

Outline of "The Eumenides" - The Kindly Ones

Prologue

The scene is set at the temple of Apollo at Delphi. The Priestess of Apollo (in robes that are like Cassandra's), enters and prays to the goddess Earth, and the succeeding divine occupiers of the holy site, ending the non-violent progression with Apollo and Pallas Athene whose temple stands before Apollo's on the hillside at Delphi. It is a day for the god to pronounce his oracles through the Priestess' mouth; she goes into the temple only to crawl out shattered a few moments later. She has seen Orestes clutching at the omphalos (navel-stone) for sanctuary surrounded by the hideous Furies who have hounded him there. The Priestess goes away declaring that Apollo himself will deal with this pollution.

Episode 1

We see the group in the temple. Standing beside Orestes who is wet with pig's blood which Apollo has used for purifying him are Apollo himself and Hermes. The Furies lie all around him having been put to sleep by Hermes' powers. Apollo speaks to declare himself firmly against the Furies and in support of Orestes, as he was the original instigator of Orestes' matricide. He sends Orestes to Athens for trial by help of Athena; this trial will eventually free Orestes from further suffering, but Orestes will have to be courageous. Apollo sends Hermes with Orestes who is an outlaw, to protect him.

Episode 2

The ghost of Clytemnestra appears to rouse up the Furies like Hamlet's father calling for revenge. She says she is in their dream and as she exhorts them they stir in their sleep and whimper like dogs dreaming of hunting; at last they wake only to realise that their quarry, Orestes, has got away.

1st Stasimon

They sing an ode of complaint against Apollo realising the escape is his doing, and they vow to carry on the feud against Orestes presumably through Clytemnestra's children by Aigisthus when full grown.

Episode 3

Apollo enters to order them off his sacred ground on pain of being shot with his arrows; he expresses deep dislike of their barbarous ideas of punishment. Then the two sides indulge in a slanging match, Apollo pointing out that they are too selective to be just or they would have been persecuting Clytemnestra for murdering her husband. He tells them that Athena will judge the case. They go off to continue hounding Orestes, unconvinced.

Change of scene to Athens - the Acropolis: we are in the temple containing the ancient wooden statue of Athena that fell from heaven.

New Prologue

Orestes kneels before Athena's statue and supplicates, pointing out that he has already been cleansed of the pollution of matricide before he came there.

New Stasimon 1

The choros enter, sleuthing like bloodhounds on his tracks - they can still smell the pollution but once again find that he has taken sanctuary. They sing an ode about the irreversibility of death and how it leads to death.

New Episode 1

Orestes defends himself again denying that he pollutes the place; he calls on Athena, promising Argos as an ally to Athens if she will help him.

New Stasimon 2

The Choros threatens Orestes and then sing an ode which contains a witches' spell repeated. They delight in their office of persecuting the guilty although they are not allowed to do it among the gods.

New Episode 2

Athena enters - she has come from round about Troy. Surprised to see the Furies she asks what it is all about. They explain the situation and although they seem to at first to want to win the case on a technicality, they agree to abide by her judgement in a trial. She invites Orestes to speak and this is a sort of committal hearing. He again denies that he is still polluted. He makes a plea which amounts to justifiable homicide - that his mother deserved to die for having killed his father and says that Apollo is essentially responsible. Orestes is also willing that Athena should judge the case. She says she cannot judge it alone since there will be dire consequences for Athens if if the Furies are to lose; they will retaliate. She will therefore set up a special court of homicide (the Areopagus) to settle the case.

New Stasimon 3

In this song which turns away from the specific case of Orestes there is a shift of emphasis towards the city and society in general, from the Furies as monsters towards the Furies as figures to be respected. They exhort their hearers to love goodness and justice and avoid anarchy by preserving the deterrents of evil.

New Episode 3

Athena returns with 12 male Athenian citizens for jurors/judges - a supplementary choros in effect to balance the female choros. Apollo is also there with Orestes and declares himself to be Orestes' advocate. Athena invites the prosecution to speak first. They do not make a speech (the Choros in Greek tragedy never made full-length speeches) but cross-question Orestes, getting from him damaging admissions of guilt though he says he

acted on Apollo's instructions in effect. Apollo then announces that what he told Orestes in his oracle was not just his own invention: Zeus is the author of all the Delphic oracles. Apollo also says that Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon was worse than Orestes' murder of her. The Choros argue with Apollo, he grows angry and declares that the mother is merely the nurse to the child which is only implanted in her by the true and only parent, the father; he cites the Birth of Athena as proof of this. He also promises that he and Argos will be good to Athens if Orestes is acquitted.

The vote is then called for but before it is taken Athena declares that the Areopagus court of homicide will be in being in perpetuity from that day.

While the votes are cast the Choros and Apollo each threaten the jurors/judges to beware the consequences of voting for the other side: the Furies for instance will bring plagues on Athens. Athena says that she will give the casting vote for acquittal because being herself mother-less it seems to her worse to kill a father. (Critics - notably the very respected Hugh Lloyd-Jones - think that this is not her real reason but a face-saving formula that will allow the Furies to still feel that they deserved to win.)

The votes are even, Athena adds hers, Orestes is acquitted and expresses his gratitude to her and Athens in a speech which is a pledge of future perpetual friendship with Athens. Then he leaves and so does Apollo. His case is now over and the last act of the play still to come is not the Orestes story but the question of revenge and justice: how do you reconcile the losing parties in a blood/revenge feud to a verdict which debars their pursuing it? This takes much longer than the trial itself took.

Last Act

No stasimon here because the Furies are too involved to sing any detached ode on this. The solution to reconciling them to the verdict is to kick them upstairs into the House of Lords, as it were. This act has therefore FOUR sections as follows:

- 1. The fury and destructiveness of the persecutors alternate with Athena's four reasoned, placatory speeches.
- 2. A crucial transitional bargaining between the Furies and Athena as she offers them benefits for accepting the verdict and not cursing Athens.
- 3. They accept and there are wonderful incantations of the Furies, now become the Kindly Ones, confirmed by shorter contributions from Athena.
- 4. Arrangements for the final procession which ends the play. This is a torchlit religious procession (processions were a major form of religious worship in Greece). It is led by Athena and includes not only the jurors/judges but possibly the maidens that serve as ministrants in Athena's temples. It also involves a change of clothes for the Furies: they now wear the red garments regularly worn in religious processions at Athens by resident aliens which is what they now are - and it symbolises their change of attitude. The Eumenides will in future be worshipped at Athens; they will be feared and powerful but benevolent and live on the Acropolis in a cave, giving up their persecution of blood-tie offenders.

A final hymn is sung as the procession marches off and a feast will crown the new-made settlements.

Blight and blood distortion are now turned to good, peace and fecundity.