

# Battle of the sexes: gender roles in aeschylus' "the eumenides"



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In the third and final play of The Oresteia trilogy, The Eumenides, Apollo testifies for Orestes and the Furies testify for the late Clytemnestra in a trial that will decide whether or not Orestes is guilty. In this play, a new system of justice centered around rationale and testimony is established. However, parallel to the establishment of a new justice system is a leap towards a society in which claims of men are have more authority over those of women, male-dominated society. The new rule of law also comes to support the marginalization of motherhood and therefore women in general. In this essay, I shall argue that in Aeschylus' The Eumenides, the battle of the genders, with the Furies representing parental equality and Apollo representing male dominance. The loss on the Furies' front defines a new social order that weakens the role of the mother and women in society.

The old form of justice was one that valued the sanctity of the parent-child bond and revenge when that familial bond was betrayed. Implemented by the Furies, the original justice system rationalized that both genders are equally important, and therefore, this system upheld the rights of the mother. The Furies exclaim that if the court does not favor them, injustice will be upon both sexes, and " caught unaware by pain, some father or mother now will cry" (Lines 606-608), as their system of justice places emphasis on the filial bond, not just the honor of motherhood. Also core to the Furies' belief is that children should " first honor [their] parents, then respect the guest" (Line 639-640), putting the value of family over any other bond. In the case of Orestes murdering Clytemnestra, the Furies do not view their advocacy of Clytemnestra as a way to side with only mothers, but instead as reinforcing justice within a family.

The Furies are adamant that a man who commits matricide, such as Orestes, is justified to be brutally punished. This notion conveys that the Furies strongly value kinship and the respect for the role of the mother. When Apollo questions the Furies, asking why they did not seek to punish “ a wife who kills her husband” (Line 235), referring to Clytemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon. The Furies respond to this inquiry by saying murdering a spouse “ isn’t killing one’s own flesh and blood” (Line 236), referring to the fact that unlike a mother and son, a husband and wife are not related by kin, therefore, the murder does not carry as much weight. One can clearly see that the Furies uphold the mother’s rights over those of the husband’s. The Furies then advocate that “ once a mother’s blood is spilled on the ground, it can’t return again, not ever” (Lines 294-296) and therefore that “[Orestes will] have to pay with [his] own blood for [Clytemnestra’s]” (Line 300).

Apollo, however, expresses a different view than the Furies. He argues using rhetoric heavily in favor of the male, based on the notion that a man has more stature and worth than a woman, and that marriage is a stronger bond than kinship. Apollo does not respect the Furies in general, let alone respect the Furies’ cause. First, he attacks the Furies and their cause. For example, he expresses his distaste for the female Furies by openly badmouthing them, calling them “ creatures [that] belong in caves with blood-befouled, blood-lapping lions” (Lines 216-217) and “ stinking, hideous filth, shunned by the gods” (Line 753). Apollo also assures Orestes by telling him, “ see how I’ve tamed, for now, these crazed hags” (Line 80). Apollo often utilizes animal imagery when describing the Furies, conveying that he doesn’t view the goddesses as the divinities they are, but instead as lower-ranking beasts.

Beyond his disgust for the Furies' nature, Apollo also announces his despise for their justice system by telling them, "it's clear to me you're stirred by utter outrage by the one crime while the other doesn't move you in the least" (Lines 248-251). Explaining the Furies' overlooking of Agamemnon's murder, Apollo replaces the power of the filial bond with the power of matrimony, saying that "marriage is a thing of destiny, greater than any oath" and that marriage is "the deepest and most intimate bond of all" (Lines 242-245). Thus, Apollo rejects the blood-is-thicker-than-water ideology of the Furies' system of justice and punishment.

In addition to abusing the Furies, Apollo also constructs an argument against them: The marriage bond is more important than the filial bond. He makes an argument against the Furies' belief parental equality when he tells the Furies that "the so-called mother of the child isn't the child's begetter, but only a sort of nursing soil for the new-sown seed" (Lines 769-771), which means Apollo does not see Clytemnestra as a parent. In addition, Apollo promotes the power of the father by stating that "the man, the one on top, is the true parent, while [the mother], a stranger, fosters a stranger's sprout" (Lines 771-772). To add ethos to his claim, Apollo alludes to Athena as the epitome of a child who didn't need a mother. He explains that "a father can give birth without a mother" (Line 775), because Athena never "grew within the darkness of a womb" (Line 778). By using the sample of Athena to confirm his argument that a father can still be a father in the absence of his mother, Apollo strengthens the power of the patriarchy and weakens the rights of matriarchy. Therefore, Apollo argues that one, Clytemnestra is

guilty for killing Agamemnon and Orestes is innocent for killing Clytemnestra, and two, the mother does not have a large role in a family.

Athena has a different viewpoint from both the Furies and Apollo. Unlike Apollo and Orestes, she acknowledges the Furies' wisdom and reveres the Furies. Athena recognizes the importance of the Furies as goddesses, as she tells them, "no house will ever grow without your blessing" (Line 1042). When the Furies express their anger towards Athena's verdict to exonerate Orestes, Athena tells the Furies, "I'll put up with your anger, for you are much older than I am [...] therefore, so much wiser" (Lines 987-988). Athena then offers the Furies a deal, "to do well and receive well, and well honored, have [their] own share of this land the gods love well" (Lines 1011-1012), for she does not try to eliminate the Furies, but instead give them a different position in the new justice system, the job of blessing the people of the Athens.

Even though unlike Apollo, Athena interacts with the Furies with reverence, Athena is prejudiced to support Apollo and Orestes, advocates of the patriarchy, rather than with the female Furies, supporters of parental equality and kinship. Athena is swayed by Apollo's argument about parentage, that the father takes on the role of the parent, while the mother merely carries the baby. She cites that "no mother gave me birth" (Line 855), and that "I am entirely my father's child" (Line 857). Athena, being the daughter of a single male parent, leader of the gods Zeus, confirms that like her, Orestes is also the child of only a male parent, as Clytemnestra does not fulfill the role of a parent. In addition, she believes that the father has the significant role in the family as the "guardian of the house" (Line 859), a <https://assignbuster.com/battle-of-the-sexes-gender-roles-in-aeschylus-the-eumenides/>

comparable belief to those of Apollo and Orestes. Therefore, it is her innate background as the child of a single male parent, Zeus, that leads her to support Apollo and Orestes in the trial. Athena does not support marriage, as she mentions that “ in all things but marriage I wholeheartedly approve the male” (Lines 855-857), but she praises men in all other platforms, having been the daughter of only a father. She is therefore still convinced that Clytemnestra is guilty for killing her husband, by saying, “ this is why the killing of a woman who killed her husband [...] can have no overriding claim on me” (Lines 858-860). Even though she does not tie into the concept of wedlock, she sides with Apollo’s argument that Clytemnestra’s ties to Agamemnon through marriage make her guilty and her actions unjust. Athena is convinced by Apollo’s rhetoric on the power of marriage. The goddess of wisdom and a symbol of feminine power and persuasion, Athena, falls a victim to Apollo’s masculine rhetorical devices and ultimately bows before the patriarchy.

Aeschylus’ *The Eumenides* on the surface is a battle between a seemingly outdated, blood-for-blood form of justice and a novel, democratic rule of law. The trial and Athena’s final verdict However, what lies beneath this central theme of justice is the battle between the sexes, as the patriarchy forces rise in power while the matriarchal side struggles to gain even a mere standing in the family unit. With the shift in power from the family to other platforms like marriage and male-only parenthood, the new form of justice reflects the alienation of the mother from a family and the marginalization of women in society. Ultimately, this trial implies a new social order.