

# Aeschylus' Republican Tragedies

by Paul Gallagher

*Only Aeschylus, Cervantes, Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Schiller, chiefly, are exemplary of truly successful tragedians. Only the historian Schiller, among these few, mastered explicitly a statement and demonstration of the principles of composing Classical tragedy.*

Lyndon LaRouche,  
"On the Subject of Metaphor"

*Only then is the entire power of the moral law demonstrated, when it is displayed in conflict with all other forces of nature, [which] lose their power over a human heart in this conflict.*

Friedrich Schiller,  
"On Why We Take Pleasure  
in Tragic Subjects"

*I advise my citizens to govern and to grace,  
and not to cast fear utterly from your city. What  
man who fears nothing at all is ever righteous? Such  
be your just terrors, and you may deserve and have  
salvation for your citadel, your land's defense,  
such as is nowhere else found among men. . . .*

*In the terror upon the faces of these  
I see great good for our citizens.*

Athena, to the citizens of Athens, at the  
conclusion of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* trilogy

Last December, in the course of its exhibition of Greek sculpture from the fifth century B.C., the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. presented three films, comprising in four-and-one-half hours the tragic trilogy known as the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus, as performed in 1983 by the British National Theatre, in attempted "original Greek tragic form." The films, even as VHS videotapes, are available only in larger libraries in the United States, and performances of this full Aeschylus trilogy are relatively rare.

If these tragedies are well-performed, as they are in this production, they make clear that Aeschylus the dramatist played a powerful role in defining and maintaining the unique quality of the Athenian republic. This is the republican idea of the individual among the Greeks generally, against the oligarchic idea of fixed human nature ruled by irrational instinct and the power of fate. This opposition, between the model of Athens and the slave-state of Sparta, are identified by Schiller in his "Legislation of Lycurgus and Solon" as the fundamental division in human history.

Aeschylus, whose mature life covered the first half of the fifth century B.C., composing and presenting plays in Athens, Syracuse, and other cities of the Greeks, laid the foundation of the idea of "tragedy" in Western civilization. He won first prizes for sets of tragedies at Greek dramatic festivals over a period of nearly thirty years. Of about seventy tragic plays Aeschylus is believed to have written, only seven survive, and of those, the *Oresteia* is the only complete trilogy. The three plays—*Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*—were presented first in Athens in 458 B.C., only two years before Aeschylus' death; they were among his last.

It is said that before Aeschylus began staging plays in 499 B.C., the form of Greek drama allowed for a chorus which spoke, sang, and danced accompanied by musicians; for narrative by the chorus leader; and for the presentation of a character by a single actor. Aeschylus, who like Shakespeare was an actor-dramatist, introduced a second individual actor. This allowed a triple dialogue among two leading characters and the chorus,

which mediated between the characters and audience. Later, both Sophocles and Aeschylus introduced a third actor (usually speaking little or not at all), and the Greek dramatic festival competitions of their later years allowed each dramatist a chorus, musicians, and three actors. Always using masks, the actors and chorus members portrayed different combinations of characters and different choral groups at different stages of a play. This is the format in which the British National Theatre presents the *Oresteia*. All actors and chorus members are males, who attempt by varying the tone and resonance of their speaking voices to merely indicate the sex and age or youth of the character.

The three plays together are an extraordinary demonstration—the oldest full demonstration known—of the powerful principles of Classical tragedy, once Aeschylus' innovations had truly created individual dramatic character through this process of dialogue. Classical tragedy “makes the tragic character's express consciousness the object of the spectator's conscious attention.” Ultimately, the negentropy or positive human development for which that character yearns and suffers, “uplifts the spirits of the spectators; that is the spark of true life, evoked so within the audience. . . .”

The tragic principle so described was identified by Lyndon LaRouche in his “On the Subject of Metaphor” published in *Fidelio* last year. That principle is focussed in these plays, on the character for whom this trilogy is named: Orestes, son of Agamemnon, the King of Argos. The suffering of the people of Argos, which culminates

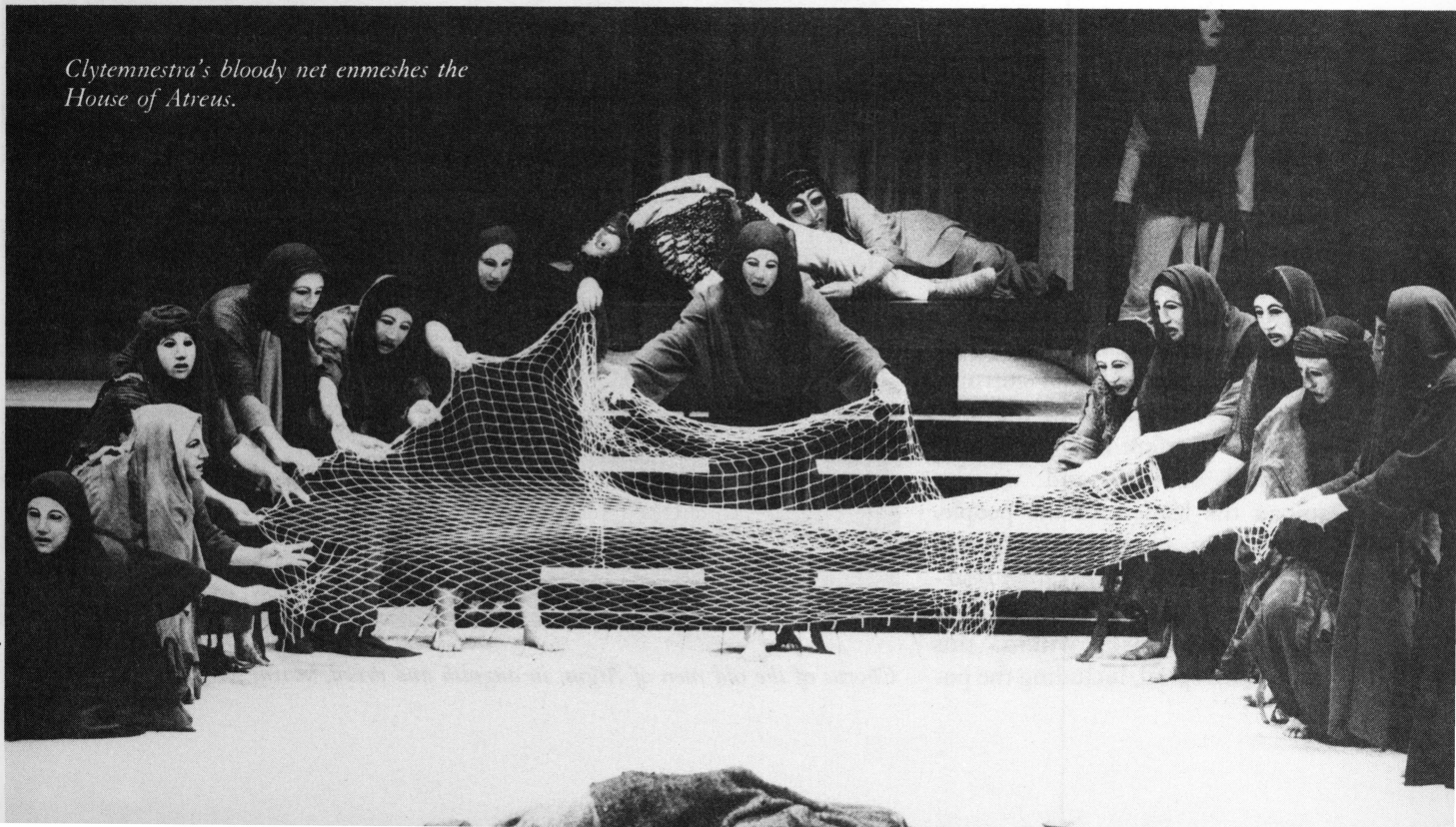
in Orestes' torment, also evokes the “terror in these faces” (of the men of Athens onstage and of the spectators) in which Athena sees “great good for our citizens” at the end of the trilogy. This is, says the goddess, a “just terror,” the terror of just men who have seen the terrible injustice and suffering unleashed when natural law is violated by irrationality, greed, and power-lust.

## Promethean Tragedy

What links the experience of spectators of Classical tragedy, to the moral emotion which moves us when we see brutal injustice and misery imposed upon peoples in real life, is a broader principle most famously demonstrated in Aeschylus' tragedy *Prometheus Bound*. When, in tragedy or in human history, such unjust suffering is seen through the terrific battle of an extraordinary human being—“a Promethean”—to end that inhuman injustice, then the moral emotions of those who “watch” are actually created and strengthened. The spectators of such a tragedy are moved to demand of themselves that some greater good must ultimately result from the suffering they see, and to search for an understanding of a higher natural law of human existence which can bring about this good. In Schiller's words, this “gives pleasure by way of the higher capacity, by causing anguish to the lower.”

*Prometheus Bound* was, in all likelihood, written by Aeschylus as part of a set of plays, of which the others have been largely or completely lost. We can see in

*Clytemnestra's bloody net enmeshes the House of Atreus.*



the *Oresteia* that the three plays were clearly meant by Aeschylus to be viewed at once, or at least within few enough days that the spectator could see them as a whole, as a single idea of the uplifting of mankind. The effect of the whole upon the audience is to evoke such “anguish,” as Schiller says, so as to come close to the “terror” which Athena speaks about at the conclusion. Yet in the final play (*The Eumenides*), the spectator’s desire to see mankind ennobled so as to deal with such suffering, is strengthened and resolved. No doubt, this was Aeschylus’ method in his other sets of plays as well, and it is a great advantage for the understanding of tragedy, that in this case, the entire trilogy has survived. Prometheus declares *in speech* that even the Olympian gods, who play with the fates of mankind, must finally bow before natural law. But in the *Oresteia*, this Promethean principle is shown *in action* to be true.

The *Oresteia* deals with the Greek city-region of Argos and its ruling House of Atreus; the impact upon them of the Trojan War and the terrible aftermath of the Pyrrhic “victory” over Troy won by the Argive Greeks under Agamemnon’s command. In the killing and maiming of much of its male population in the ten-years war, and the ongoing self-destruction of its royal house by a cycle of revenge murders, “victorious” Argos is descending before the spectator’s eyes into the kind of misery, famine, and anarchy we see inflicted today on parts of Africa, of the Balkans, and of other nations.

But in *The Eumenides*, Argos’ cycle of destruction is ended and its descent into hell reversed, not by Argos but by the citizens of Athens and her protecting spirit, the goddess Pallas Athena.

## The ‘Atreus Principle’

Aeschylus begins in *Agamemnon*, by creating and demonstrating the power—upon the moral emotion of the audience—of an apparently ironclad principle of *negative development*: of regression, of entropy, and of the descent from the long misery of warfare into the hell of irrational revenge and murder among the leaders of the people. Throughout *Agamemnon* and into the second play, *The Libation Bearers*, every character who appears is equally enmeshed within this downward spiral, including the po-

tential hero, Orestes, who appears in the second play. No one comes to put an end to this entropic spiral, who is untouched and above it; no god nor goddess decides to intervene spontaneously; if it is to end, Orestes must fight his way out of it from within and from above (in mind) at the same time.

From this equivalence which enfolds all the characters, the chorus (the people more broadly), and the audience, Aeschylus can create tragic irony and real transformation.

The first play moves toward the arrival of Agamemnon and his decimated remnants back from Troy; then toward his murder by his wife Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, whom she has taken as a lover. The bitter and sorrowful chorus (who represent “the elders of Argos”—only old men, women, and young children have survived the war) watches and speaks to the characters, to the audience and to themselves, about the history of this blood revenge. Atreus fought his brother Thyestes for the throne of this kingdom, and killed Thyestes’ children, except for Aegisthus, who escaped. Thyestes, defeated, cursed the children of Atreus, Menelaus and Agamemnon. Menelaus’ wife Helen was kidnapped and taken to Troy; army after Greek army has been wasted to get her back. Agamemnon, the commander, was convinced by the treasonous priest Calchas, that to get favorable winds to sail to Troy, he must ritually sacrifice his own daughter, Iphigenia. Agamemnon’s wife, Clytem-



Nobby Clark/Channel 4 International

*Chorus of the old men of Argos, in anguish and dread, yearns for justice.*



nestra, to revenge their daughter, has taken Thyestes' surviving son Aegisthus as her lover. Now she and Aegisthus will murder Agamemnon and Cassandra, the Trojan princess he has brought back as a slave.

These kings and nobles have made war for power, ambition, women, and revenge, rather than the defense and welfare of their people. For their violations of natural law and justice, they and above all their people are draining the cup of misery. The chorus, knowing all that has been done, is in anguish and dread throughout the first play, bitterly "rejoicing" in Agamemnon's final victory over Troy, fearing Clytemnestra's bold lying.

But Aeschylus, throughout this series of causally-linked disasters, is also "invisibly" creating an opposed, positive principle through the dialogue between the mind of the chorus and the minds of the spectators.

The dramatist creates this positive potential through *the chorus' yearning for justice*. The members of the chorus are too old for war; but at the same time, they are the elders of Argos. The chorus leader tells Agamemnon:

But I: when you marshalled this armament  
for Helen's sake, I will not hide it,  
in ugly style you were written in my heart  
for steering aslant the mind's course  
to bring home by blood  
sacrifice and dead men that wild spirit.  
But now, in love drawn up from the deep heart,  
not skimmed at the edge, we hail you.  
You have won, your labor is made gladness.  
Ask all men: you will learn in time  
which of your citizens have been just  
in the city's sway, which were reckless.

Once created, this potential spark of justice is tested at the conclusion of *Agamemnon*, and fails. When Cassandra, speaking to the chorus, foresees the imminent murder of Agamemnon within the palace, the chorus fearfully falls into confusion over whether they can act to stop it. So Clytemnestra steps out over the dead bodies of Agamemnon and Cassandra; and Aegisthus comes out with his soldiers to threaten any who resist this new tyranny, with destruction, exile, death. The chorus calls out for his punishment, but no one resists.

At the end of *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus demonstrates the powerful influence the mind of the chorus may have, within the consciousness of the spectators; how the chorus can prepare or prefigure within the spectators' minds, the appearance of a higher good, or a higher law, in complete contrast to the oppressive action of the tragedy. First the chorus changes the dead Agamemnon, whom they have distrusted and blamed for their city's devastation, into the soul of justice:

O that in speed, without pain  
and the slow bed of sickness  
death could come to us now, death that forever  
carries sleep without ending, now that our lord is  
down,  
our shield, kindest of men,  
who for a woman's grace suffered so much,  
struck down at last by a woman.

But no sooner have they done this, than they link this idea, as the play ends, to another name, of a character who has not appeared, whom they do not even know is still alive—Orestes:

Oh can Orestes live, be somewhere in sunlight still?  
Shall fate grown gracious ever bring him back again  
in strength of hand to overwhelm these murderers?

So *Agamemnon* ends.

## The Orestes Principle

Two principles have been created and opposed by the end of the first play: they would be named by Schiller the sad and harsh "counterpurposiveness" of limited or irrational nature; and the responding "purposiveness" which is evoked in human moral emotion (in the spectators, in the chorus) by a higher natural law, "poetic truth."

At the opening of Aeschylus' second play, *The Libation Bearers*, the audience's consciousness of this moral "purposiveness" becomes quickly and powerfully focussed upon the character of Orestes. The identification appears at once in the spectator's mind when Orestes steals secretly into Argos to Agamemnon's grave as the play opens. But it is given overwhelming force through dramatic dialogue: the long dialogue of prayers over their father's grave between Orestes, his sister Electra, and the chorus of mourning women who appear with her, who are the libation bearers.

The audience cannot resist, during this dramatic action, this linking of a higher moral "purposiveness" to the name and figure of Orestes. At a later point, the spectator will be brought by Aeschylus to reflect on this from a higher standpoint. Then, he or she may find it strikingly singular and unusual. After all, Orestes has returned on a mission, indeed ordered by the god Apollo, to *kill his mother and Aegisthus, to avenge his father*. Isn't this what Thyestes did against Atreus? Clytemnestra and Aegisthus against Agamemnon? Agamemnon against Paris and Troy? Did these not all appear to slaughter from necessity, if they were to have revenge?

But the audience has seen into the mind of Orestes,

through the chorus, even before he appeared on the stage. Then, through the dialogue with Electra and the chorus, Aeschylus has dramatically constructed a fact which outweighs the whole empirical progression: Orestes is different; he is not moved by personal ambition or even dynastic family obligation; *he is fighting with the slightest of means to restore the good of the city and the honor of his father*. He approaches what he must do suffering the greatest inner conflict, asking his sister Electra and his friend Pylades if it really must be done. (In this regard, Shakespeare's *Hamlet* seems to stand on the shoulders of *The Libation Bearers*.)

Therefore Orestes' action is different, despite all the "empirical evidence" that it is the same cycle of blood revenge which the chorus and audience have been watching in horror. His fight evokes the potential to transform the situation for the better. The series of dramatic actions and dialogue have been constructed, so that Orestes' action is experienced as a break in this series of blood-revenge murders: equal in power *but opposite in direction*—toward a higher idea of justice. "Logic" does not rear its head at this moment to try to contradict this.

When Orestes succeeds, even as the chorus thinks it may rejoice, Aeschylus leaps dramatically to the next level. The spectator is forced to see and reflect that Orestes' brave frontal attack on the tyranny, has *not* overcome the long cycle of brutal violations of natural law. Rather his "success" has brought forth a more violent assault: the awful Furies arise literally from the earth, as avengers of the hearth of his mother Clytemnestra, to drive him from the palace and make him mad. Orestes is overcome by distraction and flees. The grieving chorus—poor Argos—now faces descent from tyranny to utter anarchy, with no government at all. The implacable fate bearing down on the heads of all, seems now more powerful than ever.

So *The Libation Bearers* ends.

## An Unresolved Knot?

Schiller writes in "On Tragic Art," that "it is this which leaves much to be desired even in the most excellent works of the Greek stage, because, ultimately, in all these works, the appeal is made to necessity, and an unresolved knot always remains for our minds, which require reason."

Precisely thus, are the Furies now pursuing Orestes.

Schiller says that in his own Judeo-Christian civilization, or more generally any civilization believing in man in the image of one God, the spectators of a classic tragedy "seek out a justification for this particular case in universal laws, and to resolve the particular discord in a greater harmony. Greek art never elevated itself to

this pure summit of tragic compassion. . . ."

What *can* be said, albeit briefly, about the trilogy's resolution in *The Eumenides*, is that at the end of the drama, Aeschylus seeks to encircle the limit imposed by Greek civilization upon the power of reason to rise above such tragic anguish. Aeschylus does this by transferring this potential of reason from the image of Orestes, to the more powerful idea of *the Athenian citizen*.

The Furies are the power of necessity and fate, and they declare that under their rule all murderers are destroyed, none may atone, all blood-violence is paid with retributive blood violence. No god may stop this: although Apollo may briefly protect Orestes, the Furies will ultimately drain his life, drive him mad. One will arise who will kill him.

The Furies appear to represent natural law, which ultimately punishes all who willfully violate it; but they are also blindly insisting that murder must be required by further violence. They are blind to the law of the "poetic truth" of human reason and compassion—of which they know nothing. So their power at the conclusion of *The Libation Bearers* and the first part of *The Eumenides*, is what causes that anguish bordering on terror in an audience reared within Western Judeo-Christian civilization.

Orestes flees from the Furies to the shrine of Athena, always the most "Promethean" of the Olympian gods. Athena creates a completely unexpected new power to transform the situation, by calling a jury of Athenian citizens to judge the case.

Against this potential new power, and creating the great tension of the "trial," are the more and more violent threats of the Furies to blight and destroy Athens itself, if Orestes is acquitted.

By Athena's confidence that these citizens are so ennobled in power of reason as to judge this fierce battle between the Kings of Argos and the Furies, Aeschylus creates within the audience also, a moral confidence in this power of reason of the Athenians. Was it so within Aeschylus' original audience, who were Athenian citizens?

By this collaboration of Athena and the Athenian citizens, the Furies are "flanked" and brought to a higher reason; they accept a new role, agreeing to protect the arts of Athens and make its surrounding earth fruitful, and their transformation is marked by their being renamed "Eumenides" (Gracious Ones). The *Oresteia* ends in a singing celebration of the future of the republic of Athens; while within it, both Athena and the chorus (who are the Eumenides) appeal over and over to the citizens to remember that these Eumenides, so uplifted but still the Furies of implacable necessity, have the fate of the city in their charge. Athena tells them:



Nobby Clark/Channel 4 International

*Orestes is pursued by the Furies.*

Strong guard of our city, hear you these  
and what they portend? Fury is a high queen  
of strength even among the immortal gods  
and the undergods, and for humankind  
their work is accomplished, absolute, clear:  
for some, singing; for some, life dimmed  
in tears; theirs the disposition. . . .

While with good will you hold in high honor  
these spirits, their will shall be good, as you steer  
your city, your land,  
on an upright course clear through to the end.

Aeschylus' tragedies were written in the years when the city of Athens mobilized the other Greek cities to fight and defeat the invading Persian Empire. At the turning-point battles of Salamis and Marathon, Aeschylus fought and members of his family were killed. These great Greek military victories represented the quality of civilization which would ultimately make republican government triumph over empire. They came after centuries of growth of Greek cities and colonies had made

Greece the most densely populated area in human history until that time; and after Solon had given Athens government based on constitutional law.

During these years, Aeschylus himself was brought to trial in Athens—as was Socrates later—charged with sacrilege and profanation. It was claimed that his plays had revealed the secrets of one of the Eleusian mysteries; specifically that mystery (or ritual) by which one who had committed murder “with justification” might be absolved before trial. He was acquitted.

## British National Theatre

This 1983 performance by the British National Theatre is a very good one. The rigorous requirements of the style of the Greek tragic staging, and the unique and crucial role of the chorus, outlaw the “modernist interpretations” which ruin so many Shakespeare productions today. The great power of Aeschylus' drama is not disrupted by any actor's idea of staging a sensitive performance. There is little motion by the principal characters, that being part of the role of the chorus' portrayal of an idealized, passionately involved observer. What counts most is that all the actors use their training to project through their masks a clear and dramatically “singing” voice; and this, almost all of the company do extremely well. The result is that the thought-process of Aeschylus' drama remains dominant over the ordering of sensuous impressions; as Schiller specifies, “reason and imagination are active, and feeling is produced by the idea, not by a physical cause.”

The music accompanying the chorus, while it is limited and restrained for the most part, otherwise has one basic flaw: while little is known about the modes of music Aeschylus employed for his tragedies, we should *assume* that it was beautiful; this music is not. The company recognizes that the Greek poetry should be rendered as poetry or an ordered meter in English, to allow the voices to “sing”; however the poetry is sometimes grossly modernist. The chorus refers to the sins of Atreus and Agamemnon as “hubris I and hubris II,” for example. Such awful “television-speak” interrupts the spectators' concentration on the dramatic action, by suddenly reminding them they are watching modern British actors (directed by Peter Hall, who brought us the shameful “Marat/Sade” years ago).

But these problems are overcome, and the films are a very unusual opportunity, for most people, to attempt to understand the principles of Classical tragic drama as it originated. Those principles are fundamental to our ability to react, as human beings in the image of God, to the disasters unleashed by economic collapse throughout much of the globe today.