

"the house is
breathing murder":
the cycle of pollution
in the oresteia



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The Oresteia opens with a plea from a watchman: " I ask the gods for release from this misery" (3). This petition reveals the plight of many Aeschylus' characters. The curse on the house of Atreus is one of corruption, and it is a curse that cannot be broken by the mortal members of the house. They are the ones who have caused it, and they now are part of a cycle of misery and death. Only gods can fix the misery of those in the house of Atreus. In the Oresteia, Aeschylus uses a cycle of pollution in the house of Atreus to construct the need for intervention from a greater power - a god - so that the cycle can be broken, and the house of Atreus can be purified.

In Agamemnon, the language Aeschylus uses in Cassandra's speeches illustrates the theme of pollution in the house of Atreus. Before entering the house to receive her death she speaks to the Chorus:

CASSANDRA. The house is breathing murder, with the drip of blood.

CHORUS. How? Not so! That is the smell of sacrifices at the hearth.

CASSANDRA. The vapor is just like that from a tomb; it's so evident!

CHORUS. No Syrian splendors for the house in your description! (37)

Cassandra's mention of the house itself " breathing murder" not only foreshadows her own death and the death of Agamemnon, but it foreshadows all coming deaths in the trilogy. In relation to the impending murders, Cassandra mentions house instead of mentioning the murderer herself. Moreover, she describes the house as " breathing," as if it is living, and as if the house itself is the cause of the murders. This brings to mind the broader issue of the trilogy: the curse on the house of Atreus. The language

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Aeschylus uses to describe the house, specifically, "breathing murder, with the drip of blood . . . vapor just like that from a tomb," is reminiscent of pollution. In the case of the house of Atreus, the house is polluted by a cycle of corruption and murder. Agamemnon killed Clytemnestra's daughter, so Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon, and as Cassandra predicts, Clytemnestra will be killed, and the cycle of death and corruption will continue. Cassandra's speech also suggests the necessity of the gods in breaking this cycle.

In the above passage and in the rest of Cassandra's speech, the Chorus does not believe what she prophesies. This is her punishment from the god Apollo. Although she can prophesize, she "could convince nobody of anything" (34). This curse on Cassandra emphasizes the important role that the gods play in the trilogy. Because nobody believes Cassandra, she and Agamemnon cannot be saved, and the cycle of death will continue. Cassandra's curse keeps her from being able to stop her own death even though she knows it is coming. That a god put this curse on her illustrates their power, and suggests that they are the ones that affect the fate of mortals and will be necessary in ending the curse on the house of Atreus. The gods play an increasingly important part in the lives of characters in the next two plays, as the theme a cycle of pollution continues.

The cycle of pollution in the house of Atreus is extended further in Libation Bearers - this time by Orestes. Orestes' justification for killing Clytemnestra is that she killed his father. He hopes it will end the cycle of death in his house. Orestes believes that his killing was justified, while Clytemnestra's was not. However, there are many parallels between Orestes and

Clytemnestra. Both displayed the bodies of their victims in public, displayed
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the robe that ensnared Agamemnon, and suggested that a god inspired the killing. Most significantly, both Orestes and his mother believe they have done what is just, and that what they did will finally end the cycle of violence. Orestes states, " I proclaim and tell my friends that it was not without justice that I killed my mother, the pollution who killed my father and an abomination to the gods" (80). In this statement Orestes claims the murder of his mother is justified because she killed his father and caused pollution in their house. Clytemnestra argues a similar point about Agamemnon: "[Agamemnon] took no special account, just as if it were the death of an animal from his teeming woolly flocks of sheep, when he sacrificed my own daughter . . . is not he the one you should have driven from the land in penalty for pollution?" (40). Clytemnestra justifies the murder of Agamemnon by saying that he polluted their home by killing her daughter. Orestes' similarities to Clytemnestra are significant because they suggest that, although Orestes believes he is just, as Clytemnestra did, he is still perpetuating the cycle of pollution in the house of Atreus just like Clytemnestra. This is further evinced by the appearance of the Gorgons to Orestes at the end of the play. The Gorgons are a consequence for Orestes actions, just as he was a consequence of Clytemnestra's actions. Because of this, the chorus begins to doubt that Orestes has ended the cycle. They recount the series of calamities that have passed, including Orestes as a part of the cycle.

Children devoured began the first, misery hard and cruel; second were a husband's sufferings, a king's, and slaughter in a bath was his death for the Achaeans' leader in war; now in turn a third has come from somewhere to

bring safety - or should I say death? Where indeed will fulfillment be, where will lulling asleep stop the energy of Ruin? (81)

The way that Orestes is included in this recount of the cycle implies that is not the end of the cycle but just another perpetuator. While the Chorus first believed that Orestes brought safety and an end of the curse on the house, after the Gorgons appearance they suggest that Orestes only brings more death. Aeschylus ends Libation Bearers in chaos, asking from where will order come and setting up the next play to provide the answer, which is, of course, the gods.

In Eumenides, the theme of pollution is brought up once again, this time by the furies. They claim that Clytemnestra's blood is still on Orestes hands, even though he believes Apollo has purified him.

We think we are straight in our justice: no anger from us comes against those who hold out pure hands, and each walks through his life without harm; but to any who sin like this man here and conceals bloody hands, we appear as true witnesses in support of the dead, exacting payment for bloodshed with authority. (94)

The furies state that Orestes has not been purified and they call for justice. The members of the house of Atreus thought what they were doing was in the name of justice, but it, in fact, only perpetuated a curse that caused more death. This constructs the necessity for the intervention of a greater force - the goddess Athena. While Athena calls for justice like the other characters in the trilogy, she goes about it completely differently. She does not blindly resort to violence because, rationally, she realizes Orestes fate is <https://assignbuster.com/the-house-is-breathing-murder-the-cycle-of-pollution-in-the-oresteia/>

not for one person to decide: " to judge this matter is greater than any mortal thinks" (98). Although the vote on Orestes guilt ends in a tie, what is significant is the fact that Athena used trial instead of violence on Orestes, allowing the curse to be broken, and the house of Atreus to be purified.

The end to the cycle of violence by the goddess Athena, illustrates the need for rationality to end the brutality that had gone on for generations. Because of the intervention of the goddess Athena, the house of Atreus was purified, and the tragedy ends in a non-tragic way. Aeschylus uses the cycle of pollution to create chaos in the house of Atreus and a need for the intervention of a greater power. This intervention allows the chaotic and death-filled trilogy to resolve in order and harmony.