

## The Wrong Book?

Classical Theatre is compelling; one can say with much justification that those of us who do not read Greek cannot have a full appreciation of the subject and its different genres, but no-one can appreciate the spectacles as performed in Athens. The poet was "granted a chorus" and the prize was awarded for the chorus - though one must allow that the judges will have been influenced by the play *in toto* - and we have little left to us except the name of the chorus. It seems that Comedy depended for its inspiration on topical issues and the serious themes that underlay them, we believe that this was Aristophanes' viewpoint, and that he did not want the serious issues to be clouded by the fun; Tragedy explored themes which we can regard as eternal, and as such had found earlier expression in what we now call myth. Since the judges, both of what would be granted a chorus, and which work would be awarded first prize were citizens chosen by lot, rather than literary critics or some other type of expert, a paradox may well have occurred: the message of the comic poet may well have been highlighted by the execution of the performance; the humour of the episodes and the splendour of the chorus; whereas the theme of the tragic poet may have been lost as attention wandered during the speeches and the greatest impact might have been made by the chorus. At any rate, it is unlikely that the average member of the audience could comment on a play after one performance in the same way as a modern scholar with the text before him, so his bench-marks would be necessarily different.

The only trilogy which has come to us complete is the Oresteia; irrespective of literary merit - in the original, or in translation - it is profoundly disturbing. The characters in the Agamemnon are credible, even Cassandra, though we may talk about 'feminine intuition' rather than prophetic powers, and Agamemnon himself is nearer to our ideal of a kingly figure than he is portrayed by Homer (though Homer's picture may be more strictly accurate as a portrait of a Bronze Age ruler); and if we involve ourselves in the plot, and we can imagine the scenario, then we find questions raised which transcend age and culture. Of course, if we have come so far, then it is a small step to be involved in the enormity of Orestes' dilemma - and his crime; but the Libation Bearers will stand by itself, the crime is not one which we would willingly contemplate without Aeschylus. In passing we remind ourselves that Sophocles' and Euripides' *Electra* plays are read in isolation and provide a vehicle for contrast of styles (Euripides' almost mocking treatment of Aeschylus has been noted frequently, but, *pace* the 'recognition', one wonders if Aeschylus was thinking of the 'red-haired' epithet which Homer applies to the Atreidae; perhaps his audience assumed that one attribute of the Royal Families of what Hesiod called the Second Bronze age was red hair; Aeschylus, too, would then be "writing about people as they should be; Euripides, as they are"). The continuity of the Eumenides is obvious; its discontinuity may not be so apparent, but it is there.

If we exclude Odysseus' traveller's tales and poetic interludes, then Homer can be read as history; if we talk about psychological forces or *Zeitgeist* or any other modern concept, we may have a more acceptable view of the world; but we are only explaining things differently, the world might just as well be influenced by capricious Gods. The first two parts of Aeschylus' trilogy display this same quality, if the events referred to did occur - and they might have done - then there is nothing supernatural and hence exceptionable in them. But in the Eumenides, Apollo appears to preserve his property, and takes the side of a mortal against supernatural beings, and then Athene delivers a most astounding message to the citizen body of Athens regarding the biological role of women; and so the council of the Areopagus is given her *imprimatur*, how might this have affected them? Could they take this seriously? And how might it have seemed to later generations?

Some four years before the production of the Oresteia in 458, the powers of the Areopagus had been curtailed: its members probably saw themselves as having lost power, and possibly found little consolation in being the appointed body to try murder cases! If the members of the Upper Chamber at Westminster were told that they could discuss Parliamentary business, but not register a vote - and furthermore, they were to lose their attendance allowances, we could imagine the resulting scene: it is the only analogy which I can invent. The play seems to have been written so that the ex-Archons could save face, and where unity of purpose was so important, this public declaration was necessary for the citizen body at large; I cannot imagine that the loss of power was forgotten, but somehow the new status was given an enhanced legitimacy and honour was satisfied.

I find it intriguing that so few plays have survived. I also find it little short of miraculous that so many have; and it is an interesting exercise to speculate on the merits of the survivors. Any virtues which belong to the survivors might apply to the lost works - if they are lost, we do not know. And we cannot deny the virtues of those which are extant to those which are gone, not on logical grounds. I wish to suggest that the Oresteia was copied and studied because it was an exercise in self-congratulation by the Athenians, and that after the incorporation of Greece into the Roman Empire the Athenians could feel slightly superior in that their tutelary Goddess and Protectress had granted them a privilege not given to their legally minded overlords. And might this feeling not have been continued into other epochs?

Where is the justification for having Courts of Law? Their rationale is obvious, and the more hostile the society, the more obvious the rationale; but I should like to suggest one or two anomalies; they are based on the practice of swearing an oath on the Bible, and at risk of sounding like one (or two) of those persons who knock on one's door at inconvenient times offer a few quotations:

Mat. 7:1 Judge not that ye be not judged.

Mat. 5:34 Swear not at all, ....37 Let your communication be Yea, yea: Nay, nay.

So the oath is taken on a book that expressly forbids the taking of oaths and prohibits judgement. It would seem that somewhere along the way, the specious argument was developed that in this context, judgement was according to law, and hence something different. But it is very much in keeping with the tone of Athene's speech. So would it not make more sense to take the oath on the Oresteia?

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On mature reflection, I think we will preserve the status quo; there is really no hard evidence that Zeus (even under his alias Jehovah) strikes down perjurers with his thunderbolts and Aristophanes makes 'Socrates' point out that He does occasionally blast his own Oak trees; but what if the Eumenides reverted to being the Erinnyes? I pass.