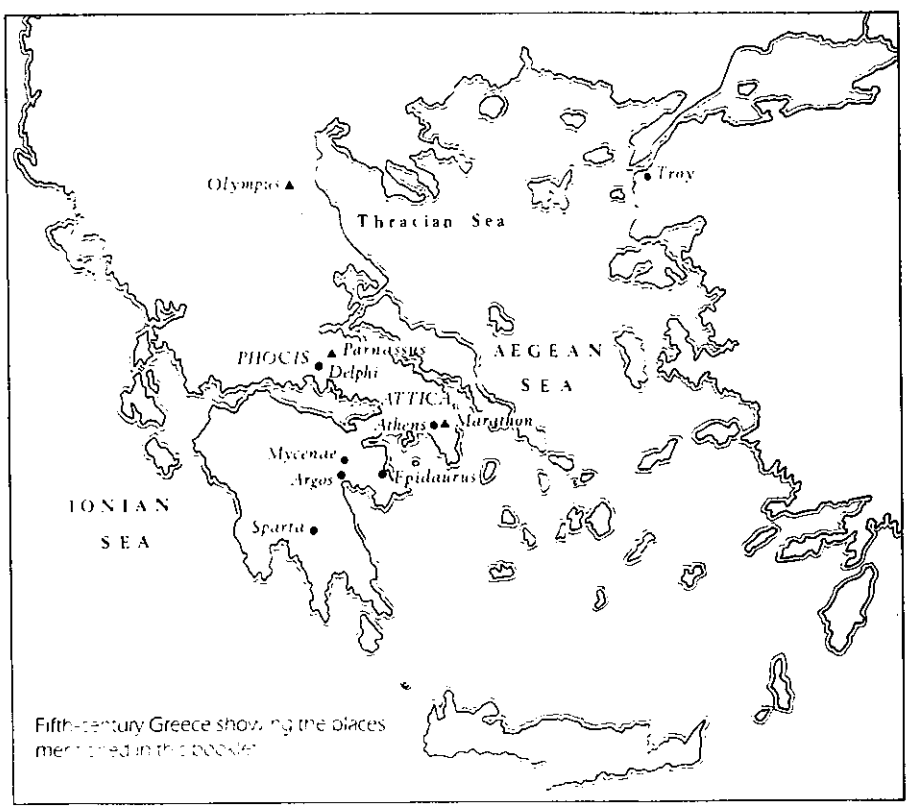
NOBBY CLARK

The Chorus of Trojan women lament at the tomb of Agamemnon.

The House of Atreus



The gods of Greece were very different from the remote and exalted deities of monotheistic religions. In a sense, they were within human reach. We cannot, in the accompanying family tree, draw a hard-and-fast line between mythical beings and real people. There may have been a real noble house of Pelops and Atreus, but it is not possible to sift historical fact from myth.



Fifth-century Greece showing the places mentioned in this booklet

OLIVER TAPLIN

Landmarks in The Oresteia

What to look out for? What to listen out for? There follow some suggestions, a catalogue of topics, aspects, themes, problems – landmarks in the landscape of The Oresteia.

Actors In the original Oresteia all the main roles were taken by three male actors who changed their masks and costumes for each part. Aeschylus himself was probably one of them. They were in effect professionals; the chorus, however, consisted of twelve chosen citizens who took some weeks away from their usual pursuits for rehearsals. They had to be good at singing and movement, activities which played more part in Greek life than ours. We are never reminded during The Oresteia that these are only actors in a play: instead our concentration and sympathy is drawn, spell-bound, into the world of the play. The world of the play never explicitly recognises the existence of the audience.

Audience More than ten thousand, possibly as many as thirty thousand, Athenians gathered to watch The Oresteia in 458 BC. It is uncertain whether there were women present – probably there were some but not many. The intensity of the experience of Greek tragedy has much to do with the size and fellow-feeling of the audience. They share the play in such a way as to intensify rather than dilute its emotional and thought-provoking power.

Blood Much blood has been spilt in the royal house at Argos. More is spilt at Troy, and on the way there. Blood once spilt cannot be unspilt: instead it demands more. Parent and child share what Tony Harrison's translation calls a 'blood-bond' (as opposed to the 'bed-bond' of marriage). To shed family blood is doubly dangerous; and it is 'blood-clan' above all that attracts the vengeance ('blood-right') and attention of the Furies. In the last words of Choephori the chorus asks:

> When will the blood-grudge be weaned off blood,
> when will it sleep,
> the fiend?

Chorus It is often said that the chorus is the feature of Greek tragedy which we find most difficult to adjust to. Of course it is not realistic to have a group of twelve indistinguishable people hanging about all the time, and interrupting momentous events with their poetic odes. Yet without the chorus The Oresteia would be impoverished beyond recognition. For a start, nearly all the great motifs are first raised by the chorus of Agamemnon.

Like us, the audience, the chorus is caught up in the events, but can do little to influence them. Instead they express their emotions and thoughts, and they attempt to interpret the difficult problems which they witness, and to see them in a more universal and timeless way. The chorus of Eumenides, the Furies, are, of course, an exception to these generalisations. They are as central and involved as any of the individual named characters. This seems to have been an inspired experiment by Aeschylus.

City When the great Greek philosopher Aristotle said that 'man is a political animal', he meant that we live in cities or communities. The ancient Greeks seldom saw themselves as a nation. They shared a language, but were split up into a large number of independent, often warring, states. Each state (polis) usually consisted of a central city with surrounding countryside and villages. One of the largest was Athens, the city of Attica. Probably no polis was larger in area or population than an English county. Such a small and tight unit of community inevitably raised difficult questions about the relation of individual and family and extended family (blood-clan) with the polis.

Curse Do we regard curses as merely primitive superstition? Even a parent's dying words? Thyestes cursed the family of Atreus even as he vomited the meat of his own children. The whole house is under a curse. This does not mean that its members go wrong automatically, like faulty robots, but they find themselves faced with difficult choices, and choosing actions which put them in the wrong.

Door The whole of Agamemnon and the second half of Choephori are set before the palace at Argos. The only way in and out is through the great central doorway. This is the threshold of the palace, the special territory of Clytemnestra. She controls this terrain, and it is at that threshold that she displays in triumph the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra. It is by trickery that Orestes is later able to get inside the door, and thus to achieve his revenge and in his turn to display two corpses. No wonder that Cassandra sees the door as the gates of Hades, 'the doorway to death'.

Family The family (or clan) in ancient Greece was more extended than ours, and it was there, among kin, that the strongest bonds and conflicts grew up. Nearly all Greek tragedies are acted out in families since that is the setting of most of our strongest experiences, positive and negative. But as well as the problems within the family, there are also problems of the relation of family and city. Was it right to involve a whole community in war for one unfaithful wife, Helen, the 'war whore'? Or to impose the usurper Aegisthus on the throne because of a family grudge? And can family-centred vendetta ever be the principle of justice in a civilised society?

Female The men of fifth-century Athens treated their women very repressively. The women were expected to stay at home, to bear and raise children, weave and run the house. They were allowed no place in politics, the law-courts, or public life in general. 'A woman's best achievement is not to be talked about', Pericles said.

Yet, at the same time, in Greek tragedy we have some of the most powerful women in all literature: Clytemnestra, Antigone, Phaedra, Medea (not to mention Lysistrata from Comedy). Apparently a contradiction. Part of the explanation may lie with the way that tragedy confronts its audience's deepest anxieties. Athenian men were well aware that, however much they might try to contain them, women were intelligent, passionate, dangerous, powerful – and indispensable. They do, after all, bear children. Or do they? Apollo in Eumenides tries to deprive them even of this.

The power and threat of the female is reflected on the divine level. Some social scientists have held that powerful female gods are a relic of times when society was matriarchal or female-dominated. Whether or not this is historically true, it makes a powerful model. The Furies are daughters of Night without any father. And among the Olympians, there was Artemis protector of childbirth, Aphrodite promoter of sex, and, of course, Athena. But Athena is a warrior goddess, a virgin without children, and without a mother. Does Eumenides in the end give the female a substantial role in society, or does it merely make a

token gesture while reducing this role to mere servitude?

Gods The many and various gods of the early Greeks may seem crude and primitive to those brought up on Christianity. There was no Bible, no doctrine, clergy or systematic theology: only a random multiplicity of cults varying from city to city, some Olympian, some chthonic (underworld). Yet this religion can, in a sense, explain the suffering and unfairness of this world, since the gods do not pretend to be kind or loving or good in human terms. They have their own interests and motives, and all that men can do is try to placate them. But do these interfering gods mean that humans have no control over their actions and destinies? Can we simply blame the gods for everything that goes wrong? This leads to the topic of 'guilt'.

Guilt If we are not responsible for our actions then it is not fair that we should suffer for them. If God or Fate or Society is to blame, then we are not guilty. Can Clytemnestra simply claim that she was an agent of justice and the family curse? Can Orestes shrug and say that Apollo made him kill his mother? For Aeschylus there is no such easy way out. God and man are jointly responsible: the actions are doubly determined. Humans must take the responsibility (credit as well as blame) for their actions, even though superhuman powers also determine them. However difficult we may find this in the abstract, Aeschylus presents the doubleness in practice convincingly and frighteningly.

House As in English the 'house' in Greek can mean both a building and a household or dynasty and its heritage living within it. It is the centre of power and wealth for the men, but also the territory and province of the women. Aeschylus constantly exploits this interplay. For example the conflagration of the palace at Troy starts a chain of beacons which ends with the watchman on the palace at Argos, and this brings out the linked fates of the houses of Atreus and Priam. Cassandra sees all the inhabitants of the palace, visible and invisible.

> Listen. The rooftops. Monotonous humming
> That drones on forever and means only terror.
> The blood-bolstered fiend-swarm holds its debauches,
> cacophonous squatters that can't be evicted...

Justice 'What is justice?' The blood-right (vendetta) is a kind of justice. But it is never ending; and it leaves all the decisions in the hands of the individual members of the wronged family. A just society needs some means of arbitration. The community as a whole must take responsibility for deciding who should be punished, who will go free. The Oresteia explores this issue.

Kommos As well as performing its own poems or 'odes', the chorus sometimes joins in a 'lyric dialogue' with actors (different from line-by-line stichomythia). Two examples are the confrontation of Clytemnestra with the old men of Argos after the murder of Agamemnon, and the confrontation of Athena and the Furies after the verdict. But this kind of interchange, with the emotional heightening of music, is especially suitable for lament, mourning the dead. This is what kommos means, and the greatest kommos in all Greek tragedy is at the tomb of Agamemnon in the first half of Choephori. Orestes and Electra and the chorus of slave women call on the aid of the dead Agamemnon; and at the same time they give him a long delayed lamentation.

Mask The actors and chorus of Greek tragedy all wore whole-head masks. The National Theatre masks (designed by Jocelyn Herbert) are, so far as we can tell, quite similar in appearance to those of Aeschylus' own day. We do not know whether the masks had something to do with the ritual origins of tragedy: it is more to the point that they make facial characteristics bold and clear in a huge theatre. They also fix each character as a certain sort of person rather than a fleeting, elusive psyche. And the lack of detailed emotional response does not diminish dramatic power, but presents it in bold blocks. The mask gives shape to feeling and thought too powerful to be borne by the naked face.

Music Aeschylus himself composed music for his choral poems and kommoi. The main accompaniment was an instrument called the aulos, something like two clarinets played together but with a more piercing tone. Greek tragedy was in some ways more like an opera than a purely spoken play. The music supplies a strong emotional colouring and gives opportunity for variety of pace and tone. It is also a reminder that we are not watching an everyday story of Argive folk, but the dramatisation of archetypal conflicts. Music is thus an agent of the interaction of the particular and the universal – the realm of poetry.

Persuasion The Greeks never underrated the power of speech and the power of desire, both kinds of persuasion. Persuasion was, in effect, the subject of their higher education; and she was even personified as a goddess in her own right. In The Oresteia Aeschylus is fascinated by the way that persuasion can be put to good or bad use, and by the ways that it can be fused or confused with trickery and force. Clytemnestra

The Chorus of Furies

NOBBY CLARK

persuades Agamemnon onto the purple cloth, symbol of his guilt and death. Orestes persuades his way into the palace ('word-guile gets things done', observes the chorus). Persuasion works both ways in the trial. And finally Athena persuades the Furies to stay at Athens and to bless the city and its people.

> How grateful I am that Persuasion was guiding
> my tongue and my lips when they were resistant.

Sex The conflict of male and female, along with the necessity of their coexistence, is one of the great concerns of The Oresteia. As well as the usual battles, sexual union is also the source of much trouble. Thyestes committed adultery with Atreus' wife, Paris with Helen ('gore-bride, war-whore'), Agamemnon with Cassandra, Clytemnestra with Aegisthus. In the end, as part of the hopeful future of Athens, the Furies promise to prosper the natural and fertile unions of marriage. A play cannot make the perennial problems of sexual conflict and infidelity go away; but perhaps it can persuade us of the hope of conciliation.

Stichomythia Greek tragedy makes no attempt to imitate the irregularity and informality of everyday conversation. Much of it consists of long set-speeches. The dialogue is usually in the form of stichomythia, that is the regular exchange of line-by-line dialogue between two characters. Once you realise that this is not chat, you will begin to appreciate the potential of stichomythia for dramatic tension. It is verbal sparring – circling, jabbing, parrying, winning and losing. Tony Harrison's use of rhyme brings out this tense formality. The plays are full of metaphors of wrestling, fall, trip, parry etc – and the dialogue often reflects this.

Theatre Theatron is a Greek word meaning 'a place for watching'. The theatre at Athens, at the foot of a slope, gave the opportunity to many thousands to see the action clearly as well as to hear the words. Theatre is both visual and aural. The epics of Homer (about 700BC), while full of speech as well as narrative, were composed to be performed by a single static bard. In the theatre the stage-space becomes a particular place where the action gravitates, and the time becomes the dramatic present, focus of past and future. The essence of the theatre is concentration. The Greek theatre, sloping round two thirds of a circular acting space (the orchestra), thus funnelled the audience's attention. The power of the National Theatre's Oresteia may have owed more than is easily realised to the similar shape of the Olivier auditorium.

NOBBY CLARK

The herald of Agamemnon brings news of the fall of Troy to the old men at Argos.

Tomb The tomb is a solid marker in the world of the living of the existence of one who is dead. Clytemnestra and Aegisthus mutilated the body of Agamemnon and gave it a minimal tomb. But that tomb is rightly the first place that Orestes visits when he returns to Argos. It is also to the tomb that Clytemnestra sends offerings when she is haunted by ominous dreams. So Orestes and Electra are reunited, and there is the great kommos.

Trilogy Each year in the Athenian dramatic competition each tragedian would put on three tragedies (and a sort of burlesque known as a 'satyr play'). Normally the three plays were not connected with each other; but Aeschylus worked out the potential of linking them into a connected trilogy. The Oresteia is the only trilogy to survive (only one in ten of Aeschylus' tragedies has overcome the hazards of the centuries). The strange thing is that each play of The Oresteia can stand in its own right; and yet each is greatly enriched by its connections with the other two. Not only the plot, but all the important issues, motifs and themes are sustained right through all three plays.

Vendetta Retributive justice exercised by the family (blood-right) is still widely practised throughout the world. If rulers feud this must involve the whole society. But the rule that the doer must suffer is for ever repeated, just as the picture of Orestes standing over the bodies of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon in the middle play of the trilogy repeats that of Clytemnestra standing over the bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra in the first. The third play must find a way to break the chain.

Vote In Eumenides Athena decides that she cannot settle the conflict by herself, and she creates a jury of humans to share the responsibility. They are under oath to vote justly. Each drops a pebble into one of two urns, one for conviction, the other for acquital. The verdict may be death for Orestes; or humiliation for the Furies; or an equal vote, in which case Athena adds her vote for Orestes. But the vote is not the end of the matter. The city which has taken over the power of judgement must still find a place for the old, dark, female forces.

Epidaurus and the Olivier Theatre

The Greek theatre developed beneath the Acropolis at Athens, within the area sacred to the god Dionysus. On the ground it consisted at first of little more than a rocky slope with a flat area at the bottom of it.

Once tragedy was established as a major art-form, cities throughout the Greek world built theatres of their own. While they followed the basic patterns of Athens, they employed architects to create finely designed constructions. One of the finest – in ancient as in modern times – was at the sanctuary of Asclepius near Epidaurus.

Epidaurus was a town in the North East Peloponnese about 30 miles south across the Saronic Gulf from Athens. A few miles inland there was a famous sanctuary of Asclepius, a demigod who was especially associated with healing. The sick used to visit his temple in the hope of a miraculous cure. Each year about the end of April there was also a major festival which attracted many visitors. As well as more obviously religious rituals, there were contests for athletics and for artistic activities such as music and epic poetry.

During the fourth century BC the priests in charge embarked on an ambitious building programme, and as part of this they had the theatre constructed for the artistic contests. Its superb symmetry is not only a great work of art, it is a highly practical instrument. The quality of its acoustics and optics are famous.

The Greek shape of auditorium – an open space with seats round two-thirds of the circle – has some advantages over others, for example straight rows of seats. It enables a much larger number of people to have a good view (there is ample room at Epidaurus for 15,000); and it gives all spectators a more or less "equal" view. It concentrates all attention towards the same focus. It also makes an architecturally more integrated form.

Such considerations as these influenced Denys Lasdun in his design for the Olivier auditorium at the National Theatre on that at Epidaurus, built some 2250 years earlier. This shape is particularly effective in the production of The Oresteia. In fact it would have been impossible without it.

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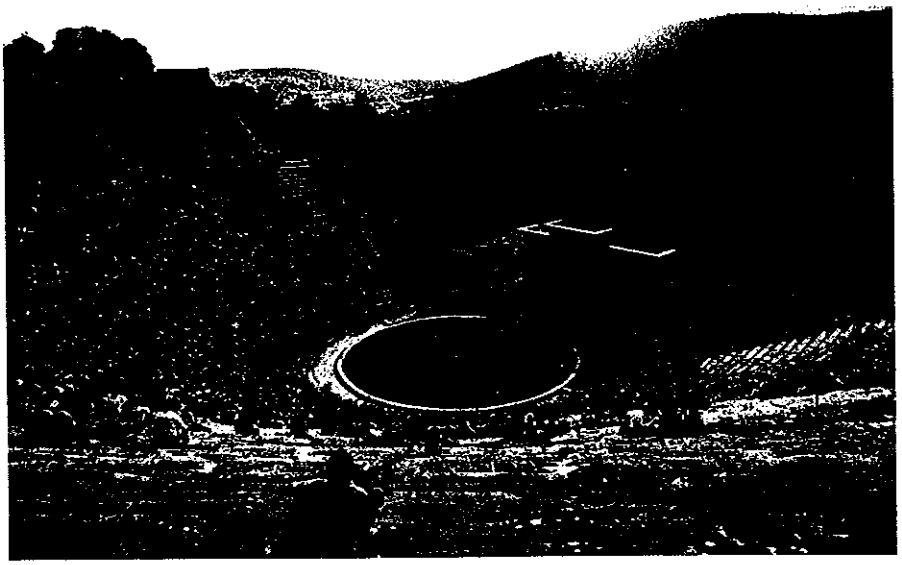
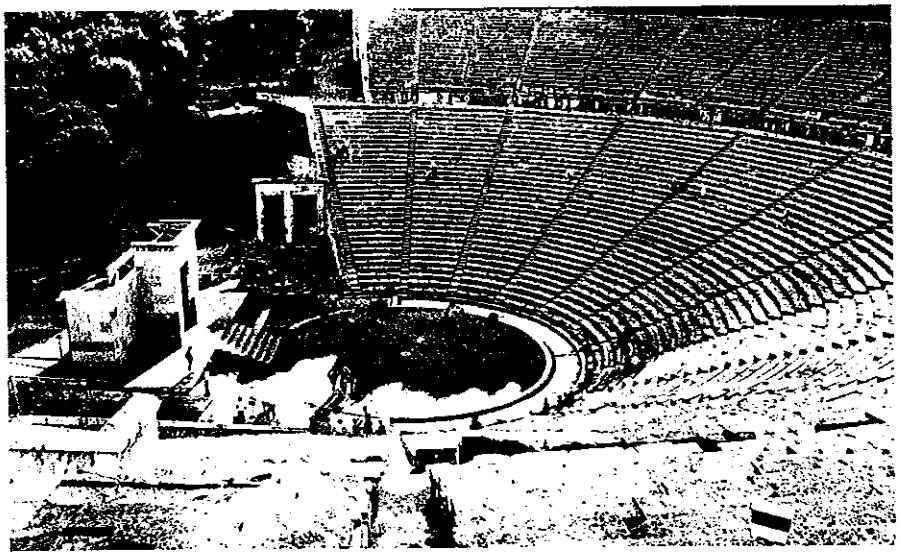
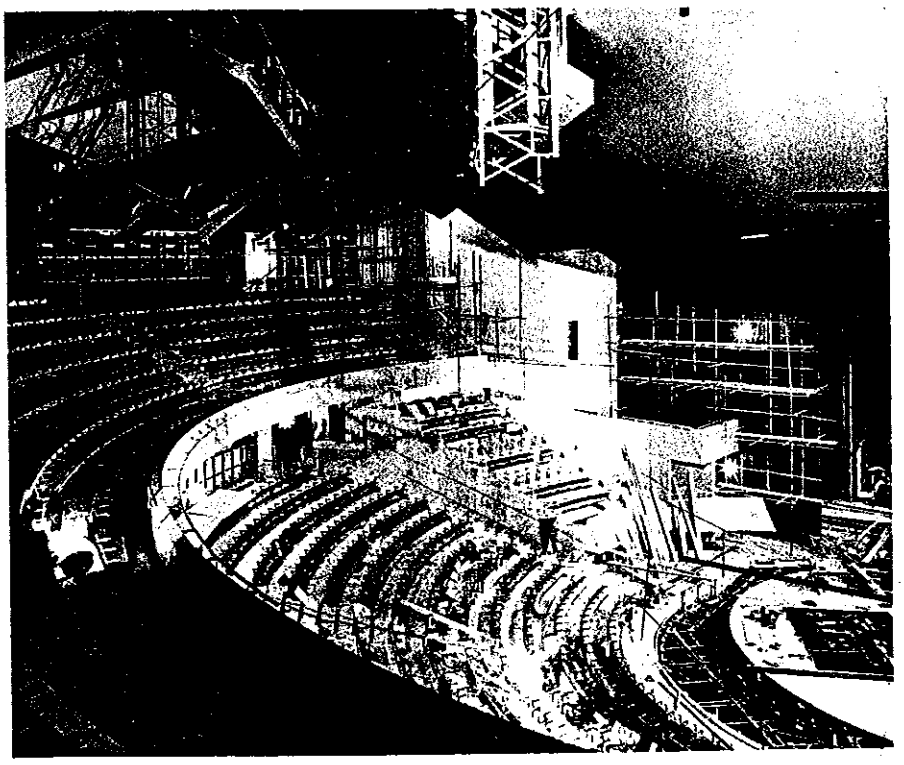


The theatre at Epidaurus (above and below).



The construction of the Olivier Theatre at the National Theatre, opened October 1976)



JOHN GOULD

The world of Aeschylus

Aeschylus' sequence of plays, The Oresteia, is much concerned with issues of choice and responsibility, with questions of authority, human and divine, and with what we call the problem of the past: are men bound and controlled by what they or their ancestors, have done before, or are they rather free to make things new and escape from the constraints of what has been done and cannot be undone? If we look at the experience of Aeschylus and his contemporaries, we can begin to see why these issues were so important to him and to his audience, and how he came to find them in the traditional story of the return of king Agamemnon from Troy, his murder by his cousin, Aegisthus, and his wife, and the subsequent revenge for that murder carried out by Orestes, his son.

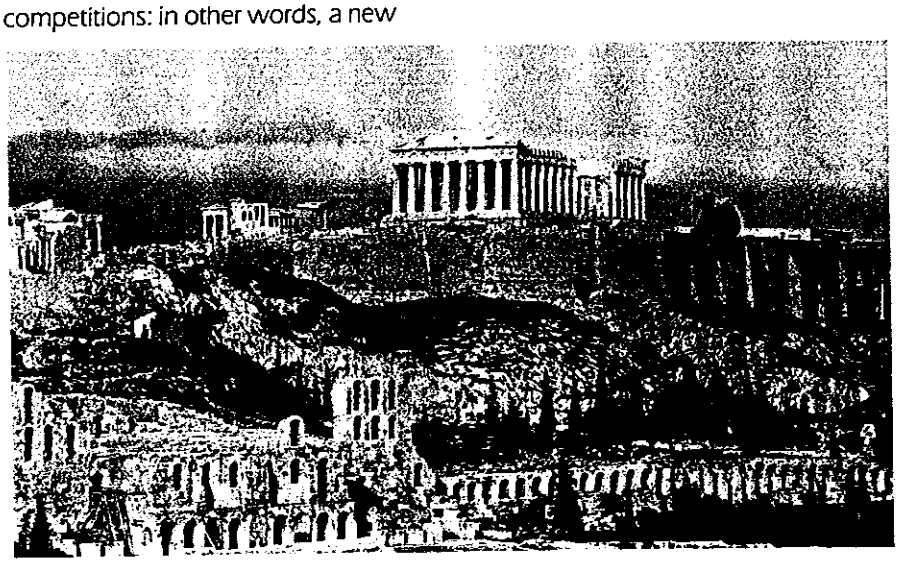
The form of theatre that we call tragedy was effectively the creation of the generation of Aeschylus, and that is no coincidence. When Aeschylus wrote The Oresteia, in 458 BC, he was in his sixties. At the time of his birth, about 525 BC, Athens and the surrounding countryside of Attica, which formed what the Greeks called a polis, were ruled by two brothers, the sons of Peisistratus, who maintained their power by force. Their father had broken the traditional authority over the countryside of local land-owning families and had established a 'tyranny', the Greek term for a centralised, semi-military form of government. This action represented the end of a system of power-holding which had existed, essentially unchallenged, for centuries and had relied on small-scale, local loyalties and on traditional sources of authority. It had been a system of paternalistic exercise of power in which disputes within the community were settled either by feud (that is, by inherited obligations of revenge-taking within the family) or by the local land-owners, by reference to traditional rules and procedures mostly never recorded in writing nor publicly available but maintained in the memory of the community through its leaders and chiefs, much as in traditional tribal societies in Africa and North America until the coming of European colonists.

Peisistratus and his sons had set about destroying the roots of this sytem, above all by creating new loyalties to replace the old. They enormously increased the prestige and importance of the city of Athens itself, by building new and imposing buildings on the Acropolis and in the Agora (the public square), by creating a new water supply for the city, by making more majestic and more evocative the traditional religious celebrations which brought together all the inhabitants of Attica, and by establishing a coinage which, with its emblem of the owl of Athena, might act like a flag as a symbol and focus of national loyalty.

The tyranny of Peisistratus' family seemed a decisive break with the past, but it turned out to be only a brief and temporary stage in the rapid development of direct democracy in Athens, which eventually involved all its free, adult male citizens in equal control and with equal initiative over the city's fortunes. When Aeschylus was fifteen, Peisistratus' surviving son, Hippias, was ejected from Athens with the help of an army from Sparta, and within two years another crucial shift of power took place. A member of another leading family, Cleisthenes, introduced new institutions which dismantled the old system of Athenian tribes, supposed kinship groups which had traced their descent from legendary chiefs and which had been the focus of local loyalties, and replaced them with ten new 'tribes' composed of local communities artificially grouped together from different parts of Attica. These new groupings formed both the 'constituencies' for elections of the most important state officials, and the regimental structure of the Athenian citizen army, as well as the communities who regularly competed in athletic contests and artistic competitions: in other words, a new framework for feelings of loyalty and solidarity. At the same time, the Assembly of all citizens was made a more effective organ of state control by being given what was in effect a standing committee, the Council (Boule) of five hundred, fifty drawn by lot from each of the ten new tribes, which discussed issues and prepared motions in advance of each meeting of the Assembly.

This new direct democracy withstood attempts to overthrow it, first from Sparta, and then, twice within ten years, to absorb it into the Persian empire, and emerged from both threats with new vitality and new confidence in its ability to control its affairs, solve its problems and make itself felt as a power in the world of Greek city-states. Aeschylus not only lived through all these things (indeed participated in the decisive battles which destroyed the Persian threat), but also celebrated his city's triumphs in his play, Persians, written in 472 BC.

Thus within the experience of one man's lifetime, Athens had moved from being a relatively backward, traditional peasant society, in which what 'the fathers' had done counted almost for everything and where few effective institutions existed for expressing the will of the majority, let alone for giving it effect, to one where there was little or nothing in the community's affairs that could not be decided, challenged or changed by a show of hands, after debate and discussion in open assembly. It was this new Athens, in the first flush of its newly-won confidence, that produced tragic theatre and it is not surprising that it is a theatre of conflict and argument.



The Acropolis at Athens. The theatre of Dionysus where **The Orestia** was first performed is to the south east, the Areopagus where Athena founds the court in **Eumenides**, is a hill nearby to the west.

Of all the issues that affect a community, the issue of violent death among its members is one that raises tensions and activates loyalties that may threaten the cohesion of the whole. The institution of the feud is one way of dealing with such an issue, but its demand for the taking of revenge for each spilling of blood is self-perpetuating and (in theory, at least) can have no end. By the lifetime of Aeschylus a compromise already prevailed in Athens between the kinship obligations of feud and the requirements of the stability and solidarity of society through the institutions of law. In Athenian law, a prosecution for homicide could only be pursued in the courts by a kinsman of the victim (for whom it was an obligation), whereas for any other crime the Athenian legal system relied on prosecution by 'he who wishes', since there was no system of public prosecutions. But in **The Oresteia** Aeschylus imagines a world before the institution of courts and popular juries and verdicts after argument and counter-argument, a world in which the obligations of the blood feud provide the only accepted means of requiting the taking of human life. In that world, Orestes' obligation to kill his father's murderers is absolute and allows of no plea of exception: within the world of the play, we see it as the result of a chain of inevitable killings in which blood has been taken for blood, and if we look forward we see that obligation stretching on forever, until one kinship group or the other is wiped out. The demands of tradition are totally, and interminably, constraining. So, as the first play of the trilogy moves forward, our sense of the past remorselessly controlling the present, despite all hopes for 'release' and for an 'end', moves further and further back, revealing always more of that constraining past: at the outset 'a year', then 'ten years', then a generation, and behind that other generations as far as we can see. Two of Aeschylus' most brilliant theatrical strokes in **The Oresteia** occur when, in the first play, **Agamemnon**, the Trojan prophetess, Cassandra, through her painful gift of second sight, 'sees' the chain of killings from the generation before as a sort of crew of uninvited guests who haunt the house and cannot be made to leave; and when in the third, **Eumenides**, the horrific spirits of the feud can track Orestes, like hounds, all the way from Delphi to Athens by the scent of the blood that he cannot wash clean of him.

Orestes cannot of himself break the thread that binds him to the past. The ancient, immemorial institution of the blood feud, represented by the terrible order of the god, Apollo himself, to avenge his father's killing, commands an absolute obedience, but cannot absolve Orestes of the responsibility for what he has done or save him from its consequences. For Aeschylus and for his audience, the inevitability of revenge becomes an image for the tyranny of the past over the present, the 'yokestrap' of 'necessity' to which Agamemnon 'kneels' by the act of killing his daughter to satisfy the gods.

But **The Oresteia**, through it is tragic drama, affirms the possibility of breaking free from the constraints of the past, not by heroic action on the part of Orestes, nor by the imposition of a god's blind, arbitrary will, but by the institutions of society. And here Aeschylus brings into the world of his play echoes of his own most recent experience. Four years before **The Oresteia** was produced, Athens had gone through the last phase in the process of breaking the power of the past that gave free, uninhibited rein to the exercise of direct democratic government. The Assembly had accepted proposals by another leading Athenian, Ephialtes, supported by the young Pericles (who, ten years before, had worked with Aeschylus in the production of his play, **Persians**). The effect of these proposals was to strip all its powers, except the right to try cases of homicide, from an ancient body, the so-called council of the Areopagus, a body which consisted of all the former holders of the chief offices of the Athenian state, and thus stood for the traditions of the past and its claim to a special wisdom and authority.

Aeschylus now imagines the issue of the unending feud within the house of Agamemnon as referred to this body, newly set up for the first time as a court to try cases of violent bloodshed by the goddess of Athens, Athena, and put to the majority vote of human jurors for decision, after argument and counter-argument. It is, as it were, a declaration of faith by Aeschylus in the ability of human, political institutions, under the guidance of divinity, to make things new and to establish justice and the rule of law responsibly and without rancour or division. The ending of **The Oresteia** does not so much root out the past, in the person of the Furies, the spirits of the demand for vengeance, as absorb it, in the form of a newly institutionalised acceptance of the duty of revenge, into a free and peaceable society.

The Oresteia is, for us, Aeschylus' last testament: he was dead within two years of writing it. It contains some of his finest, most lucid and vigorous poetry; it is great theatre. But it is also a moving distillation of a lifetime's experience of political and social change, through the medium of a traditional story of revenge, into a statement of confident belief in his own contemporary world, in society and its present political stance.

John Gould is professor of Greek at the University of Bristol and author of the chapter on Greek tragedy in performance in volume I of the *Cambridge History of Classical Literature* (forthcoming).

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