

The significance of the parados of the oresteia



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Aeschylus' *Oresteia* is undebatably one of antiquity's greatest surviving tragedies. Driven by the universal struggles of justice versus injustice, fear versus obligation and parent versus child, the play follows one ill-fated family through the passion, hatred and destruction that, through ultimate pain and suffering, eventually purges the lineage and restores honor to their name. Preluded by generations of domestic homicide, adultery and brutality, the *Oresteia* shows the purification and redemption of the house of Argeus. The play directly takes place after the Trojan war. Helen has been kidnapped, Menelaus enraged, Ifigenia sacrificed, war waged, and Troy massacred. The first play in the series, *Agamemnon*, opens upon a lone sentry gazing out across the Greek countryside pining for the loss of his king and the rise of the queen Clytemnestra into absolute power. In her husband's absence she had taken Argos into her embittered, power-starved hands, undermined his authority and driven her citizens to hate her and fear the future. The sentry sees a beacon in the distance, his sign that the Greeks have been triumphant and rejoices at the thought of his master's return home. This brief but emotional prologue immediately establishes the period, setting and the emotional overtures of the tragedy. In a few short lines, the sentry conveys the anxieties and fears of an entire city. He at once shows the love the people hold for Agamemnon and the contempt they feel towards Clytemnestra who has usurped her husband and driven the city of Argos into the ground with her tyranny and hatred. The prologue quickly segues into the grand parados-choral entrance. The audience is now overcome by the beauty and spectacle of the whirling, dancing Chorus serenading them with over two hundred lines of lyrical verse. The dazzling display sweeps the audience into the action of the play with a highly effective but now

completely lost convention that, while relaying the entire back story of the play within the context of exquisite, poetic song and intricate dance, gives a complicated social commentary on the characters of the play and the theological principals of the time. Fredrich Schiller discusses the importance of the choral segments of Greek tragedy such as the Oresteia's parados in "On the Use of the Chorus in Tragedy." He asserts that since the Chorus is a body within but above the dramatic action, "not an individual but a general conception," (474) it has the ability to step outside of the plot to make a specific comment upon the society represented. "It forsakes the contracted sphere of incidents," he explains "to dilate itself over the past and the future, over distant times and nations, and general humanity, to deduce the grand results of life, and pronounces the lessons of wisdom" (474). In bringing in the lyricism of the Chorus, the playwright heightens the poetry of the play and makes the action more credible. As Schiller describes, "with a bold lyrical freedom which ascends, as with a godlike step, to the topmost of worldly things; and it effects it in conjunction with the whole sensible influence of melody and rhythm, in tones and movements" (474). The Chorus transcends the plot and brings the audience out of the emotions of the play. As they are swept into the precise and poetic language, they are made conscious of the theatricalities they are witnessing and therefore more open to the underscored social reflection. "It is by holding asunder the different parts, and stepping between the passions with its composing views, that the Chorus restores us to our freedom, which would else be lost in the tempest" (474). Fredrich Nietzsche describes the Chorus in a slightly different manner. He looks more specifically at the Chorus' historical roots and thus determines its notability. He sees Greek tragedy as a marriage

between the gods Apollo and Dionysos; the chorus as the remnants of Dionysiac hedonism, and the episodes, language and themes as embodiments of Apollonian sensitivities. With its rigid structure and specific attributes, but freedom of beauty and artistic expression “tragedy is an Apollonian embodiment of Dionysiac insights and powers” (823). This especially pertains to Agamemnon since the typically Dionysiac chorus represents the old men or Argos left behind during the war. What was once the embodiment of freedom and pleasure, is in the case of the first play of the Oresteia, the epitome of Apollonian sense and linear logic. Although they are still performing the same songs and dances as the past epicurean Choruses, this group of impotent old men shows extreme mournfulness and sociopolitical sensibilities. Like Schiller, Nietzsche sees the Chorus as a vehicle to uplift the entire drama. Through their language and performance, the Chorus not only gives weight to the action, but serves to exalt the actors and characters. As Nietzsche explains, “it then became the task of the dithyrambic chorus so to excite the mood of the listeners that when the tragic hero appeared they would behold not the awkwardly masked man, but a figure born of their own rapt vision” (824). In contrast to Schiller, however, Nietzsche sees the Chorus as bringing the play up by sweeping the audience into their world through spectacle and language whereas Schiller sees these as means to opposite ends. In the case of Agamemnon’s Choral introduction, the extensive section elevates the play as it is more in depth than the average expositional passage. Within the finely crafted language and poeticism lies a commentary on the characters of the play and further all of society. The Chorus’ speech is predominately exposition retelling the history that has brought the play up to Clytemnestra’s power and Agamemnon’s

success. However, imbedded within their narrative is their opinion on the matters they are discussing. In their description of Clytemnestra, Agamemnon and their tangled pasts and situations, the Chorus gives a subjective view on the story and presents a romanticized view of the monarchs that is resonant of Nietzsche's later argument. Although the Chorus despises Clytemnestra and her power in the kingdom, they are equally as critical of Agamemnon and his escapades in Troy. They clearly disapprove of the war referring to it as a "quarrel over a woman of many men" (36). They see Helen as a common whore and pine for those who have lost their lives in such a futile and hollow struggle. This can be specifically seen in the use of animal imagery throughout the speech. The passage begins by referring to the brothers as eagles, screaming "in lonely agony of their nestlings, and all the watchful care they had spent guarding them" (36). This is referring to Menelaus' loss of his wife, but the phrase is ironic when looked at from Agamemnon's point of view. In his case, he has had to sacrifice his beloved daughter, his "nestling", "like a young goat" (41), to retrieve Helen for his brother. The Chorus recognizes this, saying while describing Ifigenia's sacrifice, "so [Agamemnon] dared to become his daughter's sacrificer to aid the war waged for a woman—first rites of deliverance for the ships" (41). The eagle metaphor and the Chorus' sympathy carries over to their description of the omen coordinated by the army's prophet. Here they describe the sacrifice of a pregnant rabbit to a pair of raptors "one black eagle, one white-tail... near the palace where all could see them as they fed on the womb'd gravid load of leverets, mother and all, pulled down to the hare's last course" (38). The unborn rabbits serve as a metaphor for the ill-fated Trojan people, massacred by the brutal eagles

Agamemnon and Menelaus. This conflict then becomes a battle not only between the Greeks and Romans, but Zeus and Artemis. Since it was Zeus who prompted the brothers to take up arms against the Trojans, Artemis is embittered by “ those winged hounds of her father who devour in sacrifice the unhappy cowering mother with her brood before they come to birth” (38). As Zeus is the “ god of guest-friends” (36) who demands reparations for an ill-behaved house-guest, Artemis demands revenge as the goddess of baby animals and virgins for the rabbits and Ifigenia. Thus, Aeschylus creates a complex set of interweaving metaphors that eventually leads to a critique of the Hellenistic principals that hold Zeus as the God of gods. Although the text is constantly interrupted by prayers to Zeus, the summation of the speech actually reflects a critique of the king of the gods. If Zeus supports Agamemnon and his brother in their ill-conceived exploits and the destruction of all those they had to sacrifice along the way, and the Chorus deems the expedition immoral, they must be passing judgment on the god. They also seem to be criticizing the superstition that leads men to take the advise of the prophets. The last lines of the passage speak about the pain caused by the prophecy and Ifigenia’s sacrifice: “ But Calcha’s divining art bore fruit; the scales of justice have come down and brought, with suffering, and understanding. You will learn the future when it happens. Till then, let it be. To otherwise is to have sorrow before you need. For it will come clear with the dawn’s light” (42). They are thus presenting a view of the religion that is based on uncovering and foiling fate for selfish ends and worshiping an unworthy supreme god. Throughout the parados of the first play of the Oresteia, Agamemnon, the chorus serves to, through beautiful, poetic language, uplift the play, draw the audience into the action, and make

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commentary on the action and society as a whole. As the passage runs its exposition through the story of Agamemnon and his disastrous past, it becomes much more than just a description, commenting on religion and the nature of leadership. The Chorus does not trust their monarchs or their gods and Aeschylus carefully shows this throughout their opening speech, embedding their true feelings within metaphors and poetry. The speech sets the overall tone for the play where no one can be trusted and the cycle of revenge and violence spins almost out of control. Works Cited Aeschylus. *The Oresteia*. Trans. David Greene and Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1989 Nietzsche, Friedrich. "The Birth of Tragedy." *Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 2E Ed, Bernard F. Dukore. US: Heinle and Heinle, 1974. 351-358 Schiller, Friedrich. "On the Use of Chorus in Tragedy." *Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. Ed, Bernard F. Dukore. US: Heinle and Heinle, 1974. 359-363