

Adam Connor

University of Vermont

Department of Classics

acconnor@uvm.edu

The Poetics of Purification: Orestes' Spiritual Renewal (*Eum.* 235-43)

Aeschylus' grand trilogy, the *Oresteia*, was a landmark of literary accomplishment in the ancient world. It addresses and explores a range of conflicts universal to the human condition, including questions of divinity, emotion, family, and justice. The action of the plot revolves around a chain of vengeful murders within the house of Atreus. En route to the Trojan War, the Argive king Agamemnon has his own daughter Iphigeneia sacrificed. In retribution for this act, Agamemnon's wife Clytaemnestra murders him upon his return from the war. In turn Orestes resolves to slay Clytaemnestra, his own mother, in order to avenge the death of his father. The final play of the trilogy, the *Eumenides*, features the pursuit of Orestes for his crime by the avenging spirits, the Erinyes. Rather than facing a bloody end at the hands of vengeance, however, Orestes is acquitted in a civic trial under the auspices of Athena. Thus Aeschylus uses the character of Orestes as a vehicle to introduce the notion of purification. Upon his arrival in Athens, Orestes proclaims to Athena with remarkable confidence and clarity that he has been cleansed of his sin (*Eum.* 235-43). The polished eloquence and structural congruence of this speech indicate Orestes' calmness and his faith in the justice to come.

These nine lines, spoken before the temple of Athena, mark a shift in setting from Delphi to Athens, the only geographical transition in the play. Orestes explains that he has travelled far and wide to reach the city, and he implores Athena to accept him kindly, now that his blood-taint has been washed away. The first visibly apparent significance of this prayer is the care with which the structure is laid out. Aeschylus is fond of employing ring composition in passages of particular importance, and this speech features an exemplary case. Lines 235-236 resonate with lines 241-242 in four major respects. The first word of 235 is ἄνασσ' and the last word of 242 is θεά, both in the vocative case addressing Athena. Secondly, Aeschylus places the word λοξίου in the exact same sedes, or metrical position, of line 235 and line 241. Furthermore λοξίου, which is a possessive genitive referring to Apollo, is accompanied in both cases by a noun denoting the instructions that he gave to Orestes in Delphi (κελεύμασιν in 235 and ἐφετμάς in 241). Finally, in both places the cluster of words composed of λοξίου and the noun of instruction is followed immediately by a verb of motion in the line below indicating Orestes' present arrival (ἦκω in 236 and πρόσειμι in 242). Aeschylus places both of these verbs at the beginning of the line, and ἦκω is actually enjambed as the final word of its sentence, drawing attention to the fact that Orestes has arrived at a new location and the scene has shifted.

Thus, with this high degree of parallelism between the opening and closing of Orestes' speech, Aeschylus creates a cohesive structural frame. Lines 237-240 are bookended neatly within this frame and they, too, display a consistent symmetry of words. Each of these lines in a row features a pair of words that are joined by a conjunction, related in sense, and positioned analogously. In all four cases, one word of

the pair is the second word in the line and the other is the penultimate word in the same line, with the conjunction that links them being the only item between them (except for the slight variation of line 238, where the conjunction τε comes after both words and the item that separates the pair is ἤδη). In line 237, as well as line 238, the pair consists of two modifiers agreeing with Orestes in the accusative case. The former pair is joined by the word οὐδ' and the latter, as noted above, by τε. Lines 239 and 240 both feature a pair of nouns relating to Orestes' travels and both pairs are connected by the word καί. The nouns in 239 are both dative plural and those in 240 are both accusative singular.

This carefully constructed succession of grammatical pairs lends a smooth and steady rhythm to Orestes' prayer. There is nothing erratic about his language; he is composed and resolute. There is profound balance within each line, while an overall sense of unity is achieved by the framing of the ring formation. This illustrates how calm and collected Orestes is, even as the Erinyes continue to pursue him. This cool confidence marks a significant change in temperament for Orestes. Up until this point in the *Eumenides*, he has spoken only three lines, in which he pleads for Apollo's aid at Delphi. Those words lack the self-assurance found in this passage, and the fact that he feels the need to coax Apollo must imply some degree of uncertainty in his mind. Prior to those three lines, the last Orestes is heard from in the trilogy is at the end of the *Libation Bearers*, immediately after he has slain his mother. At this point Orestes is not only disturbed by the act he has just committed, but even feels as if he's going mad, as "fear" (φόβος; *Ch.* 1024) and "his uncontrollable wits" (φρένες δύσαρκτοι; *Ch.* 1024) begin to conquer him. When he realizes that the wrathful Erinyes are fiercely pursuing

him, his terror is only magnified and he flees the scene in a panic. Thus the contrast of Orestes' manner as he reaches Athens reveals a profound transformation.

This change in Orestes is significant because, with the exception of the three lines spoken at Delphi (which are less revelatory), the last words Orestes spoke seemed to show him verging on a nervous breakdown. In addition to the fear instilled by the Erinyes, some muddled sense of guilt must have been eating at Orestes' conscience. For although he believed that it was just to avenge his father's death, he hesitated before going through with the murder of his mother. He even proclaimed directly to her that, while she must receive retribution, it was "not right" (μή χρεών; *Ch.* 930) for him to perform such a deed. He followed through with it, though, his resolve having been strengthened by the urgings of Apollo. In fact Apollo warns Orestes that if he does not avenge his father's death, he will have to face "the wrath of malignant beings" (δυσφρόνων μηνίματα; *Ch.* 278), as well as "plagues" (νόσους; *Ch.* 279). On the other hand, Clytaemnestra advises her son to beware "the dogs that bear his mother's wrath" (μητρόζ ἐγκότους κύνας; *Ch.* 924). Thus, it seems that Orestes is damned if he does and damned if he doesn't: Apollo claims that the Furies will haunt him if he lets his father's death go unavenged, but then when he does avenge it, the Furies pursue him for bringing about his mother's death. In this way Orestes embodies the classic tragic hero, ensnared in a fate that is beyond his control.

The fact that Orestes chooses the path of killing his mother explains why Apollo is so central in Orestes' speech upon reaching Athens. Up to this point Apollo has been Orestes' divine guidance and support. He is the god that conveyed to Orestes the importance of carrying out vengeance against his mother. Because he is "the prophet of

his father Zeus" (Διός προφήτης . . . πατρός; *Eu.* 19), it might seem that Apollo speaks the will of the supreme authority. However, while this may be the case to some extent, Apollo certainly also acts independently and out of passion. For example, in the first play of the trilogy Cassandra recalls that Apollo "was breathing desire as he aggressively pursued her" (ἦν παλαιστής κάρτ' ἐμοί πνέων χάριν; *Ag.* 1206). Thus it is not completely apparent whence Apollo's motive derived for offering guidance to Orestes. Yet regardless of whether he was acting on behalf of a higher power or his own volition, Apollo was the one who ushered Orestes first to Delphi and then to Athens. Therefore Orestes pays him due recognition in his invocation to Athena. As seen above, the word λοξίου is placed centrally in the same metrical sedes both at the start and the finish of the prayer, indicating the importance of Apollo to Orestes' cause. Furthermore, in line 240 Orestes writes that he has crossed "land and sea" (χέρσον καὶ θάλασσαν), which recalls χθόνα . . . τε πόντον from Apollo's actual instructions in lines 76-7. Yet, while Apollo's influence is pervasive in this speech, Athena also receives special recognition. ἄνασσ' is the first word out of Orestes' mouth in line 235 and θεά is the last word of line 242, thus essentially framing the entire speech. Of course it is natural for Orestes to name the person whom he is addressing, but this also marks the beginning of an important shift of spotlight from Apollo to Athena. Although Apollo has guided Orestes thus far, it will be Athena who oversees the ultimate resolution of justice. It is for this reason that, upon receiving his acquittal later in the *Eumenides* (752-3), Orestes gives copious thanks to Athena but only mentions Apollo with a passing word. This apparent neglect is most likely attributable to Aeschylus' desire to avoid excessive complication. Apollo is the force of Delphi, the site of Orestes' ritual purification, and Athena is the force of Athens,

where justice is finally served.

Thus Aeschylus neatly divides the role of the gods toward Orestes, but the question still remains of how Orestes is drastically transformed from a cowering suppliant to a confident traveler. After his extensive journey from Delphi to Athens, he reemerges as an emboldened hero. In the third line of his address to Athena, he explains that no longer is he either "a suppliant seeking purification" or "one with an unclean hand" (οὐ προστρόπαιον οὐδ' ἀφοίβαντον χέρα; *Eu.* 237), a declaration which he repeats to her in line 445. There are two separate explanations for this purification that has occurred, both of which come from Orestes himself. The first is that the taint of his blood-guilt was purged ritualistically. In line 448 Orestes actually states that he was required by "law" (νόμος) to be sprinkled with the blood of a sacrificial victim, and that he did so numerous times. He also explains in line 283 that his pollution "was driven out by purification rituals of swine sacrifice" (καθαρμοῖς ἤλάθη χοιροκτόνοις) at Apollo's temple in Delphi.

The other explanation Orestes proposes is that he was purified gradually through his wanderings. He claims that the blood guilt is "fading from his hand" (μαραίνεται χερός; *Eu.* 280) and that "time cleanses all things" (χρόνος καθαιρεῖ πάντα; *Eu.* 286). This relates to the notion of "learning through suffering," or πάθει μάθος, a principle that the chorus attributes to Zeus in the first play of the trilogy (*Ag.* 177). Orestes has suffered the guilt of having killed his own mother, as well as the relentless torment of the Furies for months over land and sea. Perhaps after enduring such a punishment, Orestes deserves some form of enlightenment or redemption. Whatever the case, it seems that Aeschylus intentionally intertwined these two separate means of purification — ritualistic and ethical — in order to make it

somewhat ambiguous to the audience which one was more important. He did not muddle the clarity of the work by doing so, but rather left the impression that each cause is equally necessary to the process of purification. One should observe the formal rituals, but true healing really comes with time.

After journeying from Delphi to Athens and performing the necessary ritual purifications Orestes' sin has been cleansed, but not yet utterly expunged. "His taint of guilt is slumbering" (βρίζει γὰρ αἷμα; *Eu.* 280) and the Furies continue to pursue him. Therefore he is still on his guard looking out for Athena as he awaits the τέλος δίκης (*Eu.* 243). These two words could be translated here as either the "completion of the trial" or the "fulfillment of justice." Each option seems equally viable, because the notion of justice and that of the actual court are both crucial to the *Oresteia*. The bloody trilogy finally culminates with a successful civic trial that acquits Orestes, thus extolling the power of benign justice. And while justice is perhaps the most pervasive theme throughout the *Oresteia*, its definition seems to have been transformed by the end. Prior to the trial in Athens, each character has a narrow vision of justice, dependent on personal suffering and requiring further suffering of others. Clytaemnestra defends the murder of her husband, calling it "Justice for my child" (τῆς ἐμῆς παιδὸς Δίκην; *Ag.* 1432). Orestes in turn defends the murder of his mother, saying it was done "not without justice" (οὐκ ἄνευ δίκης; *Ch.* 1027). The chorus expresses their disgust at this savage perversion of justice at the end of Agamemnon: "fate is sharpening justice for another act of injury" (δίκην δ' ἐπ' ἄλλο πρᾶγμα θηγάνει βλάβης . . . μοῖρα; *Ag.* 1535-6). Therefore when Athena, symbol of wisdom, oversees the trial of Orestes, it marks a new brand of δίκη, or "justice," in the *Oresteia*, whereby the chain of unnecessary suffering may

finally come to an end. The Erinyes become venerable goddesses with a respectable role in Athens, and Orestes may return home a hero. Aeschylus artistically signals this thematic sea change through the language of Orestes in his invocation to Athena (*Eum.* 235-43), and in this way he foreshadows the peaceful conclusion of the trilogy. After finally emerging from the darkness of misery and uncertainty, Aeschylus presents to the audience a tremendous katharsis.

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