

Aeschylus's oresteia: summary and analysis



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Aeschylus's *Oresteia* touched a chord within Francis Bacon both in its themes of parental violence and pursuit by the Eumenides and in the way

Aeschylus's poetry communicated in a subconscious emotional level.

Analyzing three triptychs, a closer examination is made between the works.

Francis Bacon paints images communicating his feelings and emotions but which transcend his own personal experience and convey the tensions and violent emotions of the twentieth century, and possibly beyond their creative timeframe to become universally pertinent and timeless for all mankind. In reading Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, the poetry touched a chord within him such that he was to use motifs from the trilogy in a number of his works but also it pointed the way for him to engender strong emotions through his paintings without employing narrative. Additionally the fate driven outcomes of the plays relate to Bacon's painting practice of utilising accident in developing his paintings. The initial appeal of Aeschylus was most likely rooted in this bloody story of parental violence, revenge and exile from the home and the ongoing pursuit by the Eumenides.

The extensive records of Bacon's conversations will be used to prove that Aeschylus was an influence and it will be seen how Bacon translates the cathartic experience of tragedy into the medium of paint. After a brief examination of the influence of his childhood, we will look at the general influence of Aeschylus on his work before analysing three triptychs based on *The Oresteia*. To show the relationship between these paintings, Aeschylus *Oresteia* and Bacon, an in depth analysis of *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* (1944) will be made, following this up by examining the *Second Version of Triptych 1944* (1988) and *Triptych - Inspired by the*

Oresteia of Aeschylus (1981). In conclusion Aeschylus's influence will be confirmed and Bacon's status of an painter of epic emotions and universal relevance will be raised.

It is difficult to say with any certainty how much Bacon was influenced by his interest in literature because he so often contradicts himself that one can never be quite sure what he really means.

Most of the time when one talks about painting, one says nothing interesting. It's always rather superficial. What can one say?

Archimbaud (1993) p171

Despite this comment, he was a most vociferous painter. One only has to read David Sylvester and Michael Peppiatt to find many instances of contradictory views. For example his desire to avoid narrative painting is frequently stated on record, yet when talking with David Sylvester, Bacon says:

I don't want to avoid telling a story but I want very, very much to do the thing that Valery (the French poet) said – to give sensation without the boredom of conveyance.

Sylvester (1980) p 65

Bacon used interviews skilfully to manage how his work was perceived and interpreted, sometimes being open and clear and at others intentionally misleading or at least spreading an air of mystery about his images and sources. The interviews with David Sylvester are a mine of information about

his work and in them he acknowledges his profound debt to literature – specifically Aeschylus and Eliot. Additionally he could list for Michael Leiris, cited in Gale (2008), p23, what books informed Triptych 1976. And Michael Peppiatt recorded that Bacon admitted that literature had more effect on his paintings than anything else.

Bacon's primary aim was to convey strong feelings and emotions: the shock of violence, fear of the threat and rumblings of fate. He wanted to communicate 'up onto the nervous system' using subconscious feelings and raw emotion rather than tell or show directly. This is just what he got from Aeschylus and T. S. Eliot. The Wasteland is not a narrative poem; it evokes feelings and,

The Oresteia of Aeschylus . . . its epic nature and hyperbolic language and imagery make it into something more universal . . . its inherent emotional violence.

Gale (2008) p21

And Bacon was a man steeped in violence. Francis Bacon's father, Edward, was a 'hardened war veteran' with an 'innate belief in physical courage and toughness'. He brought his children up under a tough military regime and had little time or affection for his son. Being an asthmatic, allergic to dogs and horses didn't prevent his father from forcing him to ride to hounds and is reputed to have had him beaten by the grooms in the stable for no reason other than to 'make a man' of him. These grooms were also those with whom he had sex after he was expelled from public school for his relationships with other boys. This fusion between sex and violence is

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probably what forged his sadomasochistic instincts. Finally, his father discovered him dressed in his mother's underwear and expelled him from the family home to which he was never to return. The paternal violence and the experiences of being cast out could have been linked to why The Oresteia struck such a chord with him. The tormented personal history, is subconsciously awoken by the poetry of Aeschylus, Eliot and others, particularly Shakespeare, and is expressed by Bacon in the violence of all his works. And it is Bacon's intention that these paintings communicate this violence of his life and sources to the viewer through feeling rather than narrative. As Andrew Brighton writes,

Bacon's stories of his traumatic childhood and early sex life may have been told for their own sake – honest and cathartic revelations and fibs – but they give us one of Bacon's pretexts. By word of mouth and in published sources, his account of himself increasingly accompanied him and his work. They lent authenticity to his art and its rhetoric of despair. They tell us something both of how he wanted others to understand his history and how he understood it himself. These understandings became sources for his paintings; they are in a sense part of the 'literature' on which his work drew.

Brighton (2001) p17

Whilst in this essay the focus is on Bacon and Aeschylus, Bacon's literary influences extended to T. S. Eliot (The Family Reunion – a modern reworking of The Oresteia), W. B. Yeats, Federico Garcia Lorca, Ezra Pound, William Shakespeare (Hamlet being another reworking of The Oresteia motif) Webster, Conrad and Freke Brut, Satre (Les Mouches – yet another reworking

of the Oresteia) and on to Sigmund Freud's writings and theories which were very in vogue at the time.

The common thread in many of these writers is tragedy. Aristotle commented that the 'purpose' of tragedy was to 'purge by pity and terror'. This cathartic theatrical experience, which can be related to Freudian theory, could well be a further aspect of the plays that attracted Bacon to the tragedies and that dramatic effect what he wanted to achieve through his painting, reworking the themes and motifs in a very different medium.

Bacon referred to these paintings as 'sketches for the Eumenides', the ancient pursuers of revenge for familial murder. Bacon's source for these creatures was The Oresteia, a trilogy by Aeschylus. (see Appendix A for a précis of The Oresteia)

What might the Eumenides mean to man, particularly Francis Bacon, well read in Freudian theory? Could they represent the super ego, Freud's internal parent which governs our excesses? Bacon's father as discussed was a brutal, disciplined man with very different value to Francis whose super ego would have been the internalisation of his parents' value system. Are they subconscious feelings such as guilt or even pressure to conform to social mores of the time? Bacon viewed his homosexuality as a 'defect' when society viewed it with such abhorrence that it was still a criminal act until 1968. Whilst these deductions have evidence to support them, what is more overwhelmingly true of Bacon is that he absorbed the feelings that poetry aroused in a subconscious, non verbal manner. When he painted he used these feelings as sources of inspiration thus painting from deep within

himself where his life experience and the poetry synthesised to create paintings raw with human experience.

It is notable that *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, 1944, the turning point of his career, is an expression of his own demons. The whole painting conveys a savage inhuman terror, wrought with pain. The Eumenides are avengers of familial murder so it is pertinent that Bacon chose them instead of the traditional saints as his figures at the base of the crucifixion, symbolising the sacrificial murder of Jesus Christ by His Father and could be a subconscious expression of his feelings about his father's abuse of him when a child but from the outset showing his sensitivity to man's inhumanity to man.

I know for religious people, for Christians, the crucifixion has a totally different significance. But as a non-believer, it was just an act of Man's behaviour, a way of behaving to another.

Although many state that the painting was completed in two days, *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*, dated 1944 was developed over a number of the preceding war years and many interpreted the triptych as Bacon's reaction to the horrors of war. But Bacon tended not to depict mankind in general, such as Picasso did in *Guernica*, but often painted single figures which communicated with the individual in each of us to share universal truths and personal feelings.

In Greek and Roman mythology there are overlapping similarities between the Eumenides known as the Erinyes (the angry ones) before their transformation to the Eumenides (the kindly ones), the Furies and the

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Gorgons. In ancient myths these creatures have heads wreathed in snakes, eyes dripping with blood, the body of a dog and bird or bat wings. In *The Family Reunion*, the play by T. S. Eliot in which he reworked the motifs of *The Oresteia*, Harry, the protagonist, describes them as “sleepless hunters that will not let me sleep” a phrase which engenders the unremitting hounding they represent. Eliot’s *The Family Reunion* was Bacon’s introduction to Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, the play that was to provide inspirational source material for many of his paintings. *The Oresteia* is a play steeped in multiple murders, revenge and retribution where the Erinyes/Eumenides pursue Orestes after he murdered his mother Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus in revenge for his mother’s murder of her husband Agamemnon and his mistress Cassandra in revenge for his sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia. These merciless creatures with an unassuageable thirst for mindless retribution of familial murder were the subjects of *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion*. Bacon stated that they were influenced by Picasso’s biomorphs and when he wanted to further explore the ‘organic form that relates to the human image but is a complete distortion of it’, Sylvester (1980) p8, the Eumenides would have provided an ideal opportunity.

The development of the biomorphic figures in *Three Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* can be seen in earlier Bacon paintings: *Man in Cap* (1943); *Figure Getting out of a Car* (1943) and *Man Standing* (1941-2) and in subsequent paintings of that era: *Figure Study I* (1946) and *Figure Study II* (1946) which show reworking but with clothing and everyday props such as plants and flowers. These placements of the figures, with everyday objects that enter

into our personal world, make them all the more threatening. From these beginnings, the Eumenides would become a recurring icon that Bacon would revisit many times until his Second Version of Triptych 1944.

Bacon said that he chose the triptych because he couldn't paint everything he needed to on one canvas.

I've never been able to make the one image that sums up all the others. So one image against the other seems to be able to say the thing more.

Sylvester (1980) p22

However, it is also interesting to note that crucifixions traditionally adopt the triptych format. The three figures stand in for the saints traditionally depicted at the base of the cross or even for Christ himself and the two thieves crucified with him. Additionally, The Oresteia is three plays and there are three Furies so the number three is woven throughout this work.

The cadmium orange background, another element of this triptych that he would reuse throughout his career has been interpreted as a 'metaphor for violence' but the evidence for this isn't clear. Nevertheless the grating burnt orange used in these painting demands the viewer's attention and is unsettling. In this painting, the paint is applied more thinly than in later years and the Eumenides are contained within their distinct biomorphic forms. At this stage of his life and career he may have needed to contain the figures symbolically controlling his own psychological demons. In later paintings, where he is a more experienced and established painter, he allowed himself to work more freely and allow accident to play its part.

In the Oresteia, the Eumenides are black but Bacon paints them white and grey like classical Greek statues, the shades of stone reminding us of the Gorgons.

In the left hand painting an armless, legless or kneeling female with her head hung in despair or supplication appears to be more of a victim than an instrument of vengeance. Hugh Davies viewed her as a mourner at the cross. whilst Michael Peppiatt as Clytemnestra “ brooding like a hen over her sorrow” Peppiatt (2007) p112.

The central figure, blinded by a cloth draped over her eyes, is sourced from the blindfolded Christ in Grunewald’s Mocking of Christ with the cloth being a metaphor for the blind pursuit of retribution by the Eumenides.

The right hand biomorph looks like a penis with a savage biting mouth. Taking a psychological interpretation, this can be viewed as the Eumenides representing Bacon’s own guilt about his sado-masochism and homosexuality. Aeschylus’s phrase “ the reek of human blood smiles out at me” touched a nerve with Bacon and his paintings of mouths in this and other paintings is him expressing it though his own medium. In visual terms, a major visual source for this mouth was a still of the Nurse’s scream in the film Battleship Potemkin (1952) by Sergai Eisenstein.

Bacon originally intended this painting as a study for a further, much larger crucifixion painting but this intention was never fulfilled. Nevertheless, many characteristics of this painting would be reused: the cadmium orange background; the triptych format; the gaping scream and the biomorphic Eumenides. In 1988 he painted Second Version of Triptych 1944 which
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became his last painting of the Eumenides. It is over twice the size of the 1944 version and the harsh orange was replaced by saturated blood red backgrounds in the outer paintings and a carpet of blood red running down the central one. This is the blood red carpet that Clytemnestra lays down for Agamemnon as her ironic greeting welcomes him home to his death.

Spread tapestries in his way. Let the great king

Walk a crimson pathway to the home

He never hoped to see. A crimson path!

His just reward; now justice shall be done.

Step down, my lord. The rest will follow.

I shall not rest

Till the gods grant what you have earned.

The bloody yet regal colouring, the grander scale, the more refined technique and the compositional symmetry afford this painting a more majestic formality. The backgrounds are simpler and flatter and the figures smaller making the feeling of the later version less claustrophobic and despite being diffused in blood, it has less of the horror of the 1944 triptych.

The Eumenides return as Martin Harrison remarked, as a sign of Bacon's "own fury and despair".

Martin Harrison, in Rachel Tant in Gale & Stephens (2008) p234

In the left hand panel the figure is less substantial and the chair more so, giving the figure an unearthly characteristic. This Eumenides has more distinct wings and is less frightening than her predecessor. She is more of an onlooker, a creature of despair – perhaps even Bacon's mother?

The central figure has an egg-like form and looks out at the viewer with a grimace of pain. Perhaps Bacon the child? One of the stand's legs looks like a scythe, the grim reaper on the red carpet on which Agamemnon was murdered.

Here we have birth and death in the same painting.

The right hand biomorph is more like a human body squatting on a table ready to pounce. Perhaps his father?

The Second Version of Triptych 1944 is a grander more refined, more mature painting than the original 1944 triptych but the raw pain is diluted suggesting a man more in control of his own demons and calmer in his advancing years.

The Triptych Inspired by the Oresteia of Aeschylus, 1981 shows sparse modern room settings which relate the theme of these pictures to the present day. The epic sensations of the Oresteia: fear, revenge, power, envy, desire, guilt, family infighting, are just as relevant today, in fact they are timeless. Although each panel is set in a room, the figures are supported or contained by a framework of lines, a common Bacon technique. Frank Laukotter's (2006, p184) view was that these "shifting spatial perspectives indicate the vagaries of fate". On the side panels these lines lead into a

doorway leading into a dark abyss, whereas in the central panel they form a plinth and a structure symbolising a throne on the blood red carpet. This bloodied carpet will be revisited by Bacon in his later triptych, Second Version of Triptych 1944, of the Eumenides.

The Oresteia is a violent and murderous play with constant references to blood:

Death and grief forever

Blood of a people lost.

Agamemnon, Lines 715-716

Blood calls for Blood

Libation Bearers, Line 77

The Gorgon waits,

Living and dead are watching,

Waiting to see

The killer killed,

Blood spilled for Blood.

Libation Bearers, Lines 832-837

Step in blood,

On thrones of blood,

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Blood-smearred from head to toe.

Eumenides, Lines 163-165

Bacon wrote to Michael Leiris in 1976 that he was working on a large triptych in which the accidents were based on the Oresteia.

I could not paint Agamemnon, Clytemnestra or Cassandra as that would have been merely another type of historical painting. . . Therefore, I tried to create an image of the effect it produced inside of me.

Francis Bacon in Gale & Stephens (2008) p216

Christopher Collard, in the introduction to his translation of the Oresteia, says that a detailed knowledge of the Oresteia is necessary in unravelling the depth of meaning in this triptych. Whilst this obviously helps with a concrete analysis and may also contribute to a subconscious understanding, in Bacon's own terms, it is not an absolute necessity for the communication of the feelings of loneliness, violence and despair that he aims to convey "up onto the nervous system".

The central panel is the first to command the viewer's attention. A contorted figure, with a grotesque, elongated neck and exposed vertebrae is bent down so that the head lies against a bowl of dark genitalia. This decomposing figure symbolises decaying power, defeat and death and arouses our pity as it struggles onto a raised platform. Here is a figure eaten away by inner conflict; consumed and gnawed by guilt. The blood red carpet suggests that the figure is Agamemnon but it could equally be Orestes and in

the linked paintings, the Eumenides appear as they do in the Oresteia after the murder of Clytemnestra.

On the left hand panel, a winged Eumenides with legs is flying over the door where matricide has taken place, into the framed space in front of it, already in pursuit of Orestes. Under the door, from the black abyss symbolising the never ending pain of sin, flows a rivulet of the victim's blood.

It seems most likely that this rapacious mutant, often blood-smeared and as if about to pounce on its prey, represented a deeply uneasy conscience. . . . When Bacon remarked " the Furies often visit me", he was alluding to what he considered the most insidious punishment of all: guilt, which he believed stalked modern post-Freudian man as the Erinyes pursued the Greeks.

Peppiatt (2008)p 334

This painting shows a particularly good example of the operation and control of accident in his technique. Out of the face of the left hand Eumenides, is a congealed streak of blood where Bacon has squeezed paint directly out of the tube and then controlled the tail with a light brushstroke. As Andrew Durham says,

Chance is exploited but the result is far from arbitrary: the creative and the critical become a single act.

Ades & Forge(1985) p 233

In the right-hand panel, a headless male, probably Orestes is being burrowed in to by a Eumenides, visually linked to the left hand one by the similar legs.

In this way, the murder of the left hand panel is linked to the retribution in the right. Orestes seems to be cleft in half by the door signifying the tragic curse that tore the House of Atreus apart and the cycle of murders that forces him into exile. The feeling engendered in Bacon by this aspect of the Oresteia would have potently echoed his own rejection when his father found him dressed in his mother's underwear and cast him out of the family home when only fifteen.

As was discussed at the start of this essay, one cannot always accept Francis Bacon's spoken words absolute fact. He was a manipulator of his own image and often contradicted himself. However, in the case of the influence of Aeschylus on his paintings, we have extensive evidence recorded in interviews that is confirmed by the examination of the paintings themselves. On examination of Bacon's childhood, parental cruelty, the blurring of sex and violence and the experience of being cast out from the family home at age 16, it can be seen why Aeschylus's Oresteia, struck such a chord within him. The murders committed by both parents, the sexual deceit, the exile of Orestes and the pursuit of the Eumenides, which Bacon admitted often visited him.

But, it was the way in which the poetry of Aeschylus conveyed subconscious raw emotion that was the greatest influence on Bacon. Always avoiding the narrative in his paintings he looked to convey feelings directly, without the conscious intervention of storytelling. His paintings communicate 'up onto the nervous system'. His emotions speak directly to ours. And on seeing the Oresteia, it is not so much the story that provides the cathartic experience of

tragedy, but again profound emotions stirred by shocking violence and terror.

In analysing the three triptychs influenced by the Oresteia, it is clear that Bacon used the Eumenides to depict his own demons: his father's betrayal of his parental role, his experience as an outcast, his guilt about homosexuality and sadomasochism, his belief in man's inherent. In the Oresteia triptych (1981), he shows us the decaying power of authority, the blood red carpet of the murder scene of a dying dynasty. One of the figures eating himself away, consumed by guilt. Aeschylus provided the inspiration and the means to paint the pain and horror of his existence, which he did so every morning before blotting it all out in an alcoholic anaesthetic.

Aeschylus wrote about fate and accident and this too was important to Bacon who used to try to use accident in his painting in order to move it further onto the subconscious plane and to make it more spontaneous and visually interesting.

Aeschylus was an epic poet who has used universal themes and powerful language to create a masterpiece of unquestionable greatness that has stood the test of time. I am a great fan of Francis Bacon's paintings which to me are magnetic, full of emotion and mystery and over time, my interest has increased rather than waned. But it is too soon to say whether or not he is an epic or even a great painter.

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