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978-0-521-25073-3 - Wagner and Aeschylus: The Ring and the Oresteia

Michael Ewans

Excerpt

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Wagner and Aeschylus



Wagner never mastered classical Greek. He tells us in his autobiography that his love for Greek culture began at the age of six, when newspaper accounts of the Greek war of independence were read aloud to him; and he began to study ancient Greek at the Dresden Kreuzschule, which he attended from nine to fourteen. In his open letter to Nietzsche (N 12/6/72) Wagner claimed that at that time: 'no boy could have had greater enthusiasm for classical antiquity than myself; although it was Greek mythology and history which interested me deeply, I also felt strongly drawn to the study of the Greek language, to such an extent, in fact, that I was almost rebellious in my efforts to shirk my Latin tasks'. In *Mein Leben*, however, he more candidly admits that Greek mythology was the real attraction: 'in the matter of the classics, I paid only just as much attention as was absolutely necessary to enable me to get a grasp of them: for I was stimulated by the desire to reproduce them to myself dramatically . . . In these circumstances it will be readily understood that the grammar of these languages seemed to me merely a tiresome obstacle . . .' (p. 15). In spite of this, by 1826 Wagner had advanced sufficiently far in his study of Greek to make a German translation of the first three books of the *Odyssey*; and his master Julius Sillig had sufficient regard for Wagner's aptitude to urge him towards adopting philology as his profession.

The family, however, moved back to Leipzig in 1827, and Wagner fell behind in his classical studies. He claimed on several occasions in later life that this was due to the pedantic approach

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of the masters at the Leipzig schools; yet it is plain that Wagner's passionate interest in Romantic drama, and his increasing devotion to music, overcame his interest in the Greek world. When he was seventeen, Wagner attempted to resume his classical studies, and to gain a firm grasp of the Greek language, by engaging a private tutor; but this came to nothing. Later—in Paris, between 1839 and 1842—he met the classical scholar Samuel Lehrs and attempted to renew his studies; but he was wisely advised to proceed no further. Lehrs told him that he would need so much time to gain a thorough grounding in the Greek language that it would stand in the way of his work as a composer. Wagner acted on this advice: the classical reading of his later years was done almost entirely in translation, though on one occasion Cosima's diary records that he read Sophocles in Greek with the German version open beside it, comparing the translation with the original (D 18/11/74).

Wagner thrived on his lack of formal knowledge. His mind was not a scholar's, and he drew so much creative gain from his own personal vision of the Greek world precisely because he never submitted to the extremes of formal discipline which were demanded in the higher stages of a classical education in nineteenth-century Germany.

Greek literature first became important to Wagner during the years when he was *Hofkapellmeister* in Dresden (1843–9). He purchased translations of almost all the major authors: Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Aristotle, Demosthenes, Euripides, Herodotus, Homer, Pindar, Plato, Plutarch, Sophocles, Thucydides and Xenophon. He lost all these books to a creditor when he fled from Dresden to avoid arrest for his part in the insurrection of 1849; but he built up an even larger collection in later life.

After 1845, the example of Greek culture was almost constantly before Wagner's eyes. It forms the point of departure for his own aesthetic ideals from the opening pages of *Art and Revolution* (1849) to his last major essay, *Religion and Art* (1880). Cosima's diaries record many occasions on which Wagner read or discussed Greek literature, both during the Tribschen years (when Nietzsche, who had not yet given up his chair of classical philology, was a frequent guest) and at Wahnfried.

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Wagner did not exaggerate when he claimed in the open letter to Nietzsche that: 'Again and again, amid the most absorbing tasks of a life entirely removed from these [classical] studies, the only way by which I seemed to be able to gain a breath of freedom was by plunging into this ancient world, however much I was now handicapped by having well-nigh forgotten the language.'

He 'plunged' in particular into the dramas of Aeschylus, returning to them many times. In 1880 Wagner read the three plays of the *Oresteia* aloud, and Cosima wrote: 'I feel as if I have never before seen him like this, transfigured, inspired, completely at one with what he is reading.' (D 23/6/80) And Wagner said of Aeschylus on the last day of his life that: my admiration for him never ceases to grow'.

That admiration had begun over thirty years earlier, in 1847, at the time when Wagner was finishing the orchestration of *Lohengrin*. He records in *Mein Leben* that he then 'for the first time . . . mastered Aeschylus with real feeling and understanding', and goes on to say that the impact on him of the Orestes trilogy was so great that:

I could see the *Oresteia* with my mind's eye, as though it were actually being performed; and its effect on me was indescribable. Nothing could equal the sublime emotion with which the *Agamemnon* inspired me, and to the last word of the *Eumenides* I remained in an atmosphere so far removed from the present day that I have never since been really able to reconcile myself with modern literature. My ideas about the whole significance of the drama and of the theatre were, without a doubt, moulded by these impressions . . . (p. 415)

The *Oresteia* released Wagner from the artistic impasse which he had reached with the completion of *Lohengrin*; and, as he implies in this passage, Aeschylus' trilogy decisively influenced the form and content of all Wagner's subsequent dramas—and in particular those of the *Ring*.

Aeschylus was born into a noble Athenian family between 525 and 510 B.C. He grew up during the last years of Athens' rule by tyrants, came to maturity during the first years of democracy,

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and fought for his country against the Persian invasions led by Dareios and Xerxes, taking part in the victories of Marathon (490 BC) and Salamis (480 BC).

The most important performances of tragedy at Athens were those given at the spring festival of the god Dionysus. Each year, three playwrights were selected and invited to produce tragedies on successive days, in competition with each other; their entries took the form of three tragic dramas followed by a 'satyr-play', a short, farcical afterpiece.

Aeschylus is the earliest Greek playwright by whom a complete work survives today. He began to enter plays for the tragic competitions in 490—some 30 or 40 years after the first performances of tragedy at Athens, said to have been given by the historically shadowy Thespis. Aeschylus exhibited tragedies in at least twenty festivals; he won the prize for the first time in 484. Only six of his plays survive; except for the earliest (*The Persians*, 472), which dramatizes the impact in the Persian capital of Xerxes' defeat at Salamis, all are based on traditional myths. The other extant plays are *Seven against Thebes* (467), the third play of a Theban trilogy concerned with the quarrel for the throne between Oedipus' sons Eteokles and Polyneikes and their death in single combat; *The Suppliant Maidens* (? 463); and the *Oresteia* itself (458). (*Prometheus Bound*, which is found together with these six plays in the manuscripts of Aeschylus, bears many signs of later authorship and is now generally suspected to be by another hand.) Aeschylus died in 456, two years after producing the *Oresteia*.

Aeschylus and his contemporaries competed annually for a token prize, and for the honour of presenting their plays for one performance at one festival. There was no prospect of revival in Athens, or of a widespread subsequent readership. Yet the audience was vast—the seating capacity of the open-air theatre of Dionysus has been estimated at around 17,000; it comprised every class of Athenian citizen—men gathered together from the city and from the countryside of Attica, bringing with them their wives and families—and also a small number of resident aliens and distinguished foreign guests. For over a century the dramatists of Athens presented this audience with tragedies

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whose surviving texts have always been envied for their rich poetic invention, their depth of human insight and their intense seriousness. These plays present an almost intolerable challenge to any subsequent dramatist; for—as Wagner well knew—such uncompromising works have never since proved capable of holding the attention of a mass audience in the west.

The plays offered by each competitor at the festival were not normally related to each other. Aeschylus is the only Athenian dramatist whom we know regularly chose to weld his three tragedies together into a trilogy, a sequence of plays which dramatize successive phases of one continuous story; and even he did not do this on more than five or six occasions. The *Oresteia* was his most famous trilogy, and almost certainly his greatest; it is the only one to have survived intact—though the accompanying satyr play, *Proteus*, is lost.

The *Oresteia* follows the fortunes of the legendary royal house of Atreus and of its city, which in Aeschylus' version of the story is Argos. The first play, *Agamemnon*, is set in front of the palace immediately after the fall of Troy; it shows the homecoming of Atreus' son, king Agamemnon, the victorious leader of the Trojan expedition. His wife Klytaimestra is determined to murder him in revenge for the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigeneia, whom Agamemnon had slaughtered at the demand of the goddess Artemis, as the price for being allowed to depart for Troy.

The play begins when the watchman, who is stationed on the roof of the palace, catches sight of a flaring beacon—the last of a relay which Klytaimestra has had posted to bring her the news that Troy has fallen. As the drama moves towards Agamemnon's return, the chorus of Argive elders meditate on the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, the abduction of Helen by Paris and its consequences—the costly, ten-year war, and the eventual fall of Troy.

All these events have implications which make the chorus increasingly apprehensive about Agamemnon's own fate. They have observed the ever-rising, 'unwomanly' power of Klytaimestra; it fills them with caution, even though they cannot sense her full purpose. And then Agamemnon arrives—not in

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unqualified triumph but alone (except for his prize and concubine, the Trojan prophetess Cassandra). The gods have scattered the Greek fleet during its return voyage, in punishment for their sacrilege in destroying the altars and temples of the gods during the sack of Troy. Klytaimestra hails him in a grotesque, hypocritical speech, and then lures him into walking into his house over a sea of finely woven tapestries, to ensure that the jealousy of the gods—who alone had the right to such an extravagant honour—will help her.

Klytaimestra fails, however, when she attempts to persuade Cassandra to enter the house. Before Cassandra, of her own accord, goes in to meet her death, her prophetic visions bring in front of the audience Klytaimestra's preparations for the murder of Agamemnon, and the sinister lurking presence of Aigisthos. He is the only surviving son of Thyestes, whose other children Atreus had butchered to punish Thyestes for committing adultery with his wife. Aigisthos has now become Klytaimestra's lover and accomplice in order to exact his own vengeance for this from the son of Atreus—Agamemnon. So at the end of the play, when Klytaimestra has murdered Agamemnon and Cassandra, Aigisthos cows the elders by the threat of force, and usurps the throne of Argos, with Klytaimestra as his consort. But Cassandra has prophesied that she and Agamemnon will not die unavenged. Agamemnon's son Orestes will return to exact the price for their deaths.

Klytaimestra sent Orestes into exile as a boy; and the second play begins at the moment when he has come of age and returns to his homeland to avenge the murder of his father. Klytaimestra killed Agamemnon herself, in Aeschylus' version of the story, and Orestes is, therefore, bound to commit matricide. The intense power of the second play, *Choephoroi* ('Libation-Bearers'), lies almost entirely in the implications of this one fact. It opens at Agamemnon's grave, where Orestes has returned to pray, committed to take his vengeance and regain the throne of his father. There too, on this same day, Klytaimestra has sent her daughter Elektra and her Trojan slave-women with libations to appease the shade of Agamemnon; for the gods have given her an ominous dream, in which she saw a snake suckling at her

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breast and drawing blood. But Elektra does not pray to her father on Klytimestra's behalf; instead she begs Agamemnon to bring her the help she needs, so that his murder may be avenged and the usurpers defeated. Brother and sister are then united, and together they summon the power of Agamemnon and of the gods—both the Olympians and the gods of Hades below—whom they will need if their attempt is to succeed.

In the second half of the play, Orestes arrives at the palace and gains admission by deceit. With the help of the chorus, Aigisthos is lured into coming alone, without his bodyguard, and is killed by Orestes. At the climax of the play Orestes, drawn sword in hand, confronts his mother and finds the strength to exact the penalty of death from her as well.

In the first play, Cassandra's prophetic vision evoked the sight of the Erinyes or Furies created by the death of Thyestes' children haunting the house of Atreus. In Greek belief, the Furies, goddesses of the underworld, rise from the blood of a slain man or woman and cry out for vengeance. At the end of *Choephoroi*, as Orestes stands over the corpses of his victims and speaks out to justify his deed (just as Klytimestra did in the first play), her Furies, unseen by the audience, approach Orestes. They madden him, and drive him from the stage.

Aeschylus' third play, *Eumenides*, is dominated by the Furies and by the god Apollo—who commanded Orestes to do the deed, promising that he would be safe if he then sought sanctuary at Apollo's shrine in Delphi. The final drama opens there, and both the god and the Furies now take the stage in visible form. The healing rituals of Delphi have not been enough to rid Orestes of his mother's Furies; Apollo promises Orestes final salvation, if he can evade them and make his way to Athens. There he seeks the protection of the city's tutelary goddess, Athena.

In doing so, however, he places Athena and her citizens in a deep dilemma. She cannot cast out her suppliant; yet the Furies also have a strong case against Orestes, and they will let loose their destructive powers on Athens, if it protects him from their wrath. Athena seeks to resolve her dilemma by assembling a number of her citizens, and joining with them to try Orestes. In doing so, she founds Athens' first homicide court, the Areopagos.

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They hear both sides, with Apollo acting as Orestes' advocate. But the arguments are inconclusive—who *could* decide whether a son owes more devotion to his father or to his mother?—and the jurors' votes are evenly divided. The Athenian custom in such a case was to give the benefit of the deadlock to the defendant; and so Orestes is released.

The Furies now turn on Athens, determined to take revenge on the city for failing to give them their due. But Athena promises to make up for the slight which they feel, by offering them a permanent home in Athens. She accepts their view that both individuals and cities need 'an element of fear' as their sanction against lawlessness, tyranny and anarchy; she asks them to fulfil that role in Athens. Eventually, Athena succeeds in mollifying the Furies, and the trilogy ends as they leave, escorted by the people of Athens, to take up an honoured residence there. Referred to by the euphemistic title of Eumenides ('Kindly Ones'), they will remain in the city, demanding revenge for the crime of murder, deterring the Athenians from civil strife, and guaranteeing justice to the future proceedings of the Areopagos; for the court will sit in judgment on the hill beneath which they are going to live.

The word 'trilogy' is often loosely applied to almost any work of drama or prose fiction which consists of one story together with two sequels which continue its narrative further. The *Oresteia* of course includes this basic design; but Aeschylus goes much further, and his more ambitious design is shared by the *Ring*. All three plays move singlemindedly from the opening situation towards one main event which occurs two-thirds of the way through the play; the remaining third of each drama is then devoted to exploring the consequences of that event, and its implications for the future of the protagonist.

The effect is that each of the first two plays is very closely linked to the events which open the action of its successor. Furthermore, *Choephoroi* and *Eumenides* are not just sequels which explore the consequences of the events of *Agamemnon*: they are also parallel to it in action and in structure. The whole sequence is set in motion by Agamemnon's act at Aulis, which the elders describe in the first ode of *Agamemnon*. At Aulis,

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Agamemnon finds himself faced with a choice which is, from another perspective, no choice at all. He must lead the expedition against Troy, since he goes as the agent of Zeus to avenge the abduction by Paris of Menelaos' wife Helen. That act violated the ties of *xenia* (hospitality) which bound host and guest—bonds which were enforced by Zeus, the most powerful of the Greek gods. But, in sacking Troy to avenge Paris' false 'marriage' to Helen, the Greeks, whom Agamemnon commands, will destroy many innocent lives; for that action the goddess Artemis, protectress of the young and innocent, demands her price. Agamemnon, who will become a sacker of cities and the slaughterer of many, must sacrifice to her his own innocent daughter—and by doing so he will bring about his own death.

Agamemnon's action at Aulis is the paradigmatic situation which underlies the action of the rest of the *Oresteia*. The climaxes of the three plays (the murder of Agamemnon, the death of Klytaimestra, and the acquittal of Orestes) are to be seen in parallel as well as in sequence. Klytaimestra when she murders her husband, Orestes when he kills his mother and the Athenians when they judge Orestes are all, so to speak, 're-making' Agamemnon's traumatic moment of decision and attempting to purge the world of its consequences. The pattern of the whole trilogy is conveyed through this parallelism: from the rich canvas of *Agamemnon*, the fortunes of the characters are locked into the narrow dark world of the second play, but eventually emerge into the new and different richness of *Eumenides*, where the Athenians find the power to avoid the threatened reprisal for their actions. This finally breaks the chain of violence, and they are then able to create a perpetual bond of mutual renewal with the Furies.

The reasons why the Athenians can escape are central to the meaning of Aeschylus' trilogy. Although Agamemnon's predicament at Aulis is intolerable, and all moral judgment on him at that time is balked, we come increasingly to realize, as *Agamemnon* unfolds, that in retrospect he deserves his death. He receives it at the hands of his wife Klytaimestra, and she is the protagonist in the main action of the first part of the trilogy. Yet, for all the emotional force of her motivation, in the closing

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third of *Agamemnon* we see her threatened with inevitable retribution for the reckless exultation with which she executed the will of Zeus.

Orestes is different. He approaches calmly, and the will of the gods has been expressed to him overtly, as a clear command from Apollo. He chooses to kill Klytimestra, not recklessly, but knowing that he, too, does wrong. And so, in the closing third of the second play, the consequences that threaten him for his act of matricide are balanced by an equal hope for his release.

Just as it takes most of *Choephoroi* for the consequences of Klytimestra's deed to overtake her, so too in the third and final play with Orestes. The first two-thirds of *Eumenides* are devoted to exploring ever more deeply what his fate should be; in the outcome, in the same way that Klytimestra receives the full retribution which was threatened at the close of *Agamemnon*, Orestes, at his trial, likewise receives the equal balance which the end of *Choephoroi* foretold.

Now it is the turn of the Athenians to receive their deserts. But *Eumenides*, with its tense contest of fluctuating fortunes between Apollo and the Furies, lacks the inexorable development towards one goal which is displayed in the first two plays: its structure is more flexible, and it unfolds towards its climax without the total parallelism of plot and situation which bound together the first two plays—and the fates of their principal characters. This foreshadows a different kind of outcome; in the closing scene of *Eumenides* the Athenians escape totally from the retribution with which they were threatened.

The main action of the *Oresteia* portrays three different agents in parallel dilemmas, all of whom come to find, like Agamemnon at Aulis, that they have to choose between two alternatives. Either choice threatens disastrous consequences; but Aeschylus shows in each case that only one of the alternatives is truly possible. And it is their degree of insight into past and future, their moral stance as they embrace the decision which they must inevitably make, which determines what will ultimately happen to them.

Klytimestra slaughters her husband recklessly, regardless of the consequences; that is why she dies. Orestes' predicament is