

Lecture #2 - Aeschylus, *The Oresteia*

The major Greek tragedies were written for a festival taking place at Athens about the time of our Easter. The festival was in honor of Dionysus, a god of ecstatic possession, whose celebrants, touched by the spirit of the god, were supposed to behave in frenzied ways—dance madly, see visions, writh upon the ground, perform various licentious or destructive acts, and generally act in ways that threaten civic order. In actuality, of course, the worshipers of Dionysus only mimicked such things; they perform rituals—closed to the public—which mimed the deeds of the god, who was (like other gods associated with the advent of Spring) a god of resurrection, having been torn to pieces as a child at the instigation of Hera and been reconstituted and brought to life again by his grandparents, who hid him away, safe from Hera's wrath, for many years. Dionysus's early experiences were said to have driven him periodically mad and initiated a period of wanderings, in which he ranged from Egypt and Libya to India, wreaking much destruction in his madness; in this character he is referred to as *Bromius*, and he can be (hopefully) propitiated by adopting his worship and miming his madness. It was also said of him that he invented wine, unsurprising in a god whose effects upon his worshipers was much like inebriation.

The festival in Dionysus's name was a festival, accordingly, in which the capacity for visionary or ecstatic experience was associated with destruction, and the theater of which the major Greek tragedies were a part was an expression of homage to it. We are sometimes annoyed that the choral odes seem to interrupt the narrative line of the drama, but for the original audience the choral odes were central moments, expressions of ecstatic response to the episodes of the story. They were both sung and danced, by a chorus made up of the sons of the best aristocratic families of the time, and they were as essential to the dramatic experience as music is to grand opera. Indeed, when grand opera was, so to speak, first invented in Renaissance Italy, its proponents thought that they were re-introducing ancient Greek tragedy.

The stories forming the bases of the plots were versions of myths and legends well known to the audience—a vast body of religious materials which differed from the materials that ultimately formed the bases of the Judeo-Christian religion in that they existed only as versions and never assumed a definitive form. There was no pre-eminent version of a standard narrative, no authorized text, no "Bible" of the Greek gods. The poet could juggle detail or revise the implications of character within certain limits, set by fidelity to the general outlines of the story—for the story, despite the existence of differing versions was still sacred and an attitude of reverence for the accepted outline of events was a necessary requirement.

The events in the background of the *Oresteia* are briefly these: Agamemnon and Atreus were both descendants of the house of Pelops, whose children, Atreus and Thyestes, were rivals for the throne of Mycenae. Atreus defeated Thyestes and drove him into exile, then pretended to forgive him and called him back, giving a great feast in Thyestes's honor, at which, unknown to Thyestes, he was served up his sons as the main course. After the feast, Thyestes was imprisoned for life, but one of his sons, Aegisthus, had escaped the horrors of the feast, and when he came to manhood he rescued his father, vowing to honor his obligation to destroy the house of Atreus. His chance came after the death of Atreus, when Atreus's son, Agamemnon, acting at the behest of the Father of the gods, Zeus, gathered together the great expedition that sailed against Troy.

Agamemnon was seeking revenge upon Troy for harboring Paris, the Trojan Prince, who had seduced Helen, the wife of Menelaus, Agamemnon's brother, and run off with her. (Whatever the Trojans thought of this deed, they were bound to defend Paris, just as Agamemnon was bound to revenge Helen's abduction and Atreus was bound to revenge the feast of Thyestes.) The siege of Troy took ten years, during which Atreus came to Mycenae, seduced Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, and with her plotted Agamemnon's destruction upon his return.

Clytemnestra had her own motive to abet this deed: In order to get his army to Troy, Agamemnon had to appease the goddess Artemis, who had becalmed the fleet at Aulis and would not release the winds unless Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia. To pacify the goddess, Agamemnon persuaded Clytemnestra to send Iphigenia to Aulis, allegedly to be betrothed to the hero Achilles. Clytemnestra complied and Iphigenia was sacrificed. When the play opens, the ten years have passed. News arrives at dawn in the form of a beacon of light to announce that Troy had fallen that very night.