

# Orestes' sun: apollo's importance to the oresteia



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Spanning an elemental and violent family conflict, *The Oresteia* by Aeschylus is a trilogy containing the plays *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. As a whole, the trilogy deals with Agamemnon's murder at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra, Orestes' revenge on his father's killers, and his ultimate trial for matricide. Although not present throughout the whole trilogy and only a supporting character in *The Eumenides*, Apollo is the character that prompts Orestes to kill his mother and he also tries to save him at the trial by claiming half of the blame. In examining Apollo's contribution throughout the play, it can be inferred that Aeschylus uses Apollo as a narrative instrument in order to move the plot towards his desired end. This is why Apollo, though only a peripheral character, has such a substantial impact on the storyline.

In *The Libation Bearers*, Apollo is present only through the words of Orestes, making him an enigmatic character. "The big strength of Apollo's oracle will not forsake me," Orestes proudly proclaims as he explains his plans of revenge to his sister Electra. He continues to explain that "the god's urgency" drives him on. Apollo is used here as a background force that makes Orestes to go on with his revenge and kill his mother. As a god that has the power of prophecy, Apollo is an important instrument in the fulfillment of Orestes' destiny and the author's aim of the text. In order to make Orestes heed his prophecy, Apollo also foresees great hardship and punishment for Orestes if he decides not to kill his mother and avenge his father's death: "He said that else I must myself pay penalty/ with my own life, and suffer grim punishment." Both the danger of such repercussions and his own desire for revenge then prompt Orestes to kill Clytemnestra. Though

Apollo's words are not heard directly, but are reconstituted through Orestes' speech, they are powerful and threatening enough to make Orestes commit the ultimate act - matricide. It is surprising for the reader when Apollo makes his physical appearance in *The Eumenides*, where his first words are directed to Orestes: " I will not give you up." It is very unusual for a god to be this involved in the humans' lives and take such a responsibility for a mortal. His words are extremely powerful in this instance and they anticipate his complete involvement in Orestes' fate and ultimate trial. Apollo continues to reinforce his steadfastness with the following lines: " Through to the end standing/ your guardian, whether by your side or far away, / I shall not weaken towards your enemies." He is appointing himself as Orestes guardian and he manages to go through with his promise by keeping him safe.

Besides his interaction with Orestes, Apollo is also seen engaging in dialogue with the furies, Athena and the judges. His defense of Orestes is visible throughout the play. When the furies come to make Orestes pay for his matricide, Apollo is very direct and concise in stating his allegiance: " Get out, I tell you, go and leave this house." His defense of Orestes does not stem only from the fact that Orestes is his suppliant, but also from the fact that Apollo himself is indirectly guilty of the murder of Clytemnestra by urging Orestes to do the deed. The dialogue between Apollo and the furies also serves to show how each of them interpret justice. Apollo agrees that Orestes should have killed his mother to " exact the price for his father," yet the furies consider Orestes' murderous acts against his own blood to be even worse than Clytemnestra's crime against Agamemnon, " Such murder would

not be the shedding of kindred blood." Apollo continues to defend Orestes and even promises repercussions for the furies if they continue with their pursuit: "Keep after him then, and make more trouble for yourselves." Later, when the trial begins, Apollo makes a surprising appearance and claims half of the blame for the murder. "I come to testify. [...] I have also come to help him win his case. I bear responsibility for his mother's murder." Just as Orestes follows up by directly stating his guilt, "Yes, I killed her," so does Apollo, claiming a part of the blame for the murder. It is worthy to note the contrast between the fact that although Apollo indirectly urges Orestes to kill his mother, he comes and bears responsibility for the murder in a very direct way. In this instance Aeschylus uses the character of Apollo to give strength to Orestes' case and to have him ultimately acquitted.

It is also curious to analyze exactly how just and unbiased the trial is, as it is led by Athena. Apollo tries to appeal to her by bringing into discussion her origins and lack of a mother. "There she stands, / the living witness, daughter of Olympian Zeus, / she who was never fostered in the dark of the womb." Considering the fact that Athene's vote was the one that changed the course of the trial, Apollo's choice of words might have won him the favor of the goddess. Apollo also states his arguments in an eloquent manner, like a true lawyer, invoking the name of Zeus to reinforce his power as a prophet and implicitly to buttress the fact that Orestes did nothing wrong by following his prophecy. "This is justice," Apollo proclaims in front of the judges. As soon as he sees that the judges aren't moved by his account he resorts to insults "You foul animals," which serve to show how much winning the case for Orestes means for Apollo. He goes on to use a

threatening and somewhat ominous tone while talking with the judges "Watch." This simple sentence comprised of the verb to watch in the imperative mood serves to show the confidence that Apollo has in the fact that he will win the trial. "I shall win this suit" he continues, which might suggest that as a prophet he has an idea of what the result of the votes is going to be and is playing his hand accordingly, just as he did with Athena, as mentioned above. The same can be inferred from the following lines: "Shake out the votes accurately, Athenian friends. / be careful as you pick them up. Make no mistake. / In the lapse of judgement great disaster comes. The cast / of a single ballot can restore a house entire." His words are enigmatic and up for interpretation, exactly as a prophecy. There is an ominous undertone, almost like a threat that goes with these lines. As the god of prophecy, this may be interpreted as both a warning and a glimpse of the future that Apollo offers: the fact that Orestes is going to win the suit and his house is going to be restored.

Considering all of the above evidence, the reader can infer that Apollo is a narrative instrument employed by Aeschylus both in order to give Orestes a push to kill his mother and to conclude the trilogy with Orestes' victory over the furies. Although he is a minor character, his actions mold and shape the whole narrative. Moreover the fact that he is a god gives him legitimacy to act and also to have a strong influence in the trial, which is very convenient for the plot. His intervention is not only physical but also spiritual in a way, having his words conveyed to the audience through Orestes. Also the fact that he has the power of prophecy makes him the perfect peripheral character to help with the direction of the action and to bring the whole

narrative exactly where Aeschylus wanted. Looking closely at his interventions throughout both plays, either by being physically present or not, it is clear that he is used both to lead the action and to offer a “ happy ending” to Orestes. Apollo also offers more insight into the character of Orestes, as he refers to him as a “ noble man” multiple times. Moreover, his actions themselves speak for Orestes, for example, the fact that he goes to such great lengths to protect him and even appoint himself as Orestes’ guardian. This is very telling of Orestes’ value as a person for he manages to gain the favor of a god and not only that, he manages to have Apollo’s ultimate protection. Apollo has a minor yet a pivotal role not only in Orestes’ journey throughout the plays but also in the fact that his actions drive the plot on and bring forth the conclusion to the trilogy.