

**Hum 110**  
**Justice and Gender in the *Oresteia***  
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How, and to what ends, does Aeschylus' *Oresteia* bring justice and gender into relation?

- I. Athena's speech - *Eumenides* 681-710: The Areopagus as the site of a gendered attack, newly founded in the play by Athena as a site of security.
  - A. Ares, Amazons, Theseus; cf. Martin 128-9 on Marathon.
  - B. Gender relations symbolize power relations.
  - C. Symbolic weight of Scythians and of Pelops' descendants (cf. Herodotus, book 4: 1, 3, and 4).
  - D. Gould, 55: "The most interesting of recent attempts to disengage from myth its signification of the role of women in human society...point to, in the mythical imagination of Greece...(the imagination of men)...a profound and ambivalent disquiet, an oscillation between obsessive fear and revulsion, on the one hand, and, on the other, an implication of total dependence.
  
- II. Gender symbolically relates the actions in the trilogy to civic issues in the Athenian polis at the time of the first staging of the *Oresteia* (458 BCE).
  - A. Pericles and Ephialtes - Cf. Martin, 110-112.
  - B. Trilogy's female : male characters :: polis's aristocratic faction: democratic faction
  
- III. Three readings of the *Oresteia*: celebratory humanist, historicist, gender-focused.

Although we can see the *Oresteia* as addressing both the "universal" theme of the construction of justice (as vengeance, punishment for a crime, divinely sanctioned retribution, or the outcome of a rational, legal proceeding), *and* a specific historical issue (interactions between aristocratic and democratic factions in Athens), an awareness of gender symbolism in the trilogy enables us to deepen our understanding of the trilogy as a ritual scrutiny of *isonomia* won at great cost in the relation of the self to the other.

  - A. Replacing Aegisthus, Clytemnestra as murderer allows a symbolic refiguring of the curse of the house of Atreus.
  - B. Athena replaces Zeus in the Aeschylean reworking of the Hesiodic account of the divine establishment of order.
  - C. Gender as a signifying system works in this play through a system of analogous hierarchies: male - female; democrats - aristocrats; husband - wife; son - mother; Olympian deities- chthonic deities

**TIMELINE**

**MYTHIC TIME**

c. 1200 B.C. E. Fall of Troy, Agamemnon's return home

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**HISTORIC TIME**

594-3 Solon's archonship in Athens  
508 Cleisthenes reforms the Athenian constitution  
490-479 Persian Wars  
484-430 approximate dates of Herodotus' birth and death

**CONTEMPORARY TIME**

462 / 1 Ephialtes, Pericles reforms; Ephialtes murdered; Athens/ Argos alliance  
458 Some Athenians ask Sparta to help overthrow Athenian democracy  
**Oresteia produced**  
454 Delian League Treasury moved from Delphi to Athens  
450 - Pericles' building program: Acropolis  
c. 450-420 Herodotus composes Histories  
443- Pericles dominant leader in Athens  
431- Peloponnesian War  
413-411 Oligarchic coup at Athens

A. There is no first Athenian woman: there is not, and never has been, a real female Athenian. The political process does not recognize a "citizenship," the language has no word for a woman from Athens. . . . Athena is the goddess without a mother, who refuses marriage and maternity for herself but presides over the vitality of those institutions in the city. Athena, at her miraculous birth, is summoned to watch over two other unusual nativities: the birth of Pandora, a trap in the form of a young girl, and the birth of Erichthonios, a child of civic soil. Athena is the *Parthenos* [virgin] who remains *parthenos*, a figure impossible for the human world, but among the gods, her role represents security itself for the *andres* [men]: the security of the hero, whose exploits Athena attends, the security of the citizen, whose polis she protects, the security of the male, comforted in his fantasy of a world without women by the idea that his goddess was not born from a woman's body - she who "was not nourished in the darkness of the womb" (Eum. 665). She represents the security of the male for all time; he knows he can continue to dream on without anxiety, since, in the active reality of civic cult, the Warrior Goddess keeps watch over the security of Athens.

Loraux, 10-11.

B. Orestes' guilt and his innocence can never be disentangled, and neither can the Furies and the gods, the threads of the Fates and the grand design of Zeus. Their final binding-song connects us all, mortals and immortals in a vast moral network, not of retaliation as in the *Agamemnon*, nor of recrimination as in *The Libation Bearers*, but of mutual responsibility. The chains of revenge are not so much broken as they are welded into the bonds of justice.

Fagles, 90

C. Despite – or because of – the 'happy ending', it is the violence and perversion of the *Oresteia* that we remember. The *Oresteia* represents threats against human beings which are a corollary of our fragile, mortal existence. Reading the *Oresteia* makes one afraid for one's life.

Brian Vickers, 15.

#### **Cited texts and suggestions for further reading:**

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