

“The Awful Grace of God”- Reading Orestes as a Play of Theodicy

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Abstract

Greeks are alleged to be the connoisseurs of literary philosophy. Orestes, a Greek tragedy by Euripides, sketches the events that follow the protagonist Orestes' matricide of Clytemnestra to avenge his father Agamemnon, inspired by the direction of a higher being. The following paper attempts navigation through the play, reading it as a play of theodicy, establishing that suffering is intrinsic to humanity. The paper looks at the actions of Orestes and their consequences. The paper also problematizes the play's dramatization of the divine will and the free will of the humans and also the understanding of the divine will by the humans.

Keywords: Theodicy, free will, divine will, matricide, Greek tragedy.

Hellenistic literature, the fountain belt of classical literature, begins in the Sumerian inscriptions of 3000 BC. Greeks are believed to be the pioneers of literary philosophy, the theoretical remuneration of conception and reception of art. To them, all drama was poetry which they regarded as an exalted exercise of human imagination. According to them, literature facilitated a sense of acculturation and enabled the discovery of the sense of self in the sublime.

The function of a work of art was a serious affair, for they knew its power to impact the human psyche. The Greeks had a proud tradition of the theatre and had a thorough knowledge of human psychology, anatomy, and voice culture, with the help of which they devised the Amphitheatre. Greeks never wanted to educate but to inspire. For a long time, the Greek theatre employed one actor, invariably a rhetorician, with several masks. Gestures formed

an essential part of rhetoric. The actor had to appeal to the audience's psyche; hence, the sublime had to be evoked, purging them of their more minor feelings.

Classical plays employ a thin line of mythological events to evoke the profound psychological truths of life. The present paper attempts to read Orestes as a play of theodicy. Theodicy is a particular branch of theology and philosophy that endeavours to solve the issue of the existence of evil, a problem that arises when coupled with the assumption of a benevolent and omnipotent God. Theodicy was coined by the German philosopher Gottfried Leibniz in his work "Essay of Theodicy about the Benevolence of God, the Free Will of Man and the Origin of Evil." Theodicy aims to depict that the traditional claims of God's omnipotence and benevolence are harmonious with the reality of sorrow.

Orestes is a classical play that maps the infinite kaleidoscopic complexity of man, a profoundly complex reading of the human psyche, written in 408 BCE by Euripides. Orestes follows the aftermath of Orestes' matricide. It is a play of theodicy for Orestes has to function as impassionate and not dispassionate by murdering his mother, Clytemnestra, out of his filial piety towards Agamemnon. He does not act on free will, his act is by the will of a higher metaphor, but he still ends up suffering. The play dramatizes God's will and human will, and the interpretation of the divine will come by man. Orestes, who is dictated to by Apollo, strives to establish pure morality by committing bloody murder. He functions on behalf of the gods to cleanse the kingdom and having done that, he is bothered, on the verge of delirious madness.

A consequence of lesser magnitude is his sister Electra and cousin Pylades being condemned to death by the violent men of Argos, from which he seeks acquittal. Orestes is constantly ruminating, his only hope being his uncle Menelaus, which gets gradually drawn. Menelaus shuns him, reluctant to compromise his questionable power among the Greeks, diminishing the value of family ties. In retaliation, Orestes goes to the extent of planning his young cousin Hemione's murder. Orestes does the right thing by killing Clytemnestra. He is an agent of the state of idealism.

Orestes, the hero, represents humanity as a whole. At the beginning of the play, he is shown as a sick, half-famished, and unkempt man of feverish delirium assailed by his sense of guilt. He can see no one but his dead mother, tormented by the constant visions of her. The furious projections of his mind put him off from reality. He suffers for he is involved. His mind is involved. He is tormented by the guilt of matricide and is unable to distance himself as the man who brought back justice from the man who killed his mother. Despite being tormented by the furies, he is yet to face Apollo's punishment, which is a clue to understanding the play's central conflict. The play documents the aberrations of man. Orestes is bothered by the death of Clytemnestra, just as his sister Electra is bothered by the death of their father, Agamemnon. It is from this Electra that Ernest Jones formulated the Electra complex.

In the entire corpuscle of the presentation of Electra, there is no mention of her regretting her mother's death. However, there is ample evidence to affirm the disturbances she experiences after her father's death. Her hooding and un-hooding provoke much critical interpretation, and she also functions as the chorus in the play. There is a gender crossing between Orestes and Electra. Electra appears to be more 'manly' than Orestes, and the man, like what is believed of a woman, is curled up on the couch. Euripides puts the hero onto the couch, literally and metaphorically, and makes him spit

out his libidinal fears, making evident his turmoil. Euripides's greatness lies in injecting this human lacuna into Orestes. The warrior is not beyond emotions. He is a just man, yet, he is just a man. He does not leap to an oedipal glory. There are two issues to be resolved in the play. Orestes's dilemma- his present delirium has to be resolved to sanity and the re-installation of justice and peace. There is no action in the play. The deed is done. The only story is the ripening of Orestes, and the resolution in the play is Orestes's resolution. Death is not the tragedy here. Nobody dies.

The tragedy is the understanding of man in his capacity to represent humanity. The tragic burden is the painful maturation of Orestes to wisdom. The mechanism of Deus ex machina is employed at the end of the play, where Apollo intervenes and resolves conflicts. In his indefinite speech, Apollo delineates Helen's life, of how her beauty makes her accursed, a bone of contention, for the war was fought for her. Apollo deliberately talks about the choice of Helen and the dignity she is endowed with after her death. A higher source makes choices. Helen never chose her beauty, just as Orestes never chose to kill his mother. Apollo banishes Orestes to the Parrhesian soil for a year, during which he has to retreat, ruminate, and come to ripening and become a wholesome man. He has to internalize his actions and reach equipoise. He has to rise above himself, become a hero, and reach a level of self-understanding.

During the one year, he has to distance Orestes, the son of Clytemnestra, from Orestes, the future king of the house of Atreus. By the end of the play, Orestes realizes his limitations and the purpose of his suffering. He realizes that wisdom and dispassion must do the action, not hatred. A greater force is constantly at war with the free will of man. The play, like a comedy, ends in marriage which becomes a synoptic of a new life. The myth of fertility is invoked. Orestes is to marry Helen's daughter, and Hermione and Electra marry Orestes's bosom

friend, Pyrates. The play thus ends in a traditional romantic psyche.

References

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