

Aeschylus: from *Eumenides*¹

The third part of Aeschylus's only surviving trilogy, the much-celebrated Oresteia, Eumenides (a Greek euphemism for the avenging Furies) was written in 458 BCE. After the slaying of his father's murderer, his mother Clytemnestra, at the command of Apollo, Orestes is embittered and on the verge of madness, but he never doubts that he has done the right thing.

The priestess's speech begins the play, and highlights the conflict between the old gods (represented in the play by the Furies) and new (Apollo) and, by extension, evolving ideas of justice and morality among humans. The location in Apollo's temple at the Oracle of Delphi.

THE PYTHIAN PRIESTESS

First, in this prayer of mine, I give the place of highest honor among the gods to the first prophet, Earth; and after her to Themis, for she was the second to take this oracular seat of her mother, as legend tells. And in the third allotment, with Themis' consent and not by force, [5] another Titan, child of Earth, Phoebe, took her seat here. She gave it as a birthday gift to Phoebus, who has his name from Phoebe. Leaving the lake² and ridge of Delos, he landed on Pallas' ship-frequented shores, [10] and came to this region and the dwelling places on Parnassus. The children of Hephaistos,³ road-builders taming the wildness of the untamed land, escorted him with mighty reverence. And at his arrival, the people [15] and Delphus, helmsman and lord of this land, made a great celebration for him. Zeus inspired his heart with prophetic skill and established him as the fourth prophet on this throne; but Loxias is the spokesman of Zeus, his father.

These are the gods I place in the beginning of my prayer. [20] And Pallas who stands before the temple⁴ is honored in my words; and I worship the Nymphs where the Corycian⁵ rock is

hollow, the delight of birds and haunt of gods. Bromius has held the region—I do not forget him—ever since he, as a god, led the Bacchantes in war, [25] and contrived for Pentheus death as of a hunted hare. I call on the streams of Pleistus and the strength of Poseidon, and highest Zeus, the Fulfiller; and then I take my seat as prophetess upon my throne. And may they allow me now to have the best fortune, far better than on my previous entrances. [30] And if there are any from among the Hellenes here, let them enter, in turn, by lot, as is the custom. For I prophesy as the god leads.

[She goes into the interior of the temple; after a short interval, she returns in great fear.]

Horrors to tell, horrors for my eyes to see, have sent me back from the house of Loxias, [35] so that I have no strength and I cannot walk upright. I am running on hands and knees, with no quickness in my limbs; for an old woman, overcome with fright, is nothing, or rather she is like a child.

I was on my way to the inner shrine, decked with wreaths; I saw on the center-stone⁶ a man defiled in the eyes of the gods, [40] occupying the seat of suppliants. His hands were dripping blood; he held a sword just drawn and an olive-branch, from the top of the tree, decorously crowned with a large tuft of wool, a shining fleece; for as to this I can speak clearly. [45]

Before this man an extraordinary band of women slept, seated on thrones. No! Not women, but rather Gorgons I call them; and yet I cannot compare them to forms of Gorgons either. Once before I saw some creatures in a painting,⁷ [50] carrying off the feast of Phineus; but these are wingless in appearance, black, altogether disgusting; they snore with repulsive breaths, they drip from their eyes hateful drops; their attire is not fit to bring either before the statues of the gods or into the homes of men. [55] I have never seen the tribe that produced this company, nor the land that boasts of rearing this brood with impunity and does not grieve for its labor afterwards.

Let what is to come now be the concern of the master of this house, [60] powerful Loxias himself. He is a prophet of healing, a reader of portents, and for others a purifier of homes.

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Goaded by Clytemnestra's ghost, the Furies chase

⁶ὄμφαλός="navel" was the name given by the Delphians to a white stone (in Aeschylus' time placed in the inmost sanctuary of Apollo), which they regarded as marking the exact center of the earth. Near the great altar of Apollo the French excavators of Delphi discovered a navel-stone. ὄμφαλός sometimes used of Delphi itself.

⁷The Harpies.

¹Translation by Herbert Weir Smyth. Harvard University Press. 1926.

²A circular lake in the island of Apollo's birth.

³The Athenians, because Erichthonius, who was identified with Erechtheus, was the son of Hephaestus, who first fashioned axes.

⁴The shrine of Pallas "before the temple," close to Delphi on the main road leading to the sanctuary of Apollo.

⁵The Corycian cave, sacred to the Nymphs and Pan, has been identified with a grotto on the great plateau above Delphi.

*Orestes to Athens. He takes refuge in the temple of
Athena, clinging to her statue.*

[Enter Athena, wearing the aegis.]

ATHENA

From afar I heard the call of a summons, from the Scamander, while I was taking possession of the land, which the leaders and chiefs of the Achaeans assigned to me, a great portion of the spoil their spears had won, [400] to be wholly mine forever, a choice gift to Theseus' sons.⁸ From there I have come, urging on my tireless foot, without wings rustling the folds of my aegis, [yoking this chariot to colts in their prime.]⁹ [405] As I see this strange company of visitors to my land, I am not afraid, but it is a wonder to my eyes. Who in the world are you? I address you all in common—this stranger sitting at my image, and you, who are like no race of creatures ever born, [410] neither seen by gods among goddesses nor resembling mortal forms. But it is far from just to speak ill of one's neighbor who is blameless, and Right stands aloof.

CHORUS [OF FURIES]

Daughter of Zeus, you will hear it all in brief. [415] We are the eternal children of Night. We are called Curses in our homes beneath the earth.

ATHENA

I now know your family and the names by which you are called.

CHORUS

You will soon learn my office.

ATHENA

I shall understand, if someone would tell the story clearly. [420]

CHORUS

We drive murderers from their homes.

ATHENA

And where is the end of flight for the killer?

CHORUS

Where joy is absent and unknown.¹⁰

ATHENA

And would you drive this man with your shrieks to such flight?

⁸Athena confirms as ancient her possession of the district of Sigeum, which had been won from the Mityleneans by the Athenians early in the sixth century.

⁹"Yoking this chariot to colts in their prime" contradicts the statement in the preceding verse, and may have been interpolated for a later representation of the play when Athena appeared on a chariot.

¹⁰Literally "where joy (or the word *joy*) is nowhere in use."

CHORUS

Yes, for he thought it right to be his mother's murderer. [425]

ATHENA

Through other compulsions, or in fear of someone's wrath?

CHORUS

Where is there a spur so keen as to compel the murder of a mother?

ATHENA

Two parties are present; only half the case is heard.

CHORUS

But he will not receive an oath nor does he want to give one.

ATHENA

You want to be called just rather than to act justly. [430]

CHORUS

How so? Teach me. For you are not poor in subtleties.

ATHENA

I say that oaths must not win victory for injustice.

CHORUS

Well then, question him, and make a straight judgment.

ATHENA

Then would you turn over the decision of the charge to me?

CHORUS

How not?—since we honor you because you are worthy and of worthy parentage. [435]

ATHENA

What do you want to say to this, stranger, in turn? After you name your country and family and fortunes, then defend yourself against this charge; if indeed, relying on the justice of your case, you sit clinging to my image near my hearth, [440] as a sacred suppliant, like Ixion.¹¹ To all this give me a plain answer.

ORESTES

Lady Athena, first of all I will take away a great anxiety from your last words. I am not a suppliant in need of purification, nor did I sit at your image with pollution on my hands. [445] I will give you strong proof of this. It is the law for one who is defiled by shedding blood to be barred from speech until he is sprinkled with the blood of a new-born victim by a man who can purify from murder. [450] Long before at other houses I have been thus purified both by victims and by flowing streams.

¹¹Ixion, king of the Lapiths, murdered the father of his bride, and was given purification by Zeus after having been denied by the other gods.

And so I declare that this concern is out of the way. As to my family, you will soon learn. I am an Argive¹²; my father—you rightly inquire about him [455] —was Agamemnon, the commander of the naval forces; along with him, you made Troy, the city of Ilion, to be no city. He did not die nobly, after he came home; but my black-hearted mother killed him after she covered him in a crafty snare that still remains to witness his murder in the bath. [460] And when I came back home, having been an exile in the time before, I killed the woman who gave birth to me, I will not deny it, as the penalty in return for the murder of my dearly-loved father. Together with me Loxias is responsible for this deed, [465] because he threatened me with pains, a goad for my heart, if I should fail to do this deed to those who were responsible. You judge whether I acted justly or not; whatever happens to me at your hands, I will be content.

ATHENA

The matter is too great, if any mortal thinks to pass judgment on it; [470] no, it is not lawful even for me to decide on cases of murder that is followed by the quick anger of the Furies, especially since you, by rites fully performed, have come a pure and harmless suppliant to my house; and so I respect you, since you do not bring harm to my city. [475] Yet these women have an office that does not permit them to be dismissed lightly; and if they fail to win their cause, the venom from their resentment will fall upon the ground, an intolerable, perpetual plague afterwards in the land.

So stands the case: [480] either course—to let them stay, to drive them out—brings disaster and perplexity to me. But since this matter has fallen here, I will select judges of homicide bound by oath, and I will establish this tribunal for all time. Summon your witnesses and proofs, [485] sworn evidence to support your case; and I will return when I have chosen the best of my citizens, for them to decide this matter truly, after they take an oath that they will pronounce no judgment contrary to justice. [Exit]

CHORUS

Here is the overturning of new laws, [490] if the wrongful cause of this matricide is to triumph. Now his deed will accustom all men to recklessness; [495] many sorrowful wounds, given in truth by children, wait for parents in the future time.

For the wrath of us, the Furies who keep watch on mortals, will not come stealthily upon such deeds [500] —I will let loose death in every form. And as he anticipates his neighbor's evils, one man will ask of another when hardship is to end or to decrease; [505] and the poor wretch offers the vain consolation of uncertain remedies.

Do not let anyone who is struck by misfortune make an appeal

and cry aloud this word, [510] “Justice!” “Thrones of the Furies!” Perhaps some father, or mother, in new sorrow, may cry out these words piteously, now that the house of Justice is falling. [515]

There is a time when fear is good and ought to remain seated as a guardian of the heart. It is profitable to learn wisdom under strain. [520] But who, if he did not train his heart in fear, either city or mortal, would still revere justice in the same way? [525]

Do not approve of a lawless life or one subject to a tyrant. The god grants power to moderation in every form, but he oversees other matters in different ways. [530] I have a timely word of advice: arrogance is truly the child of impiety, but from health of soul [535] comes happiness, dear to all, much prayed for.

And as for the whole matter, I say to you: respect the altar of Justice and do not, looking to profit, dishonor it by spurning with godless foot; [540] for punishment will come upon you. The appointed fulfilment remains. Therefore, let a man rightly put first in honor the reverence owed to his parents, [545] and have regard for attentions paid to guests welcomed in his house.

Whoever is just willingly and without compulsion [550] will not lack happiness; he will never be utterly destroyed. But I say that the man who boldly transgresses, amassing a great heap unjustly —by force, in time, he will strike his sail, [555] when trouble seizes him as the yardarm is splintered.

He calls on those who hear nothing and he struggles in the midst of the whirling waters. The god laughs at the hot-headed man, [560] seeing him, who boasted that this would never happen, exhausted by distress without remedy and unable to surmount the cresting wave. He wrecks the happiness of his earlier life on the reef of Justice, and he perishes unwept, unseen. [565]

[Enter, in procession, Athena, a herald, the jury of the Areopagus, a crowd of citizens. Orestes removes to the place appointed for the accused. Apollo appears after Athena's first speech.]

ATHENA

Herald, give the signal and restrain the crowd; and let the piercing Tyrrhenian¹³ trumpet, filled with human breath, send forth its shrill blare to the people! For while this council-hall is filling, [570] it is good to be silent, and for my ordinances to be learned, by the whole city for everlasting time, and by these appellants, so that their case may be decided well.

[Enter Apollo.]

CHORUS

Lord Apollo, be master of what is yours. Say what part you have in this matter. [575]

¹²A native of the city of Argos, on the Peloponnesus south of Corinth.

¹³The Etruscans were regarded as the inventors of the trumpet.

APOLLO

I have come both to bear witness—for this man was a lawful suppliant and a guest of my sanctuary, and I am his purifier from bloodshed—and to be his advocate myself. I am responsible for the murder of his mother. [580] To Athena. Bring in the case, and, in accordance with your wisdom, decide it.

ATHENA

To the Furies. It is for you to speak—I am only bringing in the case; for the prosecutor at the beginning, speaking first, shall rightly inform us of the matter.

CHORUS

We are many, but we will speak briefly. [585] To Orestes. Answer our questions, one by one. Say first if you killed your mother.

ORESTES

I killed her. There is no denial of this.

CHORUS

Of the three falls that win the wrestling match, this one is already ours.

ORESTES

You make this boast over a man who is not down yet. [590]

CHORUS

You must, however, say how you killed her.

ORESTES

I will say it: with drawn sword in hand, I stabbed her in the throat.

CHORUS

By whom were you persuaded and on whose advice?

ORESTES

By the oracles of this god here; he is my witness.

CHORUS

The prophet directed you to kill your mother? [595]

ORESTES

Yes, and to this very hour, I do not blame my fortune.

CHORUS

But if the jury's vote catches hold of you, you'll soon speak differently.

ORESTES

I have good confidence. My father will send protection from his grave.

CHORUS

Put your confidence in the dead now, after you have killed your mother!

ORESTES

I do, for she was twice afflicted with pollution. [600]

CHORUS

How so? Teach the judges this.

ORESTES

By murdering her husband, she killed my father.

CHORUS

And so, although you are alive, she is free of pollution by her death.¹⁴

ORESTES

But why did you not drive her into exile, while she lived?

CHORUS

She was not related by blood to the man she killed. [605]

ORESTES

Then am I my mother's kin by blood?

CHORUS

How else could she have nurtured you, murderer, beneath her belt? Do you reject the nearest kinship, that of a mother?

ORESTES

Apollo, give your testimony now. Explain, on my behalf, whether I was justified in killing her. [610] For I do not deny that I did it, as it is done. But decide whether this bloodshed was, to your mind, just or not, so that I may inform the court.

APOLLO

I will speak justly before you, Athena's great tribunal,—since I am a prophet, I cannot lie. [615] I have never yet, on my oracular throne, said anything about a man or woman or city that Zeus, the father of the Olympians, did not command me to say.

Learn how strong this plea of justice is; and I tell you to obey the will of my father; [620] for an oath is not more powerful than Zeus.¹⁵

CHORUS

Zeus, as you say, gave you this oracular command, to tell Orestes here to avenge his father's murder but to take no account at all of the honor due his mother?

¹⁴She is freed from blood-guiltiness because her blood has been shed.

¹⁵The oath taken by the judges (line 489) may pronounce Orestes guilty as to the fact; but as his deed was done at the command of Zeus, whose representative is his son, Zeus therefore assumes all moral responsibility.

APOLLO

Yes, for it is not the same thing—the murder of a noble man, [625] honored by a god-given scepter, and his murder indeed by a woman, not by rushing arrows sped from afar, as if by an Amazon, but as you will hear, Pallas, and those who are sitting to decide by vote in this matter. [630]

She received him from the expedition, where he had for the most part won success beyond expectation,¹⁶ in the judgment of those favorable to him; then, as he was stepping from the bath, on its very edge, she threw a cloak like a tent over it, fettered her husband in an embroidered robe, and cut him down. [635]

This was his death, as I have told it to you—the death of a man wholly majestic, commander of the fleet. As for that woman, I have described her in such a way as to whet the indignation of the people who have been appointed to decide this case.

CHORUS

Zeus gives greater honor to a father's death, according to what you say; [640] yet he himself bound his aged father, Cronus. How does this not contradict what you say? I call on you as witnesses [*turning to the judges*] to hear these things.

APOLLO

Oh, monsters utterly loathed and detested by the gods! Zeus could undo fetters, there is a remedy for that, [645] and many means of release. But when the dust has drawn up the blood of a man, once he is dead, there is no return to life. For this, my father has made no magic spells, although he arranges all other things, turning them up and down; [650] nor does his exercise of force cost him a breath.

CHORUS

See how you advocate acquittal for this man! After he has poured out his mother's blood on the ground, shall he then live in his father's house in Argos? Which of the public altars shall he use? [655] What purification rite of the brotherhoods¹⁷ will receive him?

APOLLO

I will explain this, too, and see how correctly I will speak. The mother of what is called her child is not the parent, but the nurse of the newly-sown embryo.¹⁸ The one who mounts is the parent,

¹⁶Literally "trafficked better"—"better" either "than his foes, the Trojans"; or "beyond expectation" (since he was guilty of the death of his daughter); or possibly, without any implicit comparative force, simply "well."

¹⁷Kinsfolk, actual or fictitious, were united in phratritai, with common worship, offerings, and festivals.

¹⁸This notion appears in Egypt (Diodorus Siculus 1. 80, whose source was Hecataeus, an older contemporary of Aeschylus) and in various Greek authors later than Aeschylus, e.g. Eur. Or. 552; Frag. 1064, the Pythagoreans cited by Stobaeus (Hense ii. 72). The passage in the play has been invoked as evidence that the Athenians of the fifth century B.C.

whereas she, as a stranger for a stranger, [660] preserves the young plant, if the god does not harm it. And I will show you proof of what I say: a father might exist without a mother. A witness is here at hand, the child of Olympian Zeus, who was not nursed in the darkness of a womb, [665] and she is such a child as no goddess could give birth to.

For my part, Pallas, as in all other matters, as I know how, I will make your city and people great; and I have sent this man as a suppliant to your sanctuary so that he may be faithful for all time, [670] and that you, goddess, might win him and those to come after him as a new ally and so that these pledges of faith might remain always, for the later generations of these people to cherish.

ATHENA

Am I to assume that enough has been said, and shall I now command these jurors to cast an honest vote according to their judgment? [675]

CHORUS

For our part, every bolt is already shot. But I am waiting to hear how the trial will be decided.

ATHENA

Why not? As for you, [*To Apollo and Orestes*] how shall I arrange matters so that I will not be blamed by you?

APOLLO

You have heard what you have heard; and as you cast your ballots, keep the oath sacred in your hearts, friends. [680]

ATHENA

Hear now my ordinance, people of Attica, as you judge the first trial for bloodshed. In the future, even as now, this court of judges will always exist for the people of Aegeus. And this Hill of Ares, the seat and camp of the Amazons, [685] when they came with an army in resentment against Theseus, and in those days built up this new citadel with lofty towers to rival his, and sacrificed to Ares, from which this rock takes its name, the Hill of Ares:¹⁹ [690] on this hill, the reverence of the citizens, and fear, its kinsman, will hold them back from doing wrong by day and night alike, so long as they themselves do not pollute the laws with evil streams; if you stain clear water with filth, you will never find a drink. [695]

were upholding, some the ancient mode of tracing descent from the mother (the argument of the Erinyes); others, the patrilinear theory advocated by Apollo.

¹⁹The Amazons, as "daughters of Ares," invaded Attica to take vengeance on Theseus either, as one story reports, because he had carried off Antiope, their queen; or because he did not enclose the hill within the confines of his newly-founded city, which included the Acropolis. Aeschylus apparently rejects the legend whereby the Hill of Ares had its name from the fact that Ares was here tried for the murder of Halirrothius, a son of Poseidon, and acquitted by a tie vote of the gods, his judges.

Neither anarchy nor tyranny—this I counsel my citizens to support and respect, and not to drive fear wholly out of the city. For who among mortals, if he fears nothing, is righteous? Stand in just awe of such majesty, [700] and you will have a defense for your land and salvation of your city, such as no man has, either among the Scythians or in Pelops' realm. I establish this tribunal, untouched by greed, worthy of reverence, quick to anger, awake on behalf of those who sleep, a guardian of the land. [705]

I have prolonged this advice to my citizens for the future; but now you must rise and take a ballot, and decide the case under the sacred obligation of your oath. My word has been spoken. [710] [*The judges rise from their seats and cast their ballots one by one during the following altercation.*]

CHORUS

And I counsel you not to dishonor us in any way, since our company can be a burden to your land.

APOLLO

And I, for my part, command you to stand in fear of the oracles, both mine and Zeus', and not cause them to be unfulfilled.

CHORUS

Although it is not your office, you have respect for deeds of bloodshed. [715] You will prophesy, dispensing prophecies that are no longer pure.

APOLLO

Then was my father mistaken in any way in his purposes when Ixion, who first shed blood, was a suppliant?

CHORUS

You do argue! But if I fail to win the case, I will once more inflict my company on this land as a burden. [720]

APOLLO

But you have no honor, among both the younger and the older gods. I will win.

CHORUS

You did such things also in the house of Pheres, when you persuaded the Fates to make mortals free from death.²⁰

²⁰In atonement for having shed blood (according to one legend, that of the dragon at Delphi, according to another, that of the Cyclopes), Apollo was compelled by Zeus to serve as a thrall in the house of Admetus, son of Pheres. An ancient story, adopted by Aeschylus, reported that, when the time came for Admetus to die, Apollo, in gratitude for the kindness shown him by the prince, plied the Fates with wine (l. 728) and thus secured their consent that Admetus should be released from death on condition that some one should voluntarily choose to die in his stead. Euripides, in his *Alcestis*, tells how, when both the father and the mother of Admetus refused to give up to him the remnant of their days, his wife Alcestis died for him.

APOLLO

Is it not right, then, to do good for a worshipper, [725] especially when he is in need?

CHORUS

It was you who destroyed the old dispensations when you beguiled the ancient goddesses with wine.

APOLLO

Soon, when you have lost the case, you will spit out your venom—no great burden to your enemies. [730] [*The balloting is now ended.*]

CHORUS

Since you, a youth, would ride me down, an old woman, I am waiting to hear the verdict in the case, since I have not decided whether to be angry at the city.

ATHENA

It is my duty to give the final judgment and I shall cast my vote for Orestes. [735] For there was no mother who gave me birth; and in all things, except for marriage, whole-heartedly I am for the male and entirely on the father's side. Therefore, I will not award greater honor to the death of a woman who killed her husband, the master of the house. [740] Orestes wins, even if the vote comes out equal.

Cast the ballots out of the urns, as quickly as possible, you jurors who have been assigned this task. [*The ballots are turned out and separated.*]

ORESTES

O Phoebus Apollo! How will the trial be decided?

CHORUS

O Night, our dark Mother, do you see this? [745]

ORESTES

Now I will meet my end by hanging, or I will live.

CHORUS

Yes, and we will be ruined, or maintain our honors further.

APOLLO

Correctly count the ballots cast forth, friends, and be in awe of doing wrong in the division of the votes. Error of judgment is the source of much distress, [750] and the cast of a single ballot has set upright a house. [*The ballots are shown to Athena.*]

ATHENA

This man is acquitted on the charge of murder, for the numbers of the casts are equal. [*Apollo disappears.*]

ORESTES

Pallas, savior of my house! I was deprived of a fatherland, and it is you who have given me a home there again. [755] The Hellenes will say, “The man is an Argive once again, and lives in his father’s heritage, by the grace of Pallas and of Loxias and of that third god, the one who accomplishes everything, the savior”—the one who, having respect for my father’s death, [760] saves me, seeing those advocates of my mother.

I will return to my home now, after I swear an oath to this land and to your people²¹ for the future and for all time to come, that no captain of my land [765] will ever come here and bring a well-equipped spear against them. For I myself, then in my grave, will accomplish it by failure without remedy, making their marches spiritless and their journeys ill-omened, [770] so that those who violate my present oath will repent their enterprise. But while the straight course is preserved, and they hold in everlasting honor this city of Pallas with their allied spears, I will be the more well-disposed to them.

And so farewell—you and the people who guard your city. [775] May your struggle with your enemies let none escape, bringing you safety and victory with the spear! *[Exit.]*

After persuading the Erinyes to accept the verdict, Athena leads a procession accompanying them to a new home, where they are now called “Semnai” (Venerable Ones) and are to be honored by the Athenians to ensure the city’s prosperity. Athena also declares that henceforth tied juries will result in the defendant being acquitted, as mercy should always take precedence over harshness.

²¹The passage points to the league between Athens and Argos, formed after Cimon was ostracized (461 B.C.) and the treaty with Sparta denounced.