Greek Atreidae dramas and Eugene O'Neill's "Mourning Becomes Electra" | A study in contrasts

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INTRODUCTION

The significance of Greek drama is aptly demonstrated today, approximately twenty-five hundred years after its creation. No truly comprehensive consideration of dramatic literature is valid without paying some heed to the consideration of two aspects of Greek theater: first, as drama in its own right; second, as an influence on subsequent playwrights. The ever-increasing accent on Greek scholarship and translation is directed towards the conveyance of the essence of Greek drama to the modern student of dramatic literature. On the other hand, perhaps the value of Greek drama can better be considered through its influence. Certainly, it can be assumed that Greek drama, particularly tragedy, has indirectly influenced serious playwrights that have followed.¹ This influence can also be seen in the light of adaptations by contemporary playwrights which take as their donne the stories found in Greek dramatic literature.

¹Aristotle, for example, formulates his theory of tragedy through examples of Greek drama, particularly the plays of Sophocles. Although the Poetics cannot be accepted today at "face" value, certain aspects of his theory are still applicable.
Numerous playwrights have written adaptations of Greek tragedy; the most familiar are Racine's Phèdre and Goethe's Iphigenie auf Tauris. Contemporary adaptations seem to be most heavily concentrated in France which, in very recent years, has produced Sartre's Les Mouches, Gide's Oedipe, Cocteau's Le Machine Infernale, Giraudoux's Electra, and Anouilh's Antigone. Why has the attempt been made to reconcile two antithetical conceptions of drama? The modern theater, presentational, naturalistically conceived, and characterised by prodigious physical activity, is a relatively fragmented medium where the ideal and the actual can never be reconciled. The Greek theater, however, is a representational and ritualistically conceived theater that makes its greatest impact through a generally subtle representation of emotional stress. Greek drama, where fact and ideal correspond, emphasizes neither action on the stage nor scenery, while the chorus contributes to the effect of statuesque immobility. It is through a gradually loosened repression, a slowly revealed psychological transformation, an outward expression of an inner conflict that we see Antigone, Orestes, Heracles, Oedipus, Alcestis, and Medea rise to that level of human suffering which is the essence of Greek Tragedy.

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It is possible that contemporary writers have reverted to the Greek themes in order to capitalize on the presence of the "tragic hero." This motive may be necessitated by the lack of a comparable character of heroic proportions in our own culture; but it is more probable that modern playwrights have been moved more by Greek themes than by Greek characterization. There are several reasons why it may be desirable to revert to the Greek themes, and these reasons possibly can be used as criteria to measure the relative success of the adaptations:

(1) The description of man in terms of timeless rather than transitory evaluations.

(2) The search for stability in an era of chaos and spiritual uncertainty.

(3) The attempt to find ways of reconciling a realistic outlook upon man's situation with a conviction that human life is to be valued and that man can be great.

(4) The effort to restate in modern terms the classic problems and classic commonplaces which represent human wisdom.

I have chosen the House of Atreus theme as a basis for discussion not only because it is one of the most moving themes of Greek tragedy, but also because this same theme was treated by the three known masters of Greek "serious" drama. Although it is not possible to pass judgment on the whole of Greek tragedy by what will be shown in the plays studied here, certain general characteristics of the three tragedians will be reflected in these plays. Although the same legend, that
of the House of Atreus, provides the material for the three playwrights, there are differences in approach and thematic nuances that allow a distinction to be made among them. The Greek dramas that will be considered are:

Aeschylus—The Oresteia
Sophocles—Electra
Euripides—Electra

The Aeschylean trilogy will be shown to be the most coherent and comprehensive treatment of the theme. Aeschylus deals with certain universal laws involving crime, vengeance, and justice. The latter is particularly important as it is the eternal law of Dikê, or Justice, that is such an important ingredient in the social and ethical framework of Greek culture. More significantly, The Oresteia reflects a progressive change in this concept of Dikê. Sophocles' Electra, while not measuring up to the tragic proportions of his Oedipus cycle, is still a powerful enough drama to be ranked close behind The Oresteia. Sophocles, too, is concerned with certain universal laws, but his treatment of the theme emphasizes retribution as the only justice. Sophocles' conception of Dikê is permanent and immutable as contrasted to Aeschylus' justice which is progressive and changing. Euripides, while not attaining the perfection of either Aeschylus or Sophocles, will be given close attention. The radical dramatic inno-
vations that subjected him to adverse criticism during his own age are particularly apparent in Electra and are instrumental in linking him to the modern adapters of the theme. Euripides is extremely modern in his preoccupation with the private, psychological neuroses of his characters and his frequent injection of elements of realism and domesticity into the play. Particular emphasis will be placed on these modern tendencies and the close parallel between his Electra and the modern adaptation to be discussed.

In addition to the evaluation of the Greek plays, it will be the purpose of this thesis to examine a modern adaptation of the House of Atreus theme, Eugene O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra, to see what use is made of its prototypes and why O'Neill reverted to this particular theme. The trilogy will be analyzed not only as an adaptation, but as a drama in its own right. There are several reasons why O'Neill's treatment was chosen as a basis for this study. He has achieved some degree of repute as America's ranking dramatist; the renown of this particular work, its scope and variety of elements, its representative qualities as a product of the twentieth-century theater, and

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4An example of this anti-Euripidean attitude is the biting comic satire of Aristophanes' The Frogs, which accuses Euripides of contributing to the decay of Athenian morals.
the fact that O'Neill's play is the only adaptation to sustain a basic and extended parallel to the Atreidae action were important determining factors. The play is, basically, a reinterpretation of the curse of the House of Atreus with an attempted relevance for a contemporary audience. Although O'Neill approaches the exalting effect of Greek tragedy more closely than other modern adaptations, certain shortcomings are evident that detract from its effect as a meaningful adaptation and, for that matter, as a play. He relies heavily upon various innuendoes of Freudianism to convey what he thinks to be the psychological implications of fate, but thematic and character discrepancies greatly hinder his effectiveness.

The only other significant modern adaptation of the Atreidae legend in English or American drama is T. S. Eliot's *Family Reunion*. Outside of its poetry, however (and Eliot himself admits this⁵), the play reflects very few characteristics that distinguish it as meaningful drama. Because of its dramatic incompetencies, a detailed evaluation of the play in terms of the central Atreidae dramas would be rather one-sided; instead, a brief mention of it will be made now. Eliot parallels only certain elements of the Greek theme in what may be considered a quasi-adaptation. He, like O'Neill,
stresses the psychological motivation of his characters; but he is primarily interested in the Christian concepts of sin, expiation, and salvation, incorporated with some aspects of Freudian psychology. By means of Christian symbolism and mysticism, Family Reunion presents a frequent Eliot theme: the protagonist lives, or rather vegetates, on the relics of a lost spiritual tradition, without a religious faith.

Thus the central Atreidæ dramas of the three Attic dramatists will be analyzed and evaluated, followed by an analysis of O'Neill's adaptation that will emphasize his failure to re-create for the modern theater the attributes of the Greek prototypes for which he strived. The term "tragedy" will be used quite arbitrarily to denote "serious" drama, rather than the various definitions of the term from Aristotle to Joseph Wood Krutch that too often constitute pitfalls for the student of dramatic literature. No attempt will be made to formulate a contemporary theory of tragedy or to evaluate existing ones, for such a work, if possible at all, would require a more detailed study than this thesis purports to be. As this study concerns theme, action, and characterization, the technical aspects of the theater (staging, lighting, etc.) will be disregarded except for the rare occasions when they elucidate action.

The Greek plays to be studied are by no means the only Greek plays that dwell upon some part of the Atreidæ legend
but represent the segment of the legend\(^6\) of greatest interest to O'Neill and other contemporary adapters. By the same token, Mourning Becomes Electra represents, although fairly representatively, only a small fraction of the large number of recent adaptations of the House of Atreus theme.\(^7\)

This study opens with a brief recapitulation of the legend of the House of Atreus that provided the materials for the plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. It perhaps will prove helpful and at the same time interesting to have some conception of the skeletal myth upon which the Attic playwrights dramatically improvised.

\(^6\)This refers to that segment of the Atraiadás legend revolving around the relationship among Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Aegisthus, Orestes, and Electra which is comprehensively treated by Aeschylus in The Oresteia. Other parts of the myth are treated in Sophocles' Ajax and Euripides' Hecuba, Andromache, Orestes, Iphigenia in Aulis, and Iphigenia in Tauris.

\(^7\)In addition to the previously mentioned French adaptations by Sartre and Giraudoux, recent English adaptations include Robinson Jeffers' The Tower Beyond Tragedy (1925), Kenneth Rexroth's Beyond the Mountains (1951), and William Alfred's Agamemnon (1953).
the God by murdering his son, Perseus, and sorcing the

Tantalus, the son of Zeus and the nymph Phoe, detered

of the myth approaching this incident.

Legend as it is described here will consist of the section
Clytemnestra and her paramour Aegisthous. The background

of Greece and Eleutheria for the murder of Agamemnon by
plays dating with one aspect of the Legend, the revenge
the first section of this thesis is a study of the Greek
and revenge, sin and punishment, in the extraitive dream.

the background Legend will accentuate the elements of arthe

material deeply, secondary, and perhaps more significantly,

traditional nature of the material, with which the Greek dre-

or Argen theme, first, the reader can become aware of the

myth will serve two purposes in this study of the House

people. It is hoped that the narration of the sacred

myths, or poems that were common knowledge to the Greeks,

dreams, the Greek dreamtrend is based their play on Legend, the

just as contemporany playwrights referred to the Greek
produced the dramatic attractiveness for the Greek playwrights.
through some understanding of the background myth the

The obscurely of Greek dream is often illuminated.

THE BACKGROUND WITH: THE CURSE OF THE HOUSE OF ATREUS
youth's flesh to the gods during a banquet. The gods, however, discovered what had happened. They restored Pelops to life and punished Tantalus for his crime by sending him to Hades and eternal damnation. With Tantalus' murder of Pelops we have the first of a series of family crimes leading to the curse of the House of Atreus.

Somewhat later, the restored Pelops wished to marry the Princess Hippodamia but met with opposition from her father, King Oenomaus. The king decreed that Pelops must defeat him in a chariot race before he could have Hippodamia's hand in marriage. There were two motives behind this stipulation. Oenomaus had incestuous designs upon his daughter, and an oracle had told him that he would be slain by the man who married her. As Oenomaus possessed the fastest horses in the kingdom and already had slain twelve of Hippodamia's suitors, Pelops knew he would have to resort to underhanded methods in order to win the race and marry the princess.

He bribed Myrtilus, the king's charioteer, to tamper with the royal chariot—with the result that Oenomaus was killed and Pelops won the race. Myrtilus received a reward for his evil assistance by being slain by Pelops who, like Oenomaus, was motivated for two reasons. He believed that Myrtilus

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3 Hamilton, pp. 346-347.
loved Hippodamia; he was also stricken by pangs of conscience for having enlisted Myrtillus' assistance. Thus the streak of hereditary evil which began with Tantalus is repeated in the actions of Pelops. As Tantalus had defied the gods directly, Pelops defied them indirectly, because of the lineage of his two victims. King Oenomaus was supposedly the son of the god Ares, while Myrtillus was the son of Hermes, the messenger of the gods. Hermes' anger at the death of Myrtillus resulted in his placing a curse upon the House of Atreus which is resolved in Aeschylus' The *Eumenides*.

Pelops' numerous children included Atreus, Thyestes, and Chrysippus. As Chrysippus was Pelops' favorite, Atreus and Thyestes were extremely jealous of him. This jealousy was transformed into violence as Atreus and Thyestes, with the help of Hippodamia, brutally murdered the youthful Chrysippus. Upon hearing of this, Pelops banished them both from his kingdom. They found refuge in Mycenae, where Atreus became king.

Atreus had three wives: Cleola, by whom he had Pleisthenes; Aeoppe, by whom he had Agamemnon, Menelaus, and Anaxibia; and Polyxena, about whom more will be said later. It was Aeoppe, the second wife, who was the vertex of the triangle that resulted in the Atreus-Thyestes blood feud. Thyestes seduced Aeoppe and was subsequently banished by Atreus. Another reason for the banishment was Thyestes'
theft of the golden ram, symbolic of kingship, which was presented to them both by Hermes. It has been indicated (p. 11) that Hermes had bestowed a curse upon the line of Pelops; the golden ram was a manifestation of this curse that was supposed to propagate greed within the family and cause them to destroy one another. The deception that had thus far typified the family line was repeated as Atreus, feigning reconciliation, invited Thyestes to a peace banquet. The 

hybris of Tantalus is suggested when Atreus, having slain Thyestes’ two sons, had them cut up, boiled, and served to Thyestes as part of the banquet. As was common in Greek legend and later in classical tragedy, the transgression of a king caused the wrath of the gods to be vented against his people. The gods’ curse upon Atreus resulted in a famine spreading over his kingdom. 4

Atreus was advised by an oracle to seek Thyestes, but his search proved to be fruitless. In the meantime he had married his third wife, Pelopia, whom he thought to be the daughter of a friendly, neighboring king. In reality, however, Pelopia was the daughter of Thyestes and was pregnant through an incestuous relationship with her father. Aigisthus was the product of this incest and was cast out by Pelopia. Atreus unwittingly kept the boy and raised him as

4A familiar example of this occurs in the Oedipus legend. Oedipus’ murder of Laius and incestuous marriage to Jocasta caused famine and desolation in Thebes.
his own son, finally sending him away to seek out and slay Thyestes. Thyestes convinced Aegisthus of his true parenthood, however, and he returned to Mycenae and murdered Atreus. The murder of their father caused Agamemnon and Menelaus to drive Thyestes out of the kingdom. Why Thyestes was driven away, rather than Aegisthus who actually committed the murder is never made clear in the legend as it has been handed down to us. Agamemnon and Menelaus then fell heir to Atreus' kingdom and married Clytemnestra and Helen, the daughters of Zeus and Leda.

Thus the legend approaches the period of the Trojan war, the aftermath of which provided the segment of the family curse which most attracted the Greek dramatists and upon which this study is based. The return of Agamemnon from the siege of Troy and his murder by Aegisthus and Clytemnestra initiates the action in Agamemnon, the first play of Aeschylus' Oresteia trilogy.

It is difficult, if not altogether impossible, to discover who exactly was responsible for preserving and recording the legend for use by the Greek dramatists. The legend as we receive it today was probably polished and handed down by Apollodorus, Hyginus, and the various other Greek scholiasts who followed Euripides. The question that arises, then, is who provided the legend for the Greek dramatists? was the version with which they were familiar basically the same as the account of the legend handed down to us by the
post-Euripidean scholiasts? It is probable that the playwrights received their version of the myth through Hesiod, Homer, Pindar, post-Homeric epic fragments (such as Stesichorus' Oresteia), and quite possibly through works that are non-extant today. There are various references to Agamemnon and Menelaus in The Iliad, and a particularly full picture of Agamemnon is portrayed in this epic. In The Odyssey, there is a rather detailed description of Tantalus' punishment; he is placed in the midst of a receding lake from which he cannot drink and is surrounded by fruit trees which elude his grasp.5 The Odyssey, moreover, provides in Books I through III full details of Agamemnon's return, the starting point for Aeschylus.

The greatest value of the preceding account is to show the skeletal substance of a myth which the Greek playwrights extended in terms of dramatic artistry. They portrayed, by way of theme and character, the culmination of the legend as meaningful drama. There is little mention of Electra, for example, in pre-Aeschylean sources; her appearance as a relatively significant figure in The Choephoroe is no doubt solely the work of Aeschylus. Orestes is mentioned briefly by Homer, but not until he is dramatically portrayed in The Oresteia, does he emerge as an individual torn between duty and family ties. In general, there is a lack of detail.

in the legend that is compensated for in the dramas; the legend is a simple, direct revenge pattern which changes in the dramas to an accent on the more significant issues of justice and retribution. We shall see the metamorphosis of the scattered details and versions of an ancient, flexible legend into a significant comment on, and interpretation of, man and life.
The Oresteia of Aeschylus

The Oresteia, the first known dramatic treatment of the Atraidae legend, was presented in 458 B.C. and won first prize at the Athenian dramatic festival that year. As has been indicated in the preceding chapter, Aeschylus probably turned to Homer and Pindar for the elements of the legend which constitute the dramatic situation of his trilogy. The situation which Aeschylus dramatically expands in Agamemnon and The Choephoroe were, therefore, well known to the Greek audience, but The Eumenides was completely original with Aeschylus. This last play of the trilogy, a denouement of the action of the first two, was meaningful to the Aeschylean audience because of its reflection of certain social and political issues of the day. A bare outline of the trilogy will be followed by a close analysis of theme and character and an attempt to see The Oresteia as a unified whole.

Agamemnon opens in Argos after the capture of Troy, and its climax is the murder of Agamemnon, on his return, by Clytemnestra. While Agamemnon had been directing the forces of Greece against the towers of Ilium, Clytemnestra had taken

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1Aeschylus, The Oresteia Trilogy, translated by Philip Vellacott (Baltimore, 1956).
Aegisthus, Agamemnon's cousin, as her paramour, and the two of them had plotted Agamemnon's murder upon his return from Troy. An event that takes place before the action of the play, however, must be mentioned because of its importance as motivation for Clytemnestra's intense hatred of Agamemnon. This event, the sacrifice of Iphigenia, was not mentioned in the chapter dealing with the background myth because of its relevance to the action of Agamemnon. While Agamemnon and the Greek army and fleet were assembled at Aulis, preparing to sail to Troy, a change in the direction of the wind prevented their embarkation. Sacrifices failed to have any effect, and finally the prophet Calchas pronounced that the anger of the virgin goddess Artemis must be appeased by the sacrifice of Agamemnon's virgin daughter Iphigenia. Agamemnon protested and was taunted by his fellow-kings with faint-heartedness. He wrote to Clytemnestra saying he had arranged for his daughter to be married to Achilles and commanded her to be sent to Aulis. The unsuspecting Iphigenia came and was duly slaughtered; the wind

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For the sake of convenience, Aegisthus is referred to as Agamemnon's cousin. The background legend, however, shows (p. 13) that Aegisthus' mother-sister, Pelopia, was the third wife of Atreus, Agamemnon's father, and therefore Aegisthus and Agamemnon were step-brothers as well as cousins. This is just one example of the pitfalls that may be expected by the researcher tracing the bases of Attic drama in Greek legend. It is hoped that this study will be a clarification of the plays rather than a concern over such scholarly ambiguities.
changed, and the fleet set sail. 3 The hybris of Agamemnon which prompted this deed and the resultant sense of outraged motherhood on the part of Clytemnestra are important thematic ingredients in the action of Agamemnon.

In The Choephoroe Agamemnon's son Orestes, who had grown up in exile, returns with his friend Pylades at Apollo's command to avenge his father. He kills both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus and departs, pursued by the Furies. Finally, in The Eumenides, Orestes stands trial before Athena and the Athenian court of Areopagus. The Furies accuse him, Apollo defends him; the mortal votes are evenly divided; Athena gives her casting vote for his acquittal. The Furies, enraged at the decision, threaten Athens with plagues, but are at last persuaded by Athena to accept a home and a position of honor in her city. Thus the Furies, the spirits of blood vengeance, are transformed into the Eumenides, the kind protectors of the innocent.

Aeschylus deals with certain universal laws involving crime, vengeance, and justice. It is his conception of the latter, the eternal law of Dikē or Justice, that is the first and most significant theme of The Oresteia. The trilogy can be seen overall as a quest for justice, as a progressive change in Dikē from the blood vengeance of Agamemnon to the tribunal justice of The Eumenides. It is this wide scope

that contributes to the meaningfulness of the plays. The quest for justice has its roots in the past; the first choral ode, for example, mentions the hereditary chain of guilt, the blood-for-blood vengeance that leads to the present action. The importance of the future counterbalances the emphasis on the past; the "new" concept of Dike in The Eumenides seems a satisfactory resolution of the problem, but it is by no means final. Orestes is acquitted by Athena, but what will be the effect of the ordeal upon him when he returns to Argos?

How one who poured out on the ground his mother’s blood
Will live henceforth in Argos, in his father’s house?

As it has been suggested, The Oresteia shows Aeschylus moving from a method which has its roots deep in the past to one which might have made Athena wonder uneasily for the future. In addition to the contemplation of a long period of past suffering and the uneasy hope for the future, Aeschylus achieves an intricate balance by his ability to show the immediate, dramatic significance of the present. Cassandra, capable of reviewing the events of the past or of prophesying the events of the future, surrenders herself to the present, to her own immediate situation:

4 The Eumenides, 11.652-3.

But I must feel
The parting of the flesh
Before the whetted steel. 6

It is necessary to notice the conditions accompanying
the Aeschylean progression of Dikē that are exemplified by
two separate choral passages:

Zeus, whose will has marked for man
The sole way where wisdom lies;
Ordered one eternal plan:
Man must suffer to be wise. 7

... ... While Zeus holds his throne,
This maxim holds on earth; the sinner dies.
That is God's law. 8

The basic ideas expressed by these passages, that man
achieves wisdom through suffering and the sinner must face
retribution, recur in various forms throughout the trilogy.
The theme of justice in The Oresteia can perhaps be under-
stood best in terms of suffering beyond the limitations of
the plays themselves. Man learns in the end the folly of
misdoing though it may take several generations of suffer-
ing to drive the lesson home. The lesson which suffering
teaches is not merely how to avoid suffering; it is how to
do right, how to achieve justice. This is made clear in the
third choral ode in Agamemnon. Similarly in the second ode
the story of Paris, his proud wilfulness, his long defiance,
and his final overthrow illustrate the slow but sure work-

6Agamemnon, ll. 1156-8
7Agamemnon, ll. 182-5.
8Agamemnon, ll. 1562-4.
ing of a moral universe and prepare our minds for witnes-
sing the same principle at work nearer home, in the family of Agamemnon. The sin of Atreus has to be expiated by his son; but the son too commits sin, by sacrificing his own daughter, and thus doubly justifies the fate which is pre-
pared for him. Irony is apparent in Clytemnestra's speech to the Chorus after Agamemnon has been slain:

With this harsh deed and bitter fact
I am content; let them at last
Leave us for ever, and oppress
Some other house with murderous wickedness.9

She fails to realize that, just as Agamemnon was punished for his misdoings, she too must face retribution. Orestes
is bound by immemorial tradition to exact vengeance for
his murdered father; but his deed, even by the primitive standards of the old religion, is still a worse crime than
that which he has avenged. In the end, reconciliation is achieved. Just as Prometheus suffered for a thousand years
and then made terms with Zeus, so Orestes suffers torment
at the hands of the Furies and is at last granted release.
Thus out of sin and struggle, revenge and atonement, comes the birth of a new phase in man's quest for justice.

The theme of justice has double significance; not only is it a quest on the human level, it is a development on the
divine level. The question of the relation of justice to vengeance is also the question of the relation of the Olym-

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9Agamemnon, ll. 1571-4.
pian gods, Zeus and Apollo, to the othonian gods, represented by the Furies. Certainly, the presence of the gods can be seen behind the important issues of the plays. Zeus wants to punish Troy; Artemis demands Iphigenia’s sacrifice; Orestes is ordered by the oracle of Apollo; Clytemnestra refers to herself as God’s instrument of vengeance. The changing emphasis on justice perhaps best can be seen on the divine level. Zeus changes from the vengeful, wrathful god who demands the destruction of Troy to a god of enlightened justice. Apollo, too, changes from a god who had cursed Cassandra to one defending Orestes before the court of Areopagus. The Furies, blood-for-blood avengers of matricide, change to the Eumenides, the “kindly” ones. Neither the blind vengeance of the othonian deities nor the compromising vengeance of Apollo’s Delphic code could continue to serve a civilized society. By the end of the trilogy, justice is translated in terms of the true justice of Athene expressed in the authority of the Athenian Areopagus.

The quest for and progression of justice on both the human and divine levels is the most significant theme of The Oresteia. The philosophical and social implications of this theme contribute to the timelessness of the plays.

The second great theme of the trilogy concerns the central figure of Clytemnestra and the significance of the woman in the husband-wife relationship. Clytemnestra is obviously the most powerful figure in The Oresteia, the only character
to appear in all three plays. Generally speaking, *The Oresteia* is a drama of situation; that is, the significance of the characters is subordinate to the issues involved. This is not to say that Aeschylus' characters are completely negligible. Certainly, there is an absence of the psychological motivation and character delineation that typifies both Sophocles and Euripides, but in *Clytemnestra* we see Aeschylus' ability to present a vivid and fully developed personality.

In regard to the theme of *Clytemnestra* as wife and mother, it is conceivable that the personal qualities which in men produced the greatness of Athens must certainly have been present in women. Denial of the proper expression of these qualities could only have engendered the poison of resentment and perverted ambition. Aeschylus is not opposed to the patriarchal society of his day; on the contrary, the plays defend the dominance of the male. Athens in *The Oresteia* gives her vote to Orestes because "in all things she is on the father's side." Aeschylus does not justify his murderess, any more than Euripides justifies his Medea or Ibsen his Hedda Gabler; but he reiterates the dangerous anomalies which must occur when, in a social framework giving every freedom to men and none to women, a passionate and strong-willed wife confronts a weak but arrogant husband. *Clytemnestra* is not merely a murderess, the horrifying instrument of pitiless justice. She is also the mother
of Iphigenia, and in that character, "a symbol of all wives and mothers who suffer from the inferior status of the woman in marriage."\(^{10}\) This attitude is voiced by the Chorus in *The Choephoroe* when they reflect, with some narrative, on the fearful crimes of which women are capable when roused by reckless passion:

> By gods detested, our whole sex is cursed,  
> By men disfranchised, scorned, and portionless;  
> For no man honours what the gods abhor.\(^{11}\)

Clytemnestra, therefore, is driven to her murderous act not only by love of Aegisthus, hatred of Agamemnon, and jealousy of Cassandra. The deepest spring of her tragedy is the knowledge that she, who has it in her to be the head of a kingdom, if need be, as well as of a family, can be freely ignored as a wife and outraged as a mother by a man she knows to be her inferior.

Dramatically, Clytemnestra is portrayed as a woman with a man's will. This is stated directly in the opening speech of the watchman, a speech heavy with dramatic foreboding that suggests the opening scene of *Hamlet*:

> Great news for Clytemnestra, in whose woman's heart  
> A man's will nurses hope.\(^{12}\)

\(^{10}\)Wells, *Introduction to his translation of The Oresteia Trilogy*, p. 22.  
\(^{11}\) *The Choephoroe*, ll. 635-7.  
\(^{12}\) *Agamemnon*, ll. 12-3.
She rails at the Elders of the Chorus for criticizing her "as an ignorant girl" (1. 275); the Chorus closes this scene with the indicative statement,

Madam, your words are like a man's, both wise and kind.\(^{13}\)

Confronted with her proud and forbidding husband, who with crushing sourness tells her not to make a woman of him, she takes the man's part and imposes her will. Once in the play she is defeated—she cannot wrest a word from Cassandra. When the murder is done, she raves at the Elders who had faltered in unmanly indecision while the king died, for still treating her as a thoughtless woman. She speaks of the man she has chosen for her shield, Aegisthus—who is called woman by the Elders (1. 1625) and by Orestes in The Choephoroe (1.303). This paradox of Clytemnestra as "man" and Aegisthus as "woman" is a subtle but effective device attesting to Aeschylus' awareness of irony as a successful dramatic device.

Finally Clytemnestra's status as a wife has been touched both by Chryseis and Cassandra— but that, though galling enough, is of minor importance, since convention allowed a soldier his concubine.\(^{14}\) Clytemnestra's tragedy both began and ended with outrage to her motherhood, when Iphigenia was taken from her, and when Orestes killed her. In the climax

\(^{13}\text{Agamemnon, ll. 350-1.}\)

\(^{14}\text{Vellacott, Introduction, p. 20.}\)
of *The Eumenides*, the trial-scene, we have a long argument between Apollo and the Furies on the respective rights and status of a man and woman in marriage and parenthood. Also, a brief but emphatic argument on the rival claims to freedom of a husband and a wife finds a place at the climactic moment of *The Choephoroe*, just before Orestes kills his mother. Clearly, the relation of man and woman in marriage expressed through the dramatic figure of Clytemnestra must be named, after the quest for and progression of justice, as the second great theme of *The Orestes*.

Thus far this study has dwelled upon themes that extend throughout the trilogy. It is also necessary to consider certain specific dramatic highlights in order to appreciate fully Aeschylus' ability to mould a narrative legend into meaningful drama. The most significant dramatic highlight is the use of the third actor. In considering *Agamemnon*, it is apparent that the fundamental difference between this play and Aeschylus' earlier plays is that there the concentration was upon one actor, here upon two. Xerxes, for example, in the earlier play *The Persae*, meets ruin at the hands of the undifferentiated Greeks and "the god." Agamemnon meets his end at the hands of Clytemnestra, so both must be characterised.\(^\text{15}\) Aeschylus goes beyond this innovation,

\(^{15}\) Kitto, 68-69. I am indebted to Professor Kitto's critical remarks throughout my discussion of Aeschylus' use of the third actor.
however, by the incidental use of the third actor. He does not use the third actor as fully as does Sophocles, for Aeschylus does not emphasize the clash of character as does Sophocles. Sophocles uses the greater fluidity of plot which the third actor gave to show his hero in different relations, but Aeschylus uses the third actor for atmosphere to give solidity to the situation which is the crux of his drama.

The third actor appears immediately—the watchman, who delivers the opening speech. Instead of the usual choral ode (parados) that opens the play, we have one character establishing a tone of foreboding that extends throughout the play. With the appearance of the Herald (l.503), the third actor assumes another guise. The Herald does not complicate the issue or throw new light on the character or motives of Agamemnon, as Sophocles would have used him. He only tells what Agamemnon has done that establishes the case against him. The Chorus has already told how Iphigenia was sacrificed to her father's ambition, how urns came back to Greece in place of living men, now the Herald tells of the ultimate transgression. During the sack of Troy, the victors overthrew the very altars of the gods. All of this the Herald tells as his duty; the irony of his speech indicates his unknowingness of what dire results these transgressions

kitto, p. 69.
will bring:

So harsh a halter Atrœus' elder son has thrown
Around Troy's neck, and now comes home victorious
To claim supremest honours among mortal men. 17

Less effective dramatically than either the watchman
or the Herald is Aegisthus. His character is described by
the Elders as that of a coward who would not go with Agamemnon
to the war, a lecher who seduced the king's wife, and
again a coward who allowed a woman to wield the sword against
his enemy. We must also look at the lines Aeschylus has given
him to speak. His statements are free from boastfulness and
from pretense, and his description of the events is objec-
tive, as far as it goes. We notice, however, that when he
speaks of the banishment of Thyestes by Atrœus he omits
to mention the reason—that Thyestes had seduced Atrœus' 
wife. As he tells the ghastly story of what Agamemnon's
father did to his father Thyestes, we realize that the
filial obligation which drove him to plot vengeance on the
son of Atrœus is exactly the same as that which now lies
upon Orestes, which is fulfilled in The Choephorœs. Al-
though Aegisthus is obviously a weak character when juxta-
posed to Clytemnestra, it must be said in his favor that
unlike Clytemnestra, he refrains from insulting the dead king.
His appeal is to justice, and his resolve is to rule. Aeschy-
lus does not praise or excuse Aegisthus; but his insistence

17 Agamemnon, 11. 524-7.
on presenting the case fairly ensures that the urgency of the central theme, what is justice? is still further heightened by the closing scene of the play.

Finally, the epitome of the dramatic effectiveness of the third actor is in the character of Cassandra. She arrives with Agamemnon and is present throughout the scene between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, but she remains silent. Even after Agamemnon departs into the palace, when Clytemnestra entreats her to speak, she remains silent. It has been said that "Cassandra silent in her chariot is more eloquent than Cassandra speaking, even if Euripides should have written a speech for her." What is the purpose of this? It is wrong to assume that Clytemnestra's desire for revenge stems from her jealousy of Cassandra. Clytemnestra's hatred and Agamemnon's sin go back to the killing of Iphigenia; on that day he doomed himself to fall by her sword. What has happened since—the slaughter of so many Greeks before Troy, the despoiling of the Trojan gods, the bringing home of the Trojan princess—these things are merely aggravations of the original offense, merely fresh illustrations of Agamemnon's *hybris*. Gradually, in her strange immobility, Cassandra imposes herself upon us as a symbol of all that is wrong in Agamemnon. She symbolizes Agamemnon's *hybris*, and any dialogue that she might contribute to the exchange between

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kitto, p. 79.
Agamemnon and Clytemnestra would only obscure her value as such a symbol. Professor Kitto tersely and adequately summarizes Cassandra's value in Agamemnon:

She illuminates Agamemnon, but chiefly her function is to accentuate, at the moment of crisis, the ethical and emotional undertone of the play. She brings to our minds swiftly and immediately a whole train of associated ideas, like a remembered scent or tune.19

Aside from the use of the third act as the most effective dramatic device in Agamemnon, the "purple carpet" scene between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra is probably the most significant, single scene in the play. Her speeches here are packed with subtlety. Every sentence is calculated to cause Agamemnon uneasiness, yet gives him no shadow of excuse for expressing it. She dwells on one theme, Agamemnon's death and the many deaths that rumor had given him in his absence. Then she eloquently calls upon her maids to spread a carpet of purple cloth from the chariot to the palace door to receive the feet of the conqueror:

... Servants do as you have been bidden; Make haste, carpet his way with crimson tapestries,

Spread silk before your master's feet; Justice herself Shall lead him to a home he never hoped to see.20

Agamemnon in reply snubs his wife resoundingly and rebukes

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19Kitto, p. 80.

20Agamemnon, ll. 908-11.
her for thus inviting the jealousy of the gods to fall on him. She accepts this without any hint of resentment and rejoins with a flood of two-faced imagery which rouses in the audience an uneasiness to balance Agamemnon's. The sea, she says, is an inexhaustible source of purple dye; and Agamemnon can well afford to tread on expensive cloth. But the "sea" she speaks of is the family feud, inexhaustible in hate; the "purple dye" is blood shed for revenge; the "one outpouring," the "safe journey's end," are alike ambiguous. The "unripe grape" is a word also used for a "young virgin," and therefore means Iphigenia, from whose death springs the wrath of Zeus against her father; and "perfected" is the word used of an unblemished victim upon whom all the rites preliminary to sacrifice have been performed. Agamemnon, self-confident and contemptuous, listens without understanding.

Although Agamemnon refuses to arouse the wrath of the gods by this act of hybris, ironical in view of his past transgressions, Clytemnestra convinces him to yield. She cries out in triumph, as she has succeeded in symbolically demonstrating personal ascendancy over her husband. Aeschylus attempts to portray Agamemnon not as a specific character, but as a sinner, in the general sense of the word, and this ultimate act of transgression in a long line of transgressions ushers him to his doom. The "cards are stacked" against Agamemnon, but Aeschylus is no determinist. He
conveys the idea that man is faced with freedom of choice, and fate takes over as a result of the choice:

So he put on, of his own free will,  
The harness of necessity.21

Agamemnon, therefore, has doomed himself by his own choice. He is by nature the kind of man who cannot survive in a world ruled by just and holy powers; he is one whom the gods must inevitably destroy.

The Choephoroe, the play most often referred to by contemporary adaptors of the theme, is even more so the situation drama. Orestes and Electra are not characters in the same full sense as Clytemnestra and Agamemnon in the first play. The one fact known about Orestes, that he was commanded by a god to kill his mother, is so absorbing in its terror that it leaves no room in the portrait of him for incidental features. In the same way, Electra's personal situation is simple and complete, a depth of misery and humiliation lit by a single hope, her brother's return and vengeance. It is this situation which governs every word and act; all that is required in the way of character is an unswerving resolution, and this Electra has. The Chorus, unlike the detached Chorus of Agamemnon which lyrically but objectively minglest past, present, and future in its commentary, is itself a third actor that takes an active part in the planning an accomplishment of the revenge. It is they who

encourage Electra at first to pray for the violent deaths of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra; they encourage Orestes to action and place themselves under his orders; and they persuade the Nurse to tell Aegisthus to come without his armed escort.

The foreshadowing that typifies Agamemnon also permeates The Choephoroe. In general, the play is an attempt to create an atmosphere of suspense leading up to the act of violence by Orestes that is the culmination of action. At times the suspense is overextended, as in the incredulity of the recognition scene when Electra moves from lock of hair to footprint to final recognition of her brother in some thirty stanzas. Suspense is effectively created, however, in the prolonged lyric chant or kommos in which Orestes, Electra, and the Chorus alternate in a series of stanzas, partly invocatory and partly reminiscent, whose purpose is to awaken the anger of Agamemnon's spirit. There is a general crescendo of excitement extending over twenty-two stanzas, followed by shorter antiphonal sentences which seem to goad Agamemnon to revenge by recital of his humiliation.

The leading characteristic of The Choephoroe is the tremendous importance of the invisible and supernatural allies who assist the vengeance. Zeus, Apollo, Hermes, Hades, the spirit of Agamemnon, are felt throughout as if they were present with the human agents. This is the sig-
nificance of the prolonged scene at the tomb, which forms more than one half of the play. The human strategy, as subsequently developed, is not especially skilful. The story told to Clytemnestra by Orestes, as the pretended Phocian mentioning the death of Orestes as a bare fact casually learned from a stranger, was not well fitted to find ready credence with the astute woman whose fears had just been quickened by the dream of the suckling serpent. That Clytemnestra did, in fact, suspect the "Phocian's" story appears from her wish that Aegisthus should bring his body-guards. Then again, the old Nurse of Orestes was hardly the safest person to whom a message of such critical moment could be entrusted. The Nurse, however, is the "real-est" character in the play, a foil to the ritualistic aura that surrounds the others. Her grief for Orestes, so naturally expressed, is welcome in the midst of characters who either never had or have been denied the luxury of natural affections. We contrast the baby she loved with the tragic man whom circumstances have made; the unnatural mother with the simple devotion of the slave.22

The Eumenides is marked by a succession of dramatic surprises, a play quite different from the first two with their emphasis on tragic foreshadowing. The dramatic persona in this final play are dominated by the gods, in con-

22Kitto, p. 89.
contrast to the first two plays where they have "behind the scene" significance. Orestes has now become the occasion of conflict between certain moral powers of the universe; and the resolution of this conflict, however poignant our interest in Orestes, must be the chief interest of the play. The issue is a perplexing one; is matricide a worse crime than the murder of a king who to the Greeks represented the human instrument of divine order?

... He was a king
Wielding an honoured scepter by divine command.23

Both the argument of Apollo and that of the Furies have strengths and weaknesses, and the human court of Areopagus is equally divided. Athena casts the deciding vote in favor of Orestes, both because of respect for fatherhood (she was born of Zeus and no mother) and because of her belief that the long period of suffering and ritual cleansing that Orestes had undergone expiated his sin.

The dramatic core of the play is the conflict between Apollo and the Furies, but it is an external conflict, the type of which characterizes drama of situation. In the final analysis, the trilogy itself is a series of situations, dramatically linked. Aeschylus is not concerned with the tragic workings of the mind, but that men of violence do things which outrage Justice, bring retribution, and provoke further violence.

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23 *The Orestes*, 11. 625-6.
Sophocles' *Electra*

*Electra,*¹ produced between 420 and 410 B.C., is Sophocles' treatment of the House of Atreus theme which parallels the situation presented by Aeschylus in *The Choephoroe*. Thematically, Sophocles also is interested in *Dikê*, but to him retribution and justice are one. That is, Sophocles conceived that justice could only be achieved through the counteraction of an act of violence by another equally violent action. Sophoclean justice, then, is immutable as contrasted to the progression and development of *Dikê* through the three plays of *The Oresteia*. Aeschylus exhibits in grand outline the working of an eternal law, full of mystery and terror. Justice, Destiny, and the Furies are the paramount agencies. As Professor Jebb has said, "The human agents are drawn indeed, with a master's hand, but by a few powerful strokes rather than with subtle touches or fine shading."²

Nor is much care shown for probability in minor details of the plot. With Sophocles, the interest depends primarily on the portraiture of human character. The opportunities for this are contrived by a series of ingenious situations, fruitful

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in contrasts and dramatic effects. Since the same events are treated in Aeschylus' *The Choephoroe* and Sophocles' *Electra*, namely the return of Orestes and his subsequent revenge, a brief listing of the changes that Sophocles makes is necessary. Some of the more significant changes will then be discussed in greater detail.

Sophocles is not interested in tracing the family curse as was Aeschylus, nor does he introduce the Furies. Aeschylus' *Electra* is more a prop for the situation than she is a carefully delineated character, while Sophocles' play is dominated by the tragic proportions of his heroine through her capability for extremes of emotion. *Electra* has finality, with none of the anticipation of resolving Orestes' crime that we see in the epilogue of *The Choephoroe*. There is no reference to the Cassandra—Agamemnon relationship, as Sophocles does not wish to introduce any more motivation than is necessary for Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon. Her transgression of justice must be seen as such a terrible act of violence that it is only right that Orestes act as he does. Only through an emphasis on the heartlessness and brutality of Clytemnestra's crime can Orestes' crime be seen as a justified act that requires no further retribution. Sophocles enhances his play dramatically by the introduction of Chrysothemis, Electra's sister, and the Pedogogus, the old attendant who returns to Argos with Orestes and Pylades. The imagery in Clytemnestra's dream changes from a serpent
to a blossoming tree; in Aeschylus, the dream is interpreted by Orestes; in Sophocles, by Electra and the Chorus. Although the presence of the gods, particularly Apollo, is important in Electra, Sophocles places more emphasis on human agents. Orestes is ready for revenge himself; he does not need to be commanded by the oracle of Apollo to exact vengeance. This emphasis on human agents is indicated by the relative subordination of the Chorus which, as in Aeschylus, usually represents the super-human element. The evil natures of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are stressed; they are extremely cruel to Electra, reducing her almost to the condition of a slave. Electra describes it:

Like a stranger and a beggar,
Dwelling in my father's house, thus,
In rags and shame,
I steal the scraps from empty tables,
when the feast is done.³

Aegisthus and Clytemnestra extend their wickedness by tyrannically ruling their subjects and forcing them to partake in a monthly celebration of Agamemnon's death. Finally, the important recognition scene varies in Aeschylus and Sophocles; a close analysis of Sophocles' effective use of this scene will be discussed later.

Although it is probable that Sophocles was aware of Aeschylus' Electra when he patterned his own heroine, the difference in portrayal of this character by the two play-

³Electra, I. 189-192.
wrights is the most significant difference in the two plays. In The Choephoroe Electra, carrying libations to her father's grave from Clytemnestra, who is distressed by the ominous dream of the serpent, hesitates over the propriety of praying instead for vengeance. She seeks the Chorus' reassurance, and as she pours the libations with this prayer for vengeance, she prays also for a heart more righteous and a hand more pious than that of her mother. It is the consciousness of wrong-doing in wishing her mother ill that Sophocles adopts and upon which he builds the whole first part of the play. It is the entire loss of this sense that afterwards marks her frantic happiness and points to what we may think of as a sort of moral collapse. She, unlike her Aeschylean counterpart, is characterized by the fact that she has borne years of persecution, hoping against hope for her brother's return. At the beginning of the play she is at the end of her resources, physical and mental; as the play progresses she is plunged into hope and then into uttermost despair; Orestes being reported dead, she nerves herself to take some action, though against Aegisthus alone; and when finally Orestes reveals his identity, she gives herself to unexpected and affectionate exultation, with no reserve at all.

It is perhaps necessary to probe deeper into Sophocles' portrayal of Electra as a many-dimensional, tragic figure, capable of love, hate, shame, despair, and exaltation. In
her opening speeches, she lyrically laments her father's
death and the absence of her brother, to whom must fall the
duty of cleansing the House of Atræus and delivering her
from oppression. She has lived under the yoke of Aegisthus
and her mother since Agamemnon's death, and it is not surpri-
sing that she is utterly unable to restrain her cries despite
her understanding that they are a kind of madness. Then, in
the calmer rhythm of iambic verse, Electra speaks to a proudly
subservient Chorus. Her speech both opens and closes with
significant verses:

I feel some shame, ye women, if I seem
To over-weary you with many tears:
But hard compulsion forces me to this,
Therefore bear with me. . . .4

At such a time, my friends, there is no room
For self-control or measured reverence;
Ill forces us into choosing words of ill.5

Placed as they are placed, these verses undoubtedly are
meant to register for this is the Electra that Sophocles
took from Aeschylus and developed in his own way. Profoundly
conscious of the wrong that by evil circumstances she is
compelled to do in hating her mother in order to ask ven-
geance for her father, she knows that her hate is a violation
of the very aïgos, piety, that she cannot help but feel.

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She is ashamed; and it is chiefly this sense of shame that makes her a tragic figure. Without it she is dramatic, no doubt, but hardly tragic.

The grief that Electra feels for her dead father is balanced by her faith in Orestes' return, for he is her one hope of success, the only living person whom she feels that she can love. When she hears that he is dead she suffers a double, deadly blow and can only break into cries of utter despair;

Ah woe is me! Oh, I am lost, quite lost. Forlorn and utterly wretched! Lost, quite lost.6

After she has heard the full story from the Pedogogus she is silent for a while and breaks her silence only to chide her mother's unnatural joy. When Clytemnestra departs triumphant, Electra unburdens her misery. From this despair Electra gradually recovers; if Orestes is dead she will carry out the vengeance without him. This forceful assertion of will would have been unbecoming to the weaker Electra of Aeschylus. Her resolve is in no way weakened because the more conservative Chrysothemis refuses to help;

.... I must do my task
   Alone. We cannot leave this
   work undone.7

6Electra, ll. 674-7.
7Electra, ll. 1019-20.
Some critical emphasis must be placed on the artistically construed recognition scene, not only because it enables us to delve further into the many-faceted character of Electra, but also because of its overall dramatic effectiveness. Unlike The Choephoroe, where Electra herself finds the lock of hair on her father's tomb, the recognition scene in Electra begins with the second appearance of Chrysothemis. She hastens to tell Electra of the discovery of the lock of hair that suggests that Orestes has returned, but Electra already has heard the report of Orestes' death by the Pedagogus. This is effective drama—the violent contrast between Chrysothemis' delight and Electra's despair and the peripeteia that lies in the bringing of joyful news only to find happiness turned to despondency.

Later, when Orestes brings in the urn which is supposed to contain his ashes and gives it to Electra, he is still a man of action whose chief thought is success in his undertaking. Though he does not yet know that it is his sister who bursts into tears on hearing him (l. 1115) and still keeps up his assumed part when he gives her the urn, he is clearly touched when she begs him to let her keep it (ll. 1119-22). In her address to the urn (ll. 1125-70), we have what is probably the most dramatic speech in the play. It is not only ironical in that we know who both are; it is not surpassed for grief and tenderness. Orestes stands watching her in astonishment, we must suppose, and is deeply moved; but natural
feelings had begun to work in him even before he hears
Electra's long lament. At the end of it his jauntiness has
left him. He knows that this unhappy woman is his sister;
he has been deeply touched by her, and he finds difficulty
in controlling his speech (ll. 1175-7). He is appalled by
what he hears from her and what he sees—her sad state; her
wasting, neglected body; and her unmarried, miserable con-
dition. Then, when the recognition comes, each forgets
himself in the other with a sense of fathomless relief,
love, and satisfaction, with an example of the sticho-
mythia that characterizes the play:

EL. O happy light! OR. A light of joy indeed!
EL. Voice, you have come! OR. My voice shall be your
answer.
EL. Here in my arms? OR. Here, where I still
would be!

Electra's despair has turned to unbounded joy; Orestes' cal-
culated dissembling disappears in the reality of his sister's
presence.

This recognition is an important part of the reconcili-
ation which Sophocles finds for the tragic situation of
Electra. The disorder, waste, and evil that have grown from
the murder of Agamemnon can only be countered by the growth

\textsuperscript{8}Electra, ll. 1121-6.
of opposite forces of order, trust, and love. If these can be re-established, the powers of wickedness must yield. The recognition gives a foretaste of how this works and what it means. Electra turns from hate to love, from despair to hope, from solitude to intimate companionship. This woman who once wanted both modesty and punishment has become, through her own relief and happiness, a symbol of punishment alone. In many respects she has become an untrammelled embodiment of the Furies. Orestes is shaken from his superficial and partial view of his task into a finer and deeper discernment. He now knows what his father's murder means in its results and the misery and wickedness to which it has led. Hitherto brother and sister have lived in different worlds, but now they are not only brought together in union and harmony but enabled to face their stern task together and in the same spirit.

When the time comes for Orestes to kill his mother, Aeschylus makes him hesitate; the tide is turned by Orestes' Phocian comrade Pylades, who bids him remember the command of Apollo. In Sophocles, Orestes never realises, until he talks with an Electra as yet unrecognized by him, what her life has been; he then proceeds to kill his mother as much to free his sister as to revenge his father. That is why, in Sophocles alone of the three Greek dramatists, the murder

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of Clytemnestra comes before that of Agamemnon. She is killed from a new and sufficient motive and when that killing is accomplished, Orestes is able to return to his original, uncomplicated motive of cleansing his father's house. And thus, when we consider the characterization of Clytemnestra, Sophocles makes matricide at least intelligible to an audience of the fifth century.\(^{10}\)

Sophocles was undoubtedly aware that he would be criticized for ignoring the stain of matricide upon Orestes, and certainly his failure to do so prevents Electra from attaining the comprehensive sweep of The Oresteia. However, it must be said in Sophocles' favor that he attempts to justify the matricide dramatically, that he integrates theme and action in spite of the moral dissonance that exists at the end of the play. In order to show that Orestes could perform his deed without appearing to be an unnatural monster, Sophocles had to show that Clytemnestra had ceased to be a mother and justly deserved her fate. We are shown the stages, if not the process, by which Electra comes to see that Clytemnestra does not deserve the name of mother. Her first doubt appears when she tells the Chorus how Clytemnestra sleeps with her paramour in Agamemnon's bed:

\(^{10}\) W. Adams, Sophocles the Playwright (Toronto, 1957), p. 62.

\(^{11}\) Electra, I. 273-4.
It is clearer when Electra comes into personal conflict with her mother and defends herself from the charge of disrespect:

Mother? No, Tyrant you are, and mistress, but not mother! What is my life? What have I found from you—You and your mate—but only persecution.12

Later, when she believes that Orestes is dead and knows that Clytemnestra is glad at the news, such reservations as she may have had are gone, and she calls her "mother most un-motherly" (l. 1154). This is the view that she communicates to Orestes when she tells of the hardships she suffers from Clytemnestra:

One much unlike her name. She is call'd my mother.13

Thus it is that the portrayal of Clytemnestra "as a mother who is no mother" is one of the important themes of Electra. She is not a completely wicked caricature; she feels at least a pang of maternal grief when she first hears that Orestes is dead. A little later, however, she is capable of addressing heartless taunts to Electra, and it is obvious

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12Electra, 11. 597-600.
13Electra, 1. 1194.
that her character has been delineated in such a fashion that the bad qualities outnumber the good.

For us, as no doubt for the Greeks, it is impossible to approach Sophocles' Clytemnestra without memories of her great predecessor in Aeschylus. We expect her to have the same characteristics and the same criminal grandeur. When we find that she has not, we are liable to lose interest in her or least to make little attempt to see her as she really is. In fact, she owes more by contrast than by resemblance to Aeschylus' Clytemnestra. Sophocles may have been conscious that comparisons would be made between the two murderesses, and he seems to have decided to create an entirely new character. His Clytemnestra lacks the implacable courage of the Aeschylean and is more like a real murderess as she would be some years after her crime. Aeschylus does not include a scene between Clytemnestra and Electra as does Sophocles, because the almost superhuman force of his Clytemnestra would have been fatal to the dramatic effect of any woman opposed to her. It is interesting to imagine the stalemate that would undoubtedly exist in diatribe between the Aeschylean Clytemnestra and the Sophoclean Electra, as each is the pillar of strength in her respective play.

Electra capably demonstrates Sophocles' manipulation of the third actor. Although it is fairly certain that in

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14Bowra, p. 236.
many respects Sophocles was influenced by *The Oresteia*. Aeschylus' use of the third actor (as discussed in the preceding chapter) was through the influence of Sophocles, who had introduced the device ten years prior to *The Oresteia*. The third actor, then, is a Sophoclean innovation that can be seen working at its best in *Electra*. The old herald is revived in the person of the trusty Pedogogus who received Orestes as a child, not from a nurse, but from *Electra* herself, and transported him safely away from Argos. His appearance particularly is felt in the first scene where the dominant note of expediency in his first speech focuses attention upon the central issue, Orestes' *Adikia*, or retributive counter-justice:

For as things are, we may not linger on:  
The time is come for action.17

And again, near the end of the scene,

No! no! Let us seek to do nothing before  
the business of Loxias,  
And make our beginning therefrom, pouring  
libations to your father!  
This is what brings us victory and tri- 
umph in our deeds!18

15 *Kitto*, p. 68.

16 *Stesichorus*, among the post-Homeric epic poets, stres-
ses the presence of the herald in the myth although Aeschylus  
dispenses with him entirely.

17 *Electra*, 11. 21-2.

18 *Electra*, 11. 82-5.
His presence is also a source of large advantage to the plot. It is somewhat of a weak point in *The Choephoroe* that the story told by Orestes was not likely to impose upon Clytemnestra, and does not, in fact, disarm her suspicion. The Sophoclean stratagem is of a different order. After the Pedogogus tells Clytemnestra of Orestes' death, the two "Phocians" arrive with the urn as envoys of Strophius, the old ally of Agamemnon. This device of two independent missions, each from an appropriate quarter, is fitted to win belief as well as provide keen dramatic irony for the spectator.

Chrysothemis is depicted as a foil for Electra. The scene that follows her first appearance cannot fail to remind us of *Antigone*. Like Ismene, Chrysothemis appeals to Electra in the name of *sophrosyne*, safemindedness, of which she is fully and formally an exponent; and like Antigone, Electra shows that there is a wisdom that transcends "wisdom." The argument between the two is simply the conflict of passion against reason, which Chrysothemis refers to as "safemindedness." To Electra, however, it is justice and not safemindedness that matters. The argument ends with Electra's hope that she may never be so devoid of the genuine wisdom that Chrysothemis lacks in spite of her conservative rational plea.

While the strictly human interest predominates in Electra, we must not undervalue the dramatic importance which
Sophocles has given to the supernatural agency, or the skill with which it is carried through the texture of the play. In other words, what Orestes and Electra are doing through an action complete and intelligible in itself is at the same time part of a larger design, the will of the gods, the principle of ἔθικη, the universal law. Sophocles is demonstrating a law in things, that violence must produce its recoil; and the fact that ἔθικη here is so grim and unrelieved is a measure of the hideousness of the original offence.¹⁹

In the final analysis, it is difficult to say whether Aeschylus or Sophocles more effectively treated the myth, as the two plays rest at opposite thematic poles. In Aeschylus we have drama of situation, a progressive concept of ἔθικη, and obvious social and political overtones of fifth century Athens. Sophocles is concerned with the theme of static retribution and an emphasis on the human agents. In some respects, Sophocles' treatment is more effective dramatically (the recognition scene, e. g.); while a possible weakness, when compared to The Oresteia, may be that the finality of Orestes' revenge, while justified dramatically, still ignores the moral issue of matricide.

¹⁹Kitto, p. 141.
EURIPIDES' ELECTRA

Euripides' Electra,¹ produced in 413 B.C., is probably the most severely criticized of the Euripidean dramas, and for the most part it will be the purpose of this chapter to show that this criticism is justified. It seems apparent that his treatment of the House of Atreus theme is too theatrically contrived to have the exalting effects of the Aeschylean and Sophoclean treatments. Some critics, however, have come to Euripides' defense in this issue. Professor Kitto contends that Electra is melodramatic while the other treatments are tragic, and thus he seems to suggest that any comparison of the three plays is rather pointless. He states that

These two plays (Electra and Orestes) are melodramatic, not tragic; . . . they aim first and foremost at being theatrically effective, and it is this that gives them their character and explains their form.²

That theatricality is the key note of Electra is not to be denied; but a defense of this kind assumes that melodrama was Euripides' intention while it is just as conceivable that he aimed for the same profound effects as

²Kitto, p. 348.
did Aeschylus and Sophocles and melodrama was the result of an aim that fell short of its mark. Primary emphasis will be placed on Euripides' changes in treatment of the myth. While the basic issues remain unchanged (Orestes' return and revenge), Euripides introduces certain innovations that actually place him closer to the modern dramatists than to his immediate predecessors.

While the main elements of Euripides' Electra are similar to those in Aeschylean and Sophoclean treatments, individual details, characterization, action, tone, and theme are different. The Atreus-Thyestes feud is present; Pelops is not mentioned, but for the first time reference is made to Tantalus. Orestes' escape as a child is treated differently. In The Oresteia he is sent away by Clytemnestra; in Sophocles' Electra it is Electra who sends him away; but Euripides has the old man, who performs a function similar to that of the Pedagogus in Sophocles' Electra, rescue him. Euripides minimizes the details of motivation behind Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia. He only mentions that she was summoned and killed by Agamemnon on the pretext of her marriage to Achilles; this absence of allusion to Artemis is one example of subordination of the background role of the gods that is commonly found in Euripidean drama.

Euripides lays more stress than either of the other dramatists did on Agamemnon's relationship to Cassandra as a major motive for Clytemnestra's revenge. Also an
innovation is Electra's marriage to the peasant and in her threat to commit suicide if Orestes fails to slay Aegisthus. The order of the killings reverts to that found in The Choephoroe although the details change; Aegisthus, who never appears on the stage alive, is slain at a feast that takes place in the countryside away from the palace and Clytemnestra is slain in Electra's hut. Neither is given any warning and for the first time Electra is an active participant in Clytemnestra's murder. There is an absence of Clytemnestra's ill-omened dream and for the first time she expresses regret for the murder of Agamemnon and the subsequent oppression of Electra. Euripides stresses the reaction of Orestes and Electra to the murder of their mother in terms of the regret they feel afterwards. There is a severe criticism of the Delphic oracle for prompting Orestes to kill his mother. A deus ex machina appears in the form of the Dioscuri; their revelations exhibit further alterations. A typical Euripidean criticism of the gods is voiced in the Dioscuri' comment of Zeus' role in relation to the Trojan war: the implication is that Zeus provoked the struggle in order "to stir up stife and slaughter of men" (l. 1282) by sending a phantom of Helen of Troy. Although Aeschylus' treatment is reflected in the forecast of Orestes' pursuit by the Furies (who never appear on stage), his madness, and his eventual expiation, some minor changes are made. Orestes is to go to Athens where he is saved by Athena; the Furies will not be reconciled but will sink into
the ground in their grief; and Electra is arbitrarily given to Pylades (who plays a very minor role in all three treatments).

It is evident that the more drastic changes that Euripides makes, supposedly for the sake of effective drama, result in little more than meretricious theatricality. It is probable that Euripides, in the light of the more complete freedom of "New Tragedy," felt the necessity to give a novel and individual treatment to a subject that was well known and very popular, whose essential features he was not allowed to change. However, some of the means which he employs to refurbish this old drama of vengeance for the murder of Agamemnon look less like happy inventions than expedients—the prologue which, in addition to being an essentially narrative device, merely supplies information which is repeated later; Orestes' lengthy speech on nobility (ll. 367-400); the unnecessarily prolonged recognition scene with its implied criticism of the one in The Choephorae; the domestic discussions between Electra and her husband; the subtle, rhetorical arguments in the Clytemnestra—Electra scene; and the reactions and emotional display of Electra and Orestes before and after the murder of Clytemnestra.

Euripides also takes liberty with the dramatic unity of place by changing the locality of the scene. In Aeschylus, Orestes and Electra meet not far from the palace, near Agamemnon's tomb; in Sophocles, the scene is likewise at Mycenae, in

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3Paul Decharme, Euripides and the Spirit of His Dramas (New York, 1906), p. 239.
front of the dwelling of the Atreidae; Euripides transports this scene to the country as a reflection of the tone of domestic realism that characterizes the play. Electra dwells in a cottage where she is the companion of a poor farmer whom Aegisthus has forced her to marry. This farmer is a very respectable man, but he is of little dramatic use in the rest of the play except to furnish the playwright an opportunity for one or two tirades against the presumptuous claims of the nobility. It is true that this rustic household offers hospitality to Crestes in his wanderings through Argos in search of his sister. As this hospitality is as meager as it is cordial, the good laborer is obliged to go and borrow food from a neighbor in order to entertain his guests properly. With dramatic irony that is too obviously contrived, the neighbor turns out to be Agamemnon's foster-brother, the aged man who long ago rescued Crestes from Aegisthus; and finally it is he who, when he brings the provisions for which he has been asked, is to recognize Crestes. The characters all serve merely as means to bring about the recognition by a way other than that used by either Aeschylus or Sophocles. No less incongruous are the means by which Aegisthus and Clytemnestra are drawn away from the protective walls of Argos. Aegisthus is supposed to be led afield by the rather improbable desire of honoring the rural deities. Electra, in order to attract her mother, sends word to her that she has given birth to a son, and that in her
inexperience she needs her aid in offering to the gods the sacrifice which is customary on the tenth day. Then there is the conflict between the legendary super-natural framework of the drama and its spirit; the former relates to the broad issue of crime and retribution, the latter to the fundamentally personal, psychological motivations of the characters. It is clear that the inner spirit and psychology of the characters and their immediate circumstances dominate the larger issues of sin and justice. A final stroke is, of course, the severe criticism of Apollo's oracle for ordering Orestes' revenge.

It is in this psychological treatment of characters and their private dilemmas that Euripides approaches the modern drama. He carries Sophocles' detailed portraiture one step forward, but with an important qualification. Sophocles, especially in his representation of Electra, uses a variety of devices to create a life-like yet essentially idealized character. Euripides, in addition to adding more details to his characterization, penetrates the idealized surface to reveal elements in the chief character which are hardly admirable if not positively unpleasant. Electra laments Agamemnon's death and Orestes' exile, but she is also obsessed with her distressing appearance and her fall in station. She dwells at length on her physical privations and discomforts and bitterly resents that strangers should witness them. This obsession with her low social level is seen in the parting shaft that she flings at her mother:
Pass into my poor house; and have a care
The smoke-grimed beams besmirch not thine
attire.4

Even more significant is Electra's eagerness in planning her
mother's death, and the deceit she employs in leading Clytem-
nestra to believe that a reconciliation is possible immediately
before ushering her into her death chamber. She has been de-
scribed as "a woman in whom it is hardly possible to find a
virtue; she is implacable, self-centered, fantastic in hatred,
calous to the verge of insanity . . . whom Euripides with his
customary moroseness and hard realism turned into a middle-
aged virago."5 Her neurotic hatred of Aegisthus is reflected
in the lines

Yea, with wine drunken, doth my mo-
ther's spouse--
The glorious, as men say--leap on
the grave,
And peit with stones my father's
monument;6

It is somehow difficult to reconcile the monster she describes
with the courteous Aegisthus who politely invites Orestes and
Pylades, perfect strangers to him, to partake in the sacrifi-
cial feast.

Orestes, too, is hardly an admirable character; his
extreme prudence, if not fear, in stopping at the borders
and in refusing to reveal himself to Electra; his attitude

5Kitto, pp. 351-2.
toward Electra's husband, which progresses from tolerant contempt to rhetorical but somewhat hollow praise; his complete lack of initiative in putting his vengeance into action (the old man presents the plan for Aegisthus' death, and Electra the plan for Clytemnestra's); his lacking of Aegisthus from behind after getting into his good graces by deceit; his squeamishness during the actual murder of Clytemnestra (he has to cover his eyes when slaying her)—this all may be quite life-like and credible, but it is a far cry from the heroic level presented by Aeschylus and Sophocles. In Orestes' absence, the optimistic Electra has been picturing him as a romantic hero who will return to Argos openly, scorning any cowardly precautions:

Not worthy a wise man, ancient, be thy words—
To think mine awless brother would have come,
Fearing Aegisthus, hither secretly.7

The real Orestes, however, is as different from this ideal as the Swiss soldier, Bluntschli, from Raina's romantic vision of Jergius in Shaw's Arme and the Man. In his first speech he shows himself quite unlike a hero, as he comes back to Argos with one eye on his line of retreat:

And now I set not foot within their walls,
But blending two assays in one I come
To this land's border,—that to another soil

7 Electra, ll. 524-6.
Forth I may flee, if any watch and know me. 8

Thus it becomes obvious that Crestes is nothing but the arm which tremulously executes the vengeance of which Electra is the determined spirit. Electra, and not her brother, "manifests decision, coolness, absence of scruples and of emotion, fierce hatred." 9 It is she who contrives the snare set for her mother and who calmly leads her into it; it is she whose voice encourages Crestes when his heart fails him; and when he covers his eyes with his cloak, so as not to see what he is doing, it is Electra who directs the point of the sword in her brother's hand against the breast of their entreating mother. This girl, whose cruelty is implacable, does not hesitate for a moment and does not even for an instant hear the voice of matricide.

Glytemnestra also has been reduced in stature; she is little more than a weak remnant of Sophocles' Glytemnestra (who in turn has been shown to be less forceful than Aeschylus' queen). She is an old, tired woman who is extremely sensitive about her reputation; she is frightened of public opinion and dares not be seen walking abroad with Aegisthus:

Fearing the people's taunts there tarried she. 10

She is typically feminine in her stressing of the fact that the main motive for her union with Aegisthus and murder of

9Decharme, p. 240.
10Electra, 1. 643.
Agamemnon was not her grief or rage over Iphigenia's death but her jealousy of Cassandra and the impossibility of getting other allies. She shows some remorse for the murder of her husband and some real pity for Electra:

... in sooth, not all so glad
   Am I, my child, for deeds that I have done.
   But thou, why thus unwashed and meanly clad,
   Seeing thy travail-sickness now is past? 11

Therefore Euripides, while not wholly convincing, attempts to portray Clytemnestra as the one compassionate figure in the play. 12 The reason behind this portrayal suggests an important thematic difference between Sophocles and Euripides. Sophocles attempts to justify matricide as an act of counter-justice by portraying Clytemnestra as a figure completely incapable of remorse; Euripides strives for the opposite effect by showing Clytemnestra as a compassionate figure in order to make the horror of matricide stand out in bold relief. In view of what is obviously an attempt for realistic drama, however, Clytemnestra's remorse is as unreal as is Electra's ruthlessness.

The dominant theme of the play, however, is a result of an evaluation of the play as a naturalistic, psychological drama akin in spirit to modern drama. Electra may be inter-

11 Electra, ll. 1105-8.

interpreted as an attempt to demonstrate how human beings can ruin their lives if they allow their passions to rule them or if they are compelled by irrational forces (such as oracles) to undertake an action beyond their capacities. Orestes and Electra submitted to a combination of these forces; the result was misery, carnage, and repentance. Despite man's knowledge of them and resulting objections to them, such forces exist. Euripides' final attitude is expressed in the lines of the Bacchae:

Alas and alas!—for thy pitiful wail
Even Gods' hearts fail;
For with me and with all the Abiders
On High,
Is compassion for mortals' misery.¹³

Thus it is evident that Euripides departed radically and relatively unsuccessfully from Aeschylus and Sophocles. There are differences between the latter two according to their different conceptions of drama, but both demonstrate the result of certain actions without focusing upon the details of suffering as Euripides does. Instead they affirmed, in different ways, the existence and operation of the positive law of Dike. Euripides' execution of his theme is flawed, not only in his failure to integrate the human with the supernatural and the past with the present, but also in his resorting to a variety of purely theatrical, melodramatic effects and his tendency to make his points explicit rather than fusing them into the flow of action.

¹³Electra, 11. 1327-30.


EUGENE O'NEILL'S MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA

Mourning Becomes Electra,\(^1\) written between 1929 and 1931, is one of the most famous plays of the American theater and certainly the most famous and representative of the modern adaptations. In a letter to Thomas Hobson Quinn, O'Neill spoke of his desire to approach the Greek sense of the "transfiguring nobility of tragedy," and went on to say:

> Where theatre is concerned, one must have a dream and the Greek dream in tragedy is the noblest ever!\(^2\)

While most modern adaptations of Greek themes retain the original setting, O'Neill's adaptation shifts the milieu of its action to New England and substitutes the Civil War for the Trojan War.

Because O'Neill does not use the Greek setting and characters, it is necessary to briefly summarize the plot of his prose trilogy and to indicate the Greek counterparts to his characters. To concentrate attention on the relationships among the central characters, O'Neill eliminates both Iphigenia and Cassandra. He also compresses the time element by changing the ages of his Orestes and Electra; both

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\(^1\)Eugene O'Neill, Mourning Becomes Electra, in Nine Plays of Eugene O'Neill (New York, 1938).

are in their twenties when the action begins. The action takes place on the Mannon estate at the outskirts of a New England seaport town. The first play, Homecoming, corresponds to Agamemnon and begins near the end of the Civil War. The Mannon family's shipping fortunes were founded by Abe Mannon (Atreus) and passed down to his son, Ezra (Agamemnon), who is serving in the war as a general in the Union army with his son, Orin (Orestes), under his command. His daughter, Lavinia (Electra), remains at home with her mother, Christine (Clytemnestra). While Ezra has been away, Christine has been having an affair with Adam Brant (Aegisthus), a ship captain. He is the illegitimate son of Ezra's uncle, David Mannon (Thyestes), and Marie Brantome, who was a French serving maid in the Mannon household. Christine and Adam poison Ezra when he returns from the war, and Lavinia discovers the cause of her father's death.

The second play, The Hunted, parallels the Greek Electra dramas and builds to the deaths of Christine and Adam. The first three acts consist of Lavinia's fruitless attempts to convince Orin of their mother's guilt and of Christine's growing awareness that Lavinia knows the truth. In the fourth act, the only act in the trilogy which takes place away from the Mannon estate, Orin and Lavinia follow Christine when she meets Adam in the cabin of his ship. Adam escorts Christine home and returns to the ship where he is murdered by Orin, who has come to realize that Lavinia had been telling the
truth about their mother's affair. The final act of the play concerns Christine's suicide after she learns of Adam's death.

The third play, The Haunted, deals with the retribution which overtakes Orin and Lavinia; the play follows none of the Greek Atreidæ dramas in plot, but is intended to serve as a parallel to The Eumenides in spirit. One year has passed since Christine's suicide; as the first act begins, Lavinia and Orin return from a trip around the world. Orin is unable to dismiss his obsession with guilt; but Lavinia manifests a strong desire to begin a new life and welcomes the attentions of Peter Miles (Pylades), a suitor whom she had previously rejected. She attempts to placate Orin by encouraging his attachment to Hazel Miles, but she has little success. The tense conflict between Orin and Lavinia reaches a climax in Act III. Goaded to desperation by his fears, Orin gives Hazel a sealed envelope which contains an account of the Mannon crimes. He makes Hazel promise to read the contents if something happens to him or if Lavinia tries to marry Peter. Orin tells Lavinia that the only way he can be certain of her fidelity is to have her share his guilt, and the only act which would result in an equal sense of guilt is incest. When Lavinia rebuffs him, he commits suicide. Lavinia, now the only remaining Mannon, realizes that she cannot find happiness with Peter, for he now displays a suspicion and irritation that was completely lacking in him before. Dismissing him, Lavinia turns to the house and de-
clares that she will live with the dead until the curse is
paid out "and the last Mannon is let die" (pp. 366-7).

O'Neill's adaptation is by far the longest modern adap-
tation (with the exception of Hauptmann's Die Atriden Te-
tralogie). Although O'Neill departs in many ways from both
the details and spirit of The Oresteia, his adaptation does
focus on the main points of the House of Atreus action and
the basic themes of retribution and justice. At the same
time, however, O'Neill sets out to do more; his chief con-
cern is the reinterpretation in modern terms of what he
considers to be the essence of Greek serious drama—the con-
cept of fate. In 1926, three years before he began to write
the first draft of the play, O'Neill made explicit his in-
terest in the concept of fate in Greek drama and set forth
his goal in adapting the House of Atreus legend:

modern psychological drama using one of the
old legend plots of Greek tragedy for its basic
theme...? Is it possible to get modern psy-
chological approximation of Greek sense of fate
which an intelligent audience of today, pos-
sessed of no belief in gods or supernatural
retention, could accept and be moved by?

The content of the preceding passage is suggestive
in at least three ways. First, O'Neill assumes not only
that a modern audience would find it difficult to under-
stand or accept Greek tragedy but that it would find it

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3O'Neill, "Working Notes and Extracts from a Fragmen-
tary Diary," in European Theories of Drama, edited by Barrett
equally difficult to accept Greek tragedy in an adaptation unless the action of the latter were removed from the Greek context. Second, O'Neill expresses not only one of his own dominant interests in adapting the material, but also a basic interest in a psychological treatment of character. Finally, O'Neill's statement makes clear that central in his psychological approach is a desire to convey what he considers to be the Greek concept of fate. This focus on fate is evident in the subsequent entries in the diary which also reveal his reason for choosing the Atreidae material for his adaptation:

story of Electra and family psychologically most interesting—most comprehensive in tense basic human interrelationships—give modern Electra figure in play tragic ending worthy of character. In Greek story she peters out in undramatic married banality. Such a character contained too much tragic fate within her soul to permit this. . . Why did the chain of fated crime and retribution ignore her mother's murderer?4

Mourning Becomes Electra, both as a play and adaptation, has certain undeniable merits, chief of which is a realistic dramaturgy which maintains a varied pace and tension throughout the trilogy. More specifically, O'Neill goes far in presenting a full depiction of the central characters and in attempting to convey a sense of the past and its relation to the immediate action. Underlying the adaptation is his intense sincerity to attempt to reinterpret

4European Theories of Drama, p. 530.
what he thought to be the essence of Greek tragedy and to
convey it in meaningful terms.

And yet *Mourning Becomes Electra* fails as a success-
ful adaptation, as a tragedy (whether Greek or any other
kind), and, to a large extent, as drama. Its most serious
failure is, paradoxically, evident in the very element which
O'Neill strives so earnestly to convey—a psychological
approximation of the Greek sense of fate. At the core of
the play's failure is a basic misconception on O'Neill's
part of the Greek sense of fate and its relation to the
agents in Greek tragedy. The results of this misconception
are an overly explicit treatment of action and an inability
to integrate theme and action. Other faults, largely re-
lated to his attempt at a psychological reinterpretation
acceptable to a modern audience, are an excessive emphasis
on the abnormalities and neuroses of the central agents; a
combination of melodrama, pathos, and false romanticism in
action and characterization; and a stressing of contrived
theatrical effects. Cumulatively, these faults result in
distractions from whatever potentialities the theme might
possess and in a thorough distortion of the quality and tone
of the prototypes. It is perhaps gratuitous to point out
that most of the specific faults just mentioned are trace-
able to the Euripidean tradition and that they are sympto-
matic of tendencies in the modern theater.
O'Neill's chief aim in Mourning Becomes Electra, consists of two elements. He wished to achieve what he considered to be the Greek sense of fate, and he wished to achieve this sense of fate by psychological means. Two additional entries from O'Neill's diary made during the writing of the trilogy help to clarify both his concept of fate and its relation to the action of the play. Writing in March, 1930, he said:

"must get more distance and perspective—more sense of fate—more sense of the unreal behind what we call reality which is the real reality."

Later in the same year he wrote that the trilogy "must, before everything, remain modern psychological play—fate springing out of the family." In short, O'Neill seems to have been trying to create a sense of a brooding, evil heritage, the source of which are the lives and actions of the various generations of the Mannon family.

O'Neill employs a variety of devices in his attempt to achieve a psychological sense of fate. The evils of the dead generation follow the Aeschylean and pre-Aeschylean patterns rather closely within the realistic frame of the action. As Thyestes seduced Atreus' wife, so David Mannon won out in a rivalry with Abe Mannon over the possession of Marie Brantome. As Atreus committed the horror

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6 Ibid., p. 533.
of the feast of Thyestes' child as a stroke of revenge, so Abe Mannon cast out the guilty pair and built a new house after razing the old one. Thus, O'Neill strives to establish a pattern of love, jealousy, and hate. The pattern is continued and assumes psychological ramifications in a series of rather explicit symbols. The new house built by Abe assumes grim overtones; Christine, early in the first play, refers to it as a sepulchre:

The "whited" one of the Bible-pagan temple front stuck on like a mask on Puritan gray ugliness! It was just like old Abe Mannon to build such a monstrosity—as a temple for his hatred. 7

Orin refers to the house as "ghostly and dead" (p. 760), and other references point up the fact that it was built as a symbol of death and hate; Lavinia makes the point that "love can't live in it" (p. 862), and she finally immures herself within it.

In opposition to the death-hate-repression symbol of the house is Marie Brantome, who achieves the status of another symbol of psychological fate during the course of the action. On the one hand, she led, indirectly, to the hatred between David and Abe Mannon, and her maltreatment by Ezra led to Adam's desire for revenge. On the other hand, Ezra loved her before he realized she was his uncle's mistress. Her presence is felt throughout the action as a

7M.G.L., p. 659.
symbol of love and of the maternal as well as the prime mover in the sequence of love, hate, and murder. O'Neill creates another symbol for Marie herself—her beautiful hair—and thus links her to Christine and Lavinia. Adam tells Lavinia that he is attracted by her hair, which resembles his mother's; Ezra is strangely attracted by Christine's hair; finally, the pattern is made explicit when Orin, during his implicit proposal of incest to Lavinia, tells her:

There are times now when you don't seem to be my sister, nor mother, but some stranger with the same beautiful hair—
Perhaps you're Marie Brantôme, eh?

Still another device used by O'Neill to convey a sense of psychological fate is the resemblance of the various characters and the way in which the resemblances relate to the psychological relationships among the characters. In a series of explicit stage directions, O'Neill makes clear that Adam resembles both Ezra and Orin; Orin resembles Ezra, particularly during Orin's seige of guilt obsession. Lavinia resembles both Christine and Ezra—at the beginning and end of the trilogy her resemblance to Ezra is stressed, while during her brief attempt to experience love and happiness O'Neill stresses her resemblance to Christine. The one device used by O'Neill which breaches the realistic

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S.E.E., p. 853.
tradition is related to his desire to stress the resemblances among characters. O'Neill originally planned to have the characters wear masks but later discarded the notion as being too obtrusive; nevertheless, he retained the conception of the expressionistic mask in his stage directions which emphasize the mask-like visages of the Mannons, particularly during moments of repressed emotion.

Variations and extensions of the resemblance device to point up not only the psychological relationships among characters but also the sense of fate are worth noting; perhaps an apt theme for these variations or extensions might be the device of "substitutions." The emphasis on psychology is particularly evident in the substitution device. Adam's love for Christine is partly based on his substituting her for his mother, Marie; similarly, Christine's love for Adam is partly based on her substituting him for her son, Grin. Moreover, Grin's attraction to Lavinia is based on his substituting her for Christine, while Lavinia's attraction to Peter is based on her substituting him for Adam. Finally, it is not unreasonable to suggest that Ezra's love for Christine was based in part on his substituting her for Marie.

Two final devices used by O'Neill are his compromising effort at a chorus within the realistic frame of the action and the use he makes of the structural division of the trilogy. O'Neill employs a varied group of the townspeople,
chiefly Seth, the Mannon handyman, to serve as a means of exposition and to comment and gossip on the action. Early in the action, a chorus hints at the existence of mysterious secrets in the Mannon past, and Seth is responsible for Lavinia's knowledge of Adam's identity. In the second play, a chorus speaks of Eara's death as fate--pride going before a fall; and in the third play another chorus gossips about the evil spirit which haunts the Mannon house. A more inclusive device is evident in the relative emphasis placed on fate in the different plays of the trilogy. The first two plays consist primarily of straightforward, progressive action. In The Haunted, a relatively more static situation prevails, while the action turns back upon itself and the ramifications of the past are developed as O'Neill focuses primarily on the inner reactions of the surviving Mannons.

The basic methods used by O'Neill to embody his conception of psychological fate in the action of Mourning Becomes Electra are revealing in several ways. They reveal, in part, an admirable quality--namely, a conscientious craftsmanship in working out a host of devices to serve as the framework of the play's larger purpose. At the same time, however, they reveal one of the play's flaws; for although there is no doubt that O'Neill's dramatic skill is such that he is able to fuse most of these devices with the flow of the dramatic action, there
is no escaping the conclusion that many of the devices are essentially contrived and, upon relatively close inspection, overdone. This is seen particularly in the exaggerated use of the symbols and in the emphasis on the resemblances among the characters and the suggestion of the mask-like features. O'Neill, in his zeal to communicate his concept, has abused one of his basic skills—that of a superior and honest dramatist of the realistic tradition. The devices, although individually plotted with great care, obtrude and force themselves upon one's attention to the detriment of the play as a whole. There would be little point in attempting a comparison of O'Neill's methods with those of the Greek tragedians, because even Euripides, whose realism faintly corresponds to O'Neill's, maintains a simplicity and austerity of action that is relatively foreign to Mourning Becomes Electra. Yet, the faults resulting from the devices used as the framework of the action and of the larger purposes behind the action are not as damaging to the play's worth as the weaknesses inherent in those elements which the devices are intended to support. The basic flaws of Mourning Becomes Electra are, roughly in order of importance, the basis of the characterization, the relation of the themes to the action and characterization, and, finally, a misconception on O'Neill's part of the very concept which he strives so painstakingly and urgently to convey.
Most critics of Mourning Becomes Electra, while acknowledging O'Neill's skill in characterization, sooner or later comment on his psychological approach to the characterization and note the many parallels to modern theories of psychology, particularly Freudianism. One such critic, O'Neill's friend, Barrett Clark, criticizes the play for placing too much emphasis on the dramatic embodiment of such theories. O'Neill's reply to Clark's criticism is illuminating:

"critics... read too damn much Freud into stuff that could very well have been written exactly as it is before psychoanalysis was ever heard of... After all, every human complication of love and hate in my trilogy is as old as literature."

It is necessary to examine the basis of the loves, hates, and jealousies among the central characters in order to refute O'Neill's implication that the basis of his characterization does not consist of aberrations, neuroses, and obsessions.

Even the relatively uncomplicated characters evince signs of neurosis and abnormality. Adam reveals an over-developed mother complex which leads at least in part to his attraction to Christine and Lavinia. Relatively speaking, however, Adam is by far the most normal in terms of his desires and hates.

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Ezra, like all the Mannons, is excessively preoccupied with a Puritanical awareness of sin and death. His aloofness toward Christine was based on the fact that, according to Ezra, Christine had made him seem like a lustful beast in his own eyes ever since their wedding night. Because Christine turned away from him to Orin, Ezra was at first jealous of, then hated, his son. For the same reason, Ezra developed an excessive attachment to Lavinia and becomes jealous upon hearing rumors of her relationship to Adam.

Christine's love for Adam seems direct, passionate, and healthy enough until some of its causes are investigated. Her love is based in part on her hatred of Ezra and her love for Orin. Her hatred of Ezra is based on sexual frustration; he turned her love to disgust on their wedding night. Her loathing for Ezra extends to an intense dislike for Lavinia, because Christine associates her with her wedding night. On the other hand, Christine developed a love for Orin because he was born while Ezra was away on duty:

He seemed my child, only mine, and I loved him for that.

Christine's love for Adam, therefore, is based to a large extent not only on her sexual hatred of Ezra, but on her

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10 *M.B.G.*, p. 714.
somewhat unnatural attachment to Orin, for she met Adam after Orin had left for the war and, as she tells Lavinia,

I never would have fallen in love with Adam if I'd had Orin with me. 11

Orin is by nature weak, sensitive, and erratic—qualities which are compounded by the head wound he has suffered in the war; consequently, throughout the play he is on the verge of a mental breakdown. Underlying his reactions, however, is the incestuous attitude toward Christine which is reflected in his comment over the dead body of Adam:

If I had been he I would have done what he did! I would have loved her as he loved her. 12

His abnormal feelings for Christine are responsible for a jealous hatred of Adam and for a resentment and hatred toward Ezra. He tells Christine that he would forgive her for anything except her love for Adam and that he is not sorry that Ezra is dead. Christine's suicide has a dual effect on Orin; he becomes the prey of an obsessive guilt complex, and his incestuous desires are transferred to Lavinia. Both find expression in his proposal of incest to Lavinia:

I love you now with all the guilt in me—the guilt we share! Perhaps I love you

11 [M.B.E.], p. 715.
12 [M.B.E.], p. 803.
too much, Vinnie!  

Psychotic and grotesque as Grin is, he finds his match in Lavinia. She is, like Ezra, sexually repressed; at the very beginning of the first play she tells Peter that she hates love. That this assertion is false is soon evident. Her hatred of Christine is based on sexual jealousy—Lavinia feels that Christine stole Adam's and Ezra's love from her. The jealous hatred incorporates two of Lavinia's dominant characteristics: sexual desire bordering on nymphomania and an abnormal father complex. The former is revealed in her frustrated desire for Adam, in her sexual attraction to the ship's mate during the trip she and Grin take to the South Seas, and in her lust for Peter, who in effect is only a substitute for Adam. The latter characteristic is revealed in her abnormal adoration of Ezra—she tells him, for example, that he is the only man she will ever love—and in her desire to usurp Christine's role. Christine accuses her with justification:

You've tried to become the wife of your father and the mother of Grin! You've always schemed to take my place!  

Thus an analysis of the motivation of his characters indicates the near absurdity of O'Neill's assertion quoted earlier. Eric Bentley rather succinctly summarizes the

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14 M.E.E., p. 716.
sexual abnormalities and characterizations that typify O'Neill's characters:

O'Neill has boasted his ignorance of Freud, but such ignorance is not enough. He should be ignorant also of the watered-down Freudianism... of the subintelligentsia... Mourning Becomes Electra is all sex talk. Sex talk—not sex lived and embodied, but sex talked of and fingered... O'Neill is an acute case of what D. H. Lawrence called "sex in the head."

The fact that O'Neill stresses abnormal psychology is important only in terms of the ultimate worth of his trilogy as a drama and adaptation. In terms of the trilogy as a drama, O'Neill's emphasis on abnormality in the motivation of the characters mitigates against the effectiveness of the characterization in that the pattern of motivation loses credibility and seems grossly contrived. But even if the motivations were acceptable on the basis of credibility, their meaningfulness must be seriously questioned, for they suggest that man's actions are guided and limited almost solely by his abnormal, diseased obsessions and neuroses. This view is hardly compatible with O'Neill's desire to "bring home to members of a modern audience their ennobling identity with the tragic figures on the stage." The effect of the characterization on the value of "Mourning Becomes Electra" as an adaptation is even more damaging. It is true

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15 Bentley, p. 246.

16 O'Neill, quoted by Bentley, p. 241.
that the agents in Greek tragedy, particularly in the
Atreidae dramas, are human beings who display intense and
violent passions, but these passions are basically elemen-
tal, vigorous, and, at times, awesome in their great sim-
plexity. One never feels that the Greek passions are warped
by the complex aberrations and perversions displayed in
O'Neill's characters. Yet it is significant that O'Neill's
characters may be compared to those of Euripides. It would
be ludicrous to attempt to compare O'Neill's characteriza-
tions and those of Aeschylus or Sophocles, for they do not
exist in the same realm. Nevertheless, even though Euripides
does suggest qualities of neuroticism in his characters, they
appear sane and wholesome when balanced against O'Neill's
sick creations.

A brief consideration of O'Neill's themes in relation
to the basis of his characterization will demonstrate that
he is unable to integrate theme and action, and that his
focus on psychological abnormality destroys whatever poten-
tialities for meaningfulness and dignity his themes might
possess. When one of the characters ascribes his impulse
or justification for an action to a larger concept such as
destiny, justice, the power of the past, or love, the real
impulse is a neurotic, usually sexual, but always volitional,
abnormality.

Adam's reason for helping to slay Berenice is based only
in part on his desire for Christine's love. It is primarily
the result of abnormal sexual jealousy; it is Christine's taunting sexual appeal which makes Adam agree to help poison Ezra. As Adam hesitates, Christine reminds him:

Have you thought of this side of the homecoming—that he's coming back to my bed?17

Christine's hatred for, and murder of, Ezra shows more clearly O'Neill's inability to integrate theme and action. She plays upon the fact that Ezra was responsible for the death of Adam's mother, tells Adam it would be only "justice" (p. 722) if Ezra died, and finally accuses God of being responsible for her suffering after Ezra's death:

Why can't all of us remain innocent and loving and trusting? But God won't leave us alone. He twists and wrings and tortures our lives until we poison each other to death.18

Underlying all these supposedly external forces and concepts, however, is nothing more than a purely volitional and abnormal combination of sex hatred for Ezra and sex desire for Adam based in part on the latter's resemblance to her son. Orin's actions are not governed by the "evil destiny" and power of dead "ghosts" as he ascribes them, but are the products of pathology (an accidental head wound) and the ramifications of sickly, incestuous desires. His final desire to confess and atone is not based on a

17 *M.E.E.*, p. 725.
18 *M.E.E.*, p. 757.
sane awareness of his crime, but on an obsessive guilt and sin complex. Convinced that it is an act of justice, he commits suicide; the real reasons for his suicide are hardly so noble. The suicide is based partly on the goading by Lavinia, partly on Orin’s desire to end his guilt torment, but most immediately on his crazed desire to see his mother again. Likewise, Lavinia falsely attributes her motives throughout the play to “justice” or to “love.” More detrimental to the integration of theme and action than either of these, however, is her echoing (in the last scene of the play) of Orin’s transfer of responsibility to the power of the past and of the dead. Her false martyrdom in desiring to shut herself in the Mannon house is incongruous in light of the conniving, neurotic tendencies she displays throughout the play. Once again O’Neill attempts to belabor his theme of fate without realizing, apparently, that he flatly contradicts the pattern of volitional aberrations that he has so carefully built up.

A final, serious flaw is ironically what originally motivated O’Neill to undertake the trilogy—an attempt to recapture the Greek sense of fate in terms of modern, psychological drama. However the preceding chapters of this study, devoted to the Greek House of Atreus dramas, suggest why O’Neill’s perspective was distorted from the very beginning. Namely, his concept of fate is indefensible in terms of Greek drama, for one of the chief characteristics
of Greek drama is its stress on the free will of man. Insofar as fate is treated in Greek tragedy it is in terms of what might best be called universal laws, such as those of retribution and justice—laws which represent a concept of balance in life, of *moira* (a proper share or portion). These laws lie beyond man's ability to alter; indeed, to challenge these laws is usually to invite *átē*, or ruin.

Man is free to choose, but at his own risk (as *The Oresteia* clearly demonstrates); for if he transgresses the bounds of *moira* he invites fate, or the anger of the gods who guard these universal laws, which usually leads to his destruction. While acknowledging the existence of forces beyond man's power, the Greek concept of fate never denies man's freedom of will. Instead, it creates a tragic relation between the two.

O'Neill's misconception of Greek fate results in his distorting the positive Greek concept of a profoundly meaningful relationship between man and eternal, universal laws to a negative and unenlightening one which denies man's responsibility and freedom of will and makes him a prey of "ghosts." By placing excessive emphasis on abnormal psychology, O'Neill helps defeat his own aims. The product of these elements is, at best, a not very convincing psychological melodrama masquerading as a moving fate drama of tragic stature. Its final effect, far from achieving the enlightening elevation of powerful drama as conceived by
the Greeks, comes close to unrelieved morbidity. Finally, there is a great disparity between theme and action in O'Neill's trilogy. The characters are impelled by abnormal sexual obsessions, but they transfer responsibility to the demands of justice or the power of the dead. Unfortunately O'Neill, far from underlining the incongruity of their claims, seconds them without ever resolving the discord.
CONCLUSION

This study indicates, in terms of the common theme, that the playwrights concerned could be grouped in three categories. In the first, we have Aeschylus and Sophocles; in the second, Euripides; and in the third, Eugene O'Neill. Aeschylus and Sophocles stand at one end of this grouping through the simplicity and austerity of their action; the tragic dimensions of their characters; the nobility and exaltation of their themes; and their effective dramatic fusing of action and theme, particularly in the superimposition of the divine and human levels. Euripides, while chronologically akin to Aeschylus and Sophocles, is actually and ironically closer to O'Neill because of several common characteristics and elements. In characterization, they both focus on a psychological treatment of the motivations and private neuroses and suffering of the individual agents. In action, both resort to elements of violence, romanticism, sentimental pathos, and domesticity. More generally, both place an emphasis on realistic detail and an employment of purely melodramatic and theatrical effects. Finally, both reflect an inability to fuse theme and action into a whole which is at once clear, coherent, and meaningful. However, in spite of the similarities that draw Euripides
and O'Neill together, they still occupy separate places in the hypothetical grouping. The reason is that Euripides' characters seem sane and his theatricality subdued when compared closely with the corresponding characteristics in O'Neill, whose resultant failure in adapting the Greek theme for the modern theater forms the basis of this study.

Although he never makes it explicit that he is trying to adapt The Oresteia, O'Neill follows the Aeschylean prototype in his emphasis on fate in relation to the several generations of a family, in the details of his plot, and in the broad structural pattern of his trilogy. The result is a gross distortion of The Oresteia on all levels except the most superficial, and most particularly a distortion of the Aeschylean concept of fate. O'Neill's desire to emulate Aeschylus is noble, but the end result of this desire is a closer approximation of the Euripidean prototype than the Aeschylean or Sophoclean. The greatest flaw in Mourning Becomes Electra is where O'Neill falls shortest of Aeschylus—the integration of theme and action. While his characters persist in ascribing their impulses to "destiny" or "justice" or some equally broad, universal concept, the real impulses show themselves to be nothing more or less than neurotic abnormalities, obsessions, and aberrations. Had O'Neill intended to demonstrate, in a mordant fashion, the ways by which human beings delude themselves with false ideas of fate, destiny, and justice
when they are not referred to melodramatic plots or to

interpretation dream to a depiction of the drama which,

treatment of universally relevant issues, one is

other and dynamic action embodiment in sense, clear, balanced

shown. Instead of concentrating on the presentation of a

which the productize of both meaningfulness and tragedy and

treatment of actual trauma and concepts with a dramatic age-

vantages of the Greek Aristotle themes center of theater in

positive Greek prototypical (aschylus and sophocles) the positive

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memory of remembrance and sentimentality in even the most

ward melodrama in serious plays and their underlying the-

existent realism and theatrical effect, their tendency to

burtedian and the twentieth century's emphasis on detailed,

type decrease, mounting because higher references both the

interests and activities of the twentieth century. In ve-

interests and activities of our own theater, but which reflect general

drama and in our own theater, but which reflects general

which are found not only in both the burttedian and other

audience, one refers to many of the characteristics

of the effect of Greek drama for an intelligent, modern

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the desire, he would not have had to make many alterations

while actually being moved by their own emotions, neuro-
general neuroses or sexual aberrations, have little relevance beyond the immediate context of the individual agents.

The adaptation of a proven Greek theme perhaps is justified if the adaptors are sincerely striving to describe man in terms of timeless rather than transitory evaluations, and if they are attempting to find ways of reconciling a realistic outlook upon man's situation with a conviction that human life is to be valued and that man can be noble. The temptation exists, however, to seize upon a time-proven theme in order to compensate for the inability to create forceful, original drama. This is not to say that this was the case with O'Neill. It is quite probable (and his working notes seem to substantiate this) that he was earnestly striving for the loftiness of Greek drama through a modern re-working of a basic theme; but it is also evident that he failed because of his inability to understand the importance of free will in the Greek concept of fate and the Greek reconciliation of the human with the supernatural.

Naturally, the full significance of Greek tragedy can not be conveyed to a modern audience successfully because of the discrepancies that invariably accompany translations. Also, it is true that the mirror held up to nature in the twentieth century differs from that which reflected the social and political life of fifth century Athens. In spite of these factors, however, Greek drama is characterized by the timeless, positive values of man's relationship to the
universe and therefore should be of more than historical interest to us. It seems logical to assume that serious drama of the twentieth century will be written when adaptations are replaced by a view of modern men and life with an approximation of the understanding, insight, and balance demonstrated by the Greek dramatists. It will be necessary to project and embody such views in original dramas which both dismiss the limiting, distracting tendencies of theatricalized realism, psychology, and mere effect, and take as their donnée situations and issues of more direct, genuine relevance to our age, civilization, and society.
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