

Dave Olson

Annotation on "The Oresteia"

By Aeschylus – Translated by Robert Fagles (Viking/NYC/1975)

When reading Aeschylus' classic "The Oresteia," I was stuck by the fierce and blunt manner used in this complicated and rich text. While I under no illusion that any society (ancient or not), hasn't been wrought with some manner of war and treachery in their existence, the fact that in 500BC, the Greeks were wrestling with conundrums of justice and punishment that have yet to be resolved, leaves me feeling a sense of despair.

The very question of how should a society resolve problems and punish for crimes is the basis of Aeschylus' collage of myth, legend, fiction and fact. The dramatic form and ritualistic performance quality seems to mean the work as a demonstrative guidebook - demonstrating precepts of justice and raising the elementary questions that a society must act itself in establishing justice system.

Particularly in the first tale of Agamemnon, through the murders of first, the returning hero of war by his conniving wife then, her own murder by her exiled son, Aeschylus discourses on the corruption of power, deceit and manipulation to enhance power, reasons for revenge, justifiability of murder, lust for power, the falling of heroes, and the results of impassioned murder.

I was particularly interested in the role the hero Agamemnon played in the tale. His speech in returning for war bring hope, shows compassion, a self-deprecating manner, a respect for the power of the people and most importantly, he speaks of knowing the difference between right and wrong. Most all of these qualities are expressed as he address his wife Clytaemnestra, who insists of draping rich tapestries along the stair for him to walk along.

“Give me the tributes of a man
and not a god, a little earth to walk on,
not this gorgeous work.
There is no need to sound my reputation.
I have a sense of right and wrong, what’s more –
heaven’s proudest gift. Call no man blest
until he ends his life in peace, fulfilled.
If I can live by what I say, I have no fear.” (lines 918-925)

His speech also seemed to push for a society to move away from the endless cycle of murder begat from the “eye for eye” mode of retribution prevalent at the time. He also spoke of the ways and means to organize a society in brief and profound commands that seem like apt, if simple, instructions in modern context; (speaking to the leader of the people),

“We must summon the city for a trial,
found a national tribunal. Whatever’s healthy,
shore it up with law and help it flourish.’ (lines 831-834)

The why and how the “god” myth begins in a society. Despite the complex levels explored by Aeschylus, never was the existence of the gods questioned; nor was any action (ie: sacrifice) performed at the behest of the gods, looked upon in a negative manner. The war tasks Agamemnon successfully performed were credited exclusively to the gods. Despite his skill in battle and personal sacrifices, he was eager not to offend the gods and was eager to kill more to further appease the unseen masters,

“... we must thank the gods with a sacrifice
our sons will long remember. For their mad outrage
of a queen, we raped heir city – we were right.”

Never did he question the gods' existence, even when killing his child – a brutal act even on an animal level. Certainly, myth and culture caused the sacrificial ritual to be an accepted of life, yet it confuses me when I think society's which produced such sophisticated thought - indeed forming the foundation of our modern civilization – and was capable of such perplexing social inquiry so many centuries ago, relied on the blind-faith, "god told us to do it for good luck," excuse to kill others.

Indeed, this ill-conceived perception cultivated by successful nations that 'our way is best so we must foist our ways upon others because our god makes us better,' which led to the fall of Athens, continues to plague the world as acts of war and murders of vengeance continue to be the way most major disagreements are resolved in the modern age despite 2500 years to come up with something better.