The Eumenides

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AESCHYLUS

Born in Eleusis, Greece, Aeschylus grew up in the Golden Age of Athens, even fighting in the Battle of Marathon against invading Persian forces in 490 BCE. He began writing plays before this, around the year 500 BCE, and by 484 he had won first prize at the Dionysia, the most important festival of tragic plays in Greece, and a huge honor for a Greek dramatist. Eventually writing over 90 plays (of which only seven have survived), Aeschylus went on to win first prize in the Dionysia twelve more times. The *Oresteia* trilogy was some of his latest and best work, and his influence over Greek drama was so great that in Aristophanes' *The Frogs* (written in 405 BCE), the comic playwright named Aeschylus the greatest poet that the world had ever seen.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The events that take place in the *Oresteia* would have been well known to the plays' original audience. According to Greek mythology, the Trojan War began as a result of Paris, the Trojan prince, stealing Helen, who was married to the Greek king Menelaus. Menelaus' brother Agamemnon then led a fleet of troops to Troy to avenge Paris's insult, and the following siege lasted ten years. The events of the Oresteia then begin the moment the war ends with a Greek victory. Aeschylus himself, however, lived and wrote nearly a millennium after the Trojan War supposedly occurred—during the Golden Age of Athenian democracy. This was a time when Athens dominated the Ancient Greek world, preaching values of republicanism and enlightenment. Aeschylus himself played a role in establishing Athenian hegemony, taking part in the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE, when Athens vanquished invading Persian forces. This sense of Athenian dominance and power is evident in Aeschylus's works, all of which argue for reason over revenge, order over chaos, and democracy over tyranny.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Greek tragedies were usually written as trilogies, meaning that Aeschylus also wrote two prequels to *The Eumenides*: *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*. All three plays center on the tragic House of Atreus and the consequences of Agamemnon's return from the Trojan War, and together, they make up a group called the *Oresteia*. The two other great Greek tragedians of Aeschylus's time and caliber are Sophocles and Euripides. Sophocles' great tragic trilogy is made up of the three Theban Plays: *Oedipus Rex*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*. These works contain elements of Greek tragedy similar to those within the *Oresteia*, such as a forewarning Chorus, an emphasis on the divine power of fate, and a series of heroic but flawed main characters. Euripides' tragedies, too, display similar qualities, with an added emphasis on the plights of female figures within these stories—he is known for tragedies such as *Medea* and *The Trojan Women*. Also relevant to the narrative of the *Oresteia* is Euripides' play *Iphigenia at Aulis*, which recounts the actions of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra before the Trojan War. The most famous accounts of the original Trojan War—the backdrop to the events in the *Oresteia*—are Homer's epic poems the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which formed a foundation for the majority of Classical Greek literature and drama. Modern takes on the story of the *Oresteia* include Jean-Paul Sartre's *The Flies*—an adaptation of the Orestes story from an existentialist philosophical perspective—and *Mourning Becomes Electra*, which is Eugene O'Neill's retelling of the *Oresteia* set in Civil War America.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Eumenides*
- **When Written:** 458 BCE
- **Where Written:** Athens
- **Literary Period:** Classical
- **Genre:** Tragedy
- **Setting:** Athens
- **Climax:** Athena creates the first trial by jury in order to determine whether Orestes should be punished by the Furies.
- **Antagonist:** The Furies

EXTRA CREDIT

Historical fiction. Athens really did originate the first trial by jury—jurors were chosen by lot, to ensure their impartiality, and had an equal say in the proceedings regardless of class or wealth.

Copycats. The Greek tragedians Sophocles and Euripides also incorporated the Furies into their plays—Sophocles in his play *Oedipus at Colonus*, and Euripides in his play *Orestes*, a rewrite of Aeschylus' own *The Libation Bearers*.

PLOT SUMMARY

The play opens with Pythia, the priestess of Apollo, preparing to perform her morning prayer. Her ritual is interrupted,

however, by a **bloodstained** refugee who has come to her temple to be cleansed. It is Orestes, the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, who killed his mother in order to avenge her murder of his father. Following him is a relentless band of Furies, demonic goddesses whose only aim in life is to punish human wrongdoers.

Though Pythia is terrified by this sight, and flees immediately, the god Apollo himself takes her place. He reveals that Orestes only killed Clytemnestra at his divine command, and explains to the audience that he has lulled the Furies to sleep, before expressing his hatred of the merciless goddesses. Apollo tells Orestes that he must continue to Athens, where Athena, the goddess of wisdom, will try his case. In the meantime, however, he offers his half-brother, the god Hermes, to guide Orestes to Athens.

After Orestes has exited, the ghost of Clytemnestra appears, scornfully cursing the Furies for their laziness. They wake up and are horrified to find their prey has escaped, cursing the Olympian gods for helping a guilty man defy their power. At this moment, Apollo emerges from the temple, and a verbal fight begins. Apollo finds the Furies contemptible and horrific, relics of a time when vengeance was more important than justice. The Furies, meanwhile, believe that Apollo is trying to steal their power. The dialogue ends with the Furies vowing to pursue Orestes, even as Apollo promises to protect him.

The scene shifts to Athens, where Orestes prays to Athena just as the Furies find him once again, threatening and tormenting him when they do. Soon after, Athena herself enters, and commands both the Furies and Orestes to tell her who they are and why they've come to Athens—she explains that she must protect her city at all costs. Both sides explain their presence to her, and agree to abide by her ruling.

Athena wishes to serve justice, but fears the wrath of the Furies. She decides, however, to create the first ever murder trial in order to determine Orestes' guilt, recruiting ten honorable citizens to form a jury. The trial begins, with the Furies arguing that Clytemnestra's life was worth as much as Agamemnon's. Apollo, however, argues that men's lives are worth more than women's, and Athena agrees, casting the deciding vote that allows Orestes to go free, an innocent man.

This chain of events horrifies the Furies, who believe that Athena has stolen their power from them. Athena, however, wisely offers the Furies a new role: patron goddesses of Athens. She explains that if they provide the city with peace and prosperity, they will receive offerings and prayer in return. After some convincing, the Furies agree, and take on the mantle of the Eumenides—"the kindly ones."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Orestes – The son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, Orestes is in exile from his home city of Argos because he killed his mother (who herself killed his father). Pious and moral, Orestes is hounded by the Furies for what they consider to be an unforgivable crime against his mother, despite the fact that Orestes was ordered to kill Clytemnestra by the god Apollo. Orestes' trial eventually becomes the centerpiece of the play, as Athena and the citizens of Athens strive to determine whether or not he should be punished for his divinely sanctioned murder.

Athena – The goddess of wisdom, civilization, justice, and skill, and a daughter of Zeus. Athena is the patron of Athens and the judge in Orestes' trial. She strives for justice, but at the same time feels a duty to protect her city. In contrast to the raging Furies and the often arrogant Apollo, Athena is a voice of reason and clarity. She does not believe in vengeance, and displays diplomacy and thoughtfulness at all times.

The Furies – Ancient goddesses of vengeance, the Furies (or Erinyes) pursue and punish those who have sworn false oaths or betrayed sacred laws. In *The Eumenides*, they seek to punish Orestes for having killed his mother, Clytemnestra. They are monstrous to behold, and frequently work themselves up into fits of rage. Envious of the power and prestige that the Olympian gods possess (the Furies are of an "older generation" of gods), the Furies seek to protect their right to avenge. At the end of *The Eumenides*, Athena uses a mixture of persuasion and threats to convince the Furies to give up their bloodthirsty role, and instead become defenders of justice and of Athens itself. From then on, the Furies are referred to as "Eumenides," or "Kindly Ones"—and it is from this that the play gets its title.

Apollo – The god of light, prophecy, and music, Apollo is Orestes' patron and has vowed to protect him. He despises the Furies, and believes that they have no right to seek vengeance against Orestes, since he has already cleansed Orestes of his sins. Apollo is a complicated figure: divine and noble, but also arrogant. Nevertheless, he (like Athena) stands for justice against the Furies' older, bloodier form of vengeance.

The ghost of Clytemnestra – The murderous wife of Agamemnon who was in turn killed by Orestes, Clytemnestra returns from the dead to urge the Furies to punish her son for her death. She represents the old system of vengeance and bloodshed, reminding the audience of the events in *The Eumenides*' prequels, *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*.

Agamemnon – The former king of Argos, husband of Clytemnestra, and father of Orestes, Electra, and Iphigenia. Agamemnon was murdered by Clytemnestra and Aegisthus in *Agamemnon*, the first play of Aeschylus's cycle. Orestes then murdered Clytemnestra to avenge his father's death, at Apollo's urging. As Orestes' trial goes on, Agamemnon's lingering memory also comes to represent male power, privilege, and misogyny in Ancient Greek society. Apollo

argues—successfully—that Agamemnon's life was worth more to Orestes than Clytemnestra's was, because fathers are more important than mothers.

Zeus – The king of the gods, Zeus is the father of Athena, Hermes, and Apollo, and is often invoked by other characters in their speeches and prayers. All the actions of the play, we are to understand, take place only because Zeus allows and wills them to. The characters think of Zeus as incredibly present in their everyday lives, and believe that he is always watching over them and ultimately controlling their actions.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Hermes – Another Olympian god, Hermes is called upon by his half-brother, Apollo, to guide Orestes to Athens. Hermes is the messenger of the gods, a trickster, and the guide who brings dead souls down to the Underworld.

Pythia – The priestess of Apollo, she is horrified to discover both Orestes and the Furies at her temple, where Orestes is waiting to be cleansed.

Athenian citizens – Ten honorable men whom Athena chooses to serve as Orestes' jury.

Athenian women – Athena summons these women to honor the Furies after she has converted the Furies into the "Eumenides," goddesses of Athens.

Electra – The daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, and sister to Orestes. She doesn't appear in *The Eumenides*, but played a major role in *The Libation Bearers*. Electra is pious and loyal to her father's memory, but unforgiving and merciless towards her mother.

Iphigenia – A daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, whom Agamemnon sacrificed to the gods in exchange for safe passage during the Trojan War. Iphigenia's murder incites Clytemnestra to avenge her by killing Agamemnon in the first play of the cycle, *Agamemnon*.

Aegisthus – Clytemnestra's lover, and her accomplice in murdering Agamemnon. Aegisthus is also Agamemnon's cousin, and hates the House of Atreus, which was responsible for his own family's ruin. Orestes murders Aegisthus alongside Clytemnestra in *The Libation Bearers*.

Atreus – Agamemnon's father, and the patriarch of the cursed "House of Atreus." Atreus brought down the curse of the gods when he punished his brother (who had stolen Atreus's wife and, briefly, his kingdom) by killing his brother's children, cooking them, and feeding them to him.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

REVENGE VS. JUSTICE

The Eumenides has two prequels—*Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*—and these three plays together form Aeschylus's trilogy called the *Oresteia*. In both of those first two plays, revenge and justice are essentially equated—that is, paying back someone who has wronged you is considered the right and moral thing to do. In *The Eumenides*, however, revenge and justice are not only defined as two separate concepts, but in fact often stand opposed to each other. And, in the end, justice prevails.

Characters within the play are strongly associated with these two ideas. The Chorus of Furies symbolizes vengeance, while the goddess Athena stands for justice. The Furies seek only to punish a wrongdoer—Orestes—by whatever means necessary. They do not even attempt to explore the nuances of Orestes' crime of matricide (killing his mother), despite the fact that his murder of his mother Clytemnestra was sanctioned, and indeed commanded, by the god Apollo. The Furies' black-and-white understanding of the facts stands in contrast with Athena's methodical and logical ability to comprehend the situation before her. Impartial and evenhanded, she seeks to hear all sides of an issue before making her decision, clearly displaying the power of justice.

The trial of Orestes constitutes a pivotal moment not simply within the structure of the play, but also within the mythological history of Ancient Greece. Athenians, who prided themselves on their fair and democratic justice system, considered the trial represented in *The Eumenides* to be the first of its kind. Thus the progression from vengeance to justice that takes place within the play—and, more broadly, over the course of the three works that make up the *Oresteia*—not only creates a satisfying dramatic arc, but actually represents a crucial moment within the creation of Classical Greek civilization. By leaving behind vengeance in favor of justice, the characters within the play are taking a huge step forward for their entire civilization. Their decision does not simply affect Orestes' fate, but also that of Athens itself, where the play is set.

No dramatic moment better symbolizes the significance of this shift than the transformation of the Furies into the Eumenides at the end of the play. Wrathful, bereft, and robbed of purpose, the Furies seem poised to take revenge on the entire city. Yet instead of doing so, they finally hear reason, and decide to become beneficial goddesses who will watch over and bless the city of Athens. The literal symbols of vengeance have abandoned that force entirely, a metamorphosis that dramatically embodies the move towards a more civilized,

rational, and just society.

GENDER ROLES

Gender roles play an active part in *The Eumenides*, and the divide between the sexes is vividly depicted in a series of conflicts. The first of these clashes comes between the female Chorus of Furies and the male Apollo. The lord of light and prophecy, Apollo is outraged that the irrational, vengeful, female Furies dare to defy him. The Furies, in contrast, react with scorn and wrath at the idea of Apollo infringing on their realm of vengeance and punishment. This tension continues when the Furies and Apollo both take the stand at Orestes' trial, each side trying to convince Athena to turn against the other.

At the trial, a second opposition emerges: one between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, who now represent the roles of mother and father. Orestes is being tried, after all, for matricide, which the Furies consider a terrible sin. Apollo, who ordered Orestes to commit the murder in the first place, feels quite differently, however. He asserts that since Clytemnestra (Orestes' mother) killed Agamemnon (Orestes' father)—thus violating the bonds between husband and wife—she thereby released her son of any allegiance to her. Essentially, Apollo is arguing that the life of the woman is worth less than the life of a man.

Apollo then goes even further, asserting that men alone are responsible for the creation of children. As an example, he uses Athena herself, who (so the myth goes) sprang fully-grown from her father Zeus's head. Her very existence, Apollo states, proves that men alone can conceive children, which means that men deserve their children's fealty to a greater degree than women do.

Within this complicated web, Athena is a strange and even contradictory figure. On one hand, she is a strong and independent woman—a rare thing within a Greek drama. On the other hand, she sides with the masculine Apollo and Orestes and helps to defeat the female Furies. She states that she is "my Father's child" and that she will "honour the male, in all things but marriage" (Athena was famously a virgin goddess). Although she is a symbol of feminine power, even the fierce Athena ultimately bows before the patriarchy.

Because of this strict divide between characters and ideas, *The Eumenides* as a tale of justice and civilization prevailing over vengeance and savagery can also be seen as a story of men prevailing over women. This equation of men with positive aspects and women with negative aspects was a common part of Classical Greek culture, and is found throughout most Greek tragedies.

FAMILIAL BONDS

At the core of *The Eumenides* sits a conflict of familial bonds. Orestes, after all, has killed his mother Clytemnestra in order to avenge her murder of his father Agamemnon. The question of the play, then, is not whether or not Orestes committed this crime (he never denies his guilt), but whether he deserves to be punished for it. The Furies unequivocally believe that the bond between a mother and child is sacred, and that no excuse Orestes offers can purge his guilt. Apollo and Orestes, meanwhile, believe that Clytemnestra sacrificed any allegiance her son owed her when she killed his father. The trial of Orestes thus basically becomes about which parent—mother or father—should matter more to a child. In the end, in a display of typical Ancient Greek sexism, Athena and a jury of Athenians decide that the father takes a privileged role, and that Orestes is therefore blameless. His father's death, in essence, wipes out his mother's.

The question of family ties, however, goes deeper than simply a question of mother versus father. Ancient Greek mythology often takes on the topic of cursed families, and one of the most famous is the "House of Atreus." Orestes is the last survivor of this royal family (along with his sister Electra, who is absent from this play), has been cursed for generations, with relatives seeking revenge on each other in a variety of horrific ways. The events of *The Eumenides*, however, finally put a stop to this curse. In fact, at the end of the play, the exiled Orestes is even able to return to his familial kingdom of Argos, his guilt erased and his birthright restored. Thus *The Eumenides* is not simply about the salvation of one man, but of an entire family. With the end of Orestes' trials and tribulations comes the end of the curse on the house of Atreus—an event that signals the restoration of order and prosperity to a previously tangled and tragic situation.

THE POWER OF THE GODS

As in *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers* before it, *The Eumenides* contains numerous mentions of and prayers to the gods by its mortal characters, all of whom clearly fear and revere divine power. *The Eumenides*, however, contains a crucial difference: in this play the gods themselves become physically-present characters. Their conflicts and decisions are of titanic proportions, and have huge consequences on the humans and civilizations around them, creating a sense of scale that fully emphasizes just how powerful they really are.

Both Apollo and Athena generate displays of godly power within the play. Apollo acts as Orestes' champion, shielding and defending him at every turn. Athena, meanwhile, is the protector of an entire city, Athens. She understands that every decision she makes will drastically affect the city that she cares for, and acts carefully and cautiously as a result. These gods

symbolize beneficial divine power, creating a sense of order and righteousness within the often tangled and terrible world of Greek drama.

In contrast, the Chorus of Furies represents the more malignant and destructive aspects of divine power. Obsessed with punishing Orestes, the Furies will stop at nothing to make his life a living hell, even threatening all of Athens if it tries to stop them. Their ability to potentially curse Athens, and to pursue and torment the long-suffering Orestes—despite the fact that he committed his crime, matricide, only on Apollo's orders—just how senseless and cruel divine power can sometimes be.

When opposed against each other, however, the Olympians—Athena and Apollo—prevail over the older yet weaker Furies. In other words, one divine power defeats the other. It is this act that allows the Furies to change into the Eumenides, quite literally transforming destructive divine power into protective divine power. The order and care symbolized by Apollo and Athena spreads to the once-fearsome Furies, creating a feeling of greater divine order in the universe.

Of course, there is one god who is absent from the proceedings, though he is often invoked: Zeus, god of thunder, and king of the Olympians. This absence, however, only serves to augment our sense of Zeus's power. So omnipotent and omnipresent is he that even other gods invoke his name and pray to him (he is also Apollo and Athena's father, again emphasizing the importance the Greeks placed on a father's sovereignty). The ultimate emblem of divine might, Zeus exists more as a symbol than a character in *The Eumenides*, demonstrating the constant presence of divine power—even when it cannot be tangibly sensed.

THE POWER OF THE POLIS

While characters both mortal and divine drive the events of *The Eumenides*, there is another figure that is equally important: the city-state of Athens. During the Classical Age of Greece, when playwright Aeschylus wrote, the city-state, or *polis*, was considered the pinnacle of civilization—and Athens was considered the pinnacle of polises. In fact, the worst punishment for a citizen of Athens was not death, but banishment. It was believed that a man could not exist without his city, and that the greatest privilege in life was to serve one's homeland.

In the face of this massive emphasis on community and home, Orestes' punishment by the Chorus of Furies becomes even more horrific. Driven from place to place and never able to return to his own kingdom, Orestes would have been a cautionary tale for Ancient Greek viewers. His suffering would have been frightening to them, while his desperate desire to end his wanderings would have been moving and relatable.

The idea of the city-state becomes even more prominent once the character of Athena is introduced. As the protector of Athens, Athena must weigh her desire to harbor the fugitive Orestes against the dangers that he may bring to her favorite city-state. Her decision to take Orestes in speaks to the importance of hospitality in Greek culture, but also to the strength and self-sacrifice of Athens as a whole, as they risk the wrath of the Furies in order to protect a refugee. These positive Athenian qualities are demonstrated once again by the jury of Athenians who vote not to convict Orestes. The Furies have threatened to destroy Athens and curse its soil if they lose the trial, but the citizens of Athens believe in justice, and have faith in it as a moral imperative. They are admirable representatives of Athens, doing the right thing even when it means endangering themselves.

Perhaps the most moving and vivid emphasis of the power of the polis, however, comes from the Furies themselves. At the end of the play, the vengeful goddesses have been stripped of power and purpose. They have no tasks left in life, and nowhere to turn. At this moment, however, Athena and the citizens of Athens welcome the Furies with open arms, inviting them not only to bless their community, but to become a part of it. At the idea of being accepted by the Athenian citizens, the Furies transform from vengeful nightmares into kind and beneficent goddesses. The act of inclusion within a polis allows the Furies to change their very natures, proof of how important and essential the Greeks considered the idea of community and its ability to transform the vengeful, primal, and violent into the civilized and just.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BLOOD

In *The Eumenides*, blood is essentially synonymous with guilt. This connection makes itself clear from the very first scene of the play, when a terrified Pythia describes Orestes, drenched in blood, waiting at Apollo's altar. Once Apollo has cleansed him, Orestes becomes clean once again—the Furies, however, beg to differ. To them, Clytemnestra's blood is a stain that will contaminate Orestes for his entire life. They strive to exact vengeance, and to pay back bloodshed with more bloodshed.

URNS

When it comes time for Orestes' trial, the citizens of Athens cast their ballots into urns in order to determine Orestes' guilt or innocence. These urns, which

ensure anonymous voting, are symbols of justice and fairness. Their existence displays how civilized and honest the city of Athens is.

THE NAVELSTONE

Thought to be a stone that **Zeus** had used to mark the center of the Earth, the Navelstone was a religious relic kept at Delphi, and the Greeks considered it enormously sacred. Apollo allows Orestes to touch the Navelstone, despite the fact that he is still covered in his mother's blood—this is a testament to the god's faith in and affection for the young man.

THE STONE OF OUTRAGE

Athena places Orestes at this stone during the trial in order to emblemize how wronged he has been by the unrelenting Furies.

THE STONE OF UNMERCIFULNESS

Athena has the Furies stand by this stone in order to symbolize their tenacity, and their refusal to stray from their vengeful task.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Penguin Books edition of *The Eumenides* published in 1975.

Lines 64-234 Quotes

They disgust me.
These grey, ancient children never touched
By god, man, or beast—the eternal virgins.
Born for destruction only, the dark pit,
They range the bowels of Earth, the world of death,
Loathed by men and the gods who hold Olympus.

Related Characters: Apollo (speaker), The Furies

Related Themes:

Page Number: 71-76

Explanation and Analysis

Apollo visits his protectee, Orestes, who has been tormented by the Furies for killing his mother, Clytemnestra. Reassuring Orestes that he has more power than the Furies, Apollo then turns his anger on the goddesses themselves, voicing his contempt and "disgust" for them, and mocking their ugliness and age.

Apollo's attitude towards the Furies reveals the deep hatred that the Olympian gods feel for the Furies, despite the fact that they carry out the necessary function of avenging interfamilial murders. This mindset towards the Furies, embodiments of vengeance, reveals a change in Apollo since this play's prequel, *The Libation Bearers*. In that drama, Apollo urges Orestes to avenge his father, and acts as a force that pushes vengeance forward. Here, however, he has turned away from vengeance and violence--a change that indicates a drastic difference in this play's worldview, as opposed to its bloody predecessors.

You—how can you sleep?
Awake, awake—what use are sleepers now?
I go stripped of honour, thanks to you,
Alone among the dead. And for those I killed
The charges of the dead will never cease, never—
I wander in disgrace, I feel the guilt, I tell you,
Withering guilt from all the outraged dead!
But I suffered too, terribly, from dear ones,
And none of my spirits rages to avenge me.
I was slaughtered by his matricidal hand.
See these gashes—Carve them in your heart!

Related Characters: The ghost of Clytemnestra (speaker), Orestes, The Furies

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 97-107

Explanation and Analysis

The Furies sleep, exhausted from chasing Orestes, even as their prey is spirited away by Apollo and Hermes. As they slumber, however, the ghost of the murdered Clytemnestra emerges and berates them for failing in their task.

Her speech helps audiences and readers to understand the Furies' motivation, and their purpose in life. In their worldview, the dead cannot rest until they are avenged. Clytemnestra is a tortured ghost precisely because her murderer (and son) still lives, unpunished, despite having corrupted his familial bond with his mother.

Clytemnestra's appearance also emphasizes the vivid presence of the dead in *The Eumenides*, a fact that is true in

many Greek dramas. To the characters in the play, the dead are still an active and powerful presence, and letting them down or going against their wishes can have terrible consequences.

> Lord Apollo, now it is your turn to listen.
> You are no mere accomplice in this crime.
> You did it all, and all the guilt is yours.

Related Characters: The Furies (speaker), Apollo

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 196-198

Explanation and Analysis

Apollo and the Furies confront each other; Apollo tells the Furies that they have no right to torment Orestes, while the Furies retort that Apollo, too, is at fault. It is important to note that in the prequel to this play, *The Libation Bearers*, Apollo ordered Orestes to kill his mother, and then promised to protect him after the deed was done. The Furies believe, therefore, that Apollo is at fault as well as Orestes.

This quote emphasizes the Furies' obsession with vengeance, as well as the power that the gods wield within this narrative. Even though the Furies know that Apollo was the driving force behind the plan to kill Clytemnestra, they can only punish his mortal instrument, Orestes.

While the Furies cannot actually harm Apollo, however, they do call attention to what they view as his hypocrisy at punishing Clytemnestra for murdering her husband, but protecting Orestes for murdering his mother. This debate highlights the tangled and often contradictory web that vengeance creates, particularly within the House of Atreus.

> Marriage of man and wife is Fate itself,
> Stronger than oaths, and Justice guards its life.
> ...
> I say your manhunt of Orestes is unjust.
> Some things stir your rage, I see. Others,
> Atrocious crimes, lull your will to act.

Related Characters: Apollo (speaker), The ghost of Clytemnestra, Agamemnon, Orestes, The Furies

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 215-221

Explanation and Analysis

As Apollo and the Furies continue their debate, they touch on the difference between the bonds of mother and child, and those of man and wife. The Furies argue that because Orestes killed his own flesh and blood, he is at fault. Apollo, however, responds that the connection between a husband and a wife is fated to be, and that their bond is guarded by "Justice" itself. (Implicit in these arguments is also the sexism that undergirds Greek society at the time—Apollo is seen as more "correct" here because Clytemnestra not only violated a sacred bond in killing her husband, but also acted distinctly un-feminine.) This debate illustrates the tangled web of allegiances that vengeance creates. Although Apollo and the Furies are each trying to convince the other, they will never actually agree on who is in the right.

Apollo also brings up another crucial concept: the idea of justice. In accusing the Furies--goddesses of vengeance--of being unjust, he is implying that there is a difference between vengeance and justice. This attitude differs from Apollo's beliefs in *The Eumenides*' prequel, *The Libation Bearers*, in which he commands Orestes to perform an act of vengeance (killing his mother) in order to bring about justice. This shift highlights the evolution in *The Eumenides* towards a system of justice, rather than a system of vengeance.

Lines 235-566 Quotes

> Queen Athena,
> Under Apollo's orders I have come.
> Receive me kindly. Curst and an outcast,
> No suppliant for purging...my hands are clean.

Related Characters: Orestes (speaker), Apollo, Athena

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 232-235

Explanation and Analysis

Having reached Athens and the temple of Athena, Orestes begs the goddess to shelter him from the avenging Furies. His prayer illustrates his deep faith in both Apollo and Athena, demonstrating the immense power of the gods over human life within this play—and presenting Orestes as a

worthy hero because of his piety.

Orestes' claim that his "hands are clean," meanwhile, allows us to understand that Orestes does not view himself as guilty of his mother's murder. He has followed divine orders, and carried out what he believes to be justice, and is therefore free of sin or corruption. At the same time, however, Orestes considers himself to be unfairly "curst" by the actions of the Furies.

> You'll give me blood for blood, you must!
> Out of your living marrow I will drain
> My red libation, out of your veins I suck my food,
> My raw, brutal cups—
> Wither you alive,
> Drag you down and there you pay, agony
> For mother-killing agony!
> And there you will see them all.
> Every mortal who outraged god or guest or loving parent:
> Each receives the pain his pains exact.

Related Characters: The Furies (speaker), The ghost of Clytemnestra, Orestes

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 262-269

Explanation and Analysis

As the Furies find Orestes cowering at the shrine of Athena, they threaten him, demanding their vengeance. Their brutal, bloody language vividly illustrates their violent worldview. The language they use also illuminates their eye-for-an-eye mentality. The Furies' logic is very simple: since Orestes has shed his mother's blood, his blood must be shed in turn. Or in their words: "Each receives the pain his pains exact."

This point of view contrasts with that of Apollo and Orestes, who believe that since Orestes was avenging his father, he does not deserve to be punished for his own murder of his mother. It is this debate that will become central as the play continues.

> Hold out your hands, if they are clean
> No fury of ours will stalk you,
> You will go through life unscathed.
> But show us the guilty—one like this
> Who hides his reeking hands,
> And up from the outraged dead we rise,
> Witness bound to avenge their blood
> We rise in flames against him to the end!

Related Characters: The Furies (speaker), Orestes

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 313-320

Explanation and Analysis

Having confronted Orestes in Athena's temple, the Furies weave a spell in order to trap him there. As they do so, they explain the rules under which they carry out their grim task, promising not to harm anyone innocent of sin. Their only purpose, they say, is to punish the guilty, especially those (like Orestes) who hide among the innocent.

During their chant, the Furies also make clear the close ties that they have to the dead, explaining how they "rise" from "the outraged dead" in order to exact vengeance. To the Furies, the dead (such as Clytemnestra) are just as important as the living (like Orestes). They believe that it is their duty to put the dead to rest, and that the only way to do so is through bloody and violent vengeance.

> Two sides are here, and only half is heard.

Related Characters: Athena (speaker), The Furies, Orestes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 440

Explanation and Analysis

The Furies and Orestes turn to Athena for judgement, and the goddess agrees to hear both sides of the story. Her measured, balanced language contrasts with that of the Furies, who utterly reject logic and moderation. Athena also differs from Apollo, who is clearly biased in Orestes' favor.

In short, in both her language and her actions, Athena exemplifies justice personified. She is determined to render a fair judgment, and will do so by learning as much as she

can about both the Furies' and Orestes' points of view. More broadly, Athena's logic and fairness represent the system of values that sit at the core of the city of Athens (as the Athenian Aeschylus portrays it). A city known for its enlightenment and intellect, Athens here represents a place where justice and reason will always prevail.

ATHENA: ...you are set
On the name of justice rather than the act.

LEADER: How? Teach us. You have a genius for refinements.

ATHENA: Injustice, I mean, should never triumph thanks to oaths.

LEADER: Then examine him yourself, judge him fairly.

ATHENA: You would turn over responsibility to me,
To reach the final verdict?

LEADER: Certainly.
We respect you. You show us respect.

Related Characters: The Furies, Athena (speaker), Orestes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 442-449

Explanation and Analysis

The Furies try to convince Athena that they are in the right, but she quickly explains to them that she is interested in justice rather than simply shows of justice. Flattered that the goddess has shown them "respect," the Furies agree to abide by whatever she decides.

This moment is a crucial one within the play. Up until now, the Furies have remained convinced that only they can decide Orestes' fate. Impressed and placated by Athena, however, they have given that power over to her. In essence, the Furies--embodiments of vengeance--have acknowledged the authority of Athena, an embodiment of (relatively) unbiased justice. This shift from vengeance to justice will continue to gain momentum as the play continues, and parallels Aeschylus' praise of the ideals of Athens itself.

But were we just or not? Judge us now.
My fate is in your hands. Stand or fall
I shall accept your verdict.

Related Characters: Orestes (speaker), Athena

Related Themes:

Page Number: 482-484

Explanation and Analysis

With the Furies having agreed to accept Athena's verdict, Orestes does the same. Up until now, he has maintained his innocence. Now, however, he admits that perhaps he and Apollo were wrong to seek Clytemnestra's death, and leaves it up to Athena to decide. With Orestes' agreement, the trial begins, and Athena becomes a judge.

As this passage makes clear, the shift from vengeance to justice is rapidly occurring. The Furies, agents of vengeance, have agreed to follow Athena's judgement, and Orestes, who himself has carried out bloody vengeance, has done the same, even admitting that his original act may have been wrong.

Embrace the one? Expel the other? It defeats me.
I will appoint the judges of manslaughter,
Swear them in, and found a tribunal here
For all time to come.
My contestants,
Summon your trusted witnesses and proofs,
Your defenders under oath to help your cause.
And I will pick the finest men of Athens,
Return and decide the issue fairly, truly—
Bound to our oaths, our spirits bent on justice.

Related Characters: Athena (speaker), The Furies, Orestes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 496-505

Explanation and Analysis

Although Athena is the all-powerful goddess of wisdom, she admits that she alone cannot decide whether Orestes or the Furies are correct. Instead, she decides to create a trial by jury--in Greek myth, the first trial by jury to ever take place, setting a precedent "for all time to come."

The action that Athena takes here is emblematic of Athenian values. Athenians believed in justice, but also

found the ideas of community and democracy to be equally important. Even though Athena is the patron goddess of the city, she still does not consider herself entitled to judge Orestes' fate. This decision illustrates Athena's fairness and rationality, while also emphasizing the importance of central Athenian values.

> Oh I can hear the father now
> Or the mother sob with pain
> At the pain's onset...hopeless now,
> The house of Justice falls.

Related Characters: The Furies (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 525-528

Explanation and Analysis

As the trial begins, the Furies take the stand first and begin to testify. They do so by painting a picture of a world without justice, referencing fathers and mothers betrayed by their offspring, and the "fall" of the "house of Justice."

This argument, though vivid, also illustrates the Furies' fundamental failure of understanding. They believe that justice and vengeance are the same thing, and that a world without vengeance is the same thing as a world without justice. In contrast, Athena understands that justice is fair and rational, while vengeance is bloody and senseless. The Furies, however, come from an older world, one without courts of law, judges, or juries. Having devoted their whole existence to vengeance, they are unable to understand a world in which reason and justice would prevail but vengeance would fall by the wayside.

Lines 567-1043 Quotes

> So
> You'd force this man's acquittal? Behold, Justice!
> Can a son spill his mother's blood on the ground,
> Then settle into his father's halls in Argos?

Related Characters: The Furies (speaker), Agamemnon, The ghost of Clytemnestra, Apollo, Orestes

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 659-662

Explanation and Analysis

After Apollo has testified in Orestes' favor, the Furies once again take the stand, mocking what the god has just said. While Apollo has argued that Orestes in fact carried out justice by killing his mother, the Furies find this argument laughable. To them, the fact that Orestes has killed his mother is unforgivable. They believe that he should be cast out of society altogether, rather than eventually take his father Agamemnon's place as king of Argos.

The Furies' powerful argument illustrates the true difficulty of this case. Although Orestes seeks justice, he himself is a murderer, and an agent of vengeance. Apollo calls for justice, but the Furies point out his hypocrisy, given his investment in vengeance in this play's prequel, *The Libation Bearers*.

> The woman you call the mother of the child
> Is not the parent, just a nurse to the seed,
> The new-sown seed that grows and swells inside her.
> The man is the source of life—the one who mounts.

Related Characters: Apollo (speaker), Agamemnon, The ghost of Clytemnestra, Orestes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 666-669

Explanation and Analysis

In the midst of the trial, Apollo tries to explain why the death of Orestes' father outweighs his murder of his mother. In doing so, he turns to a common Ancient Greek idea about parenthood: that a child is incubated in the womb of its mother, but truly belongs only to its father, who provided the "seed" for its conception.

Although tremendously sexist (and unscientific), it is this argument that eventually wins the day. Apollo has essentially proved that Orestes' familial bond to his father was more important than that to his mother; and that therefore, it made sense for him to turn against his mother after she killed his father.

It is important to note that the trial of Orestes v. the Furies, along with the ideological struggle of justice v. vengeance, also contains the age-old struggle of male v. female. Just as Apollo proves that male trumps female in terms of family ties (and social power), so too will male triumph over female

in the trial (which is judged only by men), as Orestes prevails over the Furies.

> And now
> If you would hear my law, you men of Greece,
> You who will judge the first trial of bloodshed.
> Now and forever more, for Aegeus' people
> This will be the court where judges reign.
> ...
> Here from the heights, terror and reverence,
> My people's kindred powers
> Will hold them from injustice through the day
> And through the mild night.
> ...
> Untouched by lust for spoil, this court of law
> Majestic, swift to fury, rising above you
> As you sleep, our night watch always wakeful,
> Guardian of our land—I found it here and now.

Related Characters: Athena (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 692-721

Explanation and Analysis

Before the Athenian judges cast their lots in the case of Orestes v. the Furies, Athena notes the historic importance of this moment. She decrees that she has founded the first ever trial-by-jury court in history, and that Athens will be a city of justice and fairness forevermore.

It's vital to remember that *The Eumenides* is a deeply nationalistic piece, as well as a religious one; at its heart is not simply loyalty to the gods, but also loyalty to the city of Athens. In writing the play, Aeschylus seeks not only to tell a compelling story, but to explain how Athens became the pinnacle of reason and civilization that it was in his day.

The Eumenides tells the story of justice overcoming vengeance, and is also the origin story of Athens. This fair and enlightened city is embodied both by Athena and her judges, whom the audience members and readers are meant to see as paragons of virtue and wisdom.

> Beware. Our united force can break your land.
> Never wound our pride, I tell you, never.

Related Characters: The Furies (speaker), Athena

Related Themes:

Page Number: 726-727

Explanation and Analysis

As the Athenian judges begin to cast their impartial votes, the Furies attempt to sway the outcome of the trial, threatening to "break" Athens if the verdict doesn't go their way. This moment illustrates how little the Furies understand justice. Although they believe that they are in fact carrying out just punishments, their attempt to tip the scales in their favor through violence and threats shows that they are not in fact agents of justice.

Further, the Furies' threat here is essentially a threat of vengeance--if Athenian citizens insult them, then the goddesses will "break" Athens itself. As readers, we now fully comprehend how opposed vengeance actually is to justice. In this moment, the Furies have actually set up vengeance as an obstacle to justice, demonstrating how invested they are in the former at the expense of the latter.

> Orestes,
> I will cast my lot for you.
> No mother gave me birth.
> I honour the male, in all things but marriage.
> Yes, with all my heart I am my Father's child.
> I cannot set more store by the woman's death—
> She killed her husband, guardian of their house.
> Even if the vote is equal, Orestes wins.

Related Characters: Athena (speaker), Zeus, Agamemnon, The ghost of Clytemnestra, Orestes

Related Themes:

Page Number: 750-756

Explanation and Analysis

With the jury split down the middle, Athena casts the deciding vote for Orestes. Greek myth has it that the goddess was born from her father Zeus' head, hence her statement that, "No mother gave me birth." Although she is a woman, Athena still believes that children belong to their fathers, and views men as the dominant gender.

Given these facts, Apollo's argument--that a father matters more to a child than a mother--has been successful, and Orestes wins. Although modern readers may view this reasoning as appallingly sexist, ancient audiences would

have approved of it as traditional and correct.

It is important, too, that Athena casts the dividing vote in the trial. The Athenian court is as even-handed as the justice that it serves: blind and impartial. They have clearly understood the difficulties of the case, and it is up to Athena, a god, to make the final decision. The brand-new Athenian court is a fair and balanced one.

> You, you younger gods!—
> You have ridden down
> The ancient laws, wrenched them from my grasp—
> And I, robbed of my birthright, suffering, great with wrath,
> I loose my poison over the soil, aieee!
> Poison to match my grief comes pouring out my heart,
> Cursing the land to burn it sterile and now
> Rising up from its roots a cancer blasting leaf and child,
> Now for Justice, Justice!—cross the face of the earth
> The bloody tide comes hurling, all mankind destroyed.

Related Characters: The Furies (speaker), Apollo, Athena

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 820-828

Explanation and Analysis

Learning that they have lost the trial, the Furies launch into a horrifying and vengeful rant, vowing to pay back all those who have wronged them. In reality, the ancient goddesses are terrified. In losing the trial, they have essentially lost their identity--unable to punish someone whom they believe deserves vengeance, they have been robbed of their purpose in life. The only recourse, in their understanding of the world, is to wreak vengeance on those who have decided against them. They are essentially portrayed as being unwilling to admit that they have been usurped by the "younger gods" and the polis of Athens itself.

Once again, the Furies imply that since vengeance has been thwarted, justice has as well. They truly do not understand that the two concepts are different, and can even exist in opposition to each other. Rather than understanding that in this instance justice has defeated vengeance, the Furies instead believe that justice on earth has come to an end, and destruction is near.

> And now you'd vent your anger, hurt the land?
> Consider a moment. Calm yourself. Never
> Render us barren, raining your potent showers
> Down like spears, consuming every seed.
> By all my rights I promise you your seat
> In the depths of earth, yours by all rights—
> Stationed at hearths equipped with glistening thrones,
> Covered with praise! My people will revere you.

Related Characters: Athena (speaker), The Furies

Related Themes:

Page Number: 812-819

Explanation and Analysis

After the Athenian court has rendered a verdict against the Furies, Athena seeks to appease the older goddesses, begging them not to harm Athens. Forever wise and rational, Athena offers the Furies an alternative to taking vengeance on her city, promising that if they do not, she will make them honored, patron goddesses.

This passage shows Athena's devotion to her city, as well as her deep understanding of the Furies. Despite having voted against them in the trial, Athena clearly sees that the Furies have been stripped of their purpose in life. By offering them the position of patron goddesses of Athens, she is essentially offering them a new role in the world. Instead of being feared and despised, they will instead be revered and worshipped.

> This is the life I offer,
> It is yours to take.
> Do great things, feel greatness, greatly honoured.
> Share this country cherished by the gods.

Related Characters: Athena (speaker), The Furies

Related Themes:

Page Number: 876-878

Explanation and Analysis

In order to appease the enraged Furies after they have lost in court, Athena offers them a place as patron goddesses of Athens. Ever tactful and insightful, Athena offers the Furies a chance to leave behind their identity as despised and feared agents of vengeance. Instead, she prophecies that they will be honored, and will do great things for Athens.

The story of *The Eumenides*, we must remember, is also the story of the rise of Athens. As patron goddesses, Athenian citizens believed, the Furies gave the city prosperity and greatness which helped it rise to the pinnacle of the known Greek world. Thus by showing how the Furies came to love and protect Athens (and in doing so became the Eumenides, "the kindly ones"), Aeschylus is also illustrating how Athens' rise to greatness began.

> Your magic is working...I can feel the hate,
> The fury slip away...

Related Characters: The Furies (speaker), Athena

Related Themes:

Page Number: 908-909

Explanation and Analysis

Trying to protect her city, Athena works to entice the Furies away from their vengeful plan, and to convince them to become patron goddesses of Athens. Although they are initially skeptical and hostile, the Furies gradually come to accept Athena's offer.

This passage is a crucial one, as the Furies finally let go of their identities as wrathful goddesses of vengeance, instead becoming kindly deities of protection. The feeling of their fury "slip[ping] away" is a kind of transformation as they exchange one identity for the other. Officially, they have now changed from the Erinyes (furies) to the Eumenides (kindly ones).

> I will embrace
> One home with you, Athena,
> Never fail the city
> ...
> Spirit of Athens, hear my words, my prayer,
> Like a prophet's warm and kind,
> That the rare good things of life
> Come rising crest on crest,
> Sprung from the rich black earth and
> Gleaming with the bursting flash of sun.

Related Characters: The Furies (speaker), Athena

Related Themes:

Page Number: 927-938

Explanation and Analysis

As the Furies sing a prayer for Athens' prosperity, the play begins to come to a close. While before these goddesses were barren monsters of vengeance, now they sing a chant of fertility, harvest, and peace. Through Athena's generous offer and kind words, the Furies have essentially transformed. Although robbed of their identities as embodiments of vengeance, they have instead found different roles in this new world of justice, reason, and hope.

It is vital to note that this play ends with a prayer for the prosperity of Athens. Plays in Ancient Greece were exercises in both piety and nationalism, and with this scene, Aeschylus touches on both topics. He depicts the full extent of the gods' power and generosity, while also praising and praying for Athens, his home city.

> Do you hear how Fury sounds her blessings forth,
> How Fury finds the way?
> Shining out of the terror of their faces
> I can see great gains for you, my people.
> Hold them kindly, kind as they are to you.
> Exalt them always, you exalt your land,
> Your city straight and just –
> Its light goes through the world.

Related Characters: Athena (speaker), The Furies

Related Themes:

Page Number: 997-1004

Explanation and Analysis

As the play draws to a close, Athena sums up what has happened: the Furies have ceased to be, and in their places are the Eumenides, kindly goddesses who will help Athens to attain greatness and fame. Athena's prophecy would have been tremendously moving for Aeschylus' audiences, who truly believed themselves to be living in a city blessed and protected by the goddess of wisdom.

It is also important to understand the references to justice that Athena makes within this passage. She clearly understands that huge "gains" have been made within this play, and urges her people to continue to act justly and fairly, as she has taught them to do. If they follow her command, she says, then Athens will prove a "light" that will shine "through the world," providing an example of dignity and fairness to all other nations.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

LINES 1-63

Pythia, the priestess of the god Apollo at his temple in Delphi, enters and begins her morning prayer. She honors her patron god and Mother Earth. She praises Apollo, along with Zeus, for bringing civilization to a savage land. She also prays to Athena, the goddess of wisdom; Dionysus, the god of revelry and wine; and Poseidon, the god of the sea. She then prays to Apollo to grant her a prophecy, before addressing the audience directly, telling them that any Greeks among them should enter into her temple, where she will tell the future.

As in all of Aeschylus' works, the playwright takes great care to emphasize the power of the gods. The prayer of Pythia also brings up another vital theme: the power of civilization. Within the narrative, the symbol of civilization will be Athens, while its opposite will be the savage and unrelenting Furies. As the narrative continues, audience members know that civilization and justice will inevitably prevail.

Pythia enters her temple, but then emerges immediately, terrified by an unseen horror. She describes how she walked into the sanctuary only to find a man (Orestes) inside waiting to be purified at her altar. He is covered in **blood**, but holding an olive branch topped with a tuft of wool (a signal that he comes in peace) at the **Navelstone** (thought to be the center of the Earth). Around the man, monstrous women (the Furies) are sleeping, whose appearance drives Pythia to tears. She prays to the god Apollo to cleanse his house, and then exits.

As is often the case in Greek tragedy, the audience hears about a bloody and/or disturbing sight before actually witnessing it themselves. In this case, that sight is Orestes, still drenched in his mother's blood. His physical state clearly emblemizes his moral culpability in his mother's death—a guilt that he hopes for Apollo to cleanse. Pythia's fear reminds us that only the gods can remedy the situation.

LINES 64-234

The doors to the temple open, revealing Orestes, who prays as the Furies sleep. The god Hermes watches as Apollo appears, swearing to protect Orestes and to destroy his enemies. Apollo curses the Furies, explaining that he has momentarily lulled them to sleep. He admits that they disgust him, and says that they are loathed by both gods and men. He urges Orestes to continue running from them until he reaches the citadel of Athena in Athens. The goddess Athena will then judge his case and decide whether or not he is guilty of matricide (for killing his mother, Clytemnestra). Orestes responds that he trusts Apollo to do what is right. Apollo reveals Hermes, asking him to guard Orestes and to shepherd the mortal man to Athens. Apollo exits, followed by Hermes, with Orestes following them.

This scene marks the first appearance of Apollo, a complicated figure within the play. As Orestes' patron, he is a protective and beneficial influence, protecting his chosen mortal at every turn. At the same time, he is undoubtedly responsible for Orestes' crime of matricide, and for the torments that he is suffering now. In addition to Apollo's shared guilt, he also harbors a deep hatred and contempt for the Furies, one that causes him to insult and incite them at every turn (in contrast to the reasonable and calm Athena).

The ghost of Clytemnestra appears on top of the **Navelstone**, cursing the Furies for their laziness. She tells them that they have disgraced her in death, and that the souls of those she killed are taunting her. Showing them the ghostly gashes on her skin made by Orestes' blade, she begs them to seek vengeance. Clytemnestra then recounts how she used to make offerings to the Furies when she was alive, and asks them why they have let Orestes go free, describing how he is mocking them. Last, she commands the Furies to wake up, and the ghastly goddesses begin to moan. The Furies talk in their sleep, as Clytemnestra continues to exhort them to avenge her. She then vanishes.

In a world where the dead have an immense amount of power over the living, it is unsurprising that the domineering Clytemnestra has returned from the grave to demand vengeance. Her appearance helps the audience to understand the Furies' motives—if they do not punish mortals, they are themselves punished (although it is unclear why Clytemnestra has such power over goddesses), and they even feel physical pain. While these figures are still grotesque, we now understand better why they are so driven and merciless.

The Furies awake, and their leader commands them to search for Orestes—they are appalled to find that he has fled. They describe the pain that they are suffering since their prey has escaped them, and go on to curse Apollo for allowing Orestes to escape. They ask why the god would help a criminal, and remember their terrifying dream of Clytemnestra. They lament the fact that the Olympians—the young gods—control the world. They then see that the **Navelstone** is stained with **blood**, and cry that Apollo has defiled his own temple.

Within this narrative, the Furies represent an older, more primitive order of gods, one envious of the Olympians (Zeus, Apollo, Athena, etc.) for their prestige and power. Much of the play, in fact, can be seen as a conflict between the old, savage world and the new, civilized one. The Navelstone, meanwhile, acts as a stark symbol for Orestes' guilt, and also shows how closely connected the gods are to this family conflict.

Apollo emerges from his temple with his bow and arrow to drive back the Furies. He commands them to flee his temple, and threatens to shoot them. He once again curses and mocks them, calling them monsters and describing the horrors that happen when justice and vengeance are one and the same. Telling them that all the gods despise them, he says that the Furies will forever be outcasts. The leader of the Furies, however, fires back, telling Apollo that he is responsible for Orestes' crime of matricide. They ask why he dares to stop them when they are doing their duties as goddesses of vengeance. When Apollo argues that they should also take revenge on a wife who kills her husband, they respond that such a murder does not "destroy one's flesh and blood." Apollo is shocked by their lack of respect for marriage, calling their hunt for Orestes "unjust" and telling them that Athena will determine Orestes' guilt. The Furies, in response, say that they will never let Orestes go free. They exit to pursue Orestes, as Apollo vows to protect him.

In this scene we witness just how cruel and unforgiving Apollo is to the Furies. Apollo is a god, a figure whom mortals should fear and revere, yet at the same time, he is an arrogant and flawed figure, letting his pride get the better of him as he mocks and berates the goddesses who are tormenting his favorite mortal. This is a disturbing reality common to the Ancient Greek gods—they are all-powerful, but also jealous, lustful, and must be constantly flattered and appeased by mortals. Here we also receive insight into the Furies' worldview. While Apollo believes that a wife killing a husband is the worst crime imaginable—most likely because it involves a woman overthrowing a man—the Furies believe that the worst crimes are committed against your own flesh and blood. To them, Orestes' matricide was worse than Clytemnestra's murder of her husband.

LINES 235-566

The scene changes to the Acropolis, the main square of Athens, where Orestes kneels before the shrine of Athena and prays for her to shield him from the Furies. He explains that Apollo has sent him to her, and says that he will await her decision in his future trial.

The narrative now moves to Athens, the dominant setting in the play. Orestes' immediate visit to Athena's shrine cements for the audience the close bond between Athena and her city. It also shows Orestes, the hero, as suitably pious and humble.

The Furies enter, exulting that they have found Orestes at last. Noting that he has hurt himself in his flight, they vow to continue tormenting him, and to punish him for trying to escape them. They remind Orestes of the mother's **blood** that he spilled, and assert that they must now take his blood as payment, threatening to suck the marrow out of his bones. They also tell Orestes that even in death, he will be punished eternally for his wrongdoing.

In this passage, the Furies clearly articulate their idea of vengeance (which, in their minds, is the same as justice). They believe in a strict one-to-one ratio of crime to punishment: blood for blood, torment for torment, and death for death. Audiences and readers understand how simplistic this view is, but to the Furies, their conception of vengeance defines their entire way of life.

In response, Orestes explains that suffering has made him wise. He describes how Apollo has purged him of his sins, and how he can feel his mother's **blood** fading from his hands. He calls upon Athena once again, asking her to come in peace and save him from the wrath of the Furies.

In contrast to the Furies, Orestes possesses a more complicated view of guilt and vengeance. He believes that the god has purified him, and though he once was guilty, Apollo's blessing has made him clean once more. Nothing has changed about the murder he actually committed—the only thing that has changed is a god's perspective on it. But because Apollo is a god, this makes Orestes' morally-ambivalent act now supposedly blameless.

The leader of the Furies spits back that neither Apollo nor Athena will be able to save Orestes. She waits for him to reply, but he prays in silence—full of rage, the Fury vows to eat him alive. The Furies join together in a wrathful dance, singing about the joys of vengeance. They explain that they are justice embodied, and that they only punish sinners and murderers. They then pray to their mother, Night, to avenge the dead, and to help them defeat the young god Apollo. Their hymn spirals into a frenzy as they assert that the Fates themselves gave them their power. The gods, meanwhile, must stay away from their domain. They then curse Orestes once again, vowing that he will not go to trial because "no god can be our judge." Last, they praise their own power, calling themselves "unappeasable."

Again, we witness the jealousy and bitterness that the Furies feel towards Olympians like Apollo and Athena. Aeschylus then uses a, innovative theatrical device, turning the choral ode (in which a Chorus, or group of actors, prays to a god)—which audiences would have expected to further comment upon the plot and praise the gods—as an opportunity for the Furies to expand on the importance of vengeance. Here again, Aeschylus gives the audience insight into the Furies' mindset. This understanding will be important for comprehending both sides of the future trial.

Athena enters, armed for combat, and sees Orestes and the Furies at her altar. She asks who they are, and the Furies explain that they are "the children of the Night." They go on to ominously tell her how powerful they are, calling themselves "destroyers of life" and asserting that Orestes is a murderer. Athena wonders if Orestes was forced to commit such a crime, but the leader of the Furies says that no man could be forced to kill his mother. Athena, however, says that she must hear both sides of the story, and that she must serve justice. The Furies reply that if Athena truly serves justice, they will allow her to judge the case, because she has shown them respect.

Athena's entrance deliberately comes directly after the Furies' wrathful dance, in order to contrast their vengeful disorder with her justice and logic. It is significant, too, that she first turns to the Furies and asks them to tell their story. She shows respect and understanding for the monstrous goddesses—who are her elders—unlike Apollo, who displays only scorn and hatred for them. Athena is rewarded for her logical approach when the Furies decide to allow her to judge their case.

Athena then turns to Orestes, asking him to tell her his story, and whether he has come to her to be cleansed. He, however, asserts that he does not need to be purged, because Apollo has already forgiven him for his sin. Orestes then goes on to explain his history, recounting how his mother, Clytemnestra, killed his father, Agamemnon. He boldly states that he did indeed murder his mother in revenge, but adds that Apollo commanded him to do it. Lastly, he too states that he will abide by Athena's decision.

Always evenhanded, Athena next seeks to hear Orestes' side of the story. It is significant, too, that Orestes does not deny the crime he has committed, or the guilt that he felt for it. Still, he believes himself to be pure and innocent because of Apollo's approval. His mindset demonstrates the power of the Olympian gods—they can make even murder morally acceptable.

Athena contemplates the difficult decision before her: on one hand, she acknowledges that Orestes has come to her as a suppliant, and that she should show him mercy. On the other hand, she fears that if the Furies do not win the trial, they will attack Athens, spreading venom and disease wherever they go. Finally Athena decides that she will appoint "the finest men of Athens" as a jury, and that they will decide the case.

It is significant, here, that while Athena worries about Orestes' guilt or innocence, she also fears the harm that the Furies may do to Athens. Athena is the patron goddess of Athens, and closely tied to the city-state, or polis. *Her concenr emphasizes the vital importance of keeping Athens safe at any cost—a value that Aeschylus would have wanted to teach his audience.*

After Athena exits, the chorus of Furies begins to worry that Orestes will be found innocent. They imagine a world in which they are powerless, and fear that the justice that they believe they bring will die out completely, giving way to anarchy. They plead with humanity to show restraint in their lives, and to avoid committing acts of impiety and violence. Their tone then turns threatening, as they urge humans to revere divine power or to face their wrath. Reckless men, they warn, will always come to grief.

Once again, Aeschylus allows us to understand the Furies' worldview. They do not believe in vengeance instead *of justice—rather they believe (misguidedly) that vengeance and justice are one and the same. In fact, the Furies have a fairly strong moral compass, if a simplistic, brutal worldview. They do not seek to torment all of humanity, only those who have committed crimes and deserve punishment.*

LINES 567-1043

The scene shifts to a court within Athens. Athena enters, along with the ten citizens whom she has chosen as members of the jury. She orders a herald accompanying her to call together the Athenian people to watch the trial.

In Greek myth, this moment marks the first ever trial by jury. Athenian audiences would have recognized the importance of the scene they were witnessing.

Orestes enters, and Athena directs him to the **Stone of Outrage**. The Furies enter, and Athena places them at the **Stone of Unmercifulness**. She herself stands between two **urns** in which the jury will cast votes to determine Orestes' guilt or innocence.

The trial proceeds with great formality and symbolism. Most important of all are the urns for the jury, emblems of the fair and evenhanded justice that Athens created, in which one's vote was anonymous.

Apollo enters, and Athena questions why he is there. Apollo responds that he has come as a witness for the defense, explaining that he commanded Orestes to kill Clytemnestra, and subsequently purged the mortal of all guilt. He urges Athena to serve justice.

This trial, with a jury, witnesses, and a judge (in the person of Athena) will be surprisingly familiar to modern American readers—proof of the influence of Ancient Greece on today's civilization.

Proclaiming that the trial has begun, Athena offers the Furies—the "prosecution"—the first speech. The leader of the Furies starts to question Orestes, asking if he killed his mother. He agrees that he did. They ask how he killed her, and he responds that he cut her throat at the urging of the god Apollo. The Furies are outraged that a god would condone a murder, but Orestes responds that he has "no regrets." He also expresses faith in his father, Agamemnon, whom he says "will help me from the grave." When the Furies indict him for killing his mother, Orestes responds that he did so in order to avenge his father. He then questions why the Furies did not turn on Clytemnestra, but they again respond that she did not share blood with Agamemnon. When Orestes wonders whether he is related to his own mother, the Furies react with wrath.

The device of the trial allows Aeschylus to explore the complex and thorny issues of crime, guilt, vengeance, and justice in an in-depth and three-dimensional way. After all, both Orestes' and the Furies' sides have merit. The Furies believe that Orestes, as the only surviving criminal, deserves to be punished, while Apollo and Orestes believe that since Orestes' mother was herself a murderer, her crime essentially wipes out his. The issue of gender also becomes increasingly important here. Orestes clearly values his father's life over his mother's, a mindset that fits the Ancient Greek status quo, but which the female Furies find appalling.

Orestes begs Apollo to explain to the jury why he killed Clytemnestra, adding that his murder was really justice. Apollo agrees, asserting that Orestes was in fact doing the will of Zeus, the omnipotent "Olympian Father," who is always just. The Furies are scornful, unable to believe that Zeus would order a son to murder his mother. Apollo, outraged, describes the trap that Clytemnestra laid for her husband, and the horrific, dishonorable way that she killed him.

Orestes goes a step further here, claiming that not only is his punishment by the Furies unjust, but his "crime" was itself justice, because it punished a criminal and was divinely sanctioned. It is important to remember, however, that Orestes' murder of Clytemnestra was also a vengeful act, which makes the case even trickier. To further complicate things, Clytemnestra's original murder of Agamemnon was also partly an act of vengeance—punishing Agamemnonfor sacrificing their daughter Iphigenia during the Trojan War.

The Furies are skeptical that Zeus would care more about a father's murder than a mother's. They remind Apollo and Athena that Zeus defeated his own father, Kronos, in order to gain control over Mt. Olympus.

The Furies use Greek myth to argue their case. Within Classical mythologies, there are many instances of sons overthrowing their fathers for power including—most prominently Zeus himself.

Apollo, outraged by the Furies, insults them once again, hissing that the gods "detest" them, and threatening them with the power of Zeus. The Furies are defiant, asking if Apollo intends to force Orestes' acquittal, and reminding him that doing so would not be just. They speak again of Orestes' defilement, and of the "mother's **blood**" that is on his hands.

Once again Apollo loses his temper, displaying how the gods, too, are often childish and subject to overpowering emotions. Apollo has no good rebuttal to the Furies' (valid) point that Zeus himself was essentially a patricide, but instead can only respond with insults and threats. The Furies, meanwhile, hold true to their beliefs—even though they are monstrous, it is difficult not to admire their moral tenacity.

Apollo rebuts the Furies' claim that mothers are as important as fathers. He claims that while women may carry children, men provide the "spark of life." He goes on to say that a father can create children without a mother, using Athena (who famously was born out of Zeus's head) as an example. He then attempts to flatter Athena, saying that Orestes and his kin will honor her for generations.

The strong and disturbing misogyny of Ancient Greece is in full effect here. Apollo essentially argues that women are simply not as important as men, and that fathers have a greater claim over their children than mothers do. That this argument is successful should be appalling to modern readers.

Athena asks the Furies if they have anything else to say, and they respond that they do not. Apollo reminds the jury to be just and honest. Athena then explains to the jury that they are presiding over the first-ever murder trial in Greece. She explains to the Athenians that their city will now exist as a beacon of justice and civilization, unpolluted by corruption or dishonesty. She urges them to be pious, righteous, and loyal to their city.

This passage is one of the most important in the play, as it again draws a direct connection between unbiased, civilized justice and the polis of Athens. Athenian audience members watching this scene would have (presumably) felt proud of their city, and honored to be a part of it.

As the citizens cast their ballots, the Furies grow anxious, threatening that they can curse Athens if they choose. Apollo shoots back that the Furies should fear the wrath of both himself and Zeus. The Furies respond that Apollo is meddling in "works of blood," and they repeat their plan to "crush the land" of Athens should the trial go against them. Apollo threatens that if they do so, the Furies will be disgraced. As he continues to mock them, they again call him a "young god," reminding him of their age and power.

In contrast to Athena and her articulation of fair, logical justice, the Furies are still thinking in terms of vengeance, threatening to punish the entire city of Athens if the trial doesn't go their way. They display their territorial and jealous nature here, again illuminating the conflict between the older, more primitive gods and the younger, more powerful Olympians.

Athena comes forward to cast her ballot, and announces that she has been swayed in Orestes' favor. She explains that she will always honor men above women, since she was born from only a father—and therefore she cannot value a woman's death more than a man's. Even if the jury's vote is equally split, says, Orestes will win his trial.

Athena's speech here, while it should be a statement that justice has won the day, easily comes across as even more evidence of Ancient Greek misogyny.

As the ballots are tallied up, Orestes prays to Apollo and wonders what will happen. The Furies, meanwhile, pray to their Mother Night. Apollo again reminds the Athenians to "honor Justice."

This moment within the play shows the close connection the Greeks drew between divine intervention and justice—although humans might try to dispense justice, ultimately the gods must sanction any decision they make. This makes for many complicated moral quandaries, as the often-childish and immoral gods are thus the deciders of what is objectively right and wrong.

The votes have been counted, and the lots are equal—therefore, Athena announces, Orestes will go free. Overwhelmed, Orestes cries that Athena has saved his house, and returned him from exile. He vows to honor her in Argos, as well as Apollo and Zeus, and swears that this decision has brought about a new era of friendship between Argos and Athens. Even after he dies, he asserts, the two cities will live in peace and harmony. Orestes bids the Athenians farewell, before exiting with Apollo.

Although Orestes wins the day, another vital point within this passage is the fact that the vote is tied. This displays both the difficulty of the case, and the evenhandedness of Athenian justice. Even when faced with monstrous goddesses threatening to curse their city, the Athenian citizens did not display bias, but carefully considered the question before them and voted with their consciences. Orestes' joy is not just for himself but for his whole family—the house of Atreus has been cursed for generations, and Athena's decision has now seemingly broken the cycle of bloody vengeance that had decimated the family.

Both enraged and terrified, the Furies curse the "younger gods" for violating the "ancient laws" of vengeance, and robbing them of their power. They vow to make Athens sterile, enraged by how it has made them, the daughters of Night, into a mockery.

The conflict between the old gods and the new here reaches its climax. The Furies now vow revenge on all of Athens—a threat that would have terrified patriotic Athenian audiences.

The diplomatic Athena, however, has another solution. She reminds the Furies that they are not disgraced, as the vote was tied. The real outcome, she asserts, came from Zeus. She goes on to ask the Furies not to make Athens barren. Instead, she promises the Furies a place as the patron goddesses of the city, a position in which people will revere and adore them.

Once again, Athena shows how logic and fairness will inevitably win the day. She reminds the Furies that they received justice, and that their case was considered fairly. She then goes a step further, offering to transform the Furies from embodiments of vengeance to patron goddesses of Athens, a metamorphosis that symbolizes a permanent shift from bloodthirsty vengeance to a more civilized form of justice.

Too wrathful to hear Athena's words, the Furies again curse the younger gods for their lack of respect for "the ancient laws." They lament their lost birthright and power, again threatening to spread poison throughout the soil of Athens. They then cry out for justice, asserting that it will only be fulfilled if all mankind is destroyed. Athena again tries to reason with them, telling the Furies that they can use their power for good, caring for people rather than destroying them. She also reminds them that she is the favorite child of Zeus, and the only one with access to his thunderbolts. She urges the Furies to join her as patrons of Athens. The land, she tells them, is rich, and they will receive offerings from it forevermore.

Although Athena speaks reasonably and persuasively (and includes a veiled threat of Zeus's thunderbolts), the Furies are still ruled by rage and emotion. They continue to equate vengeance with justice, and this time their rage spills out to apply to all mankind. These speeches are also full of praise for Athens, as Aeschylus flatters his audience, making them feel patriotic and proud of their city.

The Furies begin to calm down, but are still humiliated by their disgrace, calling out to their mother Night for their lost, ancient powers. Athena, however, speaks to them respectfully, telling the Furies that they are older and wiser than she is. She tells them about all the wonderful aspects of Athens, promising that they will grow to love it and that Athenian citizens will honor them. She describes Athens as a land of peace and prosperity, and tells the Furies that a happy, fulfilling life is theirs for the taking.

Although audiences and readers might find the Furies petty and merciless, it is difficult not to sympathize with their plight. As goddesses of vengeance, their entire existence has centered around punishing criminals. With that taken away from them, how are they supposed to define themselves? Athena, however, offers the Furies a new role, essentially putting an end to their identity crisis.

As the Furies repeat their lament once more, Athena again tells them that they are gifted and valuable, and that she respects them. She begs that "the spell of my voice" may "appease your fury" and pleads with them to stay. If they refuse, she adds, they should at least spare Athens from their threatened plague—to curse the city, she asserts, would be unjust.

It is crucial, in this passage, that the powerful Athena presents herself as a suppliant to the Furies, begging them rather than ordering them to be merciful towards Athens. By showing the goddesses respect, the canny Athena helps to change their minds.

Interested at last, the leader of the Furies asks Athena if she will really share her home with them. The goddess responds that no home in Athens will thrive without honoring them. She asserts that for all time to come, Athenians will revere the Furies. As she speaks, the Furies feel their anger slipping away. Athena, meanwhile, urges them to "take root in the land." She then utters a blessing to bind the Furies to Athens, praying for prosperity for her favorite city, and for everlasting peace. As she does so, the Furies begin to dance around her, vowing to protect the city forevermore and praising its "rich black earth." Athena continues, saying that the approval of the Furies will ensure blessings for the people of Athens, and that only impious men will know their anger.

Athena's willingness to share her power is proof both of her confidence, and of her devotion to Athens. She cares so much about protecting her city that she is even willing to share it with the Furies. This scene is crucial because it depicts the Furies' moment of transformation, in which they transition from goddesses of vengeance to goddesses of protection and blessing. This change is represented in their choral song and dance. While they used to pray for vengeance and bloodshed, they now wish to bless Athens and make it prosperous.

The Furies continue their prayer, promising fertility and prosperity for the land of Athens. Athena praises the blessings of the Furies and commands all Athenians to do the same. The Furies pray for Athenian prosperity, promising to share their blessings at the hearths of Athenian homes. Athena exhorts her citizens to note and praise the blessings that the Furies have brought, and she praises Zeus for changing the Furies' minds.

This passage clearly articulates the relationship between the Ancient Greeks and their gods—it was a reciprocal bond, in which the gods gave protection and prosperity in exchange for praise and offerings. The Furies have never been praised before, and so they welcome this new relationship with delight.

The Furies pray that war will never touch Athens, and that only joy and love will rule the city. Athena is overjoyed that even these embodiments of rage can be transformed, and urges her citizens to exalt them. The Furies join her, telling the Athenians to rejoice in their blessings, as they are beloved by not only Athena, but by Zeus as well.

Aeschylus here articulates a mindset that could be called Athenian exceptionalism. Athenian audiences viewing this play believed that Athens was the most civilized, glorious, and powerful nation in the world, and this passage confirms that view. Athens is portrayed as such a wonderful place that it can transform even bloodthirsty monsters into benevolent, caring figures.

An entourage of Athenian women enters in order to lead the way to the Furies' temples below the earth, where they will be offered gifts and sacrifices. The Furies sing the praises of Athens and Athena, and imagine the prayers and reverence that they will receive. Athena's entourage brings forward crimson robes in which to dress the Furies, and they light torches to lead the goddesses through the city. A procession forms that includes both actors and audience. As this takes place, the Athenian women sing praises to the "good spirits" (now the Eumenides, formerly the Furies) who will bless their houses from deep under the earth. Calling them "Awesome Spirits," the women tell the Furies to dance with triumph. They pray for everlasting peace between Athens and its newly benevolent protectors, and praise Zeus and Fate for creating such an auspicious union.

Although The Eumenides *is technically a tragedy, and part of a tragic trilogy along with* Agamemnon *and* The Libation Bearers*, the play actually ends with celebration and ritual, a symbol that order has been restored to the universe. "Tragedy" was a looser term in Ancient Greek drama, and didn't necessarily mean that the play always ended with death and sorrow. The celebration taking place onstage eventually spills into the audience, a reminder that this play was actually performed at an enormous Athenian religious festival. Thus Aeschylus ends his series of plays both by confirming Athenian supremacy and might, and celebrating the bond between theater and religion.*

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