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THE UNIVERSITY OF REDLANDS
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THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT THE DISSERTATION ENTITLED

NEW WINE, OLD BOTTLES

EXISTENTIAL "ENGAGEMENT"

IN ANCIENT GREEK AND MODERN FRENCH DRAMAS

ON TWO FAMOUS LEGENDS

by

PRESCOTT S. NICHOLS

HAS BEEN ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT

of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DATE

December 22, 1969

ADVISORY COMMITTEE

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NEW WINE, OLD BOTTLES
EXISTENTIAL "ENGAGEMENT"
IN ANCIENT GREEK AND MODERN FRENCH DRAMAS
ON TWO FAMOUS LEGENDS

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of
the Division of Languages and Literature
University of Redlands
and to
the Educational Council of
the Intercollegiate Program of Graduate Studies
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Comparative Literature

Prescott S. Nichols

December, 1969

PREFACE

One of the questions that I was asked in regard to this study was whether I am, perhaps, reading through existential-colored glasses. The answer is yes. But the obvious rejoinder is that we all view what we read, not to mention the world itself, through glasses of one hue or another. It is my belief that existentialism comes closer to speaking to the realities of the human condition and to the possibilities of the individual than any other philosophy that I know of. Thus I freely, even eagerly, admit to an existential bias. This does not mean, however, that I see existentialism in everything I read. There are a great many authors--from Virgil, say, on down to the present--in whom I can perceive very little of the existential vision.

But the Greeks--and here is a second bias that I had better admit to right now--are something special. I am inclined to think that the Golden Age of fifth century Athens is much closer to our own age, in many respects, than are any of the intervening centuries in the history of the Western world. This intense and fascinating little civilization that rose to its height and fell to its ruin within the space of just eighty years is, to my mind, a kind of microcosm for the macrocosm of our present civilization. Thus, when I find my students so frequently alluding to the antiquated customs and beliefs of the

Greeks, who lived "back then," I cannot resist telling them that they are being more Greek than the Greeks. I mean, for example, that they are more apt to insist on the truth of the oracles and the prophets than are Sophocles' own characters. They are, in brief, much more likely to insist on the so-called fatalism of the Greek world than were the Greeks themselves. In fact I am convinced that the Greeks were not fatalists at all but, on the whole, free spirits.

I suppose that one of my secret hopes is that this paper will persuade the reader that my biases have some justification.

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INTRODUCTION

It is not because the ancient Greeks and the modern French are notable wine-makers as well as play-makers that I choose a wine analogy for this comparative study of drama; nor is it because Dionysus is the patron god of both wine and drama, though to my mind both coincidences are certainly happy ones. The primary reason for taking that saw about old wine in new bottles and turning it around to read new wine in old bottles is that this formula presents what I believe to be the most appropriate controlling metaphor for my subject. In the usual use of the expression, the wine is of course the content, or theme, that is poured into the bottle, which is the form. It is a nice way of putting things, perhaps, but it only draws attention to that old distinction between content and form--a distinction which, in any genuine work of art, is largely artificial. In inverting the phrase, I choose to make an altogether different distinction, not between the theme of a work and the form of a work, but, to put it most simply, between the work itself--a drama in this case--and the legend on which it is based. Thus when I speak of new wine in old bottles, I have in mind not new themes in old forms--though this in some respects is close to what I mean--but new plays based on old legends.

Stated so starkly this sounds like a truism.

Obviously, such plays as Giraudoux's Electre, Gide's Oedipe, Sartre's Les Mouches, and Anouilh's Antigone are new plays based on old legends. What is immediately important here, however, is not so much what I have said when I have stated it thus but what I have not said. I have not said, first of all, that these new plays represent new themes in old forms, for to do so would be to confuse the legend--that of the House of Atreus, say--with Greek tragedy written on that legend, e.g., the Oresteia. Which is the old form? The Oresteia or the House of Atreus? By calling the old bottles the old legends, I clearly eliminate this ambiguity. By implication, incidentally, I allow for the fact that there have also been old wines in the old bottles, viz., the Greek tragedies that utilized the same legends, not to mention the later classical and neo-classical tragedies--call them middle wines--of Seneca and Racine. Moreover, by insisting on equating the legends with the bottles and the plays with the wine, rather than the other way around, I accomplish two things. First, I show that by the term "play" I mean something more than the mere form of the play; I show, through this association with wine, that I am thinking as well of the play's individual and substantive aspects--of its theme, its meaning. I am, in short, refusing to disassociate the meaning from the form. Secondly, and concomitantly, I show, through the association of the legend with the bottle, that for my purposes

I consider the legend little more than a fixed construct that is to be utilized in some fashion by the playwright-wine-maker.

Note, in this regard, that I have so far preferred the term "legend" to the term "myth." The reason is that "myth" has all kinds of anthropological, psychological and archetypal connotations, which although fascinating are not immediately relevant to my purpose. We tend to think of legends as being more plausibly rooted in historical events than are myths. Myths, today, are felt to arise either out of a collective response to the forces and rhythms of nature or out of what Jung calls the archetypes of the collective unconscious. Jung's concept has had a considerable influence on literary criticism today, and there have been a number of very interesting studies of literature from the point of view of recurring archetypal patterns--notably Maud Bodkin's Archetypal Patterns in Poetry. An excellent application of this approach is Gilbert Murray's discussion of the rather amazing parallels between the Orestes story and the Hamlet story.¹ Murray's whole point, of course, is that since there seems to be no external link between these two great stories they both must have emerged from the same internal source, viz., a universal quality in the human psyche that causes it to respond to this type of

¹The Classical Tradition in Poetry (New York, 1937), Ch. VIII.

hero in this type of situation--i.e., the young prince who returns from abroad to find the father-king murdered and the mother-queen implicated. This archetypal approach to literature has its own validity. It can even be applied to those works in which the author has quite self-consciously and deliberately used classical myths as his vehicle of literary expression, for what, one may ask, caused the author to respond to that particular myth in the first place? Is it not possible, for example, that the something in Sartre that sparked his response to Orestes bears a close resemblance to the something in Shakespeare that sparked his response to Hamlet? Yes, it is quite possible, yet it is readily seen that to explore such possibilities is to journey out beyond the Pillars of Hercules into the extra-literary realm. I therefore intend to limit my study to playwrights who have consciously utilized the legends; so when I ask the question Why? it will have to do not with the Where-from? of their creations but the What-for?

It is worth noting that the Greeks themselves used the word mythos in a way at once less theological and more literary than our use of "myth." Mythos could not only be used to mean, simply, "word," but it could also mean "story," which seems to be the most basic of its various senses. Interestingly enough, this is also the basic meaning of the Scandinavian word "saga," a term which the mythologist H. J. Rose uses interchangeably with "legend,"

both of which he distinguishes from "myth."² A story, of course, may be a myth or legend, but a story may equally be the "story" of an epic or a drama--in other words, the plot. Thus we find Aristotle in his Poetics laying great stress, again and again, on the mythos or plot of a tragedy. Most simply defined, mythos, for Aristotle, is the "arrangement of the incidents,"³ and his famous painting analogy, likening plot (mythos) to the "chalk outline of a portrait" and character (ethos) to the "beautiful colors,"⁴ is most expressive of this concept. It also corresponds very nicely to our wine-and-bottle metaphor: the bottle, which is much like Aristotle's "chalk outline," is merely the structure into which the wine is poured. This is by no means to belittle the importance of the mythos. If we agree with Aristotle that drama is, above all else, an imitation of an action and not of human beings, then we must accept his judgment that plot and not character is the "first principle" and "soul" of drama. Significantly, the English words "legend" and "plot" are, for Aristotle, practically interchangeable. Thus, when he gets into a discussion of the best kinds of plots, he quite naturally brings up the matter of legends:

At first the poets recounted any legend that came their way. Now the best tragedies are founded on

²Gods and Heroes of the Greeks (Cleveland, 1958), pp. 4-6.

³Poetics, trans. S. H. Butcher, VI, 6.

⁴Ibid., VI, 14-15.

the story of a few houses--on the fortunes of Alcmaeon, Oedipus, Orestes, Meleager, Thyestes, Telephus, and those others who have done or suffered something terrible. A tragedy, then, to be perfect according to the rules of art should be of this construction.⁵

Knowing that the word translated as "legend" is mythos helps us to understand the integral relationship that Aristotle perceives between the ideal plot construction and this list of legends. Clearly, in Aristotle's view, the tragic poet turns to the ancient legends primarily for one purpose--a good plot--and the best plots are to be discovered in the stories of such figures as Oedipus and Orestes, partly because they "have done or suffered something terrible."⁶ Thus, in our examination of ancient and contemporary uses of these two legends--which I shall call the House of Atreus and the House of Labdacus, not to implicate the two grandfathers but to make the legends more inclusive--we will generally conceive of myth as something akin to the Aristotelian mythos.

By now my general approach to this rather complex subject of myths or legends and the ancient Greek and modern French dramas based on them should be relatively clear. Let me sum it up now by outlining the basic,

⁵Ibid., XIII, 5.

⁶On the surface this phrase seems loose and general, but Aristotle, as usual, has a quite definite concept in mind, viz., that plot construction that is "single in its issue" and constitutes a "change of fortune . . . from good to bad," all of which he develops in detail elsewhere.

twofold premise that underlies all that I shall say in this comparative analysis: (1) Modern French dramatists have used the ancient Greek legends to express their own particular themes; (2) the Classical Greek dramatists were no different: they also used the ancient legends to express their own particular themes. Given these assumptions, which I think will become clearer as we proceed, I hope to demonstrate my major thematic point, which is that both the Greeks and the French are, to varying degrees, using the two legends to write "engaged" drama, i.e., drama that is committed in the Sartrean, existential sense. I also intend to show that several of the dramatists--Sartre, Gide, and Anouilh, among the French, and Sophocles, among the Greeks--are doubly existential in that they present heroes and actions that strongly embody the theme of freedom.

PART I

THE HOUSE OF ATREUS

CHAPTER I

AESCHYLUS' ORESTEIA: AFTER HOMER'S BANQUET

Aeschylus is supposed to have said that he merely took slices from the banquet of Homer. This is certainly true in the case of his great dramatic trilogy: the Oresteia. In the Odyssey, which contains the earliest extant account of the House of Atreus legend, Homer treats the story only secondarily. His major concern, of course, is with his hero, Odysseus, and with the events surrounding Odysseus' return from the Trojan War. The accounts of Agamemnon's murder and Orestes' revenge relate to the main action of the Odyssey solely by way of analogy.⁷ The tragic events of Agamemnon's homecoming serve as a vivid exemplum for the wily hero. When Odysseus confronts Agamemnon's ghost at the edge of the Underworld, the latter tells him all that happened to him and passes on to his old comrade the bitter lesson of experience: "Do not sail openly into port when you reach your home-country. Make a secret approach. Women, I tell you, are no longer

⁷Each of these accounts is narrated by one of Homer's characters--Zeus, Athena, Nestor, Menelaus, and Agamemnon, in that order. One can readily see the sequential progression from Olympian detachment (Zeus) to intimate, human involvement (Agamemnon). The way in which Homer develops this progression and integrates it with his theme is one of the best examples I know of his artistic genius.

to be trusted."⁸ Likewise, the account of Orestes' revenge is held up as an exemplum, positive rather than negative in this case, for Odysseus' son, Telemachus. Agamemnon implies a parallel between the two sons by speaking of them in the same breath, but the analogy is made much more explicit in the early books, which center on Telemachus and his confrontation with the problem of the suitors in the household and his search for news of his missing father. The wise goddess Athena has no qualms about holding up Orestes as the paradigm when, disguised as Mentès, she tries to goad him into some sort of action against the unruly suitors of his mother:

"Have you not heard what a name Prince Orestes made for himself in the world when he killed the traitor Aegisthus for murdering his noble father? You, my friend--and what a tall and splendid fellow you have grown!--must be as brave as Orestes. Then future generations will sing your praises." (BK. I, pp. 32-33)

And it is not very long after this that poor Telemachus is hearing the very same words from that garrulous old advice-dispenser, Nestor: "You, my friend--and what a tall and splendid fellow you have grown!--must be as brave as Orestes. Then future generations will sing your praises" (BK. III, p. 55). How Telemachus must suffer from this constant refrain! Orestes, to him, is not some ancient and legendary figure but a contemporary, the son of one of his father's closest comrades. He

⁸The Odyssey, trans. E. V. Rieu, Bk. XI, p. 183. Subsequent quotations are from this translation.

knows himself to be a failure by comparison; he knows that he is not quite able to be the man that Orestes has shown himself to be. Even though Telemachus does finally demonstrate his manhood, the constant urging of him to be a hero has a certain dramatic irony, for we are well aware that it is his wily father who will take matters into his own hands, and therefore it is he not Telemachus whose praises will be sung by future generations. For it is Odysseus more than Telemachus who profits from the example of Agamemnon's homecoming, thereby demonstrating what may be an essential trait of the epic (comic) hero--the ability to benefit vicariously from the tragic experience of others.⁹ Thus, although Homer has treated the House of Atreus saga only peripherally in terms of his plot, it has a great deal of significance in terms of theme.

It took the fifth century tragedian Aeschylus, however, to make it the central plot, the mythos, of a major literary work, the Oresteia. I say "major" advisedly, however, for there were other versions of the Orestes legend written by lyric poets in the three-to-four-hundred-year interval between Homer and Aeschylus, and it is possible that the Attic dramatist was more influenced by them than by Homer. According to Richmond

⁹Cf. also Odysseus' famous confrontation with the spirit of Achilles, who confides that he would rather be a live slave than a dead hero.

Lattimore, "The dramatist rarely worked directly from the main body of the Iliad or the Odyssey; the less authoritative minor texts were more popular."¹⁰ The Homeric legends, however, did not customarily form the subject matter of the lyric poets. When Sappho, for example, alludes to the Trojan War, as she does in "To Anaktoria," it is only by way of contrast, as a spectacular foil for her real subject:

Some say cavalry and some would claim
infantry or a fleet of long oars
is the supreme sight on the black earth.
 I say it is
the girl you love.¹¹

But there was a contemporary of Sappho living in Sicily (c. 630-555 B.C.), a well-known and influential poet named Stesichorus, who did write a number of long, narrative poems on legendary subjects, many of which related to the Trojan War. Unfortunately, only a scattering of fragments from Stesichorus' poems has survived, but much was written about his work by the ancient scholars, and from these sources we are able to get an impression of the kinds of stories and themes that attracted him. We know, above all--and in this respect he resembles Sappho--that the aspect of the war itself

¹⁰"Introduction to the Oresteia," The Complete Greek Tragedies (Chicago, 1959), David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, eds., I, 5.

¹¹"To Anaktoria, Now a Soldier's Wife in Lydia," trans. Willis Barnstone, Greek Lyric Poetry, p. 64.

that most caught his imagination was its cause: the beautiful Helen. The best known story concerning Stesichorus relates that Helen, who had become a kind of demi-goddess, found herself so abused in his poems that she struck the poet blind; whereupon Stesichorus recanted by writing his famous "Palinode"--

I spoke nonsense and I begin again:

The story is not true.

You never sailed on a benched ship,
You never entered the city of Troy¹²--

and thereby regained his sight.¹³ Apparently, his "Palinode" suggests the idea, later picked up by Herodotus and Euripides,¹⁴ that it was not Helen but a phantom of Helen that was carried off to Troy and fought over for ten years while Helen herself was safely ensconced elsewhere. This is perhaps the most blatant twisting of a legend by any writer--ancient or modern--and it is an example that should be kept in mind when we take up the French playwrights.

What we should consider here is what artistic or thematic reason Stesichorus might have had for making the change and how this relates to his own account of the

¹²Ibid., "Recantation to Helen," p. 52.

¹³For ancient allusions to this story see J. M. Edmonds, Lyra Graeca, II, 43-45. Perhaps the most interesting allusion occurs in Phaedrus, in which Plato suggests that Homer was blinded for the same reason but unlike Stesichorus did not have sense enough to figure it out.

¹⁴See Richmond Lattimore's introduction to Euripides' Helen in The Complete Greek Tragedies, III, 483-484.

House of Atreus legend in his "Oresteia."¹⁵ It is quite possible that this lyric poet, like Euripides in his Helen a century later, made Helen a phantom in order to underscore the futility of war. Fighting a war over a woman is absurd enough, even if it is the most beautiful woman in the world, but fighting over the image of a woman, the mere illusion of a woman, is of course the ultimate in ironic futility. Undoubtedly, Stesichorus came to realize that when Helen is the cause there is a temptation to focus all the blame on her, whereas when the cause is an abstraction the blame has to fall where it properly belongs--on war itself and on those who fight it. It is significant, in this regard, that Stesichorus' only known poem on the events of the Trojan War is titled "The Sack of Troy." He was probably interested in covering episodes omitted by Homer, who ends the Iliad before the sacking of Troy and only treats the event en passant in the Odyssey, but his major purpose may well have been to direct his poetic spotlight on what was clearly the most horrible and morally reprehensible feature of the war. One need only go to Euripides' The Trojan Women or the vivid second book of Virgil's Aeneid to see the kinds of horrors that Stesichorus may have depicted in "The Sack of Troy." By the same token, his prime purpose in

¹⁵Stesichorus apparently claimed that his "Oresteia" was influenced by the "Oresteia" of a poet named Xanthus. See Edmonds, II, 13.

writing his "Oresteia" as well as a poem titled "Return from Troy," may have been to depict the ironic ramifications of the war for its "victors." Thus from his "Oresteia" we have this fragment:

Forget the wars.
 It is time to sing.
 Take out the flute from Phrygia
 and recall the songs of our blond Graces.
 With the clamor of babbling swallows
 it is already spring.¹⁶

In spite of the joyous and lyrical spirit of these lines, it is possible that in the context of Agamemnon's homecoming they are ironic. Stesichorus may be making the point that though it would seem to be the season for singing--after a great victory--in reality it is not, for Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek armies, is about to be murdered in his own home. The wars cannot be forgotten because in the House of Atreus there are more "wars" to come. This is mere conjecture, to be sure, and its degree of validity depends on just where in the "Oresteia" these lines occur. Nevertheless, the spirit of this passage seems to be pacifistic, especially when we realize that the comic poet Aristophanes later drew upon these lines of Stesichorus when writing Peace, one of his anti-war satires.¹⁷

¹⁶"Season of Song," trans. Barnstone, Greek Lyric Poetry, p. 53.

¹⁷Scholiast, notes on Peace, 775-800, quoted by Edmonds, II, 52-53. It is only because of this scholiast's concern about Aristophanes' plagiarism that we have Stesichorus' lines preserved for us.

The same condemnatory attitude toward the Trojan War and, by extension, all wars of aggression, can be seen in the first play of Aeschylus' Oresteia--Agamemnon. Agamemnon's role in the sacking of Troy is bitterly condemned by Clytemnestra when she tells the Chorus that her husband and the Greeks must not commit hubristic acts against the city of Troy--"Let no lust / seize on these men to violate what they must not" (ll. 341-342)¹⁸-- knowing full well that they have done just that. Moreover, the Chorus also condemn their king by implication as they sing of the sorrows caused by the war. One of the most telling poetic statements on war is expressed by Aeschylus' Chorus through the metaphor of the war-god, Ares, as a money-changer of the most ghoulish sort:

The god of war, money changer of dead bodies,
held the balance of his spear in the fighting,
and from the corpse-fires at Ilium
sent to their dearest the dust
heavy and bitter with tears shed
packing smooth the urns with
ashes that once were men. (ll. 437-444)

Nor, in the Chorus' song of sorrow, does Helen escape unscathed: "She took to Ilium her dowry, death" (l. 407). However, it seems clear that Aeschylus considers Helen not the personal cause of the war so much as its symbolic cause--that ineffable something that draws men on to wanton and violent acts. Aeschylus captures this femme fatale quality beautifully in his image of the "blood

¹⁸Trans. Richmond Lattimore, in The Complete Greek Tragedies, Vol. I. All subsequent quotations from the Oresteia are taken from this translation.

flower":

Alas, Helen, wild heart
 for the multitudes, for the thousand lives
 you killed under Troy's shadow,
 you alone, to shine in man's memory
 as blood flower never to be washed out. (ll. 1455-1460)

However, although Aeschylus characteristically expresses his ideas through image and symbol, he does seem to take a position respective to war and aggression that is closer to Stesichorus' moral stance than it is to Homer's all-encompassing view.

Stesichorus, then, is the "missing link," the perfect bridge between the two great writers, and this is true in several respects. First of all, Stesichorus, unlike some of his more aristocratic contemporaries, apparently resembled Homer in that both poets, to use the words of Simonides, "sung to the peoples."¹⁹ The philosopher Pythagoras is supposed to have gone so far as to suggest that Homer's departed soul found a second dwelling place in Stesichorus' breast.²⁰ Thus, at least in the mind of the ancients, there was a spiritual link between the two poets. Beyond this it can be said that there are stylistic links from Homer to Stesichorus to Aeschylus. The lyric poet developed a form of poetry that was quite unlike the more personal and individual style of, say, Sappho or Archilochos. Stesichorus was

¹⁹Quoted by Edmonds, II, 15.

²⁰From the Palatine Anthology, quoted by Edmonds, II, 23.

in fact named for his innovation of the chorus, whose function was to dance and sing the poet's verses in strophe, antistrophe, and epode.²¹ The way in which the use of the chorus and the choric verse system looks ahead to the fifth century drama is obvious; so much so that one wonders why more is not said about the influence of Stesichorus whenever the origin of Greek drama is discussed.

Stesichorus also had his influence on Aeschylus' contemporary Pindar. Not only did Pindar take over the strophe-antistrophe-epode triad as a basic part of his verse form, but he, like Aeschylus, was undoubtedly also influenced by Stesichorus' treatment of the myths, of which the House of Atreus is just one example. Clearly Stesichorus' creation of the chorus was an attempt to bring the more collective quality of the legendary epic within the scope of the lyric poem. The Roman rhetorician Quintilian puts it aptly when he says that Stesichorus "sings of great wars and famous chieftains, sustaining all the weight of epic poetry with a lyre."²² Probably, as Quintilian implies, Stesichorus was not altogether successful in "sustaining all the weight of epic poetry" with his lyre. Pindar, on the other hand, may have

²¹John Addington Symonds, Studies of the Greek Poets (London, 1893), I, 306. Also, see Edmonds, II, 23. Stesichorus' real name was Teisias.

²²Quoted by Edmonds, II, 29.

achieved more success because of his less ambitious use of the legends, viz., as parallels to his contemporary subjects, which usually, of course, were athletic victories. Thus, we can see that in Pindar's ode "Pythia XI," he brings in the Orestes story as a paradigm, just as Homer does in the Odyssey.²³ The best indication we have that Pindar's version of the legend is influenced by Stesichorus is that both poets place Agamemnon's palace at Amyclae, near Sparta, rather than at Mycenae.²⁴ This is not without significance, for as we shall see, the various writers--ancient and modern--who draw on this legend tend to put the palace wherever it best suits their purpose. We do not know what Stesichorus' reasons were for altering Homer, but undoubtedly Pindar's reasons had to do with his theme, for there are other allusions to Sparta in "Pythia XI." Orestes himself is spoken of as being a Laconian, and at the end of the poem a further reference is made to Spartan heroes. As the classicist John Finley says, "When in the last lines of the poem Pindar joins the Theban hero Iolaus with the Spartan heroes Castor and Polydeuces, the undertone of Sparta in

²³See Werner Jaeger, Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, trans. Gilbert Highet (Oxford, 1954), I, 33-34, for the two poets' use of what Jaeger calls "the paradigma, the example for imitation."

²⁴See Sir John Sandys, The Odes of Pindar (Cambridge, Mass., 1937), p. 310, n. 1. The ancient source on Stesichorus is the notes of a scholiast on Euripides' Orestes, quoted by Edmonds, p. 55.

the ode is unmistakable."²⁵ It would seem that the aristocratic Pindar had sympathetic feelings toward the austere and authoritarian Spartan culture of his day, and he was therefore associating this whole Spartan aura with Orestes and thus, by implication, with the athlete Thrasydaeus, in whose honor the poem is being sung. Beyond this, there are political implications. Sparta and Pindar's own city of Thebes, in which "Pythia 11" was sung, had a tradition of mutual ties, and Pindar seems to be reaffirming these ties in the poem. For not only does he link the Spartan and Theban heroes mentioned above; he links "Laconian Orestes" with the Theban region through Orestes' close companion, Pylades, whom Pindar associates with Delphi. In this regard it should be noted that Aeschylus, too, may have had similar "foreign-relations" considerations in mind when he placed the infamous palace at neither Mycenae nor Amyclae but at Argos, for at the time the Oresteia was written, 458 B.C., Aeschylus' city of Athens had just concluded a new treaty with Argos, which had long since replaced Mycenae as the capital of that region. Anthony J. Podlecki, in his discussion of the political background of the Oresteia, comments, "It seems hardly possible to deny that (to put it most neutrally) Aeschylus approved of the Argive alliance of 461 and was concerned to bring it before his

²⁵John H. Finley, Jr., Pindar and Aeschylus (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), p. 162.

audience in commendatory terms in the trilogy three years later."²⁶

When we look at the more substantive aspects of Pindar's treatment of the Orestes saga, we see that on the whole he seems to follow Homer fairly closely; he thus serves as a kind of foil to Aeschylus, whose trilogy contains some radical innovations, as we shall see. There are, however, shifts in emphasis in "Pythia 11" that parallel the Oresteia, which was written at about the same time.²⁷ First of all, there is Cassandra, who is barely mentioned by Homer:

. . . even as the queen with stroke of gray bronze sent
Dardanian Priam's daughter,
Kassandra, to pass with Agamemnon's ghost to the shadowy
strand of Acheron

pitiless lady. (ll. 18-22)²⁸

Again, a few lines later, Cassandra is referred to as "the mantic maiden" (l. 33), who is brought to her death along with the returning hero. Secondly, there is Pindar's preoccupation with the "pitiless lady"--Clytemnestra. In the Odyssey the whole stress is on Aegisthus and his role

²⁶The Political Background of Aeschylean Tragedy (Ann Arbor, 1966), p. 83.

²⁷There is some dispute about whether "Pythia 11" was written in 474 or 454, for Thrasydaeus won foot-races in both years. Most commentators, notably C. M. Bowra in Pindar (Oxford, 1964), pp. 402-405, seem to prefer the later date, in which case it is quite possible that Pindar was influenced by Aeschylus' Oresteia (458). Cf. Mary A. Grant, Folktale and Hero-Tale Motifs in the Odes of Pindar (Lawrence, Kansas, 1967), p. 120, n. 127; also, Sandys, p. 296, and Finley, pp. 160 and 162.

²⁸Trans. Lattimore, The Odes of Pindar (Chicago, 1947), p. 90. Subsequent quotations are from this translation.

in plotting and executing the murder. In the first accounts that Homer gives us, through Zeus and Athena in Book I, Clytemnestra is not even mentioned, though she does naturally dominate Agamemnon's thoughts when he gives his own account to Odysseus. Pindar, however, focuses on Clytemnestra, and his condemnation of her becomes clear when he questions her motives:

Was it Iphigeneia, who at the Euripos crossing
was slaughtered far from home,
that vexed her to drive in anger the hand of violence?
Or was it couching in a strange bed
by night that broke her will and set her awry--for
young wives
a sin most vile, and that may not be hidden ever
from neighbors and their speech. (ll. 22-27)

The allusion to the sacrifice of their daughter Iphigeneia and the overall ambiguity of motive suggest Aeschylus' Agamemnon, and yet one cannot escape the feeling that the most plausible motive, for Pindar, is Clytemnestra's infidelity. Here again, he may have in mind Nestor's account in the Odyssey, in which the adultery is brought up for the first and only time--with Aegisthus as the seducer "besieging Agamemnon's wife with his seductive talk" but with Clytemnestra not entirely free of taint, "fond lover, willing dame" (Bk. III, p. 57). Pindar also deviates from Homer in stating unequivocally that Orestes returns to kill both Aegisthus and Clytemnestra: "and with late-visited Ares / slew his mother, and laid Aigisthos low in his blood" (ll. 36-37). Homer mentions only that Orestes kills Aegisthus. But the implication

that he also kills his mother is strong, for Nestor tells us, "When Orestes had done the deed, he invited his friends to a funeral banquet for the mother he had loathed and the craven Aegisthus . . ." (Bk. III, p. 58).²⁹

Aeschylus, however, is much more concerned with the Clytemnestra-Orestes relationship than is either Pindar or Homer. It is just here that he leaves the other two, the ancient and the contemporary, behind; hence it is just here that we should undertake a close examination of the Oresteia in terms of Aeschylus' dramatic purpose and theme as they are manifest through his most significant innovations in the legend. Let us begin with the one tangible link between Stesichorus and Aeschylus. It is the only extant fragment, other than the "pacifistic" fragment quoted earlier, from Stesichorus' "Oresteia," and it reveals that poet's interest in Clytemnestra's foreboding dreams:

She dreamed that a serpent appeared with blood-dripping scales, and from his belly stepped a king from the ancient dynasty of Pleisthenes and Agamemnon.³⁰

Our source for this fragment is Plutarch, who says about

²⁹However, Robert Graves--The Greek Myths (Edinburgh, 1960), II, 63--argues that if Orestes had killed his mother, "Homer would certainly have mentioned the fact." My own feeling is that Homer tells just those parts of the story that serve his purpose.

³⁰"On Klytaimnestra: Foreseeing the end of the Aegisthos line," trans. Barnstone, p. 52. Barnstone has added Agamemnon's name in order to make it clear what the poet is talking about. Apparently Stesichorus is utilizing the version of the legend that has Pleisthenes as the father of Atreus.

it, "And so it seems that Stesichorus has modelled Clytemnestra's dream on real happenings and the truth of the matter" ³¹ At this point, Stesichorus seems to be bringing his focus to bear on Clytemnestra herself and on what must be passing through her mind relative to the pending revenge by her son. As often happens in Greek literature, she has prophetic dreams, which as Plutarch says relate to "the truth of the matter." She senses that rather than the royal line being passed on through her new union with Aegisthus, it will revert to the line of her murdered husband as revealed in the person of Orestes. What is most striking about this dream, of course, is the way in which the serpent image anticipates the snake imagery of Clytemnestra's dreams in Aeschylus' Libation Bearers, the second play of the trilogy.

When in that play Orestes asks the Chorus why they have been ordered to bear libations to Agamemnon's grave, they reply, referring to their queen,

It was the dreams she had.
The godless woman had been shaken in the night
by floating terrors, when she sent these offerings.
(ll. 523-525)

And they go on to explain, in reply to Orestes' questions, that Clytemnestra dreamed she had given birth to a snake which, when she suckled it at her breast, "drew in blood along with the milk" (l. 533). Orestes then gives to the

³¹On the Slow Revenge of the Deity, quoted by Edmonds, II, 55.

dream its obvious interpretation:

See, I divine it, and it coheres all in one piece.
 If this snake came out of the same place whence I came,
 if she wrapped it in robes, as she wrapped me, and if
 its jaws gaped wide around the breast that suckled me,
 and if it stained the intimate milk with an outburst
 of blood, so that for fright and pain she cried aloud,
 it follows then, that as she nursed this hideous thing
 of prophecy, she must be cruelly murdered. I
 turn snake to kill her. This is what the dream portends.
 (ll. 542-550)

The dream consequently reaches its fulfillment at that
 moment when Orestes and Pylades take Clytemnestra inside
 the palace to her execution:

Clytemnestra: You are the snake I gave birth to, and
 gave the breast.

Orestes: Indeed, the terror of your dreams saw things
 to come
 clearly. You killed, and it was wrong. Now
 suffer wrong. (ll. 928-930)

It seems likely that this snake imagery originating in
 Clytemnestra's dreams was suggested to Aeschylus by
 Stesichorus' poem of the previous century. And yet there
 is the obvious difference that whereas in Libation Bearers
 the snake symbolizes Orestes himself, in Stesichorus'
 version the king, Orestes, steps from the belly of the
 serpent. One wonders if it is not possible that
 Stesichorus considers Clytemnestra herself as the serpent
 "with blood-dripping scales." If so, his rendering is
 even closer to that of Aeschylus than appears on the
 surface. For Aeschylus associates Clytemnestra as well
 as her son with the snake image. Early in the play we
 have Orestes saying,

Zeus, Zeus, direct all that we try to do. Behold
 the orphaned children of the eagle-father, now

that he has died entangled in the binding coils
of the deadly viper (ll. 246-249)

And this image, too, is picked up at the play's end when
Orestes, standing over the bodies, calls the dead
Clytemnestra

Some water snake, some viper
whose touch is rot even to him who felt no fang
strike, by that brutal and wrong daring in her heart.
(ll. 994-996)

These passages give us a good insight into Aeschylus' consistency in his use of imagery. Just as he introduces the snake dream early in the play and returns to it as he approaches the climax, so does he pick up, near the play's end, the image of Clytemnestra as viper that he introduced near the beginning. If the original idea of the snake dream is Stesichorus', then that poet's influence on Aeschylus' Oresteia is significant indeed, for the snake imagery of the Libation Bearers can be seen to have a significant relationship with the action and themes of the trilogy as a whole.

To see what that relationship is, we must first note the connection between the snake image and other images that Aeschylus dwells upon in the Oresteia. The first "viper" passage quoted above alludes to the two dominant images of the preceding play, Agamemnon: one is the "eagle-father," referring of course to Agamemnon himself, and the other is an allusion to the net imagery of Agamemnon's death--"entangled in the binding coils." On several instances Agamemnon is equated with an eagle,

which comes to signify not only his kingship, the "king of kings," but his soaring and destructive hubris. The association of both Agamemnon and Menelaus--"twin throned, twin sceptered" (l. 43)--with eagles is brought out in the opening lines of the long Parodos of

Agamemnon:

Their cry of war went shrill from the heart,
as eagles stricken in agony (ll. 48-49)

and the image is returned to several times. As H. D. F. Kitto has shown, rather convincingly, the act of Agamemnon and Menelaus killing the hare--"watched by all / [they] tore a hare, ripe, bursting with young unborn yet" (ll. 118-119)--is not just the crime for which Artemis demands the sacrifice of Iphigenia; it is a symbolic prefiguration of the wanton act of violence that these same eagle-kings will practice on Troy.³² In this context the net becomes the inevitable nemesis in which the soaring hubris is entangled and caught. As the Chorus says, speaking of Zeus,

you slung above the bastions of Troy
the binding net, that none, neither great
nor young, might outleap
the gigantic toils
of enslavement and final disaster. (ll. 357-361)³³

³²Form and Meaning in Drama (London, 1956), p. 5.

³³The Chorus is thinking primarily, at this point, of Paris, who committed his own act of hubris when he stole Helen while a guest of Menelaus. I should point out here that I am not using "hubris" in the usual, loose sense of "excessive pride" but in its original sense: "wanton violence, arising from the pride of strength, passion, etc., riotousness, insolence, lewdness, licentiousness." The Classic Greek Dictionary.

In a like manner Clytemnestra speaks after the murder of having to "fence high the nets / of ruin beyond over-leaping" (ll. 1375-1376). Thus Agamemnon's own particular hubris meets its designated nemesis when he is taunted into treading the lush, purple carpet into his palace and to his doom. The carpet symbolizes at once the "treading down" of hubris and the leading tentacle, as it were, of the nemesis that lies in wait. When Clytemnestra entangles him in his robes in his bath the net image has become a vivid reality:

as fishermen cast their huge circling nets, I spread
deadly abundance of rich robes, and caught him fast.
I struck him twice. (ll. 1382-1384)

The eagle has been caught, but the action is by no means over. And this is Aeschylus' whole point as we shall see.

In addition to the motif of hubris, which dominates the entire rising action of Agamemnon, i.e., up to its climax, there is also the all-important motif of the blood-curse on the house of Atreus. Not until the climax itself, in which Cassandra describes the murder almost as it takes place, does Aeschylus make explicit the blood-guilt:

The small children wail for their own death
and the flesh roasted that their father fed upon.
(ll. 1382-1384)

It is as if the author is suddenly revealing for us the actual operating principle behind Agamemnon's murder. The hubris leads the king up to it, but the real force that makes his downfall inevitable is the blood-curse.

From here on the curse becomes a dominant motif. But of course the way the curse, which is essentially a divine force, manifests itself is through the acts of men. Clytemnestra is author of the deed--though Aegisthus, lately arrived, tries to take credit for it--and she attempts to justify herself following the deed. But even she senses that though she has acted through the personal motive of vengeance, she may also have been an instrument of the curse:

In the shadow of this corpse's queen
 the old stark avenger
 of Atreus for his revel hate
 struck down this man,
 last blood for the slaughtered children.
 (ll. 1500-1504)

Thus the curse rises to the surface late in the play and supplants the hubris as the dominant element. In doing this, Aeschylus achieves two things: (1) he demonstrates that something more complex than mere retributive justice is at work, for relative to the curse Agamemnon is innocent, he is merely a victim of the sins of his father (and for the sins of his father's father, practically ad infinitum); and (2) he demonstrates that the problem is not solved, that the dispatching of the hubris figure has not resolved anything, for the curse can still continue to operate. Every act of vengeance, no matter how righteous, is simply another link in a seemingly endless chain of blood-violence.

This fact begins to dawn on the Chorus immediately

after the murder, when they observe to their horror Clytemnestra standing arrogantly before the dead bodies and bathing in her blood-glory. "When he was down / I struck him the third blow," she says, adding in self-mocking irony, "in thanks and reverence / to Zeus the lord of dead men underneath the ground" (ll. 1385-1387). Several times the Chorus chastizes her for her arrogant speech, saying finally,

Standing above the corpse, obscene
as some carrion crow she sings
the crippled song and is proud. (ll. 1472-1474)

Clearly, Clytemnestra has taken on at least some of the hubris of her victim. It is as if his hubris were transmitted to her through his spattered blood (ll. 1389-1390). To be sure, Clytemnestra has been proud and manly and over-reaching throughout. She has staged the fateful homecoming in the manner of a twentieth-century movie producer creating an extravaganza--spanning almost the whole of Greece with her beacon-message system, sending great flames to the sky with sacrifices when the message is received (ll. 90-93), and unrolling the majestic purple carpet to receive her proud victim. But now, in striking that third blow and in vaunting her deed before the elder Argives, her wanton insolence is fully revealed. Thus, by the play's end, she may choose to believe that her deed has "swept from these halls / the murder, the sin, and the fury" (ll. 1575-1576), but we, along with the Chorus, know the curse is still operating,

and ask, with them, "Then who shall tear the curse from their blood?" (l. 1565).

The answer offered by the Libation Bearers is, of course, Orestes, and the manner in which he returns from exile, now a grown man, to execute the deed is already well-established by Homer, Stesichorus, Pindar, and others. But in order to see the highly significant differences in Aeschylus' handling of the action, we must turn once more to the snake imagery of this second play of the trilogy. It will be noted that in the first "viper" passage quoted above, Aeschylus is linking the snake image with the net imagery of Agamemnon: "now / that he has died entangled in the binding coils / of the deadly viper" (ll. 247-249). This fusing of the two images acts as a very effective verbal transition between the two plays. The feeling of entanglement introduced in the "fishermen's" net cast by Clytemnestra in Agamemnon is carried on in the image of the "binding coils" of the snake in Libation Bearers. At the same time we can see that the net image is being carried on in another way--in the action as well as the poetry--for Orestes dramatically displays, a moment after the slaying of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, the very robe in which his mother had entangled Agamemnon and which she had displayed after his murder. Standing over the bodies, Orestes exclaims,

Behold again, o audience of these evil things,
the engine against my wretched father they devised,
the hands' entanglement, the hobbles for his feet.

Spread it out. Stand around me in a circle and display this net that caught a man. (ll. 980-990)

Orestes may not be as exultantly arrogant as his mother had been, standing over the bodies of Cassandra and Agamemnon, yet the parallel is unmistakably there. The re-emergence of the bloody robe and the repetition of the net image hint rather strongly that the chain is not broken, that the pattern of crime and counter-crime, of hubris-nemesis-hubris, and of the passing on of the blood-curse has not yet been brought to an end. A moment later, as the play moves swiftly to a close, this point is emphasized dramatically in what is probably the most daring innovation of the Oresteia: the sudden appearance before Orestes' mind's eye of the Furies. The way in which Aeschylus returns to the snake image at this critical moment is a brilliant fusion of poetry and action:

Chorus: You liberated all the Argive city when you lopped the heads of these two snakes with one clean stroke.

Orestes: No!
Women who serve this house, they come like gorgons, they wear robes of black, and they are wreathed in a tangle of snakes. I can no longer stay. (ll. 1046-1050)

The servant women, the Libation Bearers, have been crying out all through the play for justice and revenge. Now they think it has been achieved "with one clean stroke." But that stroke, though it may indeed have severed the heads from two snakes, has apparently struck a Hydra-like monster, for it has engendered clusters of writhing snakes

in their place. The viper-mother has given birth to the serpent-child, which in turn is to be pursued by the snake-entangled Furies. The snake-curse continues; the chain is still unbroken.

The importance of the Furies, who of course become the Chorus of the final play of the trilogy, Eumenides, cannot be emphasized too strongly. As we have seen, there is no mention of them in connection with the House of Atreus mythos in Homer or Stesichorus or even in Aeschylus' contemporary, Pindar. Pindar, in fact, uses the Furies only once in all of his odes.³⁴ As Mary Grant says, "The revenge taken by Orestes on his mother is seconded by Ares: no Furies follow him, and this at a time when the great trilogy of Aeschylus was presenting so forcefully the evolution of primitive ideas of vengeance toward higher conceptions of justice."³⁵ As in other aspects of their poetry, Pindar appears to be the conservative traditionalist and Aeschylus, the progressive innovator. According to at least one modern classicist, Cedric H. Whitman, Pindar resembled the Attic tragedian Sophocles in that they both were probably "in the main stream of tradition, when they omitted the Furies and treated the murders as simple justice."³⁶

³⁴"Olympia II," l. 41. Cf. Grant, p. 120, n. 127.

³⁵Grant, p. 47.

³⁶Sophocles, A Study of Heroic Humanism (Cambridge, 1951), p. 161. Cf. discussion of Sophocles' Electra in Chapter II below.

Homer, it is true, is silent about whether Orestes kills his mother, but both he and Pindar, as we have seen, hold Orestes up as a paragon. When Orestes carries out his just vengeance, the saga is over as far as Homer and Pindar are concerned. Thus when Aeschylus, on that spring morning in 458 B.C., revealed this Chorus of gorgon-like creatures, described by the Priestess of Apollo as "black and utterly repulsive" with their eyes dripping "the foul ooze" (ll. 48-54), his audience must have been shocked in more ways than one. The account of the audience being so astounded by these creatures that some of the women gave birth on the spot is proverbial, but the Greek spectators must have also been shocked by the fact that Orestes would be hounded at all. And yet, for those who had been following the first two plays closely, earlier that morning, it must have been a shock of recognition. For knowing that Aeschylus invariably unified his trilogies so that the third play would be continuing the same action, and sensing the chain reactions that had already been set up in the first two plays, with Orestes' initial vision of the Furies adding just one more link to the chain, they were psychologically primed for the actual appearance of the Furies in Eumenides.

As we have seen, Aeschylus' dramaturgical method is to present, in each play, a climax that seems to have within it the tragic resolution of the conflict, but then

to reveal to us in the denouement the real force that has been working behind the conflict and is still unresolved. It is in the denouement that he thus sinks home his lesson that justice is not mere retribution, whether it be divine retribution for impious hubris, or vengeance for a personal wrong, or a combination of the two. In Eumenides there comes, finally, a true resolution, but the dramaturgical pattern of the play nevertheless resembles the others. The rising action is the hounding by the Furies of Orestes and his subsequent trial, and the climax can properly be said to be his acquittal. Here again we have what could be the final resolution. Now that Orestes has purged himself through suffering and been acquitted in a trial before gods and mortals, he can return home to rule in Argos. But immediately following his exit, with his advocate, Apollo, we see that we still have the Furies to contend with. In a repeated refrain they pour out their pain and their hate:

Gods of the younger generation, you have ridden down
the laws of the elder time, torn them out of my hands.
I, disinherited, suffering, heavy with anger
shall let loose on the land
the vindictive poison
dripping deadly out of my heart upon the ground;
this from itself shall breed
cancer, the leafless, the barren
to strike, for the right, their low lands
and drag its smear of mortal infection on the ground.
(ll. 778-787)

The house of Atreus has at last been freed of the curse, but now the whole state of Athens is in danger. The

Furies will have their revenge for being defeated by the gods "of the younger generation"--viz., Athena, Apollo, and Zeus himself. It seems that the next step in the endless chain of retribution will be the pollution of Athens. But this Athena prevents by insisting that the goddesses have not really been defeated and by inviting them to dwell in a dark cave under the Areopagus. Evoking the goddess Persuasion, she sways them with her reasoning --as well as with a little show of force, "I have Zeus behind me" (l. 826)--and the Furies end by bestowing blessings on the city as they go off to live in their underground headquarters.³⁷

It is important to realize, as several commentators have pointed out, that the Furies have not actually been converted into a benevolent type of goddess. The Erinyes (Furies) may now be called Eumenides, "the kindly ones," but all that has really changed is our attitude toward them. They retain their retributive, pain-inflicting power:

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. (ll. 950-955)

³⁷This "conversion" of the Furies may be an even more significant innovation than the hounding of the Furies. Maud Bodkin--The Quest for Salvation in an Ancient and a Modern Play (Oxford, 1941), 22--cites the classicist A. W. Verrall to the effect that there is no authority for the mystic conversion of the Furies before Aeschylus.

"For some, singing; for some, life dimmed / in tears" There could be no clearer indication that Aeschylus recognizes this basic fact of human existence, i.e., that there is no necessary relation between suffering and moral behavior.³⁸ Yet the dispensation of pain is not entirely irrelevant to the acts of men, for it is still the sins of the past that cause the Furies to unleash their retribution on the innocent:

That man
 who has not felt the weight of their hands
 takes the strokes of life, knows not whence, not why,
 for crimes wreaked in past generations
 drag him before these powers. (ll. 931-935)

What then has been changed, if the Furies are allowed to have the same powers they have always had? The change is that now the instrument of retribution can no longer be private vengeance or a curse working on a royal house; now the instrument is to be the sanctions of the public law of the state. We are mistaken if we look on Athena's intervention as simply a kind of tempering of the principle of love and mercy. Love is to be a significant factor, but hate will also have its proper function, as we see in this important verse of the Chorus:

This my prayer: Civil War
 fattening on men's ruin shall

³⁸However, cf. this rendering by Philip Vellacott in his translation of The Oresteia Trilogy (Baltimore, 1959)(my emphasis):

They fulfil for all to see,
 Giving, after their deserts,
 Songs to some, to others pain
 In a prospect blind with tears.

not thunder in our city. Let
 not the dry dust that drinks
 the black blood of citizens
 through passion for revenge
 and bloodshed for bloodshed
 be given our state to prey upon.
 Let them render grace for grace.
 Let love be their common will;
 let them hate with single heart.
 Much wrong in the world thereby is healed.
 (ll. 976-987)

If hating exists--and indeed it does, in "the black blood of citizens"--then let it not be manifested in internal strife, whether public or private; let it be used against the city's enemies. Thus, "much wrong in the world . . . is healed" (my emphasis). Aeschylus, then, has introduced the Furies as a means of expressing his theme of justice through civilization.

If a measure of human justice can be achieved through civilization, there nevertheless remains the problem of divine or cosmic justice, and Aeschylus' profundity derives from his treatment of this theme. The problem of cosmic justice is simply stated: Why do innocent people have to suffer? A hint of an answer is contained in what is probably the most famous statement in Aeschylus: "Wisdom comes alone through suffering." The verse in which this occurs is from the so-called "Hymn to Zeus" of Agamemnon:

Zeus, who guided men to think,
 who has laid down that wisdom
 comes alone through suffering.
 Still there drips in sleep against the heart
 grief of memory; against
 our pleasure we are temperate.
 From the gods who sit in grandeur
 grace comes somehow violent. (ll. 176-183)

This is a powerful and true expression of the manner in which wisdom actually seems to come to us. We cannot seek such wisdom; we cannot say, "Now that I am suffering, what is it that I must learn?" For the very nature of deep suffering is such that we cannot, at the moment we suffer, imagine any possible good coming from it; we can only think, "I suffer, and I wish I did not." But in time, in the "grief of memory" that "drips in sleep against the heart," comes a wisdom that we did not seek; it comes almost violently, against our will. Meaningful as this passage is in itself, however, there is some difficulty in giving it much significance in the context of Agamemnon, let alone the trilogy as a whole. Who is it, some have asked of this trilogy, that gains wisdom through suffering? Not Agamemnon, surely. Not Clytemnestra. Not even Orestes, that we can see. Quite possibly, it is the Chorus.

The Chorus of elderly Argives in Agamemnon learn to their horror that their king is murdered and that the curse is still at work in Clytemnestra, and they acquire enough wisdom to see that more vengeance must follow. The Chorus of Libation Bearers, after pushing the cause of vengeance throughout, even to the point of actively aiding it at one point, also come to realize, though they cannot see Orestes' Furies, that in the sought-for vengeance the end is still not reached. The situation in Eumenides, however, is quite different, for here the

Chorus has become one of the protagonists. In creating this Chorus of dark-robed goddesses, Aeschylus has, in effect, left the way free to bring in the spectators themselves as a kind of tacit Chorus. The traditional Aeschylean Chorus fulfills a mediating function, but here Aeschylus leaves the mediating position vacant. Instead, he moves the scene of the drama to Athens and brings contemporary political elements into the resolution, so that the Athenians realize that it is the evolution of their own civilization that is being depicted for them. Undoubtedly they are intimately involved, emotionally, in the closing conflict over the fate of their city, and in the final recessional they are even physically involved as they march with the Chorus and actors to the hill of Areopagus. Aeschylus has steadily closed his psychic distance to the point where it is non-existent, to the point where drama has once again become religious ritual. It is the spectators, then, that are more and more undergoing the learning experience--not only the tragic catharsis of pity and fear, which they experience at the climax of each of the plays but, beyond this, a further wisdom that is pointed up for them, first through the mediating choruses of Agamemnon and Libation Bearers, and finally, through more direct, albeit vicarious, participation in Eumenides.³⁹

³⁹We should not overlook the learning experience of the actors in the Chorus. According to Jaeger, I, 246, they practiced for a whole year in preparation for the

But, we must finally ask, what is this wisdom? The answer can only be found through Aeschylus' theology, in other words, through his concept of Zeus. In the "Hymn to Zeus" of Agamemnon the Chorus begins its invocation in a very tentative manner:

Zeus: whatever he may be, if this name
pleases him in invocation,
thus I call upon him.
I have pondered everything
yet I cannot find a way,
only Zeus, to cast this dead weight of ignorance
finally out of my brain. (ll. 160-167)

It is as if Aeschylus is creating his own Zeus, as if he is groping for a religious concept that will lift the weight of ignorance from his own mind. As E. T. Owens rightly points out, this choral hymn needs to be taken in the context of the situation, which is that the Chorus is searching for an answer to the terrible sorrows they have been describing;⁴⁰ nevertheless, it is also a groping for an answer to all the sorrows in life, particularly those that are yet to occur during the course of the Oresteia. The thrice repeated refrain of that first parodos--"sing sorrow, sorrow; but good win out in the end"--foreshadows the movement of the whole trilogy. Good does win out in the kind of precarious harmony that is achieved through Zeus's agent, Athena, but the problem is that it is this same Zeus who causes all of the strife and suffering in

Dionysian Festival. Says Jaeger, "The Chorus was the high school of early Greece"

⁴⁰The Harmony of Aeschylus (Toronto, 1952), p. 63.

the first place.⁴¹ In attacking Troy, in reprisal for abduction of Helen, Agamemnon and Menelaus are acting in accordance with the will of Zeus. And yet Agamemnon's nemesis is also willed by Zeus, for as the Chorus tells us, Zeus is the "first cause, prime mover. / For what thing," they ask, "without Zeus is done among mortals?" (ll. 1486-1488). In Libation Bearers, too, it is Zeus's will that commands Orestes through the oracle of Apollo. Finally, in Eumenides, it is Zeus, who through Athena, brings about a reconciliation that allows the Furies to retain their terrible power to inflict pain and suffering.

What sort of god is it that not only permits but causes suffering? What reason can there be for suffering? The answer has already been stated: "wisdom / comes alone through suffering." Without suffering there can be no wisdom, and the wisdom that is gained through suffering may be no more than the understanding of this very fact. This is a highly unsatisfactory truism, to be sure, for it actually explains nothing. But to my mind, it is more profound, if not more meaningful, than the view that the wisdom one gains through suffering is the knowledge of how to avoid it in the future. Such a notion

⁴¹However, Gilbert Murray--Aeschylus (Oxford, 1940), pp. 101-102--and Kitto--Form and Meaning in Drama (London, 1956), pp. 69-71--argue that it is not the same Zeus, that Zeus himself is evolving or developing in this trilogy. But for a thorough and well-documented refutation of the evolutionary theory of Zeus in Aeschylus, see Hugh Lyoyd-Jones, "Zeus in Aeschylus," Journal of Hellenic Studies, LXXVI (1956), 55-67.

not only reduces wisdom to mere prudence, it also implies that it is possible to avoid suffering altogether.

Although Aeschylus does mean to demonstrate that man can mitigate suffering through the institution of public law, he obviously does not believe that it can ever be eliminated completely. What he seems to be groping for, then, is something akin to the Christian concept of "mystery." As Owen says, that all strife is the will of Zeus is the ultimate mystery with which Aeschylus must leave us.⁴² The universe that Aeschylus presents to us in his Oresteia is a true cosmos; it is not chaotic or morally indifferent. And yet he makes us see that even in such a cosmos there must of necessity be strife and suffering.

To recapitulate our discussion of what happened "after Homer's banquet," we can call attention to certain points of significance. First, all indications are that Homer's version of the House of Atreus legend was, for the poets that followed, the starting point. Prior to Aeschylus, Homer was the one that set the tradition. However, there were lyric poets, notably Stesichorus, who may have served as a link between Homer and Aeschylus and who probably, as in the instance of Stesichorus' snake dream, exerted more of an influence on Aeschylus'

⁴²The Harmony of Aeschylus, p. 126. Also cf. Richmond Y. Hathorn, Tragedy, Myth and Mystery (Bloomington, 1962), pp. 38-61.

Oresteia than did Homer. Unlike his great contemporary, Pindar, Aeschylus was an ingenious innovator when it came to the use of myth, and he made significant and unique alterations in the legend of the House of Atreus, notably in his introduction of the Furies as an avenging force against Orestes. We have seen how the Furies were one of the principal devices that Aeschylus used to express his theme of the cyclic futility of private justice--crime and counter-crime, revenge and counter-revenge--and the necessity for public justice leading to harmony and reconciliation. And we have seen, finally, how this relates to his deeper theme of cosmic justice and human suffering. Aeschylus' most daring heterodoxy in this regard may have been his point that even the operation of hubris-nemesis, which is after all a part of divine justice, is really cyclical--that it, too, is an endless chain, for nemesis must inevitably produce its own reaction, which is another manifestation of hubris, etc. The final point that needs to be stressed here is that after 458 B.C. it was this great tragedian's Oresteia that became the definitive rendering of the House of Atreus legend for all time. The dramatists who have come after Aeschylus, including his younger contemporaries, Sophocles and Euripides, have had to take this great masterpiece into account. They might follow Aeschylus or they might choose to alter him but they would never be able to ignore him.

CHAPTER II

SOPHOCLES AND EURIPIDES: SPOTLIGHT ON ELECTRA

One of Sophocles' greatest plays is his Electra. Probably the only reason that it has not acquired the fame of Oedipus the King or Antigone is that so many find its theme of just vengeance morally repugnant. Revenge is acceptable in serious literature if it is shown to be followed by a counter-revenge as in the Oresteia, or if it is agonized over as in Hamlet, but a vengeance that is carried through to a successful conclusion, overcoming obstacles that are merely physical rather than moral, offends our finer sensibilities. It is hard to sympathize with a single-minded hero like Orestes, who through stratagems and lies infiltrates the palace and swiftly accomplishes the double murder, or with a heroine like Electra, who, when she hears her mother cry that she is struck, calls out to Orestes, "If you have strength-- again!" (l. 1418).⁴³ True, as C. H. Whitman points out (see p. 33, n. 36), Sophocles was much more within the tradition than was his older contemporary, Aeschylus, when he depicted Orestes as carrying out a just retribution. But we should remind ourselves that it is one

⁴³Translated by David Grene, The Complete Greek Tragedies, Vol. II. Subsequent quotations from Sophocles' Electra are from this translation.

thing to mention, as do Homer and Pindar, that after Aegisthus and Clytemnestra had committed their crimes the young hero Orestes came along and took his just revenge, and quite another thing to render this event, to devote a whole drama to an action that embodies its own inescapable horror. We also should remember that the Oresteia was now the definitive version of the legend, that Aeschylus had in a sense initiated a new tradition. Just as the older tragedian had shocked his audience with the sudden intrusion of the Furies, so must Sophocles have amazed them in his turn when he refused even a hint of future punishment or suffering inflicted by the Furies.⁴⁴ A comparison of lines from the Choruses of Libation Bearers and Electra makes quite explicit Sophocles' fundamental deviation from Aeschylus in this regard. First, from the Libation Bearers, those lines that we have already quoted:

You liberated all the Argive city when
 you lopped the heads of these two snakes with one clean
 stroke. (ll. 1046-1047)

Now, from Electra:

O race of Atreus, how many sufferings
 were yours before you came at last so hardly
 to freedom, perfected by this day's deed.
 (ll. 1508-1510)

⁴⁴In fact Sophocles implies that Orestes and the Pedagogue are themselves the Furies; the Chorus speaks of them as "the pursuers of villainy, / the hounds that none may escape" (ll. 1388-1389). As Kitto says, Sophocles' play "makes the Erinyes, with Ares and Hermes, divine partners in the act of vengeance"--Sophocles: Three Tragedies (Oxford, 1962), p. 156. On Ares' role, cf. Pindar's "Pythia 11," l. 36.

Both of these passages occur after the climactic killings and both speak of newly won freedom or liberation.⁴⁵ Out of context, they express the same point of view. The great difference, of course, is that the first is ironic and the second is true; the words of Aeschylus' Chorus are immediately refuted by Orestes' sudden vision of the Furies whereas the words of Sophocles' Chorus constitute the play's epode. They are Sophocles' final word on the subject. Thus we can see that at the very beginning of its dramatic history (i.e., its history in drama) the House of Atreus legend was in for some drastic alterations.

There are several respects in which Sophocles returns to the Homeric tradition. First, he moves the infamous royal palace back from contemporary Argos to ancient Mycenae. Secondly, like Homer, he implicates Aegisthus equally with Clytemnestra in the murder of Agamemnon. Electra says in her opening speech,

But my mother and the man who shared her bed,
Aegisthus, split his head with a murderous ax,
like woodsmen with an oak tree. (ll. 97-99)

All through the play the two are considered equal in guilt. This can be seen again in the following exchange between Electra and the Chorus, in which they describe the nature of the crime:

Chorus: Pitiful was the cry at the homecoming,
and pitiful, when on your father on his couch

⁴⁵In the original Greek, the verb "liberated" (Libation Bearers) and the noun "freedom" (Electra) have the same root: eleutheros.

the sharp biting stroke of the brazen ax
was driven home. . . .

Electra: That day of all days that have ever been
most deeply my enemy.
O night, horrible burden
of that unspeakable banquet.
Shameful death that my father saw
dealt him by the hands of the two
(ll. 201-206)

No mention here of Agamemnon being entangled by his robes in the privacy of his bath. In fact the scene of the crime appears to be the same as in the Odyssey: a banquet. When Electra speaks of the "horrible burden / of that unspeakable banquet," it might appear at first glance that she is alluding to the hideous banquet in which her grandfather, Atreus, served up to Thyestes the flesh of his own sons. Also, the Chorus' statement that Agamemnon was killed "on his couch" is rather ambiguous and misleading. The Greek word is koitais, which can mean either "bed" or "couch," its literal sense being "a place to lie down in." Lattimore's "couch" tends to preserve the ambiguity, but another translator, Francis Ferguson, tries to be unequivocal:

With a terrible cry,
Agamemnon met
The murthering edge
In his own bed.⁴⁶

And when he comes to Electra's mention of the banquet, Ferguson implies that it was a banquet held that night, after the deed: "That was my bitterest day: that night /

⁴⁶ Sophocles, ed. Robert W. Corrigan (New York, 1965), p. 133.

the unspeakable supper was like death for me"47

However, Kitto, probably because of his awareness of Sophocles' tendency to follow Homer, is equally unequivocal in the opposite direction: "Pitiful the cry at his return, / Your father's cry in the banquet-hall"48

It is safe to assume, then, that Agamemnon's koitais is his banquet-couch, and that he was killed at his banquet as in the Odyssey.49

There are other aspects, too, of Sophocles' handling of the mythos that show he is consciously following the Homer-Pindar tradition. First, regarding the ambiguity of Clytemnestra's motive, Sophocles, like Pindar, mentions both the sacrifice of Iphigenia and the seduction of Clytemnestra by Aegisthus. Again like Pindar, Sophocles considers the sexual motive the stronger of the two, for he has Electra tell her mother:

47 Ibid.

48 Sophocles: Three Tragedies (Oxford, 1962), p. 107. Cf. also trans. F. Storr, Sophocles (London, 1913), p. 141: ". . . dire the cry / that from the banquet-chamber burst" Cf. also R. C. Jebb's rendering of "festal couch."

49 Of course a practical reason why Sophocles is able to have Agamemnon murdered at the banquet is that he is not actually dramatizing the incident as Aeschylus is in Agamemnon. As is well known, the Greek dramatists, probably out of a sense of decorum, conducted violent scenes such as murders and suicides off-stage; thus it usually served the dramatist's purpose to have the actual site of the incident fairly remote or private, e.g., Antigone's cave, Jocasta's bed-chamber, or Agamemnon's bath. If these scenes were more public, the fact that the Chorus and the other actors were never there to witness them would be hard to explain.

it was not with justice
 you killed him, but the seduction of that bad man,
 with whom you now are living, drew you to it.
 (ll. 561-563)

Regarding the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Sophocles follows the ancient tradition that Agamemnon had to do this because he had offended Artemis by killing a stag in her sanctuary. As Kitto points out, this is quite different from Aeschylus' account. "Aeschylus made Artemis demand the sacrifice not because of something that Agamemnon had already done, but because of what he was proposing to do, namely to sacrifice lives in a 'war for a wanton woman'" ⁵⁰ Sophocles absolves Agamemnon further by pointing out that Artemis had killed all of the winds at Aulis, so that the Greeks were not just prevented from sailing to Troy; until Artemis was appeased with the sacrifice they would not even be able to sail home. It is interesting to note, also, the way in which Sophocles differs from Aeschylus in the matter of Clytemnestra's dreams. As in Libation Bearers we learn that Clytemnestra is sending offerings to Agamemnon's grave because of her bad dreams. In Sophocles' Electra it is not the Chorus, who incidentally are women of the city rather than Trojan serving women, but Electra's sister Chrysothemis, who answers Electra's query by saying, "I think it was night terrors drove her to it" (l. 410). She then goes on to describe Clytemnestra's dream:

⁵⁰Sophocles: Three Tragedies, p. 156.

There is a story that she saw my father,
 the father that was yours and mine, again
 coming to life, once more to live with her.
 He took and at the hearth planted the scepter
 which once he bore and now Aegisthus bears,
 and up from out the scepter foliage sprang
 luxuriantly, and shaded all the land
 of this Mycenae. (ll. 417-424)

The contrast with the snake dream of Libation Bearers is evident. The image of the scepter growing and sprouting forth luxuriantly hardly has the nightmarish quality of the snake drawing blood at Clytemnestra's breast, yet it is clear that for Clytemnestra the dream bodes evil. It seems quite likely that even though Sophocles has come up with a dream that differs altogether from that in Aeschylus, he has taken the original idea for it from the same source, namely Stesichorus. For Sophocles is following the Stesichorus fragment--

She dreamed that a serpent appeared with blood-dripping
 scales,
 and from his belly stepped a king from the ancient
 dynasty
 of Pleisthenes and Agamemnon

--when he lays the stress on the continuation of the Agamemnon line. It is just that he does so through different imagery. In place of the new king stepping forth from the serpent's belly we have the new growth springing up where the scepter, symbolizing the kingship, has been planted. Through this independent development of Stesichorus' dream, Sophocles accomplishes at least three things which relate to his over-all purpose. By having Agamemnon take the scepter from Aegisthus, he again implicates the latter equally with Clytemnestra. Secondly,

by not mentioning Orestes specifically, he puts the emphasis once again on the act of retribution itself rather than on the agent of that act. Finally, by speaking of the luxuriant growth, which will shade "all the land / of this Mycenae" he makes the act seem like a natural and good thing.

Also reminiscent of Homer's Odyssey is the manner in which Orestes undertakes his revenge. In his opening speech Orestes repeats the words of Apollo:

"Take not spear nor shield nor host;
go yourself, and craft of hand
be yours to kill, with justice but with stealth."
(ll. 37-39)

"Craft" is thus the key to all of Orestes' actions throughout the play. Sophocles is probably stressing this, in part, in order to enhance the action's plausibility. We have to understand why it is that Orestes has not returned armed and with a "host" such as the army that accompanies Polyneices when he returns to attack his king-brother in Thebes. The answer is that Orestes has been instructed to use craft instead of force. Beyond this, the parallel with Odysseus' homecoming seems unmistakable. For example, at the end of his long speech Orestes sounds very much like Odysseus when he cautions the Pedagogue: "We two must go away. It is seasonable, / and seasonableness is greatest master of every act" (ll. 75-76). The plan of course is to sneak into the palace by telling the lie of Orestes' death in a

chariot race. The long speech in which the Pedagogue describes in glowing and vivid detail the manner of Orestes' "death" is a brilliant tour de force, for the scene is replete with dramatic irony. The spectators know the true situation of course, and they are able to contrast this knowledge with the dual effect that the news of Orestes' "death" registers on Clytemnestra and Electra respectively as the Pedagogue unfolds his story. Furthermore, the details of the chariot race are so concrete and "real" that one finds himself believing the account by the time it is over. This of course is part of Sophocles' point: to be credible, a lie, like literature for that matter, must be made so plausible that it seems more real than life itself. Aristotle's famous dictum that "the poet should prefer probable impossibilities to improbable possibilities"⁵¹ applies equally to the liar. Odysseus too is a liar, who must on more than one occasion use deceit in order to overcome imposing dangers and obstacles, not the least of which is the palace full of unruly suitors that awaits his homecoming. The analogy with Orestes' situation is clear; in fact as we have seen, it is Homer who first draws the parallel between the situations of Agamemnon-Orestes and Odysseus-Telemachus. We remember that Agamemnon advises Odysseus, "Do not sail openly into port when you reach

⁵¹Poetics, XXIV.

your home-country." In an interesting kind of turnabout, Sophocles' Orestes appears to be making Odysseus his paradigm, for it is now Orestes who is being careful not to "sail openly." The parallel is also manifest in the play's recognition scene. Orestes, like Odysseus, is posing as someone else and is confronting the woman whom he is closest to, Electra, who supposes him to be dead. The moment is a poignant one, and in Orestes' case still a dangerous one because the enemy has not yet been dispatched, and in neither Penelope's case nor Electra's can the poet allow the recognition to be made too quickly or too easily. Sophocles of course handles the scene with great dramatic skill by making it also the moment of peripeteia or reversal of fortune. One instant Electra is confronted with the urn that allegedly contains the ashes of her dead brother; the next instant she is made to realize that the young man bearing the urn is indeed her brother, alive and well. The scene is somewhat suggestive of Penelope's famous recognition of the long lost Odysseus, a principal difference being that Sophocles is using his recognition scene as the pivotal point of his action, in other words as the climax of the play.

Sophocles' most significant departure from Homer is his emphasis on Electra. Electra is never mentioned in the Odyssey, and in the Iliad she is only alluded to briefly when Agamemnon, in an attempt at reconciliation with Achilles (Bk. IX), is "magnanimously" offering the

young hero his pick of his three daughters--Electra, Chrysothemis, and Iphigenia.⁵² Pindar omits her entirely from "Pythia 11," and although Aeschylus includes her, to be sure, it is quite possible to analyze his Libation Bearers without once mentioning Electra (see previous chapter). It is absolutely impossible to do so with Sophocles' Electra. The reason is that Electra is the protagonist of the play; she dominates the stage from the moment she appears, right after the prologos of Orestes and the Pedagogue, until the very end of the play. It is Orestes who, through the use of guile and craft, undertakes the actual revenge; it is he who actually does the deed at the play's end; but it is Electra that we are concerned with; it is she who is constantly in the spotlight. We must now ask why. Why does Sophocles, in his dramatization of the House of Atreus mythos, choose to make it Electra's story?

Part of the answer is obvious: Electra is a highly intriguing and sympathetic figure, for she is the one who has to grow up in a household in which she knows that her father has been murdered and in which she sees her mother and another man reaping the fruits of the crime. This interest in Electra's plight was shared by

⁵²Homer, however, refers to Electra as Laodice, and Iphigenia as Iphianassa. See Graves, II, 51. Note that as far as Homer is concerned Iphigenia is still alive during the Trojan War.

Euripides when he wrote his *Electra*.⁵³ Both dramatists must have said to themselves something like this: Well, it is all very fine for young Orestes to grow up removed from the tragedy and then to return at the command of Apollo and dispatch the guilty parties, but what about *Electra*? What is it like to live all that time in such a household? What is the manner of her suffering? What is in her thoughts as she awaits her brother's return? In speaking to these questions let us keep our initial focus on Sophocles' play with references to the Euripidean version by way of comparison.

What, then, is the manner of *Electra*'s suffering? First of all, says Sophocles, she is an outcast; she is a foreigner in her own house:

Like some dishonored foreigner,
I tenant my father's house in these ugly rags
and stand at a scanty table. (ll. 189-191)

Euripides, too, has her in rags, but he puts her situation even more starkly. His *Electra* is more than a "dishonored foreigner"; she is a prisoner and a slave:

Mourn again for the wasted dead,
mourn for the living outlaw
somewhere prisoned in foreign lands
moving through empty days,

⁵³As with Aeschylus, *Oresteia* and Pindar's, "Pythia XI" there is some doubt and some dispute as to which poet wrote his version of *Electra* first. Kitto, for one, believes that both sides of the argument are inconclusive: "The vexed question of the priority between the two *Electras* need not detain us here. It has too often been attacked with arguments that work either way, and on the assumption that the later play is full of implied criticisms of the earlier." Greek Tragedy, p. 350.

passing from one slave hearth to the next
 though born of a glorious sire. (ll. 202-206)⁵⁴

Although Electra's lines here are generalized, so that they beautifully suggest the universal plight of the outcast and the oppressed, they clearly are meant to apply to her particular situation. Euripides, moreover, takes the additional step of having Electra exiled from her own home:

And I! in a peasant's hut
 waste my life like wax in the sun,
 thrust and barred from my father's home
 to a scarred mountain exile
 while my mother rolls in her bloody bed
 and plays at love with a stranger. (ll. 207-212)

Sophocles emphasizes the wasting of Electra's life in another way. He has her reveal that she has become, in effect, an old maid:

But for me already the most of my life
 has gone by without hope.
 And I have no strength any more.
 I am one wasted in childlessness,
 with no loving husband for champion. (ll. 183-187)

He makes it clear, moreover, that she has lost her beauty, for when Orestes, still disguised, realizes who she is he cannot hide his astonishment: "Is this the distinguished beauty, Electra?" (l. 1177). And when assured that it is indeed she, he exclaims, "Form cruelly and godlessly abused!" (l. 1181). In a sense Sophocles' Electra, who continues to live in the palace, is worse off than

⁵⁴Translated by Emily Townsend Vermeule, The Complete Greek Tragedies, Vol. IV. Subsequent quotations are from this translation.

Euripides' Electra, living in exile as a poor farmer's wife. For whereas the latter can only imagine her mother "rolling in her bloody bed," the former is constantly confronted with the reality of Clytemnestra and her usurper-lover:

What sort of days do you imagine
I spend, watching Aegisthus sitting
on my father's throne, watching him wear
my father's self-same robes, watching him
at the hearth where he killed him, pouring libations?
Watching the ultimate act of insult,
my father's murderer in my father's bed
with my wretched mother--if mother I should call her,
this woman that sleeps with him. (ll. 266-274)

Thus, we can see the different ways that the two poets develop sympathy for their heroine by showing how she suffers.

The suffering of Electra, however, is approximately where the resemblance between Euripides' and Sophocles' treatments ends. For each poet's purpose in establishing sympathy for Electra is quite different. Euripides, typically, does so in order that we will understand her and even pity her; Sophocles does so in order that we will believe in her and support her cause. Euripides' Electra is actually a rather Medea-like figure in many respects. Like Medea, she is an alien and an outcast, with the entire royal household pitted against her. We not only sympathize with her hate, just as we do with that of Medea; Euripides also makes it clear that she is in a sense the cause of her own sorrows, for in her opening statement she declares, "I am not forced, I chose this

slavery myself / to illuminate Aegisthus' arrogance for the gods . . ." (ll. 57-58). Thus, we can not justify her; we can not say, as we can with Sophocles' Electra, that she is "right" in her hate and her desire for retribution; we can only say that we understand. Sophocles also means for us to "understand" Electra's hate, but in quite a different way. He intends for us to recognize its justness, which of course has to do with its cause. We see this when Electra tells Clytemnestra,

I know why
I act so wrongly, so unlike myself.
The hate you feel for me and what you do
compel me against my will to act as I do.
For ugly deeds are taught by ugly deeds. (ll. 618-621)

Even as Electra admits that she is wrong, we are meant to feel that in some sense she is right, because she has been forced into this position.

Our translator of Sophocles, David Grene, believes, and the above passage would tend to support him, that all of Electra's actions are no more than reactions. "I think we are meant to see Electra not as a real person in her own right but as a mass of response to other persons and their deeds and words, whether true or false."⁵⁵ In his introduction to Electra, Mr. Grene argues that Sophocles' play is not a justification of Electra but "a play about the power of hate and misery bred in a particular personality which finally seems to lose the natural power to

⁵⁵"Introduction to the Electra," The Complete Greek Tragedies, II, 124.

create."⁵⁶ This interpretation is, of course, one way of trying to solve the moral problem created by the play. It just does not seem possible that a few decades after the Oresteia, Sophocles would be putting forth the principle of just violence or "fight fire with fire." Thus Mr. Grene prefers to believe that a just Electra is not Sophocles' intention. In my opinion it definitely is Sophocles' intention, but the only way we can accept the idea, perhaps, is to place Electra's situation and her action in a social-political context. Electra, as we see her in Sophocles' play is not merely an avenger for a past wrong; she is an oppressed figure who rebels against her present condition. Again and again, her present sufferings are accentuated to the point where they greatly overshadow the crime against Agamemnon. She is even threatened at one point with imprisonment in an underground cave (ll. 380-383). What Electra is undertaking--and as we shall see, it is really she rather than Orestes who bears the moral responsibility for the task--is not revenge so much as revolution. Sophocles tends to emphasize the political nature of the situation by stressing, for example, Aegisthus' role as the usurper-king. We have already seen this in Clytemnestra's dream about the planting of the royal scepter. Sophocles is making it clear that the House of Atreus is more than a

⁵⁶Ibid.

family; it is the center of a political dynasty, an idea that becomes even stronger when we realize that during the historical period depicted the King of Mycenae was, to a large degree, King of Greece. Electra, then, is more than the outcast daughter; she is a "dishonored foreigner." If we look at this play in the context of revolution, Electra's hate takes on a meaning and a clarity that it may not have had before. For an oppressed people who have reached the revolutionary threshold, "ugly deeds" are indeed "taught by ugly deeds." As Electra tells the Chorus,

In such a state, my friends, one cannot
be moderate and restrained nor pious either.
Evil is all around me, evil
is what I am compelled to practice. (ll. 306-309)

Electra's hate is not peculiar to "a particular personality," which, as Mr. Grene believes, has lost "the natural power to create." On the contrary it appears to be a manifestation of the more impersonal brand of hate generated by genuine revolutionaries; it is very similar to what I would term the "creative hate" of black militants in this country today.

As Sophocles' Electra approaches the climactic recognition and beyond that the moment of revolution, she has a number of confrontations that can perhaps best be understood in light of this analogy with militant blacks. In the all-important confrontation with her mother, for instance, she is given the opportunity to speak, and when she does, of course, she "tells it like it is." She

tells Clytemnestra, who has been pleading the cause of justice, that first of all what she did was not just and that secondly even if it were, what right would that give Clytemnestra to retaliate, violently, against Agamemnon:

If this is the law you lay down for men, take heed
 you do not lay down for yourself ruin and repentance.
 If we shall kill one in another's requital,
 you would be the first to die, if you met with justice.
 (ll. 580-583)

Clearly, Electra is well-aware that retribution is a two-edged sword, but one is likely to wonder, here, if she is aware of the ramifications of her own logic as it applies to herself. Undoubtedly on reflection she would be, but I think Sophocles means for us to understand that any possible, future retribution against Electra is absolutely irrelevant. Like the black militant, she is so oppressed and so bent on revolt that she is fully committed to the possibility of her own death. Clytemnestra, in her turn, is typical of the white majority in that even when Electra "tells it like it is," she fails to understand. "You see," says Electra. "You let me say what I please, and then / you are outraged. You do not know how to listen" (ll. 628-629).

The confrontation of Electra with her sister Chrysothemis is even more revealing, for surely Sophocles has added this character, not mentioned by Aeschylus or Euripides, solely in order to have her serve as Electra's foil. The Chorus announces her entrance to Electra by saying, "I see your sister, / blood of your blood, of the

same father and mother . . ." (ll. 325-326). In the language of scientific experiment, Chrysothemis, having the same heredity and the same environment, is the control; and the way in which she responds is, of course, quite different from that of her strong-willed sister. Quite obviously, she is the Ismene to Electra's Antigone. Or, in terms of our contemporary analogy, she is a "Negro" who lacks her sister's courage to be "Black."

She tells Electra,

. . . I am sick at what I see, so that
if I had strength, I would let them know how I feel.
But under pain of punishment, I think
I must make my voyage with lowered sails,
that I may not seem to do something and then prove
ineffectual. (ll. 333-338)

And Electra naturally responds by chiding her severely for her inaction:

Here you are saying: "If I had the strength,
I would show my hatred of them!" You who, when I
did everything to take vengeance for my father,
never did a thing to help--yes, discouraged the doer.
(ll. 347-350)

But Chrysothemis, in her turn, has counsel for Electra, telling her "to yield to authority" (l. 396). The voice of prudence, when speaking to a would-be revolutionary, always calls attention to the weakness of the oppressed in face of the great might of the oppressor. In the second confrontation between the two sisters, Chrysothemis makes a very practical point: "Can you not see? You are a woman--no man. / Your physical strength is less than is your enemies'!" (ll. 997-998). Her point is pertinent

and persuasive, for at this moment Electra is totally helpless and alone. Before, knowing that Orestes would one day return, she tried merely to get her sister to stand by her in her defiance; now Orestes is presumed to be dead, and Electra, after passing through a moment of utter despair--"Death is a favor to me, life an agony. / I have no wish for life" (ll. 821-822)--is trying to get her sister's help in accomplishing the deed themselves. But Chrysothemis can only caution her in tones that the "Negro" might well use with the "Black":

I beg of you, before you utterly
 destroy us and exterminate our family,
 check your temper. All that you have said to me
 shall be, for my part, unspoken, unfulfilled.
 Be sensible, you, and, at long last, being weaker,
 learn to give in to those that have the strength.
 (ll. 1009-1014)

"Be sensible" is a common refrain in such situations, and the Chorus, typically, repeats it so as to be sure Electra gets the message: "Give heed to her. No greater gain for man / than the possession of a sensible mind!" (ll. 1015-1016). But Electra has a different kind of mind, and she has already formed her decision: "The deed must then be done by my own hand / alone" (ll. 1019-1020). And it is this lonely and heroic point that she has reached when Orestes is suddenly, in effect, "reborn" from the ashes.

The most famous comparison of Sophocles and Euripides as dramatists is the statement that Aristotle attributes to Sophocles himself to the effect that

whereas Euripides portrays people as they are, he, Sophocles, portrays them as better than they are. Most scholars have found a great deal of truth in this view, and it would seem to be quite applicable to the two treatments of Electra. I have described the action of Sophocles' Electra in deciding to take the deed entirely upon herself as heroic, and there seems little doubt that in the context of the action she is intended as such. Shortly after this crucial moment, the Chorus says of her,

She takes no thought of death;
she is ready to leave the light
if only she can kill
the two Furies of her house.
Was there ever one so noble
born of a noble house? (1075-1081)⁵⁷

The question is, of course, rhetorical. In spite of Mr. Grene, who speaks of "the absence of nobility and magnitude" in Electra,⁵⁸ I submit that Sophocles, without a doubt, means Electra to be of noble character. Euripides, on the other hand, treats his Electra differently. Yet his point about her is not that she is ignoble but simply that she is a human being. No one is more aware than Euripides that a noble station in life does not necessarily proclaim a nobility of character. We see Electra in rags and doing the housekeeping chores for a peasant farmer. Her willingness to do such menial work--"you will bear it

⁵⁷Note that here Clytemnestra and Aegisthus are spoken of as Furies.

⁵⁸Grene, p. 124.

better," she tells the Farmer, "if I claim some share with you in the work" (ll. 71-72)--does not reveal a noble defiance but a simple human kindness. It helps us to sympathize with Electra early in the play. Even more significant, however, is the kindness demonstrated by the Farmer himself. He has not touched Electra in bed or harmed her in any way, and he displays great generosity toward the supposed strangers, Orestes and Pylades: "Why were our doors not opened to them long ago?" (l. 357). Electra tells him, "I think you equal to the gods in kindness . . ." (l. 67), and Orestes is moved by his generosity and by Electra's account of him to deliver a pensive, Hamlet-like monologue on the subject of inner and outer nobility:

Alas,
 we look for good on earth and cannot recognize it
 when met, since all our human heritage runs mongrel.
 At times I have seen descendants of the noblest family
 grow worthless though the cowards had courageous sons;
 inside the souls of wealthy men bleak famine lives
 while minds of stature struggle trapped in starving bodies.

How then can man distinguish man, what test can he use?
 the test of wealth? that measure means poverty of mind;
 of poverty? the pauper owns one thing, the sickness
 of his condition, a compelling teacher of evil;
 by nerve in war? yet who, when a spear is cast across
 his face, will stand to witness his companion's courage?
 We can only toss our judgments random on the wind.
 (ll. 368-379)

To many readers this discourse, about half of which is excluded here, must seem curiously removed from the main action; yet it is at the heart of Euripides' theme. Explicitly, Orestes' philosophizing has to do with the

Farmer's nobility of soul, but the other side of the coin--"I have seen descendants of the noblest family / grow worthless"--has obvious implications for Electra and himself. As the Old Man says, when Orestes and Pylades appear, "Well. They look highborn enough, but the coin may prove / false. Often a noble face hides filthy ways" (ll. 550-551).

To see whether the "coin" of Electra and Orestes proves to be false or true in Euripides' play, we must analyze the manner in which these two undertake the killings. It should be noted, first of all, that the killings are in reverse order to those in Sophocles. In Sophocles' Electra, Clytemnestra is killed first, and the action of the play ends before the actual killing of Aegisthus, but Euripides follows Aeschylus in saving Clytemnestra for last. The effect in each case is to emphasize the second killing at the expense of the first. Thus, Sophocles fixes his dramatic focus on Aegisthus by having him step triumphantly into the palace after Clytemnestra's death thinking that the corpse he is about to view is that of Orestes. The dramatic irony is as grisly as it is intense, and the ironic reversal revolving around Orestes' supposed death parallels the recognition scene, the difference being that whereas Electra is saved by Orestes' "rebirth," Aegisthus is destroyed. He is destroyed, moreover, at a moment when he is gloating in triumph. Euripides, however, weights the scales the

other way by having Orestes kill Aegisthus when he is out in the country "scything young green shoots of myrtle for his hair" (l. 778) and when he is most benign and generous in the manner of the noble Farmer, inviting Orestes and Pylades to join him at the feast of the slaughtered bull. Moreover, Orestes strikes his blow from behind and without warning. The messenger tells Electra that while Aegisthus was bending over the barbecue,

your brother stretched up, balanced on the balls of his feet,
and smashed a blow to his spine. The vertebrae of his back
broke. Head down, his whole body convulsed, he gasped to breathe, writhed with a high scream, and died in his blood. (ll. 840-843)

Obviously, Euripides sees nothing noble in this killing. Nor does he in the killing of Clytemnestra that follows. Just as Orestes does the dirty work in the case of Aegisthus, it is Electra who plans and, indeed, executes the matricide. She lures Clytemnestra to the peasant hut, where the corpse of Aegisthus is now lying, on the pretext that she has given birth to a son and needs her mother to perform the proper rituals. The scene is clearly meant as a kind of sordid parallel to the murder of Agamemnon as portrayed by Aeschylus.

There are echoes of the Oresteia all through Euripides' Electra. Not the least of these is the younger dramatist's well known parody of Aeschylus' rather implausible handling of the recognition scene in

Libation Bearers,⁵⁹ but Euripides also follows Aeschylus rather than Homer in such things as setting the scene in Argos, saying Agamemnon was entangled in a "net" in his bath, and alluding, as we shall see, to the hounding of the Furies and Orestes' subsequent trial in Athens. In the case of Clytemnestra's death, Euripides achieves a kind of poetic justice through the parallel with her murder of Agamemnon. She drives up in her chariot and is enticed into the hut just as she had enticed Agamemnon into the palace. The element of poetic justice is made explicit by the Chorus. "Time circles back and brings her to the bar," they say, and then go on to describe, an instant before Clytemnestra's murder, the manner in which she killed Agamemnon (ll. 1155-1163). The crucial difference, of course, is that Clytemnestra meets her death in a farmer's hut, not a royal palace, and she hardly treads on a purple carpet. With an irony that clearly echoes the Clytemnestra of Agamemnon, Electra tells her mother,

Enter our poor house. And, Mother, take good care
the smoky walls put no dark stain upon your robes.
Pay sacrifice to heaven as you ought to pay.
(ll. 1139-1141)

Finally, Clytemnestra, like Aegisthus, is far from arrogant when she is killed. Her argument with Electra

⁵⁹A number of commentators have discussed Euripides' parody, so there is no need to go into it here. Allow me to make the point, however, that the tradition of parodying an older version of a legend was established long before the twentieth century.

parallels the argument in Sophocles; however, Electra is extremely harsh and scornful whereas Clytemnestra, after a feeble attempt to justify herself, becomes very motherly--"How poorly you look. Have you not washed? Your clothes are bad." (l. 1106)--and almost remorseful--"O god, how miserably my plans have all turned out. / Perhaps I drove my hate too hard against my husband" (ll. 1109-1110). At the moment of her death, she is a pitiable figure indeed. "You saw her agony," asks Orestes,

how she threw aside her dress,
 how she was showing her breast there in the midst of death?
 My god, how she bent to earth
 the legs which I was born through? and her hair--I
 touched it (ll. 1206-1209)

Clearly, Euripides is demonstrating that vengeance is not something to be glorified and ennobled in the manner of Sophocles but is a sordid and wretched affair.

On the surface Sophocles' Electra is not as actively involved in the killing of Clytemnestra as Euripides' Electra. Whereas the former is on stage, holding the audience's attention while Orestes performs the deed inside, the latter is in the hut with Orestes, and afterwards she admits equal responsibility in the act: "I urged you on, I urged you on, / I touched the sword beside your hand" (ll. 1224-1225). And as we have already seen, the planning, the setting of the trap, and the luring of Clytemnestra into the trap were Electra's as well. In Sophocles the craft that goes into the

planning and execution of the act is Orestes' and the Pedagogue's, and the hand that wields the sword is solely Orestes'. Yet while the act is being brought to its successful conclusion, it is Electra who sustains the whole moral and emotional force of the action, and even during the killing itself it is she who is before the audience, crying, "If you have strength--again!" (l. 1418) as Orestes strikes their mother. In a very important sense the deed of retribution is not Orestes' but hers, for it is she who is fully committed to the deed in the existential sense of being engagé.

The existential commitment of Sophocles' Electra can, in fact, be observed throughout the entire action. Sophocles makes it clear that she has been involved right from the beginning, for it was she and not a servant as in Aeschylus and Euripides who stole the child Orestes away and smuggled him into exile in the first place (by turning him over to the Pedagogue). In her confrontations with Chrysothemis, furthermore, we see that Electra is fully committed to the existential idea of acting as one thinks and feels. She roundly chastizes her sister not so much for her timidity as for the discrepancy within her between thought and deed. It is meaningless to the existentialist to say, "If I had the strength," I would do such and such, for this is mere words. In caustic tones she tells Chrysothemis, "But you who hate, you tell me, hate in word only / but in fact live with our father's

murderers" (ll. 357-358). The reason for this discrepancy between word and fact in Chrysothemis is that she has no real integrity of being; she is, to use the modern parlance, "other-directed." Alluding to the warning that their mother has apparently been giving Chrysothemis concerning her wayward sister, Electra says, "All these warnings / of me you have learned from her. Nothing is your own" (ll. 343-344). Lacking Electra's inwardness, Chrysothemis must learn what to think and do. The same is true even for Orestes. In the prologue he tells the Pedagogue, "I came to Pytho's place of prophecy / to learn to win revenge . . ." (ll. 33-34). He, more than his sister, talks about "justice," but what is "justice" in this case but an abstract weighing of crime and retribution? It is Electra who has lived a life of misery among her fathers' murderers, "like some dishonored foreigner," until she is "past childbearing," "past marriage." It is Electra, finally, who has, during the action of the play passed through the progressive stages of isolation and despair to the point where she can no longer rely either on friends or on future hopes, so that she has to make the existential decision to go it alone. What Electra feels, with her whole being, is not so much an injustice as a pervading sense of evil, all around her, and she acts, finally, to root the evil out at its source.⁶⁰

⁶⁰The elements of existentialism in Sophocles' plays generally will be gone into more thoroughly in a later chapter.

Although for Sophocles there can be no aftermath to the act, for Euripides the aftermath is as significant as the act itself. We see this not only in Electra but even more in Euripides' sequel, Orestes. In Electra both Electra and Orestes start feeling guilt immediately after the matricide. One senses this in Orestes' first words as he emerges from the hut:

O Earth and Zeus who watch all work
men do, look at this work of blood
and corruption, two bodies in death
lying battered along the dirt
under my hands, only to pay
for my pain. (ll. 1177-1182)

And Electra makes the feeling explicit:

Weep greatly for me, my brother, I am guilty.
A girl flaming in hurt I marched against
the mother who bore me. (ll. 1183-1185)

Both seem to realize that they acted only to rid themselves of their own hurt, and thus they sense the essential selfishness of their deed. The Chorus, alluding to Electra's persistence when Orestes wavered, beautifully articulates her sudden vacillation:

Circling, circling, your wilful mind
veers in the blowing wind and turns;
you think piously now, but then
thoughtless you wrought an impious thing,
dear girl, when your brother's will was against you.
(ll. 1201-1205)

But they still feel that the House of Atreus has finally been rid of its curse by Electra "ending your family's great disasters" (l. 1232). However, at this precise moment, in a coup de théâtre similar to Orestes' sudden vision of the Furies in Libation Bearers, the Dioscuri,

Castor and Polydeuces, appear on the roof of the house. Since, according to legend, the Dioscuri are the brothers of the murdered Clytemnestra, they bear a direct relation to the action, and since they have been immortalized, they also serve as divine oracles. Castor, speaking for both, outlines a future for Orestes that is clearly based on the action of Aeschylus' Eumenides. It includes the Furies--"The dreadful beast-faced goddesses of destiny / will roll you like a wheel through maddened wandering" (ll. 1252-1253)--and it includes the acquittal by public trial--"the voting-pebbles will be cast equal and save you" (l. 1265).

Castor's oracular speech has, however, several noteworthy innovations. First of all, we are informed that Menelaus and Helen have just returned, Menelaus from Troy, and Helen from Egypt, for Euripides is following Stesichorus in saying that Helen never went to Troy. Says Castor, with typically Euripidean bitterness, "Zeus fashioned and dispatched a Helen-image there / to Ilium so men might die in hate and blood" (ll. 1282-1283). There are a number of justifications for bringing in Menelaus and Helen, one being that Helen is a sister both to Clytemnestra and the Dioscuri, another being that Helen's sexual improprieties have already been associated with Clytemnestra early in the play. For example, in her confrontation with Clytemnestra, Electra alludes to both these aspects when she says,

Although for beauty you deserve tremendous praise,
 both you and Helen, flowering from a single stalk,
 you both grew sly and lightweight, a disgrace to Castor.
 When she was raped she walked of her own will to ruin,
 while you brought ruin on the finest man in Greece
 (ll. 1062-1066)

Too, Euripides is undoubtedly already looking ahead to his Orestes, in which Menelaus and Helen appear as major characters and Helen becomes the symbolic cause of human strife. Another interesting innovation is the destiny that Euripides decides to allot his Electra: she is to marry Orestes' friend Pylades. It is perhaps this element of denouement as much as anything that has given this play a melodramatic cast.⁶¹ On the surface it would seem that having overcome the evil mother, Electra and Pylades will now get married "and live happily ever after." However, Euripides was probably as aware as anyone, as is evident in his domestic tragedies such as Medea and Hippolytus, that marriage is seldom a solution to anything;⁶² moreover, Electra and her husband will still have to live in exile from Argos. As she asks, rhetorically, "Are there more poignant sorrows or greater / than leaving the soil of a fatherland?" (ll. 1314-1315). Clearly, the marriage to Pylades is mainly just a way for Euripides to tie up

⁶¹Cf. Kitto, Greek Tragedy, p. 348 ff., who classifies both this play and Orestes as melodramas.

⁶²Cf. these lines from Orestes:

Marry, and with luck
 it may go well. But when a marriage fails,
 then those who marry live at home in hell.
 (ll. 602-604)

one (or two) of his loose ends. A third innovation, much more significant than the others, is the allusion to Orestes' acquittal. It can be argued that with or without Athena an acquittal is an acquittal, but I think Euripides has eliminated the goddess for a definite purpose. He seems to want, first of all, to emphasize a principle:

And so for the rest of time this law shall be established:
When votes are equal the accused must have acquittal.
 (ll. 1268-1269)⁶³

What Euripides is saying, as he seems to say in so many of his plays, is that it is basically impossible for us to judge our fellow man. There may be "votes" for a person and "votes" against a person, but these will always tend to equalize each other, and when they do, the only possible verdict, the only humane verdict, is--innocent. Secondly, by excluding Athena, he is saying that the gods have nothing to do with it; this is a human verdict, the verdict that we pass upon our fellow men.

Where then does the guilt fall, if by the standards of humanity, Orestes and Electra are to be judged innocent? Shockingly enough, for orthodox Greeks at least, the answer is Apollo. Euripides follows Aeschylus in making it clear that Orestes has been abiding by Apollo's command, something that Sophocles barely mentions,

⁶³Translator's italics.

but he veers from Aeschylus in failing to exonerate Apollo by having him protect and defend Orestes and by demonstrating that Apollo has been carrying out the inscrutable and mysterious will of Zeus. Castor says of Apollo, "He knows the truth but his oracles were lies" (l. 1246). And a moment later the Dioscuri are even more severe: "On Phoebus I place all / guilt for this death" (ll. 1296-1297). When the Chorus asks them,

Why could you, who are gods and brothers
of the dead woman here,
not turn her Furies away from our halls? (ll. 1298-1300)

the Dioscuri reply, "Doom is compelling, it leads and we follow--/ doom and the brutal song of Apollo" (ll. 1301-1302). Clearly, the doom has to be followed out to the bitter end. But what is the "brutal song of Apollo"? Knowing Apollo to be the god of reason and logic, we can see that probably his "brutal song" is that very cry for abstract justice that urges Orestes and Electra on to their terrible deed. Euripides is expressing the view that we men, who allow our "Apollos" to sting us into bitter acts of vengeance and "justice," can ultimately only be pitied. It would be wrong to judge us and condemn us, but on the other hand it would be wrong to ennoble us by placing a false glory upon our deeds. Euripides' view is deeply humanitarian but always tinged with a note of cynical bitterness, as in that line of Orestes' speech on nobility: "We can only toss our judgments random on the wind."

Although in Electra the pity overshadows the bitterness, in Euripides' Orestes it is quite the other way around. In this play, whose action takes place just six days later, Orestes is going mad, and his madness sets the tone for the entire drama. In her prologue Electra tells us,

After the murder Orestes collapsed to bed. There he lies, wasted by raging fever and whirled on to madness by his mother's blood-- I dare not breathe the name of those Eumenides who pursue him now, hounding him with terror. (ll. 35-38)⁶⁴

The creatures that hound him and whose real name Electra can not utter are of course the Furies. Modern interpreters of the Oresteia have frequently chosen to look upon the hounding by the Furies as an image for psychological guilt and insanity,⁶⁵ but it is not well known that Euripides, as in so many things, was centuries ahead in introducing this "modern" interpretation. It is important to understand, too, that the Furies are not merely driving Orestes to madness; they are the madness. Thus when Electra cries, "Oh no! No! Help! He is going mad!" (l. 254), Orestes, in a manner suggestive of Aeschylus' Orestes at the end of Libation Bearers, screams,

No, Mother!

. For god's sake, Mother,

⁶⁴Translated by William Arrowsmith, The Complete Greek Tragedies, Vol. IV. Subsequent quotations are from this translation.

⁶⁵For example, Eugene O'Neill in The Haunted, the third play in his Mourning Becomes Electra trilogy.

Tyndareus makes Aeschylus' point about the endless chain of revenge:

Suppose a wife murders her husband.
Her son then follows suit by killing her,
and his son then must have his murder too
and so on.

Where, I want to know, can this chain
of murder end? (ll. 507-510)

Curiously, however, Tyndareus' concern is not for Clytemnestra and Helen, whom he calls an adulteress and a whore respectively, but for law and order:

No sir, not my daughters, but the law:
that is my concern. There I take my stand,
defending it with all my heart and strength
against the brutal and inhuman spirit of murder
that corrupts our cities and destroys this country.
(ll. 522-525)

As William Arrowsmith points out in the introduction to this translation,⁶⁷ this allusion to the law is a typically Euripidean anachronism, for there was no public law in Mycenaean times--which of course is Aeschylus' point when he shows the evolution of civil justice in his Oresteia. The effect of placing Orestes in this context, as Arrowsmith says, is to make him little more than a criminal, for rather than resorting to violence he could have brought his mother and Aegisthus to trial. In any event, Orestes is goaded by this tirade into a long reply that starts out with a feeble attempt at self-justification and ends with Orestes striking out absurdly at Apollo: "He commanded my mother's murder, / Accuse him of murder,

⁶⁷"Introduction to Orestes," The Complete Greek Tragedies, IV, 187,

then. Put him to death" (ll. 594-595). And from here on, as Orestes tries to get Menelaus to intercede and prevent his and Electra's execution at the hands of the people, all sane and rational concepts of morality become converted into absurd gobbledygook:

But right or wrong, it is only right
 that you should do some wrong to help me now.
 When my father mustered an army for the siege
 of Troy, he also did a wrong--and yet
 that wrong was generous. He did that wrong for you,
 to right the wrong that your wife Helen did.
 And wrong for wrong, you owe me that wrong now,
 Menelaus. (ll. 646-650)

From the self-flagellation of a guilt-complex, Orestes' madness seems to be passing through a kind of crazed self-righteousness to a ruthless amorality.

Secondly, Orestes' madness begins to infect everyone around him. When Pylades arrives to extend his hand of friendship, Orestes asks him anxiously, "But if my madness strikes you too?" (l. 792). And indeed Pylades is struck by it, for it is not long before he is advising Orestes to murder Helen: "That will touch / Menelaus where it hurts" (ll. 1105-1106). Electra, not to be outdone, then offers the plan of taking Helen's daughter Hermione hostage and keeping the sword at her throat, to which Orestes gleefully responds, "What a woman! / The mind of a man with a woman's loveliness!" (ll. 1204-1205). As the insanity builds and spreads, we see that it is by no means restricted to these three; it is infecting the community as a whole. However, there is

also a sense in which Orestes and the others have been infected by the community. In one of the odes the Chorus sings of the decay of the House of Atreus:

Back and back they ebb
a glory decays,
the greatness goes
from the happy house of Atreus. (ll. 810-811)

And they go on to recount the passing of the ancient curse through the generations of the House of Atreus ending with the final madness of Orestes: "Raving Furies stalk him down, / his rolling eyes are wild . . . (ll. 836-837). Thus, for Euripides the curse becomes more than a chain of retribution; it becomes an endless chain of madness. It is a madness, moreover, which is now mounting to a peak of scope and intensity, and which finally bursts forth in a frenzy of destruction as Orestes and Pylades "murder" Helen, with Electra screaming from the sidelines, even more viciously than Sophocles' Electra,

Murder!

Butcher!

Kill!

Thrust your twin swords home!
Slash, now slash again!
Run the traitress through,
kill the whore who killed
so many brave young men (ll. 1302-1305)

And then as Orestes holds the sword at young Hermione's throat, as the flames begin to rise up from the palace roof, and as Menelaus calls the knights of Argos to battle--the height of madness is reached.

It is at this moment that Euripides introduces what is surely one of the most improbable dei ex machina

in all literature. Apollo appears suddenly above the palace and in one divine stroke reconciles everyone and everything. Pylades will now marry Electra, and, says Apollo, "Great happiness / awaits him" (ll. 1659-1660). Even more absurdly, Orestes is to marry none other than Hermione, "the girl against whose throat your sword now lies" (l. 1654). Most absurdly of all, Helen still lives. It seems that "being born of Zeus, she could not die" (l. 1635), and she now stands with Apollo above the palace. Helen's role in this play is most significant. At the moment that Orestes and Pylades "kill" her, she seems to become an image much like Euripides' Helen-image in Troy, and yet throughout the drama it is assumed, contrary to the version given in Electra, that it was the real Helen who was in Troy. All of this play upon illusion and reality, of course, supports the theme of general madness, and it would seem that for Euripides Helen symbolizes both the real cause and the illusory cause of all human strife. But what is the point of the "happy ending"? Certainly, it is not an attempt to justify the deeds of Orestes and Electra; nor is it, as some have suggested, merely Euripides' clumsy way of picking up the pieces of a broken play. Undoubtedly, the best explanation is that given by Arrowsmith:

What we have here, I think, is a transparent tour de force, an apparent resolution which in fact resolves nothing, the illusion of a deus ex machina intervening to stop the terrible momentum of the play by means of a solution so inadequate and so unreal by contrast with the created reality of the play that

it is doomed into insignificance. The resolution, that is, is so designed as to be merely an apparent resolution: if the experience of the play is a real one, what remains after Apollo leaves is not the taste of the happy ending but the image of total disaster: the burning palace, the dead girl, the screaming mob, and the degenerate heirs dying in the arson of their own hatred.⁶⁸

The absurdity of Apollo's various proposals for the future should be sufficient to demonstrate that, as Arrowsmith says, the denouement is less real than the nightmarish action that leads up to it. With Euripides, moreover, any action that has developed purely at the human level must become suspect when it is suddenly solved at the divine level. It is most significant, I think, that in Electra Euripides stresses that Orestes will be acquitted by a tie vote of a human jury, whereas in this play Orestes is told (my emphasis),

Gods shall be your judges,
sitting in holy session on the hill of Ares,
and acquitting you by sacred verdict. (ll. 1650-1652)

The fate of Orestes as outlined here is a kind of bitter parody of the action of Eumenides, for whereas in that play Aeschylus works out what is in effect a genuine deus ex machina with subtle interactions between the human and the divine, Euripides' deus ex machina is patently false, thereby demonstrating that the only reason for throwing the problem of human madness and strife into the "lap of the gods" is that it is totally insoluble at the human level. The true theme of Orestes,

⁶⁸Ibid., p. 190.

then, is expressed not in the manipulations of the ending but in the long and absurdly garbled report of the Phrygian slave, who begins, "Greekish sword--kill dead! / Trojan scared, oh" (ll. 1368-1369) and ends,

But Menelaus, ai--
 all his suffer, all his hurt
 to bring the lady Helen home,
 ah ah,
 nothing is. (ll. 1499-1503)

Perhaps this message of despair, of "nothing is," can be better understood if we begin by placing it in the context of Euripides' life and his social milieu. After pointing out that Orestes was produced in 408 B.C., William Arrowsmith calls attention to the fact that this was "just a year or so before Euripides, old, embittered, and disillusioned with Athens, withdrew in voluntary exile to Macedon, where he died a few years later."⁶⁹ Mad as Orestes is in the play, Euripides quite possibly feels a certain identity with him when he has Apollo tell him, "It is your destiny to leave this land / and go into exile . . ." (ll. 1644-1645). Regarding Athens at this time, there was certainly much to be embittered about. What had once been a free and great society was now destroying itself through the madness and violence of a protracted war with Sparta, and by the year 408 it was very clear that Athens would go down in defeat. Says Arrowsmith,

⁶⁹Ibid.

The political climate of the play itself graphically represents the state of affairs in Athens, and, presumptuous or not, I am tempted to see in the play Euripides' prophetic image of the final destruction of Athens and Hellas, or that Hellas to which a civilized man could still give his full commitment. It is a simple and a common symbolism: the great old house, cursed by a long history of fratricidal blood and war, brought down in destruction by its degenerate heirs.⁷⁰

At the risk of being even more presumptuous than Mr. Arrowsmith, I would suggest that the mood expressed by Euripides is quite similar to a mood prevalent in our society today. It is certainly no accident, for example, that this relatively unknown play was produced recently in Berkeley, California, and that it was done, furthermore, in modern, "hippie" dress. Nor, by the same token, is it merely coincidental that Jean-Paul Sartre's The Flies, which as we will see is much closer in spirit to Sophocles' Electra than it is to either of Euripides' plays, was produced just last year in Watts, Los Angeles' Black ghetto. The revolutionary spirit of Sophocles in Electra would seem to be as prevalent today as the defeatist spirit of Euripides in Orestes.

Throughout this chapter we have seen how two great tragedians have taken the same legend, the same mythos, and worked it into two totally diverging expressions of the human condition. We do not know which poet presented his version first, but we do know that consciously or unconsciously the two took stances that were quite

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 191.

independent of each other. And they took stances that were quite independent of Aeschylus before them, though Sophocles more than Euripides. We have seen how Sophocles adhered closely to the outlines of the legend presented by Homer, whereas Euripides followed and occasionally parodied the mythos established by Aeschylus. What the two poets had in common was their preoccupation with the situation of Electra. Both poets stressed Electra's sufferings as well as her active role in the undertaking of the retribution, but they did so for quite different reasons. Sophocles, by playing up Aegisthus' usurper role at the expense of the matricide, by playing up the political implications at the expense of the domestic implications, by weighting the scales of justice in Electra's and Orestes' favor, and, most importantly, by thrusting Electra into an isolated situation where she is compelled to demonstrate her own integrity of purpose, made his Electra into a noble, existential, and revolutionary heroine. Euripides, by doing none of these things and by introducing a note of guilt and of future trials and sufferings at the end, made his Electra into a figure that is alternately to be feared and pitied but never ennobled. Moreover, he demonstrated in his Orestes that even pity may be impossible when such madness is allowed to perpetuate itself.

Ultimately, the best way to distinguish among the Weltanschauungen of the three great tragedians is in terms

of where they place their faith. Aeschylus' Oresteia, as well as his other trilogies, clearly reveals a faith in the "system," i.e., both in the divine cosmos and in man's ability to work in social harmony and achieve justice through civilization. Sophocles, in Electra and his other dramas, demonstrates a faith not in the "system" but solely in the individual and his ability to act truly and nobly. Euripides, like Sophocles, has no faith in the system, but as he shows in his Electra, his faith in the individual is limited to man's potential for human kindness. Finally, in his Orestes, Euripides seems to demonstrate that he has lost even this, that he now has faith in nothing at all. It is indeed fascinating that a single mythos could be used to express three such disparate world-outlooks.

CHAPTER III

GIRAUDOUX'S ELECTRE TRUTH AND JUSTICE IN PRE-WAR FRANCE

With literature, as with red wine, the only sure test of its greatness is how it ages. The "wines" of the three great tragedians of fifth century Athens have aged very well indeed. In the case of the newer "wines" of the twentieth century French playwrights, one is understandably dubious about whether they, too, will improve with age. Certainly, they now seem, in the parlance of the wine tasters, a little "young" by comparison, and there are indications that they may turn out to be a little too thin and perhaps a little too tart ever to be great wines. However, there can be little dispute that writers like Giraudoux, Sartre, and Anouilh are fully on a par with the Greeks in terms of the imagination and independence of their respective treatments of the Greek legend and in terms of the clarity, if not always the profundity, of their world-visions. The viability of these modern plays has little to do, in my opinion, with whether or not they are "tragedies." Thus, we will not get embroiled here in the "Is-tragedy-dead?" controversy, which seems just as futile as, and perhaps bears some relation to, the "Is-God-dead?" controversy. Perhaps it

should be pointed out, in this regard, that by the customary criterion--i.e., the tragic fall of a noble hero--none of the Greek plays discussed in the first two chapters--Oresteia, Electra (S), Electra (E), or Orestes--can properly be termed a "tragedy." If one wanted to classify all or some of these as "tragedies," he would have to find other criteria, and he could, then, if he chose, see if these criteria also applied to Giraudoux's Electre or Sartre's The Flies. Our concern, however, is with the manner in which each of these playwrights has reinterpreted the House of Atreus legend and with the dramatic and thematic purpose that underlies his reinterpretation.

The French are by no means the only modern dramatists to utilize Greek myths; the reader of English-language literature is more likely to think of Eugene O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra or T. S. Eliot's Family Reunion as prominent examples of uses of the House of Atreus legend. There is, however, a basic approach used by the French which can best be understood by showing how it differs from the approach used by such authors as Eliot and O'Neill. A modern critic, Giorgio Melchiori, says of T. S. Eliot:

His is not the approach used by the modern French playwrights . . . who deliberately gave a new twist to the ancient myths: keeping even the mythological names, they wanted to emphasize the connection, they wanted their audiences to assume from the very start that their characters were literary creations acquiring little by little new individual personalities.

Eliot instead tried to follow the reverse process by starting from characters who were supposed to belong to ordinary life in modern times and making the audience realize that their plight was the same as that of Greek heroes. The result is that while in the first case we have abstract types gradually humanized, in Eliot we have everyday characters dehumanized.⁷¹

The distinction is valid and useful. What might be added is that in beginning with the mythos itself, the French were using the same method as the Greeks. One has to keep in mind, of course, that the French, largely because of the neo-classical upsurge in the seventeenth century led by Corneille and Racine, have always had a much stronger classical tradition in the theatre than, say, the English. As Wallace Fowlie says, in reference to the modern French playwrights, "They favored classical mythological themes and thus renewed the Greek tradition of Racine's tragedies. Precisely because of Racine, these subjects are better known to a contemporary audience in France than in other countries."⁷² One of the recent French writers to renew the Greek tradition in drama was Jean Giraudoux, whose Electre was produced in Paris in 1937.

In terms of the basic mythos or plot of the House of Atreus legend, Giraudoux's Electre follows the pattern set by the Greek "Big Three." As in Libation Bearers and

⁷¹The Tightrope Walkers (London, 1956), p. 136.

⁷²Dionysus in Paris: A Guide to Contemporary French Theater (New York, 1960), p. 18.

the two Electras, this modern version commences its action at what is the natural starting point for this segment of the legend--Oreste's incognito return to his native city, which is Argos, as in Aeschylus and Euripides --and ends its action, as in the Greek dramas, with Oreste's killing of Clytemnestre and Egisthe.⁷³ There are elements throughout the play that suggest that Giraudoux was well acquainted with all three classical versions. For example, taking a cue from the farmer-husband in Euripides, Giraudoux introduces, as a key figure in the action and dialogue, a gardener, who is Electre's finance by Egisthe's decree. He also has the usual recognition scene between Electre and Oreste.

Since each of the Greek dramatists gives an independent and individual rendering of the recognition scene, it is interesting to observe the way in which Giraudoux keeps this scene but modifies it to suit his own ends. First of all, he chooses to make the recognition entirely psychological. Avoiding Aeschylus' physical clues such as the footprints and the locks of hair, which are ridiculed beyond repair in Euripides' Electra, Giraudoux has Oreste convince the Gardener of his identity by merely asserting his nobility as it were: "You understand species and kinds. Look at me and see the kind I

⁷³I am using the French spelling for all names in the French plays so as to distinguish them from the Greek.

am" (Act I, Scene 6).⁷⁴ And Electre, too, is convinced intuitively, Oreste's name alone providing, for her, sufficient proof: "Ungrateful sister," says Oreste, "only recognizing me by my name!" (Act I, Scene 6).

Beyond this, Giraudoux uses the recognition as a means of bringing to light the intimate and special nature of the relationship of the brother and sister. Thus the initial union of the two is spoken of as a marriage. The instant that the Gardener is convinced of Oreste's identity he turns over his engagement ring, and when, at the moment of recognition, Clytemnestre appears and accosts Electre, she informs her mother that the stranger, Oreste, is her husband now. When Clytemnestre commands her to come in, she replies, "What? Leave my husband the night of my wedding?" (Act I, Scene 7). As if wishing to compound the incestuous quality of the relationship further, Giraudoux then makes Electre not only Oreste's wife but his mother. This is accomplished through Electre's strange words as she appears to "create" Oreste, saying, "I'm calling you to life. From this brotherly shape which my dazzled eyes have scarcely seen I'm making my brother in all his features" (Act I, Scene 8). And then she goes on to describe his features as she caresses and "creates" them. Electre's purpose, of course, is to build up a psychological

⁷⁴Translated by Winifred Smith, The Modern Theatre, ed. Eric Bentley (New York, 1955), Vol. I. Subsequent quotations are from this translation.

barrier between Oreste and Clytemnestre, whom he has never known as his mother since he was whisked away when he was a mere baby. Electre says of her mother, who is watching them, "She suspects we're here, creating ourselves, freeing ourselves from her. She thinks that my caresses will cover you, wash you clear of her, make you an orphan" (Act I, Scene 8). Psychologically, Electre is cutting one cord and tying another; she is making Oreste hers. What Giraudoux accomplishes here is quite novel, but it is certainly not without traces from the Greek plays. For example, the feeling of a union of man and wife is as implicit in Euripides as the mother-son relationship is in Sophocles. Giraudoux also seems to be echoing Sophocles when he shows Oreste undergoing a "rebirth." The difference is that for Sophocles the "rebirth" is symbolic; it is expressive of the play's peripeteia and it is significant because of its effect upon Electra's fortunes. For Giraudoux the "rebirth" has its significance for Electre--"my brother was born like the sun, a golden animal at his rising" (Act I, Scene 8)--but it is also a psychological rebirth for Oreste. As the Beggar says earlier, "Everything in nature reveals itself" (Act I, Scene 3), and the new Oreste has revealed himself here.

Giraudoux's most striking modification of the legend is his unique representation of the Eumenides. To begin with, it is remarkable that he brings them in at

all, for in none of the Greek versions do they appear until Orestes kills his mother. Here, however, they enter at the rise of the first curtain in the form of three little girls escorting Oreste to the palace. Like the witches of Macbeth, these strange little sisters have the play's opening lines, and, again somewhat like the three witches, practically their first utterances seem designed to deceive Oreste. They assert, for example, that the Gardener "won't be able to say a word" or that "he'll bray--or meow--" whereupon the Gardener speaks naturally, informing Oreste that the girls are liars (Act I, Scene 1). A moment later they reveal their more ghoulish side, when the Gardener points out to Oreste the room where Atreus gave the infamous banquet of sons:

First Little Girl: The dinner when he served up their hearts took place in the room next it. I'd love to know how they tasted.

Third Little Girl: Did he cut them up or cook them whole?

Second Little Girl: And Cassandra was strangled in the sentry box.

Third Little Girl: They caught her in a net and stabbed her. She yelled like a crazy woman, through her veil. I'd love to have seen it. (Act I, Scene 1)

When they are not lying or being sadistic or being insulting--"We lie, we slander, we insult"--they are "reciting," i.e., chanting enigmatic phrases about Clytemnestre's fears or Electre's hates. But what is undoubtedly their most extraordinary feature is that which

the Gardener reveals to Oreste:

No one knows who they are. They've been wandering about the town for two days without friends or family. If we ask who they are, they pretend they're the little Eumenides. And the horrible thing is that they grow and get fat as you look at them. Yesterday they were years younger than today. (Act I, Scene 1)

These weird creatures are shooting up and burgeoning out anachronistically, like poisonous mushrooms. The next time they appear they seem "to be about twelve or thirteen years old" (Act I, Scene 12); then, the following morning, they are about fifteen; and in the final scene, they "are of exactly the same height and figure as Electre" (Act II, Scene 10).

None of the above traits would be out of character in the Erinyes or Furies. In fact, it is obvious that Giraudoux is using the term "Eumenides" as an ironic euphemism for the "repulsive maidens" of Aeschylus. However, Giraudoux appears to be making his Furies deliberately ambiguous by suggesting, at one point, that they may be the three Fates, which in Greek mythology were quite distinct from the Erinyes.⁷⁵ At another point they act very much like Christian tempters, when they try to persuade Oreste to reject Electre's truth and enjoy the pleasures of royalty and love. Never, until the very end, do they exhibit the one essential feature of the Furies,

⁷⁵ However, the Furies, like the Fates, were generally felt to be three in number and may sometimes have been linked with the Fates in the popular imagination. Cf. Graves, I, 122, and II, 72.

that of the hounding avengers for a blood murder. Obviously, Giraudoux means his girls to be potential Furies, who are growing rapidly into their allotted role. Thus, in this sense, they are also Oreste's Fates. They only appear when Oreste is on stage, and when they seem to be tempting him to escape his fate, they are of course only mocking him. When Oreste finally commits his crime, they are ready for him. They tell Electre,

You'll never see Oreste again. We're leaving you to pursue him. We've taken on your age and your shape--to pursue him. Good-bye! We'll not leave him until he's been driven to madness or suicide, cursing his sister. (Act II, Scene 10)

Giraudoux also alters the basic plot of the legend, in a way that affects the position and role of Electre herself. To begin with, there is no evidence that Electre has been maltreated in the manner of the Electras of Sophocles and Euripides. True, Egisthe is having Electre married off to a lowly gardener, to render her power innocuous, but unlike Euripides' Aegisthus he is not at all doing it to punish her with a life of virtual slavery and deprivation. The startling fact is that in Giraudoux's version Electre does not know for certain that her father was murdered, or rather she does not have factual proof. The accepted view of Agamemnon's death is that he slipped and fell on his own sword when he was going to his bath. Thus, over the past seven years, Electre has only had a vague suspicion, much like that of Hamlet, that something is rotten. It is not even known

that Egisthe is Clytemnestre's lover, for unlike Aegisthus, who blatantly enjoys both Agamemnon's kingdom and his bed, Egisthe, at least in the first act, is only a regent to the Queen. The only real basis that Electre has for hating Clytemnestre, at first, is her belief that her mother once let the baby Oreste fall on to the marble without making any attempt to catch him. It is her word against her mother's at first, but it soon becomes evident that it is Electre that is telling the truth. Next she forces an admission from her mother that she has a lover, and, finally, it is revealed that the lover is, and was, Egisthe and that the two did in fact murder the "king of kings." But by the time of this revelation, it becomes apparent that Egisthe has suddenly gained the stature of a wise and honorable king. Moreover, the state of Argos is being attacked by enemies from without, and the only way that the people can be saved is for Egisthe to marry Clytemnestre and rule as their king. As Electre herself is aware, all the cards are stacked against her. She exclaims to Egisthe, "They [the gods] thought my task not painful enough, so they made a figure of honor out of you, whom I despise!" (Act II, Scene 8). To top it all, Egisthe, far from hating Electre, actually loves her much more than he does Clytemnestre, and he expressly commands that she and Oreste be allowed to go free.⁷⁶

⁷⁶Cf. O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra, in which the Electra-figure, Lavinia, is in love with the Aegisthus-figure, Brant.

What is Giraudoux doing here? Why does he seem to be weighting the scale against Electre? The answer is that he wants to remove every possible motivation from Electre except one: pure justice. Electre has no other reason to do as she does except that of uncompromising justice. She knows that if she relents, if she allows the truth to remain hidden, the state will not only be saved but will prosper, with Oreste as its new king. But she cannot accept this expediency in the face of justice. Hence, she calls Oreste; he kills the King and Queen; the city is taken; the palace goes up in flames; the Furies attach themselves to the fleeing Oreste; and she can still say, "I have justice. I have everything" (Act II, Scene 10). She cannot say, "I have my conscience," nor can she say, "I have Oreste," for as the Furies are quick to point out, her conscience will be of little use to her in the years to come, and Oreste has been taken. Giraudoux has stripped everything away from her except justice.

To make viable this conflict between truth and expediency Giraudoux has arrayed powerful forces on either side. In abstract terms, he gives us, on the one side, Truth, Justice, and Purity; on the other, Compromise, Security, and Love. In concrete terms, we have, of course, Electre on the one side, as "humanity's conscience," as the "guardian of truth." At the end of the first act, we see that the whole point to the rather secondary but nevertheless poignant controversy over whether the little

Oreste fell or, as Clytemnestre alleges, was pushed by his sister is to prove Electre's absolute integrity to the truth. As the Beggar says, in his long speech at the end of the act, "So Electre didn't push Oreste! That makes everything she says legitimate, everything she undertakes irrefutable. She's unadulterated truth, a lamp without a wick." It is at this point that Electre "reveals" herself. Suddenly, like the wolf cub in the Beggar's parable, she becomes a full-grown wolf that will leap at her master's throat. At the head of the forces on the other side of the conflict is, of course, Egisthe, who is the eloquent exponent of expediency. As regent of a complacent and prosperous state, Egisthe feels that it is his role to prevent the gods, whom he pictures as slumbering indifferently in the heavens, from being aroused from their lethargy by Electre's signals of truth. In fact he wages "merciless war against all who signal to the gods" (Act I, Scene 3). Egisthe seems to reveal himself in the role of noble king, for, after his "experience" on the mount, he has an honorable and glorious conception of his role as leader of his people, and he argues eloquently for the safety and preservation of the state. But hovering far above Egisthe's head is a large bird--a bird so high that even the Beggar cannot tell whether it is a kite or an eagle--and when the bird finally descends after Egisthe makes his exit, we learn that it is a vulture. Thus, Egisthe is truly revealed not as the great and noble king

symbolized in the eagle but as the criminal that he is.

It would be a gross over-simplification, however, to suggest that the conflict of Electre is no more than justice versus expediency. To get an idea of how Giraudoux broadens and deepens the conflict beyond this, we must first look at another significant departure from the original mythos: the addition of a sub-plot centering around a petty official, the President, and his promiscuous wife, Agathe. It is anachronistic innovations like this that have earned Giraudoux the epithet précieux. The petty domestic squabble between the President, a typically French official that somewhat parallels our chief justices, and his young, pretty, and adulterous wife can only serve as an ironic deflation of whatever serious and dignified tone the "tragedy" might otherwise have achieved. To be sure, much of Giraudoux's style, though it reaches peaks of rich poetry and high seriousness, often has this same mocking, deflationary effect. Moreover, the style is so dazzling that, in the words of one critic, it "blinds audiences by its brilliance and enchants them by its flights of fancy, often obscuring the author's ideas."⁷⁷ The ideas, however, are there, and Giraudoux is using such poetic devices as metaphor and such dramaturgical devices as sub-plots to unify and intensify his expression of them. In the case of Agathe and the President,

⁷⁷ Agnes G. Raymond, Jean Giraudoux: The Theatre of Victory and Defeat (Amherst, 1966), p. 1.

Giraudoux is clearly concerned not with sexual passion or lovers' quarrels but with the issue of truth and deception. As Agathe herself points out, her lover's identity, which the President is so doggedly intent on discovering, is of little consequence. After hinting to her husband that she has deceived him not with one but with many, she points out that not even this is the issue:

They think we deceive them only with lovers. Of course we have lovers, too. But we deceive you with everything. When I wake and my hand slips along the wooden bedstead, that's my first adultery. . . . And my second adultery is when I open my eyes and see daylight through the blinds. And my third, when my foot touches the bathwater and when I jump in. I betray you with my fingers, with my eyes, with the soles of my feet. (Act II, Scene 6)

Thus it is the deception itself that is important.

The most literal parallel between the sub-plot and the main action is, of course, through the adultery of Clytemnestre. The two adulteries come together and work upon each other in a scene resembling nothing more than a fugue. As the President chases his wife about with his persistent "Who is it?" and as Agathe finally replies with the truth that lies behind her deception, viz., that she despises her husband; Electre, in counterpoint, cries out, "I've found out mother, I've found out!" and "Listen, mother! Listen to yourself. It's you talking" (Act II, Scene 6). The two parallel threads then cross each other at the scene's end as Agathe's truth suddenly becomes Clytemnestre's truth: Both have had Aegisthus for their

lover and both went to him out of loathing for their husbands. The sub-plot is also linked, through its theme of truth and deception, with the question of Agamemnon's death. Giraudoux, by leaving the question of the murder in doubt until near the end of the play, has shifted his central focus from the issue of retribution and justice to that of truth and knowledge. In this sense Electre more resembles Oedipus than her Greek counterparts, for as with Oedipus her prime task is not to avenge the crime but to search out the truth of the crime. The central issue of this play is thus the same as that in Oedipus the King: Does truth sometimes come at too high a price? The adultery raises the same question in microcosm, as it were, for it is an age-old problem whether it is better to spare the spouse with a lie or hurt him (or her) with the truth. What has to be understood is that in bringing in the adultery sub-plot Giraudoux is by no means attempting to reduce the issue of truth and deception to the purely individual level. On the contrary, he introduces the adultery motif for the purpose of giving an additional facet to his primary emphasis, which is the problem of truth and deception as it applies politically, i.e., to society as a whole.

Unlike other French writers that fall within the purview of this study, Giraudoux is not normally thought of as being engagé, i.e., fully committed to and involved in the political and social issues of the day. To be sure,

Giraudoux was involved in his personal life, holding high posts in the French diplomatic service for a number of years, but an implied criticism in the epithet precieux is that he did not demonstrate his commitment through his writing, in the engagé tradition of such writers as Gide, Malraux, Sartre, and Camus.⁷⁸ Both Gide and Sartre have in fact criticized Giraudoux on this score. Alluding to Giraudoux's best known "classical" play, La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu,⁷⁹ Gide has written,

Giraudoux's most beautiful books were written under the sign of the dove. Not, of course, that he ignores war and keeps his eyes closed to the devastation it produces; but even in the works in which it plays a part, even the one in which it is the very subject matter, he endeavors to rob it of all reasonable significance, of all meaning, carrying all the way to paradox a thought that tends too much toward play. . . .⁸⁰

As usual Gide's comment is perceptive and largely true, yet it is also true that the contemporary significance of the anti-war theme in this reinterpretation of the story of the Trojan War was not lost on his French audience in 1935. As Laurent LeSage points out, in a critical work on Giraudoux, "The topical pertinency of this great play escaped no one in 1935. All Europe had

⁷⁸David I. Grossvogel--The Self-Conscious Stage in Modern French Drama (New York, 1958), p. 73--refers to Giraudoux's "précieux existentialism"--a paradoxical and therefore appropriate label I feel.

⁷⁹The English title, Tiger at the Gates, not only obscures the legendary basis of this play; it totally ignores the satiric irony of Giraudoux's title.

⁸⁰Quoted by Raymond, p. 2.

bitter memories of World War I and knew that another was in the making. When the Chancellor of the Reich ordered the occupation of the Rhineland, an apprehensive French public felt that Troy's Gates of War must surely open again."⁸¹ La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu, however, is the only one of Giraudoux's plays that is generally felt to be engagé. Thus, Jean-Paul Sartre--in What is Literature?, which is his manifesto for une littérature engagée--rather flippantly dismisses Giraudoux as no more than a stylist. Quoting Giraudoux's saying that "the only concern is finding the style; the idea comes afterwards," he remarks that Giraudoux was wrong, for in his case, "the idea did not come."⁸² This judgment is not only harsh but demonstrably untrue. In a recent study that focuses not on La Guerre de Troie but on such plays as Siegfried and The Madwoman of Chaillot, Agnes Raymond shows that Giraudoux had ideas and that these frequently evolved out of the contemporary political situation. In this respect she quotes a revealing passage from Giraudoux, in which he stresses that his works "must be considered as part of a whole and as a kind of uninterrupted chronicle of the present time."⁸³

⁸¹Jean Giraudoux: His Life and Works (University Park, Pa., 1959), p. 73.

⁸²What is Literature?, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York, 1965), p. 20. For Sartre, of course, style must never precede idea. His concept of "engaged" literature will be gone into more thoroughly in the next chapter.

⁸³Quoted by Raymond, p. 19.

As Madame Raymond points out, Giraudoux's rich and imaginative metaphors are more than whimsical embroidery; they are usually at the heart of his major theme. As an example of this, she cites one of his frequent erotic-political metaphors:

For the last few years, truth no longer has had the strength to restrain itself. All you have to do is to tickle a man or a nation with the tip of your finger for either of them--and formerly it took a long embrace--to have a multiple orgasm of truths. As far as I am concerned, of the thirty family or state secrets I was in possession of when I came of age, certain of which date back to the Wallensteins, of the thirty apparently pure springs from which I alone drank and drew my right to be a sovereign, I have barely five left. You'll see. I, the oldest monarch in Europe, shall be buried with no secrets. ⁸⁴

Though not all of Giraudoux's ideas are this preposterous, he does, according to Madame Raymond, often make a similar link between sexual and political imagery. In fact we can see such a linkage in Electre. The wise Beggar remarks at one point, "If Greek justice lies in Agathe's lap (dans les jambes d'Agathe), that's just what it deserves" (Act II, Scene 7). As we have seen, the question of truth in relation to sexual infidelity is linked with the larger truth regarding the death of Agamemnon. The latter, the assassination of the king, is of course a "state

⁸⁴Quoted by Raymond, p. 22. She points out that this passage first appeared in "Visite chez le Prince," Nouvelle Revue Francaise (October 1, 1923), p. 405, and that Giraudoux "valued the metaphor so highly that he incorporated it in the last act of his first version of the play [Siegfried]"--Raymond, p. 24.

secret," similar to those discussed in a more general way in the passage from Siegfried above. In Electre the same sort of connection is made between the erotic relationship and the relationship of a government to its people. As Egisthe stresses again and again, what is at stake is the prosperity and security of the country: "Why, since I've been Regent, while other cities are devoured by dissension, other citizens by moral crises, are we alone satisfied with other people and with ourselves? . . . Because, in this city, I wage merciless war against all who signal to the gods" (Act II, Scene 3). And again, in a passage suggestive of our own social-political situation, Egisthe says, "In order to avoid racial trouble between our citizens--something that can't help marking human beings as different in the eyes of the gods--I've always given great importance to misdemeanors and paid slight attention to crimes. Nothing keeps the gods so quiet as an equal value set on murder and on stealing bread. I must say the courts have supported me splendidly" (Act I, Scene 3). As the climax of the play approaches, it becomes clear that national security is at stake, for the Corinthians have surrounded the city. Egisthe needs to marry Clytemnestre immediately to save the city, but Electre feels a more compelling need to bring out the truth about the assassination. Thus the conflict between truth and expediency is starkly drawn.

Since Electre was produced in Paris in 1937, the

contemporary relevance of its theme is not difficult to perceive. If France was approaching a crisis when La Guerre de Troie was produced two years earlier, it certainly was at the very brink of a crisis when Giraudoux presented Electre to his countrymen. The choice that confronted France in 1937 was between a compromise peace, which is clearly symbolized by the proposed marriage of expedience between Egisthe and Clytemnestre, and a destructive war, symbolized by the attacking Corinthians and by Oreste's final killing of the king and queen. We must remember, too, that Giraudoux, as a high government official, undoubtedly knew what he was talking about when he spoke of "state secrets" and implied that the government felt impelled to lie to its people in order to preserve the status quo. In the climactic scene of the play, Egisthe asks Electre the key question; he asks if her justice is absolute, if it "consists in reexamining every sin, making every act irreparable." And she replies, "Oh, no! Some years, frost is justice for the trees, other times it's injustice. There are criminals we love, murderers we embrace. But when the crime is an assault on human dignity, infects a nation, corrupts its loyalty, then--no pardon is possible" (Act II, Scene 8). The statement is explicitly political, and it must have carried a great poignancy for its French audience of the late thirties, just as it might for those many Americans of the late sixties who have doubts about

the credibility of their own government or about the official truth regarding the assassination of their leaders. The conflict between Egisthe and Electre is over the fate of the nation, and thus is rooted in their opposing concepts of what constitutes a nation. For Electra, a nation is "when you see a huge face fill the horizon and you look straight at it with pure, brave eyes." But Egisthe, of course, is less concerned with the face than with the body: "There's also a huge body to rule and to nourish." Developing the metaphor further, Giraudoux brings us back, finally, to the issue of truth. For Electre, as the nation is a face, so its truth is in its eyes. When Egisthe states the issue bluntly--"There are truths that can kill nations, Electre"--she counters,

Sometimes, the eyes of a dead nation shine forever. Pray Heaven that will be the fate of Argos! But since my father's death, since our people's happiness came to be founded on injustice and crime, since everyone has become a cowardly accomplice in murder and lies, the city can prosper, sing, dance, conquer, heaven may shine on it, but it will be only a cellar where eyes are useless. Infants suck the breast without seeing it. (Act II, Scene 8)

In spite of all of Egisthe's efforts to delay the revelation of the nation's truth, Electre will not wait--"I've seen too many truths fade away because they were a day too late"--and she persists in bringing it out. We are reminded, finally, of the metaphor from Siegfried: the "multiple orgasm of truths" bursts forth in spite of all efforts at restraint.

Though the currents of conflict are intricate and

complex in this drama, it would seem safe to assume that pure justice is triumphant. However, as one biographer and critic has pointed out, Egisthe's case is so convincing that we cannot help comparing him to the Creon of Anouilh's Antigone, who presents similar views with equal reasonableness and persuasiveness:

. . . just as, in Anouilh's play, the eloquence of Creon sometimes makes us wonder whether in fact Antigone's self-immolation is worth while, so too in Electre Renoir [an actor] must by his performance have raised doubts in some minds as to the validity of Electre's intransigent "purity." Two Giraudoux speak here with equal eloquence, and leave us puzzled.⁸⁵

Although the comparison is apt and can even be extended, as we shall see, to Anouilh's Oreste, the flaw in this view is the assumption that the conflict is purely dialectic and thus the outcome can be determined by weighing the relative eloquence and persuasiveness of the speeches on either side. To be sure, Giraudoux's own emphasis on long, set speeches at the expense of action would foster such an interpretation, but he has also quite deliberately fashioned a plot that would make Electre's act all the more significant because all the more painful. The plot should not be ignored, even when the language is as brilliant as Giraudoux's. Nor need we accept the view of LeSage, who makes a similar point based on his knowledge of Giraudoux's experience in

⁸⁵ Donald Inskip, Jean Giraudoux: The Making of a Dramatist (London, 1958), p. 90.

government service. According to LeSage, the interpretation that maintains that the point of the play is that "disaster is preferable to security obtained by lies, and out of the wreckage a greater and purer nation can be built" is false because it "implies the sort of intransigent thinking that we should hesitate to attribute to a writer who was also a professional diplomat." "Giraudoux knew," he says, "that uncompromising consciences bring misfortune, and that in the world of practical affairs the Aegisthes are right and the Electras wrong. He could not have approved of his heroine."⁸⁶ My own view, however, is that the truth of the play is expressed in its last sentence: "It all has a beautiful name . . . it is called the dawn" (Act II, Scene 10). In other words, out of the ashes of the phoenix will rise a new nation based on justice.

This is the truth of the play, but perhaps, and this may be what LeSage has in mind, it is not the whole truth. For we have not yet reckoned with the gods. Egisthe's speech on the indifference of the gods is one of the most brilliant in the play:

I do believe in the gods. Or rather, I believe I believe in the gods. But I believe in them, not as great caretakers and great watchmen, but as great abstractions. Between space and time, always oscillating between gravitation and emptiness, there are the great indifferences. Those are the gods. I imagine them, not constantly concerned with that

⁸⁶LeSage, p. 75.

moving mould on the earth which is humanity, but as having reached the stage of serenity and universality. (Act I, Scene 3)

He conceives of the gods as "the great indifferences"^L—totally unconcerned with, even unconscious of, human problems. Yet, in a way that proves ominous, Egisthe qualifies this concept of divine laissez faire, first by admitting that the gods can be signalled out of their indifference, and secondly, by acknowledging that "sometimes there seem to be interruptions in human life so opportune and extensive that it is possible to believe in an extraordinary superhuman interest or justice. Such events," he continues ironically, "have something superhuman or divine about them, in that they are like coarse work, not at all well designed" (Act I, Scene 3). By this, he means that a plague will break out, for example, destroying not only the town that sinned but some neighboring innocent town, or war will break out and destroy, along with the degenerate people that caused it, others who are brave and just. Occasionally, there is divine justice, in other words, but because it is divine, it is rather messy.

The irony here--not dramatic irony, for Egisthe is as aware of it as the audience--is that the Beggar, who is most strenuously applauding these speeches, is, or so it is rumored, a god. It soon becomes clear that he is indeed a god and that he is receiving Electre's signal. When Electre reveals herself, she reveals herself to him,

and henceforth the Beggar acts much like Apollo in urging the brother and sister to their final act of assassination.⁸⁷ Of course, the Beggar is also the Chorus, commenting on the action, not to the audience, but to whoever of the other characters will listen. But in the end he reveals himself as truly a god, for it is clear, as Egisthe ominously and ironically predicted, that a superhuman hand is in on the killing--not only because the vulture assists Oreste but because everything--the city, the palace, the populace, and even Oreste and Electre--is destroyed along with the criminals. Moreover, the fact that the Furies assume Electre's age and form as they take up their task implies that Electre herself has been--in the larger perspective of the cosmos--just another avenging fury.

The idea that Giraudoux is expressing here is, in a sense, very close to the traditional Greek religious concept. Certainly, the Greek gods were by no means "the great indifferences" of Giraudoux: they participated quite actively in the affairs of men. But because there was a plurality of them and because each had his own particular sphere of interest, they invariably threw their power and influence on opposite sides of the same conflict, so that the end result was the same as if they

⁸⁷More likely, he is Zeus rather than Apollo, for he speaks of weighing a Baker's wife's hands in the scales, seemingly an ironic allusion to the golden scales of Zeus.

had been totally indifferent. Thus Aeschylus has Apollo commanding Orestes to commit an act whose consequences he can do nothing about--because of the Furies, who are, in fact, antecedent to the Olympians. The major difference between Aeschylus and Giraudoux, of course, lies in their resolutions. Whereas Aeschylus removes the conflict to a more enlightened and civilized state where the wise goddess Athena administers a justice tempered by mercy and by public, human law, Giraudoux shows the conflict destroying the state, but with the hope that a more civilized state will arise.

CHAPTER IV

SARTRE'S THE FLIES AND ANOUILH'S ORESTE

FREEDOM IN OCCUPIED FRANCE

Man, according to Aristotle, is a political animal. Undoubtedly, no society has ever accepted this definition of man as enthusiastically as have the Greeks of the Age of Socrates or the French of the Age of Sartre. For most Americans politics has long been something apart from and even alien to the actual business of living. As a topic it has always been vaguely taboo in "polite conversation," along with the only other subjects of really vital human significance--sex and religion. Although, to be sure, this apolitical attitude has been changing radically during the last decade, particularly among American youth, it still continues to be reflected in our view of literature. Since literature is about "life" and since politics is still felt to be alien to "life," the inclusion of political matters in literature can only be considered an intrusion, a contamination by some external force. Not so for the French or the Greeks. Aeschylus' resolution to the conflicts of the Oresteia was largely political, and it was quite relevant to the political questions of the day. As for Sophocles, he never treated contemporary social issues overtly, but it is unlikely that a man who served as a part-time general for his close friend Pericles

would have remained aloof from such matters. As I have shown, this great poet's Electra can be taken as a most eloquent expression of the spirit of revolution. And of course much of what Euripides wrote, including his Orestes, was directed quite pointedly toward the social-political ills of late fifth-century Athens. Euripides was a favorite target of the great engagé comic poet, Aristophanes, but even he acknowledged that this tragic poet believed in commitment. When in The Frogs Aeschylus asks Euripides what he considers to be the "chief duty of a poet," the latter replies unhesitatingly that it is "to speak truth for the improvement of the City."⁸⁸ Probably all three of the tragedians considered this a prime function of their art, and undoubtedly the French dramatists under consideration here would agree. Giraudoux, we remember, wished his work to be considered as an "uninterrupted chronicle of the present time," and Sartre, the acknowledged spokesman for the French school of engagé literature, has put it thus: "The 'engaged' writer knows that words are action. He knows that to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change."⁸⁹ Thus, for Sartre, too, the function of the writer is "to speak truth for the improvement of the City."

⁸⁸Aristophanes: Four Comedies, trans. Dudley Fitts (New York, 1959), p. 129.

⁸⁹What is Literature? p. 17.

In 1943 the "City" was France; it was a nation that, to use Giraudoux's metaphor, had preserved its body by losing the truth that shone in its eyes. During this period of the Vichy government, the Nazi occupation, and the French resistance, a number of France's foremost playwrights chose to address their people through the disguise of ancient legend. Best known are Sartre for The Flies and Jean Anouilh for his Antigone. It is not so well known that Giraudoux, too, presented his "resistance" drama in Sodom and Gomorrah.⁹⁰ Regarding this play Madame Raymond points out that its title alone was enough to suggest the defeat of France in 1940, for at the time of the armistice, Marshal Petain had addressed his people in words that might well have been an allusion to the destruction of the two Biblical cities for their depravity: "Our defeat is the result of our laxity. The spirit of pleasure is destroying what the spirit of sacrifice built up. What I bid you, first of all, is to effect an intellectual and moral recovery."⁹¹ Says Raymond, "The publication of Petain's speeches in book form in 1941 may actually have triggered the composition of Sodome et Gomorrhe."⁹² Jean-Paul Sartre comments on

⁹⁰ See Raymond, "Theatre of the Occupation," pp. 99-181.

⁹¹ "Appel du 25 juin 1940," La France Nouvelle (Paris, 1941), p. 26. Quoted and translated by Raymond, p. 100.

⁹² Raymond, p. 100.

the mood of the period thus:

At the very moment when we were about to abandon ourselves to remorse, the people of Vichy and the collaborators, by enticing us to push forward, held us back. The occupation was not only the constant presence of conquerors in our towns; it was also on all the walls, in the journals, this unclean image that they wanted us to give ourselves. The collaborators began by appealing to our good faith. "We are conquered," they said, "let's show we're good losers; let's recognize our faults." And, right afterwards: "Admit that the Frenchman is fickle, thoughtless, boastful, egotistic, that he understands nothing about foreign nations, that the war caught our country in utter decay." . . . Before such baseness and such gross deceits, we stiffened, we felt a desire to be proud of ourselves.⁹³

As Jacques Guicharnard says, alluding to Sartre's The Flies: "At that moment the flies of the uneasy conscience were buzzing like the very devil in the murky atmosphere of occupied France."⁹⁴ As for Anouilh's Antigone, it epitomized the No of the Resistance in a highly charged and crystalized form and was understood as such by the audience. What is of immediate relevance here is that prior to writing Antigone and at about the same time that Sartre was working on The Flies, Anouilh made an abortive but most interesting attempt at his own interpretation of the House of Atreus legend with his Oreste.⁹⁵ This

⁹³"Paris sous l'occupation," Situations, III (Paris, 1949), p. 35. (my translation).

⁹⁴"Those Years: Existentialism 1943-1945," Yale French Studies, XVI, 128.

⁹⁵Although Oreste was written in 1942, it was not published until 1945. Antigone, also written in 1942, received its first performance on Feb. 4, 1944. See Leonard Cabell Pronko, The World of Jean Anouilh (Berkeley,

play, too, can be placed in the category of resistance drama.

In Oreste we can see a distillation of some of the dominant features of the older versions of the legend. The Chorus has disappeared; the gods are not even mentioned; and the Furies are conspicuously absent. As Egisthe tells us at the beginning, we have here just the four players--Egisthe, Clytemnestre, Electre, and Oreste--and they are going to play for us the same old game--a game that it takes just four to play. In short Anouilh has stripped the legend down to the bare human situation. One might almost say that he has returned it to pure mythos, except that even in the mythos, the bare outlines of the legend, there is action, whereas in this play, at least in this finished portion of it, there is virtually no action. It would seem likely that Anouilh, like Sartre and Giraudoux, saw the Clytemnestra-Aegisthus-Electra-Orestes quadrangle as an excellent configuration for the political situation of the time. It would be interesting to know, in fact, just why Anouilh chose not to finish this play. One wonders if it might have been his discovery that Sartre was writing a play based on the same legend and with similar political implications. Or, as is more likely, he may have reached the point where he

1961), p. 192, and John Harvey, Anouilh: A Study in Theatrics (New Haven, 1964), p. 177. According to Harvey, "Oreste is generally held to be anterior to Antigone" (p. 94).

decided that his theme could be better expressed through another mythos entirely: that of Antigone. But what, precisely, is Anouilh's theme? And how has he fashioned the legend to express it?

The title would suggest that Anouilh has decided to depart from his ancient and modern predecessors--Sophocles, Euripides, and Giraudoux--in returning to Orestes rather than Electra as his protagonist, and yet one of the striking things about the piece is the way in which Anouilh's Electre keeps intruding and thrusting her presence upon the others. At the very beginning, when the four "players" are rather formally introducing themselves to the audience, Electre immediately sets herself apart from the others by shouting her name. As Egisthe remarks, "She shouted it. She will shout during the whole contest. She is too young. She doesn't know yet how to play the game."⁹⁶ And true to form, Electre continues to interrupt importunately as Egisthe matter-of-factly delivers the background exposition. Finally, at the moment when Egisthe has indicated that the action is about to begin, with his and Clytemnestre's killing at the hands of Oreste, Electre suddenly steps forward and exclaims, "No! I come first!" It is as if Anouilh himself

⁹⁶Original translation. As this fragment has never been published in English translation, I have rendered it in full in the appendix, and subsequent quotations are from this version. The original can be found in Robert de Luppe, Jean Anouilh (Paris, 1959), Appendix, pp. 101-116.

is sensing what Sophocles and Euripides discovered about Electra: because of what she has endured, Electra must come first. As Anouilh's Electre puts it,

From the start I have been alone. I, Electre, alone; since I was quite small, and for always. I was not taken away--I, the daughter. I was allowed to live. I was left here. And I did not need any faithful old man to teach me hate. I learned it all alone. At first this wasn't true; they didn't make me do the dishes. They didn't force me to get water from the well; it was I, it was I who did everything deliberately in order to have it said: "Look; they treat poor Electre, the Queen's daughter, like dirt."

We are reminded of Sophocles' Electra when she says, "I tenant my father's house in these ugly rags / and stand at a scanty table" (ll. 190-191), and again of Orestes in the same play when he speaks of having "to learn to win revenge" (l. 34). And the "faithful old man" is, of course, an allusion to Sophocles' Pedagogue. However, the idea that Electre herself has chosen this life of deprivation--"I . . . did everything deliberately"--strongly echoes the Electra of Euripides when she says, "I am not forced, I chose this slavery myself / to illuminate Aegisthus' arrogance for the gods . . ." (ll. 57-58). In Sophocles, of course, the example of Chrysothemis is a constant reminder that his Electra, too, has chosen the life that she leads. But in that case Electra's defiance is shown as an act of existential freedom, whereas in Electre's case there is something about it that is almost perverse: "I didn't wash; I didn't comb my hair. The robes that my mother gave me I

let become torn, and when I was alone, quite small still, I pulled at the tear with my finger. I rubbed myself on the walls like a leper." When Clytemnestre taunts her daughter with actually wanting her sordid existence, Electre agrees wholeheartedly: "Yes, I wanted it, with all my strength. More than all your dresses, jewels, or cosmetics, more I wanted it."

Anouilh's "heroine" is thus a rather far cry from the nobility of Sophocles' Electra or the pure truth of Giraudoux's Electre. This Electre is perverse, strident, and immature, the last quality being emphasized by the frequent allusions to her having only recently been a little girl. In contrast her antagonist, Egisthe, is reasonable, calm, and worldly wise. It is perhaps here, more than in any other aspect of the play, that Anouilh is most influenced by Giraudoux's interpretation of the legend, for we recall that his Egisthe, too, has a most kingly bearing as well as a sophisticated awareness of the situation. Both Egisthes are conscious not only of their own truth but also of the truth that confronts them in Electre. We recall that there is a sense in which Giraudoux's Egisthe actually loves Electre and awaits her severe, uncompromising justice. Anouilh's Egisthe not only awaits justice; he appears to seek it. This is revealed when Electre discovers that the whole time she has been waiting for Oreste's return Egisthe has been waiting just as anxiously: "I watched you waiting every

evening until the darkness effaced you. I, also, was waiting." When Oreste finally does return, both Clytemnestre and Egisthe testify to the latter's great sense of peace, of release from tension. Says Egisthe, "I went back into the palace strangely tranquil for the first time." And Clytemnestre adds, "And you were good, that evening. You went to bed near me all dressed, without that crease of bitterness that was getting deeper and deeper at the corner of your lips, without those hard words that were always escaping from you toward the end. . . ." The action or "game" of the play has still not begun at this point, and yet Anouilh skillfully merges the expository narration with the stage action so that the mood of the former is rendered through the latter. As Electre describes running to meet Oreste on his return, she actually runs and throws herself into his arms, and as Egisthe and Clytemnestre discuss his new mood of tranquility, they sit together in repose on a bench in the shade. However, just as in Electre Egisthe's bird suddenly descends revealing itself not as an eagle but as a vulture, so is this Egisthe's wise and calm spirit suddenly cast in doubt, for Electre exclaims to her brother, "Don't listen to them; don't listen to them, Oreste! They are acting this repose, this trust, this human tenderness all of a sudden. They are taking possession of innocence, this evening, as they did of your father's kingdom another time. Don't look at them: this

ridiculous, living tableau, it is not they." And she goes on to proclaim that the "assassins" are, in truth, living in fear and hate.

With this speech by Electre the conflict begins to resemble that in Giraudoux's version, for it now becomes a question of whom can we believe. Just as in Electre our belief in the heroine hinges on the veracity of her account of Oreste's fall from his mother's arms, so here Anouilh seems to be developing a situation in which the key credibility issue is Egisthe's alleged change of mood upon Oreste's return. Part of Anouilh's genius is that he is able to balance the two sides of his conflict so perfectly. Undoubtedly, he does this for artistic reasons, i.e., in order to make both sides seem viable and thereby make the conflict at once more dramatic and more genuine, but it is also likely, given the political-social context, that his purpose in making Egisthe so plausible and sympathetic and Electre so strident and perverse is extra-literary. This can best be seen through a comparison with the very similar conflict between Anouilh's Creon and Antigone, for in both Oreste and Antigone he seems to be weighting the argument unnecessarily in favor of the older and more reasonable male. Creon and Egisthe, representing the tyranny of the state--and hence, in contemporary France, the occupation--are the picture of sweet reasonableness, whereas Electre and Antigone, with whom Anouilh's audiences were

to identify, are in many respects irrational and immature. Where Antigone is somewhat naive and sentimental, Electre is unnecessarily vociferous and petulant. Undoubtedly, in both instances Anouilh was overloading the dialectic aspect of the conflict in order not to rouse the suspicion of the Nazi censors. And yet to the French themselves the political aspect of the conflict in Antigone was obvious. According to Hazel E. Barnes,

Apparently it was clear to almost everyone in France that Anouilh was not interested primarily in the individual psychology of anyone in the play but that Antigone's position symbolized that of France under the conqueror. Debates were carried on in the newspaper arguing as to just what was the real message of the play, but the argument was conducted almost always on the political level. At present it seems quite clear that the author was responding to the very early attempts of the Germans to win over the French by a policy of conciliation and that Antigone represents what seemed to Anouilh the right choice-- a refusal to cooperate in any way, this being the only path to freedom.⁹⁷

In this context it is not hard to see Electre, too, as a heroine who makes the "right choice." If, during the period of the occupation, Oreste had been performed, the double-edged irony of Egisthe's first comment on Electre-- "She doesn't know yet how to play the game"--would not have been lost on the audience. For the statement not only implies that she is young and naive; it also implies, in the context of the occupation, when "playing the game" was synonymous with collaboration, that she has integrity and courage.

⁹⁷The Literature of Possibility: A Study in Humanistic Existentialism (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1959), pp. 25-26.

Given the strong likelihood of political connotations in the central conflict, it is possible to perceive other elements in Oreste that would seem to be allusions to the contemporary situation. For example, when Electre charges Egisthe and Clytemnestre with "taking possession of innocence," Anouilh may very well have in mind the attempt of the Vichy government to lay the burden of guilt upon the people. If this is so, Anouilh is handling the theme more obliquely than either Giraudoux or Sartre, but it amounts to the same thing. For if the people themselves are guilty of France's defeat, the collaborationist leaders are, by implication, innocent. By casting themselves in the role of a tender and loving couple, Clytemnestre and Egisthe can hope to transfer the guilt to Electre, the people. Electre, sensing their motive, points out that their marriage is far from being tender and loving, exclaiming with ironic bitterness, "Oh indissoluble sanctity of marriage!" and proclaiming that they are bound only by the body of her dead father. Undoubtedly, Anouilh has in mind the marriage of expedience which Giraudoux in his *Electre* uses to suggest the Vichy collaboration with the Nazis. The common bond is the defeat of France. "They didn't only kill our father," says Anouilh's Electre, "they made him fall the whole of his length."

In this context *Oreste* himself can be assumed to represent the Free French in exile. Anouilh may be

alluding to this when he diverges from all previous interpretations of the legend in showing that Oreste as a very young boy had observed his mother and Egisthe making love. On the surface this kind of personal, domestic touch is reminiscent of Giraudoux's Oreste being dropped by his mother as a baby. The significant difference is that in this case it is Oreste himself, and not Electre, who perceives the event. Thus he, too, has his memories; he does not, like Sophocles' Orestes have "to learn his revenge." In the political context, he is a Frenchman.

As Anouilh's title would suggest, it is Oreste who, were it not for Electre's persistent intrusions, would have been the protagonist of his finished play. It took Jean-Paul Sartre, however, actually to make Oreste his hero. In this respect he resembles Aeschylus more than the other two Greek tragedians, who focused on the plight of Electra. Euripides, to be sure, makes Orestes the protagonist in his play by that name, but, as we have seen, Orestes is alternately too passive a character and too insane a character to be considered that play's hero. Like Aeschylus, furthermore, Sartre includes as a part of his action not only the fateful killing of Egisthe and Clytemnestre but the full aftermath of that deed. Thus, while he begins the action of The Flies at the same point as do Aeschylus in Libation Bearers and Sophocles and Euripides in their Electras, i.e., with Orestes' clandestine return, he brings this "movement" of the mythos to a

climax at the end of Act II and then devotes the third and final act to an action that roughly parallels that of The Eumenides, beginning with Oreste in the sanctuary of the Temple of Apollo (though in Argos, not Delphi) surrounded by the Furies, with the important modification that Electre is with him. The situation at the beginning of Sartre's play is, however, the same as that of Sophocles': Electre is living in miserable but defiant slavery within the palace, and Oreste, with his Pedagogue, returns--free and uninvolved. As Cedric Whitman says of Sophocles' Orestes, "He is singularly free of any emotional involvement with the situation and views it like a stranger or a god."⁹⁸ The same is true of Sartre's Oreste. The difference--what turns out to be the crucial difference--is that the latter has a vague feeling of wanting to be involved, and the action of the play is his doing so. He thus replaces Electra as the protagonist.

Undoubtedly, Sartre was as influenced by Giraudoux's version of Electre as he was by those of the Greeks. This is most readily seen in his handling of such "divine" elements as gods and furies. Like Giraudoux, Sartre brings on stage a god, in this case one who openly reveals himself to be Jupiter, but a Jupiter with his own, distinct, Sartrean personality. As the choice of the Roman "Jupiter" over the Greek "Zeus" would indicate, he

⁹⁸Whitman, p. 155.

is an ironical and even fictional figure, far removed from the genuine divinity of the Zeus of Aeschylus.⁹⁹ The editors of an excellent American edition of the play (in the original) describe him as a "sophisticated, worldly-wise and somewhat weary Roman Jupiter in a late and decadent Greek society, something of a caricature of a god."¹⁰⁰ Sartre makes it clear that he intends the distinction between Jupiter and Zeus when he has Oreste address "Zeus" at a crucial point in the play:

Ah! Zeus, Zeus, king of the sky, I have rarely turned to you, and you have shown me but little favor, yet you are my witness that I have never wished for anything but the Good. At present I am weary, I can no longer distinguish between Good and Evil and I need someone to mark out my road. (Act II, Tableau 1, Scene 4--my translation)

To my knowledge it has never been noted that this invocation of Zeus echoes strongly the famous "Hymn to Zeus" of Agamemnon, which begins,

Zeus: whatever he may be, if this name pleases him in invocation, thus I call upon him. I have pondered everything yet I cannot find a way, only Zeus, to cast this dead weight of ignorance finally from out my brain. (ll. 160-166)

Interestingly, Aeschylus' Chorus are even more tentative than Oreste in their use of the name "Zeus," but like Sartre's hero they are at a point of darkness and

⁹⁹Gilbert's rendering of "Zeus" throughout his English translation is an unnecessary distortion.

¹⁰⁰F. C. St. Aubyn and R. G. Marshall, "Introduction," Les Mouches (New York, 1963), p. 11.

uncertainty; they have nowhere to turn but to Zeus. The two passages are remarkably similar, and there can be little doubt that Sartre intended the parallel. The crucial difference, of course, is that in Aeschylus Zeus does, ultimately, make his divine wisdom manifest, whereas in Sartre it is the fraudulent Jupiter who responds with his "abacadabra" and his bag of tricks.¹⁰¹ Thus, the non-present Zeus has, paradoxically, more validity than the ever-present Jupiter. Sartre's Zeus, according to a French critic, is "the symbol of the Good, the principal moral absolute" whereas his Jupiter is no more than "the patron of all the Egisthes."¹⁰²

As for the Furies, it is quite possible that Sartre's representation of them as Flies was influenced by Giraudoux's loathsome little girls, to whom the Gardener exclaims "You're just like flies!" (Act I, Scene 1).¹⁰³ Sartre's Furies also resemble Giraudoux's

¹⁰¹Of course, even to bring gods on stage, as Sartre and Giraudoux do, is to belittle them. It is worth noting that the Greeks made it a practice never to bring Zeus on stage. Not even in Prometheus Bound, where he is the antagonist, does Zeus actually appear. Aristophanes is continually lowering gods by machine in order to mock them, but never Zeus. As for the lesser gods, it is significant that the tragedian to bring them on stage most consistently is the one who is the most irreverent: Euripides. Sophocles, on the contrary, usually has no gods at all.

¹⁰²Francis Jeanson, Sartre par lui-meme (Paris, 1955), p. 15. Quoted by Aubyn and Marshall, p. 12 (my translation).

¹⁰³It is also possible that Sartre was aware that the Erinyes may have been very fly-like in their origin. Citing Jane Harrison, Prolegomena to the Study of Greek

Eumenides in that they are steadily growing. They are "as big as bumble-bees" to begin with and are described as "getting fatter and fatter" (Act I, Scene 1).¹⁰⁴ As Sartre's Jupiter matter-of-factly explains,

They are only bluebottles, a trifle larger than usual. Fifteen years ago a mighty stench of carrion [Agamemnon's murder] drew them to this city, and since then they've been getting fatter and fatter. Give them another fifteen years, and they'll be as big as toads. (Act I, Scene 1)

They maintain a kind of ubiquitous presence throughout the action until Oreste's killing of his mother when they appear with even greater force. Electre cries out to Oreste,

There they are! . . . They're hanging from the ceiling like clusters of black grapes Presently they'll swoop down on us and I shall

Religion, as her authority, Hazel Barnes says, "The Erinyes almost certainly developed from the Keres, tiny winged creatures who seem in the beginning to have functioned almost like bacteria, causing putrefaction, disease, etc." (Barnes, p. 390, n. 18.)

¹⁰⁴Translated by Stuart Gilbert in No Exit and Three Other Plays (New York, 1955). Some of the subsequent quotations from The Flies will be from this translation, but occasionally I will offer my own and will so indicate in parentheses. My reason for not relying entirely on Gilbert is that his version sometimes appears to me to be either too free, too British, or too, for want of a better word, "loose." In his essay on the theatre, Sartre advocates a dialogue that preserves "an extreme conciseness of statement--elipses, brusque interruptions, a sort of inner tension in the phrases which at once set them apart from the easy-going sound of everyday talk" ("Forgers of Myths," p. 332). I think he is attempting this in The Flies, though it is not often apparent in Gilbert's rather easy-going English. (In order to pin point, as closely as possible, each passage's place in the play, I cite in each case the act, scene, and in some instances, "tableau" number from the original.)

feel thousands of tiny clammy feet crawling over me. Oh, look! They're growing bigger, bigger; now they're as big as bees. (Act II, Tableau 2, Scene 8)

When Oreste asks, "What do the flies matter to us?"

Electre replies, "They're the Furies, Oreste, the goddesses of remorse." Thus, for the first time, just prior to the curtain that ends the second act, they are overtly labeled as Furies; moreover, and this has a greater significance which we shall examine in a moment, they are depicted as goddesses of remorse. Then, dramatically, at the rise of the curtain for Act Three--the "Eumenides" section--they appear as a speaking, chanting, and dancing Chorus. They reveal themselves fully as Furies in the same manner that Giraudoux's Eumenides do at the very end of Electre.

The important thematic difference between these Furies of The Flies and the Erinyes of the Greeks lies in the word "remorse." To be sure, the Furies, as they appear in Euripides' Orestes and even at the end of Aeschylus' Libation Bearers, begin as manifestations of Orestes' personal sense of guilt, but in the Greek view, we must keep in mind, they are also supernatural agents of retribution. Sartre not only presents his Furies as manifestations of remorse but he extends this to a collective remorse or feeling of guilt that hangs over all the people of Argos. This is why the Furies exist, as flies, long before Oreste's crime. These Furies likewise differ from the mythological concept in that they are agents of Jupiter

whereas, traditionally, they were considered as goddesses that antedated and existed independently of the Olympians. By thus making them collective and placing them under Jupiter, Sartre is able to make his point that these Furies are phenomena that have been imposed on man by God. It soon becomes apparent that the collective guilt which the populace has felt ever since Agamemnon's murder is actually a result of a giant hoax that has been foisted on them by Jupiter in order to keep them under his subjection. King Egisthe participates in this hoax, moreover, by sponsoring the annual festival of death on the day of Agamemnon's murder, at which time the people of Argos are conditioned to believe that the ghosts of their dead rise up and haunt them for their sins for 24 hours.¹⁰⁵ Sartre's point is that there is absolutely no necessity for these people to feel remorse; nor is there any necessity, after the second crime, for either Oreste or Electre to feel remorse--a truth which Electre fails to understand. The reason that man does not have to be chained down with remorse is that man is free; he is free of the gods; he is free of any absolute system of morality. But he does not realize that he is free because Jupiter, "God of Death and Flies" (Act I, Scene 4), keeps him in a constant state of abject fear by plaguing him with the Furies and with

¹⁰⁵This, too, is a parallel with Sophocles' Electra, which refers to a festival of dancing and sacrificing mockingly named in Agamemnon's honor (ll. 278-284).

the ghosts of their dead.

As one writer, L. W. Kahn, has pointed out in a perceptive comparison of the freedom theme of The Flies with that of a play by Schiller, the bondage inflicted on the people of Argos by Zeus and his kingly cohort, Egisthe, is very similar to that imposed on the people of Seville by Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor.¹⁰⁶ The Grand Inquisitor maintains that man is too weak to bear the full burden of suffering that must necessarily come with the freedom to choose between good and evil; thus, he asserts the absolute tyranny of the Church, keeping the people in a continual state of terror and denying them all ethical freedom of choice. Likewise, Sartre's Jupiter maintains a rule of terror, and, to do so, he uses the same three forces which the Grand Inquisitor excoriates Christ for failing to use--miracle, mystery, and authority. He asserts his authority, both directly and through Egisthe, his king on earth. As he tells Egisthe, "I made you in my image. A king is a god on earth, glorious and terrifying as a god. . . Each keeps order; you in Argos, I in heaven and on earth . . ."

(Act II, Tableau 2, Scene 5). Also, he constantly holds before man the mystery: "For a hundred thousand years I have been dancing a slow, dark ritual dance before men's

¹⁰⁶L. W. Kahn, "Freedom: An Existentialist and an Idealist View; Sartre's Les Mouches and Schiller's Wilhelm Tell," PMLA (March, 1949), pp. 5-6.

eyes. Their eyes are so intent on me that they forget to look into themselves" (Act II, Tableau 2, Scene 5). And, when the occasion calls for it, he resorts to miracle. When Electre defies the mass superstition by dancing in white at the festival of death, Jupiter, fearing that the people are beginning to be persuaded that they are really free, suddenly flings out his arm and utters an incantation--"Posidon, carabou, carabon, lullaby"--that causes the huge boulder blocking the cave to "rumble across the stage and crash against the temple steps" (Act II, Tableau, Scene 3). The crowd, awe-struck by this miracle, cries out, "Mercy on us!" and falls back into its former state of god-fearing bondage.

To see how Sartre's Oreste asserts his existential freedom, we have to follow him through the play and see him in relation to the other characters. He first appears as the product of a rationalistic and cosmopolitan education at the hands of the Pedagogue.¹⁰⁷ When Oreste expresses regret over not having anything that he can call his own, the Pedagogue replies,

What about your liberal education, Monsieur? That belongs to you, your education, and I fashioned it for you with love, like a bouquet, matching the fruits of my wisdom and the treasures of my experience. Did I not, very early, make you read all the books in order to familiarize yourself with the

¹⁰⁷ Here again I think Gilbert's rendering of "Tutor" is a slight distortion. "Pedagogue" in English, and in French as well I suspect, carries with it slightly pejorative connotations of pedantry, academic liberalism, etc., which are clearly intended by Sartre.

diversity of human opinions and make you travel through a hundred lands, pointing out to you in each case how variable are the customs of man? And now here you are--young, rich and goodlooking, wise as an old man, free of all servitudes and beliefs, without family, country, religion, profession, free for all commitments and knowing that you must never be committed--in short a superior man, capable, to boot, of teaching philosophy or architecture in a great university, and you're complaining! (Act I, Scene 2--my translation)

What better summary of the benefits to be derived from a so-called liberal arts degree! Oreste has earned his "B.A.," at the hands of the Pedagogue, and he is "free." As the latter says, with a Sartrean irony that he apparently is unaware of, Oreste is "free for all commitments" and yet is wise enough to know that he "must never be committed" (ne faut jamais s'engager). But it soon becomes evident that Oreste is vaguely ill at ease with the Pedagogue's "smiling skepticism" and with his lack of commitment in life. The Pedagogue insists that it is his very non-involvement that makes him free, but it is clear that this is only a freedom from and that Oreste is seeking an existential engagement or commitment to life. Later, in the climactic scene with Electre, he is strongly tempted to flee Argos, and thus the world of commitment, and return to the Eden-like world of Athens and Corinth where he can "live at peace." Despairing and confused, he calls upon Jupiter for some sign as to which way to turn, whereupon Jupiter obliges with an "abraxas, abraxas, tsou, tsou," and light flashes out

around the sacred boulder--a sign which Electre mockingly interprets as meaning he should leave for Corinth. But Oreste suddenly realizes that this sign is only a part of the hoax and that it is up to him to choose the other way--the way "down into the abyss of Argos." He realizes that for himself and Electre as well as for the people of Argos he will have to kill the king and queen and take upon himself the burden of his crime. We see him now in contrast to Electre, who, led by her remorse for the crime and her hate for Oreste, defects to Zeus in penitence. Oreste, on the contrary, accepts the burden of responsibility, thus freeing the populace from their bondage of remorse. When Zeus admonishes Oreste for leaving them nothing but futility and despair, Oreste delivers the oft-quoted existential dictum: "They're free; and human life begins on the far side of despair" (Act III, Scene 2). Then, after a long oration to the people, in which he tells them that he has taken possession of all of their sins and remorse and "night-fears," Oreste strides off at the play's end like the pied piper with the Furies shrieking in pursuit.

Sartre found in the House of Atreus mythos the perfect objective correlative, as it were, for his theme of existential freedom. One reason that he succeeded in making a hero of Oreste while Anouilh apparently failed may have been that Sartre was more certain of his theme from the very beginning. Anouilh, as we have seen, also

tried to get his Oreste involved. Realizing that because of the nature of the mythos itself it is hard to think of Oreste as being involved prior to committing his crime, he imbued his Oreste with childhood memories of Clytemnestre and Egisthe in conjugal love-making, but having done this he may have realized that all he had done was to make him a weak echo of Electre. It took Sartre to demonstrate that Oreste's shift from detachment to commitment could be the very action of the play. The significant thing about Sartre's Oreste early in the play is that he has no memories. As Sartre has it, Oreste was sent from the kingdom as a baby and was, in fact, supposed to have been killed but was rescued by some "rich Athenians," who found him in a forest.¹⁰⁸ Thus, as Oreste, now a cultured Athenian, puts it to the Pedagogue, "I have no memories, none whatever" (Act I, Scene 1). In the context of the German occupation, Anouilh's Oreste could, as was suggested earlier, be likened to the Free French in exile, but Sartre's Oreste is clearly removed from the situation in a way that transcends mere geography: Oreste, like so many of Sartre's fictional heroes, is a bourgeois intellectual who finds himself alienated from the plight of an oppressed people. In this case, of course, the oppressed class may be equated with the French under the occupation,

¹⁰⁸The resemblance to the early years of Oedipus must be more than coincidental. For a discussion of other interesting parallels between The Flies and the Oedipus mythos, see next chapter.

and their condition is shown, in its negative aspects, by the mood of remorse among the people of Argos, and, in its positive aspects, by Electre's resistance. We have already called attention to the mea culpa attitude that the Vichy government was foisting on its people during the occupation. The link with the plague of remorse in The Flies is spelled out clearly by Philip Thody:

The official policy of the Vichy government was to tell the French people that the defeat in 1940 had come as a just punishment for their frivolity and godlessness in the inter-war years, and that they must be prepared to suffer to expiate their sins. This policy received the support of part of the Catholic church, with the result that Sartre was able to show religion collaborating with the temporal powers in Argos in order to maintain that "moral order" which was the motto of the Vichy regime. . . . Orestes, the spokesman of the Resistance movement, will kill both Aegisthus, the German invader, and Clytemnestra, the French collaborator who accepted the invader and welcomed him in.¹⁰⁹

As Electre explains it to Oreste, "Here everyone cries his sins on the housetops. On holidays you'll often see a worthy shopkeeper dragging himself along on his knees, covering his hair with dust, and screaming out that he's a murderer, a libertine, a liar, and all the rest of it" (Act I, Scene 5).

Electre herself refuses to feel remorse, and through her oppression and through her defiance becomes, in the first act, more of a symbol for the resistance than is Oreste, who is still uncommitted. Her oppression, first

¹⁰⁹Jean-Paul Sartre: A Literary and Political Study (New York, 1960), pp. 72-73.

of all, is revealed to be even greater than that of Electre in Anouilh. Where Anouilh's Electre has to get water from the well, Sartre's has to herd the pigs and take out the garbage--"ashes from the hearth, peelings, scraps of offal crawling with maggots, a chunk of bread too filthy even for pigs" (Act I, Scene 3)--which, of course, she perversely dumps at the feet of a statue of Jupiter as an "offering." Anouilh's Electre has to wash the dishes, but Sartre's is also required to wash all of the king's and queen's underwear. "Such dirty underwear it is," says Electre, "and full of stains. All their underclothing, the slips and undershirts that have covered their rotten bodies, the nightgowns that clothe Clytemnestre when the King shares her bed: I have to wash all of it" (Act I, Scene 4--my translation). As she tells her brother, she is "the least of the servants in the palace." Anouilh can be just as sordid, for his Electre, we may recall, is considered a whore by the neighborhood boys, but Sartre's sordidness is all on the side of pointing up the degree of Electre's oppression. As with Sophocles' Electra, moreover, the greater Electre's resistance the greater becomes her oppression. Thus when she defies Egisthe by dancing in her white dress, he banishes her: "You shall go hence barefooted, with nothing in your hands, wearing that shameless dress" (Act II, Tableau 1, Scene 3). After her proud and joyous dance has failed, however, she becomes even more of a

resistance figure than before. She angrily tells Oreste, whom she still believes to be the carefree Philebus from Corinth,

You came with your hungry eyes in your sweet, girl's face, and you made me forget my hate; I opened my hands and I let slide to my feet my only treasure. I wanted to believe that I could cure the people here with words. You saw what happened: they like their sickness, they need a familiar wound which they can carefully maintain with the scratching of their dirty fingernails. It's by violence that they must be cured, for one cannot conquer evil except by another evil. (Act II, Tableau 1, Scene 4--my translation)

This is the familiar excoriation of the liberal by the radical. Electre has shifted from the protest phase to the revolutionary phase. The ethic of "conquer an evil by another evil" is what Sophocles' Electra holds to throughout; it is the ethic of revolution. Sartre's Electre, however, is a radical without being an existentialist, for after her and Oreste's violent act, she fails to accept responsibility in the manner of Oreste and lapses into a mood of remorse very similar to that of her mother after the murder of Agamemnon. Thus, just as, previously, Electre acted as a positive foil to Oreste's uncommitted liberalism, she now becomes the negative foil to his existential freedom. As Philip Thody says (above), it is Oreste who is "the spokesman of the Resistance movement." Simone de Beauvoir testifies to this when she recalls the effect upon her of the first performance of The Flies: "How moved I was when the curtain rose! It was impossible to be mistaken about the

meaning of the piece; falling from the mouth of Oreste, the word Freedom exploded in a burst of lightning."¹¹⁰

The word "freedom" is, of course, as emotion-laden as it is ambiguous. Certainly, as de Beauvoir uses it, the word seems to have all of the political-social connotations that it has when it "falls from the mouths" of black people in this country today. And undoubtedly Sartre intended the word to have this kind of explosive force. However, it is also clear that he is using the word philosophically, somewhat in the sense of "free will." Sartre has, in fact, been frequently criticized for confusing political freedom with metaphysical freedom. The confusion, however, exists not in Sartre but in the minds of his critics. Perhaps the most concrete illustration of what Sartre means by "freedom" is his famous statement that "Never were we freer than under the German occupation."¹¹¹ These few words say a great deal. Principally, they show us that for Sartre "being free" has nothing to do with the actual achievement of what we normally think of as political, social, or economic "freedom." As he puts it in Being and Nothingness, "The formula 'To be free' does not mean 'to obtain what one has

¹¹⁰ La Force de l'age (Paris, 1960), p. 553. Quoted by Aubyn and Marshall, p. 7 (my translation).

¹¹¹ "La Republique du Silence," Situations, III (Paris, 1949), p. 11 (my translation). This is the opening sentence of the volume. (In French: Jamais nous n'avons ete plus libres que sous l'occupation allemande.)

wished' but rather 'by oneself to determine oneself to wish' (in the broad sense of choosing). In other words success is not important to freedom."¹¹² When one is in prison, says Sartre, he is free insofar as he chooses to act freely, e.g., to try to escape or to resist. By the same token, under the German occupation or, for that matter, under any form of oppression, one is free at the moment that he chooses to resist. It makes little difference whether he actually succeeds in liberating himself or his people through his resistance. Oreste, as we recall, is "liberated" when he returns to Argos from Athens, but he is not existentially "free" until he chooses to "descend into the abyss" that is Argos and undertake his deed. He may or may not become "liberated" again in the future, but he is still free at the play's end even though he carries the terrible burden of the Furies, for he chooses to carry that burden.

Sartre, however, takes the concept of freedom much deeper than this, not only in Being and Nothingness but in The Flies. As we have seen in the analogy we drew between The Flies and the "Legend of the Grand Inquisitor," Sartre's whole point is that we are all free--that man is, by definition, a free being. Man's consciousness automatically makes him free; it is this that makes him, in Sartre's terminology, a poursoi, a "for-itself" as

¹¹²Being and Nothingness (abridged), trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York, 1966), p. 459.

distinguished from other things in the universe, each of which exist en-soi, or "in-itself." Man's consciousness puts him constantly outside of himself; he is constantly transcending himself; he is, in short, constantly having to choose himself. It is not really a question, then, of one's choosing to be free, of, as Sartre puts it, "determining oneself to wish." One cannot avoid choosing. This is why, in the well known phrase, man is "condemned to be free."¹¹³ Possibly it is just here that one could legitimately argue that Sartre is trying to have his freedom both ways, that he is trying to say both that man is free and that man should know himself to be free. However, the key, for Sartre, as for all existentialists, is awareness. To act in a way that is truly free, one must be aware that he is free. This, of course, is what finally distinguishes Oreste from the others. As Jupiter says, "Oreste knows that he is free." This, in a sense, is what defines the existentialist: all men are free, but only the existentialist knows that he is free. If one is not aware of his freedom, he is, according to Sartre, living in mauvaise foi--literally, "bad faith," or, more freely, "self-deception."¹¹⁴ Such

¹¹³ Being and Nothingness, p. 415 (my emphasis).

¹¹⁴ Hazel Barnes consistently translates it as "bad faith," but Walter Kaufmann, for one, prefers "self-deception" as being more descriptive of what is meant. See his discussion of the term in his Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre (Cleveland, 1956), p. 222. See also Barnes' rejoinder to Kaufmann in The Literature of Possibility, p. 50, n.

is the case with Oreste before the deed and Electre after the deed. Oreste deceives himself into thinking it is really possible to be uninvolved, and Electre deceives herself when she thinks she can deny any responsibility for the crime yet cannot cast off her remorse. Her condition of bad faith gives her security, perhaps, but it also enslaves her to the godhead: "I will obey your law," she cries to Jupiter, "I will be your creature and your slave Save me from the flies, from my brother, from myself! Do not leave me lonely and I will give up my whole life to atonement" (Act III, Scene 3). Oreste, on the other hand, is totally alone, but his responsible commitment frees him from divine control; as Jupiter confides to Egisthe, "Once freedom lights its beacon in a man's heart, the gods are powerless against him" (Act II, Tableau 2, Scene 5).

Sartre's concept of freedom is, of course, rooted in that statement which constitutes the ontological starting point for all existential thought: existence precedes essence. For the existentialist the only given is existence itself. We look, and suddenly it, whatever it is, is there; it confronts us. Only then, after its existence, can we define it, can we say that it has "roundness" and "hardness" and "blackness," can we, in short, apply to it its essences. As Sartre insists again and again, this is just as true for man himself. Man's existence, however, is not an entity, an in-itself;

it is more like a process, which is the for-itself. Perhaps the best image for man is an arrow in flight, but an arrow with no substance--a vector. It is there, it flashes by; we can not "fix" it or examine it, we can only wonder at what direction it will take. Thus there is nothing static about man; there is nothing that we can call "human nature." "For Sartre as for Hegel," says Hazel Barnes, "essence is what has been. Sartre calls it man's past. Since there is no pre-established pattern for human nature, each man makes his essence as he lives."¹¹⁵ This can be seen when applied to human history. For many, history is a kind of evolving or unfolding, a process of human nature manifesting itself anew again and again. For Sartre it is the accretion that builds up behind man as he ceases to exist. It becomes an essence only when it is over with.

It is helpful to return to Giraudoux at this point, for his approach to the matter of existences and essences is a good example of what Sartre's is not. It is, in fact, on this philosophical issue that Sartre has been most critical of Giraudoux. In 1940, when Giraudoux had a well-established literary reputation and when the younger Sartre was still relatively unknown, Sartre wrote an article titled "Jean Giraudoux and the Philosophy of

¹¹⁵"Key to Special Terminology," Being and Nothingness, p. 549.

Aristotle." Although in it he principally discusses Giraudoux's novels, specifically a minor work that had just appeared called Choix des Elues, his philosophical criticism applies equally well to Giraudoux's Electre. What makes Giraudoux an Aristotelian, in Sartre's view, is that he is constantly depicting things and people as revealing their essences. For both the ancient philosopher and the modern author, says Sartre, "man's freedom lies less in the contingency of his evolution than in the exact realization of his essence."¹¹⁶ This is, of course, directly contrary to the existential view of man's freedom, for if one can be said to realize his essence, his essence must have preceded his existence. In Electre, as we have observed, characters are continually "revealing" themselves, which is to say that they are realizing their hidden "essences." Oreste reveals himself, first as orphan, then as avenger. Egisthe reveals himself as tyrant when the hovering "bird," which in a sense is his essence, is seen to be not an eagle but a vulture. Electre reveals herself to be the "guardian of truth." Even the Eumenides, who have been growing throughout, finally reveal their "true natures" as Furies when they become exactly the same height and figure as Electre and hound Oreste into exile. The rapidly burgeoning Eumenides are

¹¹⁶"Jean Giraudoux and the Philosophy of Aristotle," Literary and Philosophical Essays, trans. Annette Michelson (New York, 1955), p. 57.

an image for the whole movement of the play; everything is a growth, an unfolding. As Sartre says in his essay, Giraudoux's literature is full of beginnings: "We are led from one beginning to another, through an awakening world."¹¹⁷ The prevailing atmosphere in Giraudoux is that of morning. In his only allusion to Electre Sartre points out that it "ends in catastrophe and at dawn."¹¹⁸ Thus the freedom of Giraudoux's characters is, for Sartre, rather questionable. They are, perhaps, free in that their acts are not seen as determined by environmental and hereditary forces, but they are really only free to develop their essences. Just as "a circle is a circle," says Sartre, so is a character of Giraudoux a "scientist-husband" or a "young boy meant to suffer in love."¹¹⁹ Sartre concedes, however, that Giraudoux's characters do seem to realize their essences spontaneously: "Man conforms to his archetype of his own free will; he is constantly choosing himself as he is."¹²⁰ For Sartre this kind of freedom, however, differs little from that of the cucumber. The only real freedom is that in which man chooses himself totally, i.e., out of nothingness; he literally makes himself up as he goes along. As Dolores

¹¹⁷Ibid., p. 51.

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹Ibid., p. 56.

¹²⁰Ibid.

Mann Burdick says, in her analysis of character and freedom in Electre and The Flies, "For Giraudoux . . . a character 'is' before he acts; for Sartre the process is reversed."¹²¹ This formula, of course, is too neat. For Sartre, a character acts as he 'is,' not before he 'is.' He says, "Human reality does not exist first in order to act later; but for human reality, to be is to act, and to cease to act is to cease to be."¹²² In The Flies Oreste does not suddenly reveal himself as the "true" Oreste, although Electre reacts as if this were the case when she calls him Oreste for the first time; rather he chooses himself at that crucial moment, just as he will continue to do at each subsequent moment.

It is possible to argue, of course, that it makes little difference whether one perceives human action in the manner of Sartre or of Giraudoux. As Miss Burdick says at the conclusion of her analysis, "One is tempted to suspect that Giraudoux's Electre who at last 'announces her essence' by committing her fatal deed is not so different in kind from Sartre's Oreste who 'discovers his liberty' in the same way."¹²³ However, in terms of the themes of the two dramas, the divergent concepts of character are crucial. Perhaps Giraudoux's theme could be called the revelation of truth and Sartre's, the

¹²¹"Concept of Character in Giraudoux's Electre and Sartre's Les Mouches," French Review, XXXIII (December, 1959), p. 135.

¹²²Being and Nothingness, p. 452.

¹²³Burdick, p. 136.

manifestation of freedom. As we have seen, Giraudoux has altered the basic mythos so that the truth of Agamemnon's death is unknown, and he has added a sub-plot which develops the issue of truth and deception. Everything in the play works toward the final revelation of truth near the play's end when the Beggar tells "the way it all happened."

Truth, after all, is an essence. This particular truth, moreover, has to do with events in man's past, which for Sartre is synonymous with human essence. Of course, when the truth is revealed it becomes a tragic and destructive force in the present; nevertheless, the issue with truth is whether or not it is to be revealed. In The Flies, on the other hand, revelations of any kind would be irrelevant, for the issue here is not truth but freedom. The manner of Agamemnon's death in the past is important only insofar as it determines who should be taking responsibility for that act in the present. Oreste does not act to avenge a dead father but to save the city from the existing plague and, more importantly, to commit himself. Thus, while Electre is a play of revelations, The Flies is a play of deeds. In the political context one could venture the suggestion that in pre-war France, where the people lived in a state of false complacency, the issue of governmental credibility was still a crucial one. But after the capitulation and defeat, this issue no longer seemed relevant; under the occupation it mattered little whether the government told the people the truth when it had

already taken their freedom. Under oppression the only relevant political issue is freedom from that oppression. In both Electre and The Flies, then, the author's concept of character is integrally linked to his thematic purpose.

One cannot understand fully what Sartre means by freedom unless he comes to grips with this writer's concept of "situation." On the surface one would suppose an individual's situation to be the external circumstances in which he is placed. But as Sartre uses the term this is definitely not the case. The individual is part of his situation; he in fact exists only in situation. Thus according to Sartre it would be wrong to think of the situation as consisting of limits to one's freedom, for this would be to make of it something external. Actually, one experiences his freedom only in and through his situation. As Sartre puts it, "I am never free except in situation."¹²⁴ Dolores Burdick comes close to an adequate synonym when she suggests the word "plight,"¹²⁵ for this term implies that one is inextricably bound up with his situation. However, "plight" is limiting in that it tends to connote only those situations that are awkward or even dangerous; moreover, it implies that the individual is no more than a passive creature of his situation. For Sartre, there is always a sense in which a man chooses his

¹²⁴Being and Nothingness, p. 485.

¹²⁵"Imagery of the 'Plight' in Sartre's Les Mouches," French Review, XXXII (January, 1959), 243.

situation. He uses the illustration of one's being confronted with a steep rock, which he is unable to climb. "Here I am," says Sartre, "at the foot of this crag which appears to me as 'not scalable.'"¹²⁶ The rock is only "not scalable," of course, because he contemplates scaling it. As Sartre puts it, "The rock appears to me in the light of a projected scaling--a secondary project which finds its meaning in terms of an initial project which is my being-in-the-world. . . . For the simple traveler who passes over this road and whose free project is a pure aesthetic ordering of the landscape, the crag is not revealed either as scalable or as not-scalable; it is manifested only as beautiful or ugly."¹²⁷ The latter project is precisely that of Oreste in Act One of The Flies. Oreste, who is "traveling to improve my mind" (Act I, Scene 1), can only react to the palace at Argos aesthetically: "I am looking at a huge, gloomy building, solemn and pretentious in the worst provincial taste" (Act I, Scene 2) and again, contemplating the palace door, "That's the Dorian style, isn't it? And what do you make of that gold inlay? I saw the like at Dodona; a pretty piece of craftsmanship" (Act I, Scene 2). The palace, and by extension the city of Argos, only become Oreste's situation when he chooses to make them

¹²⁶ Being and Nothingness, p. 464.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

his situation, when he decides to take that other path-- in the language of Being and Nothingness, the other "project"--that "leads down to the city," "down into the depths" (Act II, Tableau 1, Scene 4).

Sartre's concept of the "theatre of situations" is, of course, a logical outgrowth of this way of viewing human action. It also is another way of countering the prevailing tendency to view man as a static entity, or as an essence, or, in the context of drama, as a "character." In his essay "Situation of the Writer in 1947," Sartre says,

The theatre was formerly a theatre of "characters." More or less complex, but complete, figures appeared on the stage, and the situation had no other function than to put these characters into conflict and to show how each of them was modified by the action of the others. I have elsewhere shown how important changes have taken place in this domain; many authors are returning to the theatre of situation. No more characters; the heroes are freedoms caught in a trap, like all of us.¹²⁸

The allusion is probably to his Theatre Arts article, "Forgers of Myths," which is the statement of this concept that is best known to American readers. What the younger French playwrights of the 40's were trying to get away from, says Sartre in this article, was the kind of pre-war theatre that focussed on characters and brought in "situations" merely to put them in stronger relief. "The best plays of this period," writes Sartre, "were psychological studies of a coward, a liar, an ambitious

¹²⁸What is Literature?, p. 287.

man or a frustrated one."¹²⁹ The playwright of the "theatre of situations," on the other hand, is interested in portraying character only insofar as he exists and, therefore, acts in situation. This does not preclude the possibility of strong characters; it simply means that the character is what he does and no more. As Sartre says of Anouilh's *Antigone*, "She represents a naked will, a pure, free choice; in her there is no distinguishing between passion and action."¹³⁰ There can be heroes in the theatre of situations, but they are to be thought of as "freedoms caught in a trap." "In a sense," says Sartre, "each situation is a trap--there are walls everywhere."¹³¹

The most interesting thing about Sartre's theory of drama, in light of the comparative study that we are undertaking here, is the way in which it seems to parallel some of the basic concepts in Aristotle's Poetics. Aristotle, as we know, places his emphasis on action and plot; drama, for him, is primarily "an imitation of an action." Although Sartre's word, "situation," appears rather static by contrast, it should be clear by now that the concept is integrally related with the idea of human action. In a lecture given recently at the Sorbonne,

¹²⁹"Forgers of Myths: The Young Playwrights of France," Theatre Arts (June, 1946), p. 324.

¹³⁰Ibid., p. 325.

¹³¹What is Literature?, p. 287.

Sartre makes it clear that he conceives of action as being at the very heart of drama:

The theatre being an image, gestures are the image of action, and (here is something never said since the advent of bourgeois theatre and which must nevertheless be said) dramatic action is the action of characters. People always think that dramatic action means great gestures, bustle. No, that's not action, that's noise and tumult. Action, in the true sense of the word, is that of the character; there are no images in the theatre but the image of the act, and if one seeks the definition of theatre, one must ask what an act is, because the theatre can represent nothing but the act.¹³²

Except for the inevitable allusion to things bourgeois, this could be right out of Chapter Six of the Poetics. Indeed, considering the degree to which Sartre takes issue with Aristotle's philosophy, as in his essay on Giraudoux, his indebtedness, conscious or otherwise, to this ancient philosopher's aesthetics is remarkable. Sartre's view of the theatre as an "image of action" is very close to Aristotle's concept of "imitation of an action." It is clear from the way Aristotle uses the word "imitation" (mimesis) that he means much what Sartre does by "image."¹³³ It is also clear from the way that Sartre describes what he means and does not mean by "action" that here, too, his concept coincides with Aristotle's praxis. It is significant in this regard that Sartre

¹³²"Beyond Bourgeois Theatre," Tulane Drama Review (March, 1961), p. 4.

¹³³See S. H. Butcher's excellent discussion, "'Imitation' as an Aesthetic Term," Aristotle's Theory of Poetry and Fine Art (London, 1895), pp. 121-162.

frequently relies on this Greek word for action, praxis, when he argues for an engagé literature.¹³⁴ For both Sartre and Aristotle action in the theatre is not to be equated with activity. It is, according to Sartre, "the action of characters," of "the act"; or, as Aristotle puts it, "action implies personal agents."¹³⁵ Both theorists clearly demonstrate their emphasis on action by bringing in character only parenthetically to show what the action is of. Aristotle makes this point even stronger when he says, "Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life, and life consists in action, and its end is a mode of action, not a quality."¹³⁶ Clearly, Aristotle would be opposed to a "theatre of character": "Dramatic action," he says in the Poetics, "is not with a view to the representation of character: character comes in as subsidiary to the actions."¹³⁷ Moreover, the way in which Aristotle defines character (ethos) is strikingly existential: "Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids. Speeches, therefore, which do not make this manifest, or in which the speaker does not choose or avoid anything whatever, are not expressive of

¹³⁴ See What Is Literature?, pp. 233-235, also pp. 247, 285, and 290.

¹³⁵ Poetics, VI, 5.

¹³⁶ Ibid., VI, 9.

¹³⁷ Ibid., VI, 10.

character."¹³⁸ As Sartre would put it, man is the choices that he makes.

The parallels between these views on drama are of utmost significance, for both writers speak with some authority regarding the two periods of drama that come under our purview. Aristotle is of course the acknowledged authority on the great period of Athenian tragedy that preceded his own century. Sartre is at least the self-acknowledged authority on the French drama of the forties, a drama of which he himself was a practitioner. Each writer, moreover, made his critical judgment on a certain type of drama the basis for a general theory of literature, and each made his theory an integral part of a whole philosophy, other parts of which he expounded elsewhere. It should be evident by now that their view of drama is, by and large, an accurate description of the kinds of plays we have been analyzing. Among the Greeks only Euripides can be said to be writing a "theatre of character." As Hazel Barnes has pointed out, his *Electra* is the only one that becomes a full, three-dimensional figure, portrayed in terms of her psychological character. Aristotle himself demonstrates, more by what he does not say about Euripides than what he does say, that this tragedian did not entirely fit his conception of drama as "imitation of an action." Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, on the

¹³⁸Ibid., VI, 17. Ethos, of course, is the root of our word "ethic."

other hand, is unquestionably, as Miss Barnes says, a "theatre of situations." As she points out, Aeschylus' characters "are not wholly lacking in individuality, particularly not Clytemnestra nor Agamemnon, but all are subordinate to the basic problem posited by their situation."¹³⁹ As for Sophocles, he is, as we have seen, very existential in his treatment of his heroine. As Miss Barnes says, Sophocles' version "focuses upon the person of Electra, who has chosen to identify her life so completely with her hatred of her mother and her mother's lover that she is little more than the embodiment of the will for vengeance. In existentialist terms, one would say that she has chosen herself as revenge and that Sophocles is interested in showing us the effect of this choice upon her life before and during the act in which she finds her fulfillment."¹⁴⁰ Certainly it is Sophocles that Aristotle most consistently holds up as the paragon, particularly his Oedipus the King. I hope to show in a later chapter that all of Sophocles' extant dramas constitute a "theatre of situations."

Among the three French dramatists we have discussed, perhaps Giraudoux, with his emphasis on a

¹³⁹Barnes, p. 19. Cf. John Jones' discussion of the Oresteia in On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy (New York, 1962), pp. 82-110. Jones does an excellent job of debunking the tendency of critics to convert all Greek drama as well as Aristotle's theory to an emphasis on character rather than action.

¹⁴⁰Ibid.

character's hidden essence, conforms more closely to the pre-war, "bourgeois" concept than he does to Sartre's "theatre of situations," and yet his *Electre* certainly bears some resemblance to the "naked will," the fusion of "passion and action," that Sartre sees in Anouilh's *Antigone*. Anouilh himself is, of course, one of Sartre's prime examples of the writer of "theatre of situations." In fact "Forgers of Myths" is, in part, a defense of Anouilh's *Antigone* against the New York critics, who apparently reacted negatively when it first appeared on Broadway. We will analyze *Antigone* in a later chapter, but we have already seen how Anouilh's *Oreste* is almost a prototype for the "theatre of situations." Ultimately, of course, Sartre has in mind what he has been attempting in his own plays, an obvious example being *No Exit*, which quite literally has its characters entrapped between walls. As for *The Flies*, we have seen how *Oreste* chooses himself, how he "finds" his freedom, only in situation. The one thing that can be said about all of these dramatists, Greek and French, whether they actually write "theatre of situations" or not, is that they are, in the full Sartrean sense, engagé--they are not only writing about the world, they are acting upon the world.

PART II

THE HOUSE OF LABDACUS

CHAPTER V

GIDE'S OEDIPE: "ENGAGED" HUMANISM

In the terms of our controlling metaphor, the transition from the legend of the House of Atreus to that of the House of Labdacus¹ constitutes a change in bottles. Our study of the various ancient and modern treatments of the first of these legends shows us, if nothing else, that it is truly amazing how many varieties of wine can be poured into the same bottle. The corollary to this observation, of course, is that it is also rather amazing how two different bottles can contain very similar wines. We have already seen, for example, how Anouilh, apparently dissatisfied with one bottle, the House of Atreus legend, abandoned it and chose another, the House of Labdacus legend, in which to pour the same (or at least very similar) wine. We shall also see, as we proceed in our comparative analysis, that the theme of freedom, which both Sartre and Sophocles introduced in their interpretations of the House of Atreus legend, is likewise developed,

¹Although the name "Labdacus" is relatively unfamiliar in Greek mythology, I have chosen it arbitrarily to designate this particular mythos. Just as it would be misleading to speak of the "Orestes Legend," since Electra is the more dominant figure in so many versions, so would it be wrong to speak of the "Oedipus Legend" if we mean to include the story of Antigone. Labdacus, being Oedipus' grandfather, bears the same relationship to him as Atreus does to Orestes, and it is for this reason that I speak of the House of Labdacus.

though in very different ways, by Gide and Anouilh in their Oedipe and Antigone respectively. We shall take up Gide's Oedipe first, with allusions to Sartre's The Flies by way of comparison and allusions to Jean Cocteau's The Infernal Machine by way of contrast; then we shall examine Anouilh's Antigone; and finally we shall return to Sophocles, not only his Oedipus the King and Antigone but his other plays.

One reason for putting the French before Sophocles, thereby reversing the chronological progression followed in Part One, is that Sophocles' versions of the House of Labdacus legend are so well known. His Oedipus the King and Antigone are not only the definitive Greek versions of these two great stories, they are the only Greek versions. A number of tragedians tried their hand at the Oedipus mythos, but none of their interpretations remains.² The only other extant plays on the legend treat segments of it that can be considered peripheral.³ Only Sophocles

²James Jones--On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy, p. 141, n.--points out that there were "ten or more poets, apart from Sophocles, who wrote Oedipus tragedies."

³Aeschylus' Seven Against Thebes dramatizes the Theban civil war, which ends in the mutual slaying of Oedipus' sons, Eteocles and Polyneices; thus it covers the events just prior to the opening of Antigone. Euripides' Phoenician Women, much of which is later interpolation, covers roughly the same period but, typically, includes all the characters associated with the legend--including Oedipus and Jocasta, both of whom are still alive--and overlaps somewhat into the action of Antigone and also of Oedipus at Colonus, which of course is Sophocles' account of Oedipus' death in exile.

actually renders those stories in which Oedipus and Antigone have their famous "moments of truth." To be sure there has been a long tradition of subsequent reinterpretations and adaptations of Sophocles' plays. Versions of Oedipus, for example, have been done by Seneca in the Roman period, Corneille in seventeenth century France, and Voltaire eighteenth century France. However, each of these writers has returned to Sophocles for the basic mythos. Sophocles himself, as we shall see later, made very significant alterations in the House of Labdacus legend, but there is a sense in which his interpretation is the mythos. One result of this is that the French dramatic interpretations of this legend tend to be even more self-conscious than those of the House of Atreus legend, for the modern playwright is constantly aware that his Antigone or his Oedipus is a reinterpretation of Sophocles' Antigone and Sophocles' Oedipus. We can readily see this self-consciousness in Andre Gide's Oedipe, which was completed in 1930 and is thus the earliest of all the French plays in our study.

The opening words of Gide's play are, as in Sophocles, spoken by Oedipe himself, but the effect is quite different from that great hero's expression of concern for his people. "Here I am," says Oedipe, "all present and complete in this instant of everlasting time . . ." (Act I).⁴ The "Here I am" calls to mind

⁴Translated by John Russell in Two Legends: Oedipus

Anouilh's Oreste, which begins with Egisthe's "So. Here we are," and the effect is very similar: it calls attention to the characters qua characters. Oedipe is saying, in effect, you have seen me before and now you will see me again. Like the goddess Athena, a mythical hero is always born full-blown, in his manhood and at his moment of crisis, from the brow of the author. Also, of course, Oedipe is calling attention to himself as actor on a stage, for he goes on to say that he is here "like someone who might come down to the front of the stage and say: 'I am Oedipe.'" Like Anouilh, Gide, in calling attention to the myth qua myth, is also making the audience aware of the play qua play. This form of theatricalism is quite obvious in the opening speech of Gide's Chorus, in which they immediately explain to the audience that their function is "to represent the opinion of the majority" (Act I). Of course, the very presence of a Chorus in a modern play is an implicit allusion to the original Greek drama, and it is significant that although we do not find a Chorus in Electre or The Flies, we do find it in Anouilh's Antigone, albeit in a rather different form. Just as the Greek Choruses were sometimes thought to split into two groups to deliver their strophe and antistrophe, Gide frequently divides his into a "Right-hand Chorus" and a "Left-hand Chorus." It thus falls to the Right-hand Chorus

and Theseus (New York, 1950). Subsequent quotations are from this translation.

to divulge the news of the Theban plague in the following manner: "We should prefer to hide it from you; but the action of this drama could not proceed unless we give you a most lamentable piece of news. The plague--since we must give it its real name--continues to bring mourning to Thebes" (Act I). We shall see how the plague relates to Gide's happiness motif, but what is noteworthy here is the blatant theatricalism involved in handing the audience this piece of exposition so that the action can proceed.

That Gide's drama is self-conscious not only of itself but of Sophocles' Oedipus the King is revealed when, immediately after we learn that Creon is expected back from Delphi with news from the oracle, Creon himself enters. Although in Sophocles it is Oedipus who announces that he has sent Creon on this mission, here it is the Left-hand Chorus who reminds him of it and it is Oedipe who remarks Creon's arrival:

Left-hand Chorus: You yourself have been good enough to dispatch the excellent Creon, your brother-in-law, to the sanctuary, he will soon be here to give us the oracle's much-awaited answer.

Oedipe: Here he is, just back at this very moment.
(Enter Creon.) (Act I)

For one familiar with Sophocles, the effect is doubly comic. Sophocles manages to obscure his coincidences through the compelling force of his action, but Gide, by calling attention to the coincidence, is parodying Sophocles in very much the same way that Euripides, in Electra, mocks Aeschylus' handling of the recognition

scene. The same kind of comic self-consciousness is seen again when Oedipe asks Jocaste how she could have known, when she married him, that Laius was dead. Replies Jocaste, "Dear, dear Oedipe, do not call attention to it. None of the historians has noticed yet" (Act III). Gide is alluding to the rather astonishing fact that in Oedipus the King it is implied that Jocasta did not actually learn of Laius' death until after Oedipus became her husband and king, for she says that she was told what happened by the one servant who survived the incident after "he came home again / and saw you king and Laius was dead."⁵ Gide, however, does not call attention to this merely to demonstrate his "one-up-man-ship" over the classical scholars but to suggest that Jocasta must have sensed, when she married Oedipe, that he was her former husband's killer; thus, and this is important to Gide's theme, he is able to portray his Jocaste as much less ignorant than Sophocles'. Nevertheless, the effect is comic. Clearly, Gide was enjoying himself, as we see also in his presentation of an Ismene who at times is no more than a caricature of the "weak sister." For example, when in the first act, Polynice begins his rather graphic description of the effects of the plague, Ismene promptly faints. And again, at the play's end, when Antigone is

⁵Oedipus the King, trans. David Grene, The Complete Greek Tragedies, II, ll. 758-759.

about to lead her blind father into exile, Ismene exclaims, in an allusion to her role in Oedipus at Colonus, "Oh! I can't bear to see you go like this. Just give me time to order a black dress and I'll catch up with you on horseback" (Act III).

To get an idea of the purpose behind Gide's comic effects, it is helpful to read some of his comments in his Journal. Apparently, as he remarks in an entry for June of 1932, this aspect of the play was criticized when it was performed in Paris. "The jokes in Oedipe," Gide writes, "displeased in general and even rebuffed some of the best disposed."⁶ Gide, however, has no regrets about his use of jokes but only about an explanatory preface that he had written for an Antwerp production out of the fear that "that rather heavy audience would not dare laugh even though it felt like doing so."⁷ His mistake, he says, was in forgetting about the preface and allowing it to stay in when the play was later performed before the more sophisticated Parisian audience. The implication that Gide considers his "jokes" an integral part of his play becomes more explicit when, in the same entry, he discusses with approval the way in which the director of the Darmstadt production used staging devices that called attention to the many anachronisms of the

⁶The Journals of André Gide, trans. Justin O'Brien (New York, 1949), III, 235.

⁷Ibid.

play--such things as having the actors wear "their tragic finery over an outrageously contemporary costume." Gide remarks,

The scenic illusion, consequently, was non-existent; but my desire not to try to achieve it became at once obvious, and when the chorus was heard to declare: "The action of this drama cannot get underway without . . ." etc., the audience was grateful to me for bringing them into collusion with me and understood that the interest of my play was elsewhere: in the clash of ideas, and that the drama took place on another plane from that of the ancient tragedy.⁸

Clearly, one purpose behind Gide's theatricalism, his destruction of "scenic illusion," is to focus on the "clash of ideas" (combat des idées) by avoiding altogether the catharsis of Greek tragedy.

The most striking, and amusing, example of this is the exchange that occurs at what in Sophocles is the climax, the moment of both peripeteia and recognition, when Oedipus realizes his identity and his crimes. In lines that are potentially tragic, Oedipe says, "This king whom I killed, tell me--No, don't speak. I see it all. I was his son." But the practical and affable Creon, who has just walked in leading Tirésias, remarks,

Well, upon my word! What's that I hear? That would make my sister his mother! Oedipe, whom I thought so much of! I can't imagine anything more abominable! Not to know if he's my brother-in-law or my nephew! (Act III)

The effect, of course, is to deflate the whole issue, to expel from it all possible emotional content. In another

⁸Ibid.

important Journal entry on Oedipe, Gide makes it clear that he is deliberately excluding emotion; he is, as he puts it, "leaving the pathos" to Sophocles. "I propose," writes Gide,

to let you see the other side of the scenery, were it to be an obstacle to your emotion, for it is not your emotion that matters to me and that I am trying to evoke: it is to your intelligence that I am addressing myself. I intend, not to make you shudder or weep, but to make you reflect.⁹

This statement, of course, could easily have been made by Bertolt Brecht in regard to his "epic theatre." As one critic has remarked, Gide's Oedipe utilizes, avant la lettre, the Brechtian theory of a drama of "alienation."¹⁰

To say that Oedipe is a combat des idées from which emotional effects are excluded is not, however, to suggest that Gide himself has no emotional involvement in this play. Perhaps a comparison with Sartre's The Flies will show the degree to which both writers are personally involved in these two "mythical" dramas. The similarities between certain aspects of the two plays are rather striking when we consider that they are based on different legends. The Theban plague, for example, is an integral part of the Oedipus mythos as conceived by Sophocles, but Sartre also introduces a plague in Argos as a key element in his interpretation of the Oreste mythos. In fact,

⁹Ibid., p. 254.

¹⁰Helen Watson-Williams, André Gide and the Greek Myth: A Critical Study (Oxford, 1967), p. 115.

whereas Gide implies, through his Chorus, that he is compelled to mention the plague solely because of the exigencies of the mythos itself, Sartre, as we have seen, uses it because it is absolutely essential to his theme of collective guilt. Gide differs from Sartre in seeing the plague not as a symbol of remorse but of a vague unhappiness; however, the important thing for both authors is the way in which the city-wide plague affects and is affected by the hero. We have already noted, en passant, that Sartre's Oreste is a foundling: he was left to die in a forest, but a royal servant from another city--Athens, in this case--took pity on him and took him home to be raised as an adopted child. Although the foundling story is a familiar one, the prime example, certainly in classical literature, must be that of Oedipus,¹¹ and it would seem reasonable to assume that Oedipus was almost as much of a prototype for Sartre's hero as was Orestes. As would be expected, Gide, too, makes his Oedipe a foundling, but taking his cue from Euripides' Phoenician Women, he also has him born out of a drunken and lustful union.¹² In the prologue to Euripides' play, Jocasta relates,

¹¹See Richmond Lattimore, The Poetry of Greek Tragedy (New York, 1958), pp. 82-83.

¹²Although Gide remarks that The Phoenician Women was of little help to him in writing Oedipe--Journals, III, 82--he is at least indebted to Euripides for this much.

But Laius, in his lust, and drunk beside,
 begot a child on me, yet when he had,
 knowing his sex was sin, as God had said it,
 he gave the child to shepherds to expose¹³

Before Gide's Oedipe knows his identity, he learns that the oracle has revealed the manner of Jocaste's and Laius' union. As Creon puts it, "One festive evening, they were careless--" and Oedipe replies, "I see what you mean. And what became of this child of drunkenness?" As Oedipe himself describes it later,

A shepherd, while driving his flock to pasture, had found me on the mountainside, hanging by one foot, like a fruit, from the low branches of a shrub (thats why I am slightly lame)--naked, exposed to wind and rain, as if I had been the fruit of some clandestine passion, an unwanted, compromising child. . . . (Act II)

And Creon of course sums it up with one convenient label: "bastard."

Although Jean-Paul Sartre does not delve into the manner of conception of his foundling hero, his Oreste resembles Oedipe in the essential respect that he, too, is clearly unwanted. Like Oedipe, moreover, he returns to his own city a stranger--with the difference that he does know, at least superficially, his own identity. Again, it is a city that has lost its king, the hero's father, and is in a state of plague as a result of that king's murder. Both Oreste and Oedipe are called upon,

¹³The Phoenician Women, trans. Elizabeth Wyckoff, The Complete Greek Tragedies, IV, p. 461 (ll. 21-24). Cf. the inscription to Act Two of Oedipe: "O Oedipus, O rashly engendered son of drunkenness!" (Euripides: Phoenician Women).

therefore, to be saviors of their cities, although Oedipe differs from Oreste in that he is already that city's ruler. Both heroes, furthermore, are paradoxically criminals as well as saviors, for one has killed his father and the other, his mother, and both have killed the reigning king. Thus they receive their horrible "punishments," Oedipe the blinding and the loss of Jocasta, and Oreste the Furies, and both go off into exile as outcasts at the play's end. Many of these resemblances are a result of parallels between the two mythoi, but they also occur because of Sartre's choice of action and his innovations regarding the plague and the foundling birth. More significant than the plot parallels, however, are the similarities in treatment of the heroes themselves. Clearly, both Sartre and Gide look on the personal crisis of the protagonist as of far more importance than the rescue of the city. That "the people" in Oedipe are unhappy, early in the play, is less significant than that Oedipe himself is "happy," just as in The Flies Oreste's false freedom is more significant than the people's false remorse. Unlike most of the heroic figures, both ancient and modern, that we have discussed, these two undergo a radical change--a conversion. This is, in fact, what each play is about, and it is worth noting, in this regard, that Gide once gave his play a working title of La Conversion d'Oedipe.¹⁴ Although Gide,

¹⁴Journals, II, 402.

in one sense, undoubtedly intends the term "conversion" ironically, it is quite genuine, too. Another tentative title was "Oedipe, or the triumph of ethics,"¹⁵ which again is both ironic and sincere--ironic in the sense of conventional ethics but sincere in the context of Gide's personal ethic. Sartre, too, must have meant The Flies as a "triumph of ethics," as the "ethical essay" that he promises at the end of Being and Nothingness.

Both Sartre and Gide were, however, concerned with much more than the "conversion" of their hero, for they both were writing "engaged" literature. We would not ordinarily expect Gide to write an imaginative work that is, in the Sartrean sense, engagé, and yet, surprisingly enough, Gide makes a decided move toward engagement in Oedipe. The most overt allusion to things contemporary in Oedipe is the mention of two book titles that were known to French intellectuals in Gide's day. In disapproving tones Creon speaks of Eteocle's book called the Malady of the Age (Mal du Siècle) and subtitled Our Present Discontents (Notre Inquiétude) (Act II). As George Painter points out, the former is an allusion to a book by Marcel Arland titled Le Nouveau Mal du siècle (1924), and the latter, to the Notre Inquiétude (1926) of Daniel Rops.¹⁶ The two authors are said to have been young disciples of

¹⁵Ibid., II, 400.

¹⁶Painter, p. 110.

Gide. If what Eteocle says about his own book is a reliable clue, both of the real books were inward-turning and self-conscious.¹⁷ When Polynice speaks of thought as being like a "dragon of which as a rule we know only the body and that part, the tail, which drags along in the past" but whose "invisible nostrils are somewhere inside me, scenting, snuffling, nosing about"; Eteocle responds, "That is the dragon I call 'the malady of the age.' I too feel it within me, forever asking, asking. It's fairly eating me up with questions" (Act II). Clearly, this kind of soul-searching is an important motif in the play as it was in Gide's own life, and Oedipe, too, can identify with this spirit in his young sons. But only partially. When Creon says, "I expect you recognize yourself in them," Oedipe replies, "Sometimes." It is interesting, moreover, that when Oedipe first hears of Eteocle's book, he wants to know if it is about the plague, to which Creon, of course, answers no and goes on to point out that the "discontents" in the book "are of a most elevated sort" (Act II).

What is the plague, if it is not the "malady of the

¹⁷After noting in his Journal that Arland took exception to Oedipe, calling Gide a "magnificent play-actor," Gide writes, "Try all one's life never to do an insincere thing, not to write a single sentence that goes beyond one's thought in any way, and one can then hope to be called, at about sixty, a 'play-actor' by an M.A. [Marcel Arland] Most likely he took offence at the few words in my Oedipe where I make my Eteocles the author, like him, of a Nouveau Mal du siècle." (Journals, III, 185.)

age"? The implication is that the plague is social rather than psychological, a view that is borne out by Polynice's description:

. . . not far from the palace we came upon a group of people smitten with the plague. They were all smeared with vomit and feces, and writhing in some terrible colic. It seemed as if each were helping the other to die. We could hear nothing, all around us, but their weeping, and sighing, and hiccuping. And when they looked at us-- (Act I)

Whereupon Creon cries "Enough! Enough!" and Ismene faints. This is not a depiction of bourgeois soul-sickness but of the physical sickness of the hungry and oppressed. As in The Flies, the Church, represented here by Tiresias, would like the people to think that their ills are the result of their own sins. "Every one of you is guilty before God," says Tiresias. "We cannot imagine a man without stain. Therefore let each of you descend into the depths of his being and there examine himself and repent." And although, as Oedipe points out, "the people would always rather have a religious interpretation than explain things naturally," their attitude is actually ambiguous:

Right-Hand Chorus: And if we fasted that year, it was from penitence, of course--

Left-Hand Chorus: But also because we had nothing left to eat. (Act I)

The plague, then, is social in its implications, and it points the way toward a social orientation on the part of Oedipe himself.

Oedipe's answer to the riddle of the Sphinx is, of course, Man. He tells his sons,

You must understand, my little ones, that each of us, in adolescence, encounters, at the outset of his journey, a monster who raises before him the riddle that can block his way. And although for each of us, my children, this particular Sphinx poses a different question, be assured that for all of these questions the answer remains the same, yes, that there is but one and the same response to such diverse questions, and that this single response is Man, and that this one man, for each of us, is Oneself. (Act II)¹⁸

With such a strong expression of individualistic humanism, however, one is likely to overlook what follows. For when Tiresias asks Oedipe if this is the final word of wisdom toward which all of his knowledge leads, Oedipe replies, "Not at all. That's where it begins. That is the first word." And he adds that his sons will have to find the words that follow. Clearly, Oedipe's, and therefore Gide's, humanism is not merely individualistic; it is social and even progressive. "Don't always look behind you," Gide admonishes his sons. "Be persuaded that humanity is beyond question much farther from its goal, which we cannot yet glimpse, than from its point of departure, which itself has already vanished from our view" (Act II). When the blinded, but not broken, Oedipe goes off into exile at the play's end, he says, "I am no longer a king; nothing but a nameless traveler who renounces his possessions, his great name, and himself." Creon and the Chorus, in an opportunistic turnabout, plead with Oedipe to stay, saying, "Think of your dear

¹⁸My translation. The problem here is mainly one of punctuation. Russell's version catches the pauses for emphasis but disturbs the syntax.

Thebans, your people. What can you care for those who do not know you?" But Oedipe responds, "Whoever they may be, they are men. I shall be glad to bring them happiness at the price of my sufferings" (Act III). According to George Painter, the self-blinding and the exile "represent Gide's communist mission." "It is a punishment," says Painter, "and a relinquishment of his past egoistic blindness to reality, and the acceptance of a new discipline."¹⁹ Like the exiled Oreste, Oedipe is now engagé.

As is well known, the early thirties was a period in Gide's life, as it was in the lives of many Western writers, when he was most communistic in his thinking and thus most "engaged" in the political sense. To be sure, as James C. McLaren has pointed out, Gide's evolution toward social awareness and political activism began a number of years before he wrote Oedipe in 1930 (we must keep in mind that Gide was then 61). During World War I, for example, he worked at the Foyer franco-belge, helping to take care of the poor and the sick, and in 1925-26 he went on a special diplomatic mission to the Congo, which resulted in his book Travels in the Congo, an outspoken condemnation of French colonial oppression.²⁰ Such experiences as these undoubtedly lie behind the

¹⁹Painter, p. 110.

²⁰The Theatre of Andre Gide: Evolution of a Moral Philosopher (Baltimore, 1953), p. 57.

humanitarianism of his Oedipe: "Whoever they may be, they are men." After 1930 and until 1936, when Gide visited the Soviet Union and expressed his disillusionment with Soviet Communism in his Return from the USSR, was the time when he was most politically involved. It is interesting to note that his political writings and speeches of this period were later collected in a volume titled, appropriately, Littérature engagée. This book by no means contains Gide's best writing. Even its full-length play, Robert ou l'Interet general, is characterized by Painter, for example, as poor, left-wing propaganda, although McClaren calls attention to the fact that Gide, after his Russian trip, revised the play considerably so as to place more emphasis on character and less on the pro-communist message.²¹ A deeper and more personal expression of Gide's social consciousness is to be found in his other plays of the early thirties, particularly in Oedipe. Says McClaren, "It is in Oedipe . . . that we find what is perhaps the clearest synthesis of Gide's views on moral development and social progress, closely associated with his own experience but linked through dialogue and characterizations to present-day life."²²

When Gide tentatively calls his play "The Conversion of Oedipe" we now see what he means: Oedipe has

²¹Ibid., p. 77.

²²Ibid., p. 60.

passed from egoistic individualism to engagé humanism. Of course, the irony is that the term "conversion" ordinarily implies religious salvation, which is precisely what Oedipe does not experience. All through the play, the priest, Tiresias, with an occasional assist from the conventionally pious Chorus and the conventional but impious Creon, attempts to get Oedipe "to see the light." In Act One he tells Creon, "His [Oedipe's] soul is like some sealed vessel, to which fear can find no entrance. My authority is based on the fear of God, and there is blasphemy in Oedipe's untroubled happiness. It is for you, Creon, to start a little crack in that happiness." And when Creon wants to know why, "Because it is by means of that disquieting little crack that God will find a way into his heart." Gide makes it clear that Tiresias, like Sartre's Jupiter, actually is fearful because his own position of authority is in jeopardy. Yet Tiresias' judgment of Oedipe is half-right: Oedipe's happiness is false and it is important to open up that "little crack." In the second act Tiresias tells him, "O Oedipus, you try to escape from God, and you don't even know who you are; I should like to teach you to see yourself." To which Oedipe retorts, "To hear you talk, anybody would think that I was the blind one of us two." It is quite true that Oedipe is blind, that he doesn't know himself. It is even true that he has been trying "to escape from God," for he tells us that he once

followed the road that led to God but changed direction when he committed his crime and went instead to meet the Sphinx. When he solved the riddle of the Sphinx with the answer of Man, he thought he was free, but now, at the end of Act II, he realizes that he has been asleep for twenty years, "dulled by [his] rewards," and that now it is time to "awake from happiness."²³

Gide's Oedipe never does come to God, but neither is he able, like Sartre's Oreste, totally to dismiss God. This is seen in the final lines of the play when Oedipe turns to Antigone: "Come, my daughter. In you, alone of my children, do I wish to recognize myself. In you I put my trust, unblemished Antigone. You alone shall be my guide." That Gide's play is anti-clerical but not anti-theistic is most obvious when Antigone rejects Tiresias while still retaining her faith: "In escaping from you, Tiresias, I shall remain faithful to God. It even seems to me that I shall serve Him better by following my father than I did by being with you" (Act III). By choosing Oedipe rather than the Church--she intended "to

²³Gide, of course, had his own battle with God and with religion throughout much of his life. In his youth he rebelled against a puritan upbringing but for a long time was unable to free himself of the problem of God, with the result that he was continually beleaguered by well-meaning friends in the Catholic Church. One such friend was Paul Claudel, and as several critics have pointed out, it is he, more than likely, that Gide has uppermost in mind in his portrayal of the importunate Tiresias. For a most perceptive analysis of Gide's relationship to God, see Sartre's essay "The Living Gide," trans. Benita Eisler, Situations (New York, 1965), pp. 66-67.

take orders" (Act I)--Antigone reveals an implicit faith in man, just as Oedipe, by choosing Antigone as his guide, reveals an implicit faith, if not in God, at least in the possibility of God.²⁴ In The Flies, by contrast, the existence of God is never a real problem for the hero. When Oreste genuinely calls upon Him for aid and Jupiter responds with his facile "miracle," the hero knows instantly that he must rely solely on himself. It is as if he had his answer ready in advance, just as Oedipe does when he confronts the Sphinx. We recall Jupiter's complaint that "Oreste knows he is free."²⁵ But Gide's Oedipe still has to work out his relationship to God. He says that the next word on the subject will have to be found by his sons, but we know by the end of the play that they are going to disappoint him. We might almost say, then, that Oedipe's true son is Sartre's Oreste, for he does not have to live through "the agony and death of God," but can proceed from that point to "new truths." For Sartre, God is irrelevant, but Gide is the one who has helped to make Him so.

²⁴Gide notes that André Malraux once chided him about this ending: "'Yes,' he says laughing, 'Oedipus escapes the Sphinx, but only to let himself be eventually gobbled up by his daughter. . . . You ought to write an Oedipus at Colonus, in which Oedipus, before dying, would repulse even Antigone'" (Journals, III, 140).

²⁵As Sartre says at the end of his essay on Gide, "Chosen in the abstract, at twenty, his atheism would have been false. Slowly earned, crowning the quest of half a century, this atheism becomes his concrete truth and our own. Starting from there, men of today are capable of becoming new truths" ("The Living Gide," p. 67).

What most unites the two heroes, Oreste and Oedipe, is the nature of their "conversion" and the assertion of their freedom. It is noteworthy, for example, that Oedipe, like Oreste, chooses to express his critical decision with the metaphor of the abyss: "I must first go down to the very bottom of the abyss."²⁶ To be sure, the path into the abyss means different things to the two heroes. For Oreste it is a re-entry into the world of Argos, with all its tragedy and guilt; for Oedipe it is much more internal: it is at once a sounding of the depths of his own psyche and a delving into his past. And yet the kind of change undergone by each of them is obviously quite similar. Oedipe, having already confronted the Sphinx, has gained his individuality and his freedom, but it is the freedom we spoke of earlier that comes from his being a "bastard." He tells Creon that as long as he thought he was Polybius' son he "tried to ape his virtues"; he felt that he should follow those who had gone before him and profit from the lessons of the past. But--

Then suddenly the thread was broken. I had gushed up from the unknown; no longer any past, no longer any father's example, nothing to lean on any more; everything to be built up anew--country, forefathers--all to be invented, all to be discovered. Nobody to take after but myself. (Act II)

This is an eloquent expression of what it means to be free. And it is interesting to see how Gide, in his

²⁶ Quite possibly Sartre was influenced by Gide in this respect.

Journal, carries this idea into his own life and even into his aesthetics. Alluding to the "slow growth" of his Oedipe, he writes,

How much easier it is to work according to an accepted aesthetic and ethic! Writers who are submissive to a recognized religion advance sure of every step. I owe it to myself to invent everything. At times it is an immense groping toward an almost imperceptible light. And at times I ask myself: what is the good of it?²⁷

"I owe it to myself to invent everything"--this is Gide's ethic, just as it is his hero's ethic, and one might say that it is also the ethic of existentialism. And yet, in context, we know that as Oedipe exults in his freedom, there is something missing--the same something that is missing in the early Oreste: engagement. Just as Oreste becomes increasingly aware of his lightness, of his need to take up the heavy burden of commitment, so does Oedipe begin to sense that his happiness, too, is a kind of bad faith.²⁸ "I don't want a happiness made up of blundering ignorance," he finally exclaims to Jocaste (Act III). He comes to realize that there is a new monster, a second Sphinx stirring within him, and that now this too must be faced. He realizes that true freedom must involve not only commitment but a new self-discipline, an overthrow of his previous egoistic introversion. It is just

²⁷Journals, III, 121.

²⁸Oreste's "lightness," incidentally, is something that Sartre himself has felt throughout his life. In Words he speaks of himself as floating in the air: "I made every effort to sink: I had to wear leaden soles" (p. 61).

here, of course, that he leaves his disciple-sons behind. For, as he says at the end, "They have picked out from my example merely what flatters them--authority and license--and let slip what is best and most difficult--self-discipline."

One might say that Oedipe is a "three-stage" hero, whereas Oreste is only a "two-stage" hero, for, as we have seen, Sartre sees no necessity to have his hero grapple with God. Perhaps, one reason that Gide chose the mythos of Oedipus over that of Orestes was that the former does have two "moments of truth"--the riddle of the Sphinx and the riddle of Oedipe's own identity--while the latter only has one (unless we think of Oreste's crime as one and his trial as another). Another reason for Gide's not choosing to do an Oreste, however, was probably that he did not think of Oreste as being free, though this may be because he had in mind not so much Aeschylus' version as that of Racine in his Andromache. Alluding to the latter, he once wrote, "Oreste's character: not really virile, but dominated completely by his fate. He needs his crime to motivate his remorse."²⁹ As Helen Watson-Williams has pointed out, what disturbed Gide about Oreste was that he was doubly trapped, first by the necessity of the crime and second by the madness that afflicted him afterward. "As Gide conceived the [ideal]

²⁹Journals, I, 124.

hero," says this critic, "he is above all independent and free from any domination either by a super-human force or by his human situation."³⁰ Gide had chosen other Greek prototypes for his plays--Philoctetes, Prometheus, Ajax--but it is ironic that the one that he was most successful in re-creating as a free hero was the one who is popularly felt to be almost the archetype of man trapped by his fate: Oedipus.

A good way to understand what Gide is doing in his Oedipe is to turn for a moment to Cocteau's Infernal Machine as a foil in order to observe what he is not doing. Cocteau was himself greatly preoccupied with the Greek myths. On the House of Labdacus legend alone, he wrote, in addition to The Infernal Machine (1934), a condensed, prose adaptation of Antigone (1922) and the libretto for Stravinsky's opera-oratorio, Oedipe-Roi (1927). Regarding the latter, Claude Mauriac reports an amusing conversation between Cocteau and Gide in which Cocteau "reproaches Gide with having written an Oedipe right after his own Oedipus and cannot forgive him even though he quotes Gide's humorous reply, 'What can I say, my friend, it's an--oedipemie!'"³¹ Behind this pun, which plays upon the fact that oedipe, in French, has come to mean "riddle-solver," Gide can justly be suspected of

³⁰Watson-Williams, p. 87.

³¹Conversation with Andre Gide (New York, 1965), p. 58.

having a deeper meaning, for the important thing in his Oedipe is, after all, the way in which his hero solves the great riddles that confront him. Cocteau, on the other hand, seems obsessed by Oedipus' entrapment by the gods. Compare, for example, these passages from his speaker's text to Oedipe-Roi:

- (1) At the moment of his birth a snare was laid for him--and you will see the snare closing.
- (2) . . . Oedipus is a plaything of the heartless gods.
- (3) He is in the snare.
- (4) The King is caught.³²

As for The Infernal Machine, the title itself reveals what Cocteau is up to: his intent in this play, no longer a brief adaptation but an extended reinterpretation, is to present for us, not the hero himself so much as his trap. Clearly Cocteau sees it as a fiendishly clever trap, a diabolical trap; therefore, the gods, who are behind it all, must be "infernal." Even in his Antigone, several years earlier, he speaks of the "infernal gods."³³ As he says in his epigrammatic inscription to The Infernal Machine, "The gods exist; that's the devil of it." And the "Voice" ends his prologue:

Watch now, spectator. Before you is a fully wound machine. Slowly its spring will unwind the entire span of a human life. It is one of the most perfect

³²"The Speaker's Text of Oedipus Rex," trans. E. E. Cummings, The Infernal Machine and Other Plays (New York, 1963), pp. 405 ff.

³³Five Plays, trans. Carl Wildman (New York, 1961), p. 61.

machines devised by the infernal gods for the mathematical annihilation of a mortal.³⁴

Throughout the play there is the same stream of imagery--traps, snares, webs, etc.--that we find in Cocteau's Oedipe-Roi.

Aside from the verbal imagery, there are two primary ways in which Cocteau achieves his peculiar brand of fatalism, both of which have practically nothing to do with Sophocles: one is his alteration of the mythos itself and the other is his staging technique, what he has termed poésie de théâtre. Cocteau's innovation in the mythos is to take up the action considerably prior to that of Oedipus the King, i.e., after Oedipe has killed his father but just before he confronts the Sphinx. Thus Act One shows Thebes in a stage of siege by the Sphinx, with Jocaste, in a scene reminiscent of the opening of Hamlet, talking with the sentries on the ramparts. Act Two, whose action we are to imagine occurring simultaneously with that in Act One, treats Oedipe's meeting with the Sphinx, a young girl, and Act Three takes place on Oedipe's and Jocaste's wedding night. Only in the fourth and final act does Cocteau take us into the action of Oedipus the King. This approach is quite different from that in Gide's Oedipè, which begins, exactly like Sophocles' play, in media res and moves swiftly through the events that lead to the discovery and consequent catastrophe. To be

³⁴Trans. Albert Bermel, The Infernal Machine and Other Plays, p. 6.

sure, in bringing in Oedipe's full-grown sons and daughters, Gide is introducing plot elements that are extraneous to Oedipus the King, but these are based on the actions of other extant tragedies, particularly Oedipus at Colonus, and, to a lesser degree, Antigone and Aeschylus' Seven against Thebes. Most of Cocteau's action, however, is not treated at all in the action of the ancient tragedies but is only covered summarily through background and exposition. Too many readers of Oedipus the King have fooled themselves into thinking that the background--the patricide, the riddle solving, the incest--is the action itself, when, in fact, it is only the setting up of the situation in which the action takes place. Cocteau, however, shifts his focus so that the background becomes the action. We do not hear, many years later, of Oedipe's marriage to Jocaste; we see them on their wedding night. The emphasis now is not on Oedipe's discovery but on his entrapment.

The first clue that Cocteau is also using theatrical techniques to emphasize the infernal working of the gods is in those words of the "Voice": "Watch now, spectator. Before you is a fully wound machine." The inference is that the "fully wound machine" is not so much the working out of divine fate as the unfolding of the action before the audience. According to Francis Fergusson, each of the scenes is played on a "small lighted platform in the center of the stage, which is hung with 'nocturnal cur-

tains."³⁵ All of the activity of the characters takes place in this small arena, but the real action is the working of the "machine" behind the "nocturnal curtain" (clearly Cocteau's own term). The interesting point that Fergusson makes is that the life we see on the foreground stage is modern life with all of its "small shrewdnesses," while behind the scenes but somehow visible in the darkness is "the different reality of the mythic pattern."³⁶ Cocteau in fact resembles Gide, Giraudoux, and Anouilh in his frequent anachronisms. Says Fergusson, "The 'Thebes' which is established in the first scene by the slangy gossip of the soldiers: its cafes throbbing with popular music, hot or blue; its rising prices and its threat of revolution or war--even the menace of the 'Sphinx' which the authorities cannot deal with--might be any demoralized Balkan or Mediterranean commercial city of our time or any time."³⁷ It is uncertain, however, whether this kind of poésie de théâtre really conveys a sense of the "mythical pattern" or merely a theatrical pattern. One critic, Grossvogel, may well be correct when he says, "The mystery of fate appears to have fascinated Cocteau especially because of the stage sleights that its dramatic representation allows."³⁸

³⁵The Idea of a Theater (Garden City, N.Y., 1949), p. 209.

³⁶Ibid., p. 210.

³⁷Ibid., pp. 210-211.

³⁸Grossvogel, p. 60.

The spectator is left in awe not of the workings of fate but of the workings of Cocteau's theatre. Nevertheless, it is true that everything in The Infernal Machine conspires to show Oedipe as something less than free.

Jacques Guicharnaud sums this up very well:

. . . in La Machine Infernale such stress is put on the caprices of the gods and destiny that Oedipus' heroism disappears. Oedipus did not solve the Sphinx' riddle: she gave him the answer out of love; and although he puts out his eyes at the end, it is not so much his own act as it is in Sophocles' version. During Cocteau's play the weapons themselves (Jocasta's brooch and scarf), from the very beginning, are impatient to put out Oedipus' eyes and strangle Jocasta.³⁹

Thus Cocteau, taking the same legend and writing only four years after his countryman, has created a version that is quite alien to Gide's emphasis on humanism and freedom.

What Guicharnaud says about the self-blinding (above) is doubly true relative to Gide's Oedipe, for both Sophocles and Gide make this a free act, though Gide does so more overtly. Gide makes it very clear that for his Oedipe the self-blinding is not really a punishment and certainly not a form of self-flagellation enacted out of contrition. Tiresias, in precisely the same spirit as Sartre's Jupiter, tries to induce Oedipe to feel remorse: "Repent! Come to God, who is waiting for you! Your crime shall be forgiven" (Act III). But Oedipe is fully aware of the inherent contradiction in

³⁹Modern French Theatre (New Haven, 1967), p. 54.

repenting for an act that was allegedly fated in the first place:

That crime was imposed by God. His was the ambush on my road. Before even I was born, the trap was laid, and I could not but fall into it. For either your oracle was lying or I had no possible escape. I was caught. (Act III)

And a moment after his blinding he tells Tiresias, "I am surprised that this offer of repentance should come from you, who believe that the gods are in complete control of us, and that it was never in my power to escape my destiny." The blinding itself, however, is not part of Oedipe's destiny. Not even in Sophocles is the blinding ordained by the oracles. "And now am I still God's puppet?" Oedipe asks rhetorically.

Has the oracle foretold what I must do next? Must I still consult it? And find out, O Tiresias, what the birds have to say? . . . If only I could escape from the God who envelops me, escape from myself! Something heroic, something super-human torments me. I should like to invent some new form of unhappiness--some mad gesture to astonish you all, and astonish myself, and astonish the gods. (Act III)

Without doubt this is meant to be a free, motive-less act. It is the acte gratuit with which Gide, along with the Surrealists, was so preoccupied for many years. The acte gratuit, as defined by Hazel Barnes, for example, "is an act of pure caprice, an act with no motive other than the wish to demonstrate that one can perform such an act."⁴⁰ Gide's Oedipe succeeds in such a demonstration:

⁴⁰Barnes, p. 261.

he astonishes himself, others, and the gods.

It remains now to compare this "gratuitous" freedom with the "engaged" freedom of The Flies. Certainly on the surface Oedipe's act of self-blinding and Oreste's act of killing are free in much the same sense. In both cases it is quite clear that the hero could have done something else; in neither case was his act prescribed by some external authority, whether of God, the Church, or the State. Both acts are in fact violently defiant of these institutions; both, moreover, bring intense suffering upon the doer. Where the acts seem to differ is that in Oreste's case there is no question of it being without motive. His motive may be complex--he wishes to save the city; he wishes to save himself; above all, he wishes to become committed--but it is still there as part of his act. Obviously Sartre's concept of existential freedom does not depend on one's act being gratuitous. Indeed, as Hazel Barnes points out, Sartre once wrote a short story, "Erostratus," which attempted to ridicule the notion of the acte gratuit, at least as it was then being espoused by the Surrealists.⁴¹ As Sartre expresses it in Being and Nothingness, "It is in fact impossible to find an act without a motive but . . . this does not mean that we must conclude that the motive causes the act; the motive

⁴¹Ibid.

is an integral part of the act. For as the resolute project toward a change is not distinct from the act, the motive, the act, and the end are all constituted in a single upsurge."⁴² This of course is thoroughly consistent with Sartre's whole concept of man as a pour soi, as, in short, a free, acting being.

Obviously, a distinction needs to be made between metaphysical freedom and psychological freedom. Although Sartre consistently argues for the former, as in the above statement, he clearly infers the latter when he speaks of the need for awareness, for not living in "bad faith." The freedom that Oreste and Oedipe acquire is really psychological: they both come to the realization that they are free. Sartre, being a philosopher, would like to nail this psychological freedom onto a solid foundation of ontological freedom, but Gide does not really care whether man is ontologically free or not. This is evident when he has his Oedipe admit that even his self-blinding might have been predestined:

Doubtless my offering of myself was also foreseen, so that I could not but have made it. . No matter! Willingly do I sacrifice myself. I had gone so far that I could go farther only by turning in violence against myself. (Act III)

Apparently that "No matter!" was not emphatic enough, for Gide notes in his Journal a review of Oedipe in which the writer characterized the conflict as "between free will

⁴²Being and Nothingness, pp. 413-414.

and predestination. Many do likewise," Gide goes on, "and through my fault; for I am well aware . . . that I indiscreetly emphasized that obvious conflict--which tormented me greatly in my youth, but which long ago ceased to disturb me and which, in my very play, seems to me less important, less tragic, than the struggle (which moreover is closely related to it) between individualism and submission to religious authority."⁴³

Thus we are back to psychological freedom. The way one demonstrates that he is psychologically free is through an act of defiance which appears to be without motive. An excellent example is Sartre's own refusal of the Nobel Prize. Acceptance of the prize would have been an equally free act, but Sartre's negative act, because (1) it is obviously not conditioned by authority or convention, and (2) because it appears to be without motive, i.e., an acte gratuit, is a much better demonstration of freedom, not only for the world but for Sartre himself. Thus we can conclude that Sartre implicitly believes in the acte gratuit, just as Gide implicitly believes in existential freedom. Moreover, as we have shown, Gide's freedom, since it begins with Man and works, as it were, toward men, is linked with humanism. It is "engaged" humanism.

⁴³Journals, III, 215.

CHAPTER VI

ANOUILH'S ANTIGONE: FREEDOM IN SITUATION

When Jean Anouilh wrote and published his unfinished Oreste, one might say that he gave the show away. For as long as an author completes whatever he sets out to write on a given legend, it is possible, if one does not make too close a comparison with the author's other works in each case, to assume that the theme is determined by the legend. However, when, as in Anouilh's case, we know that within the space of a year the playwright started his Oreste, gave it up for a bad job, and then wrote the highly successful Antigone, we can be reasonably certain that this is a clear case of the writer's using the legend to convey his theme. As we have already seen when comparing Oreste and Antigone in the political context of the Nazi occupation (Ch. IV), there are obvious parallels between the characters of the two plays, particularly between Electre and Antigone, and Egisthe and Creon. Thus when in Oreste Egisthe says of Electre, "She is too young. She doesn't know yet how to play the game," we know very well that Creon might have made precisely the same statement about Antigone. Indeed, it may have been Electre's stubborn refusal to "play the game" that eventually caused her metamorphosis, as it were, into Antigone. We recall that even though the

title character of the first play is Oreste, it is Electre who intrudes so vociferously and persistently that she threatens to take over entirely. Quite possibly Anouilh found himself pausing at some point in his writing and saying, in effect, "She wants to take over? Very well, let her take over; let her dominate the play, but let her do so not as Electre but as Antigone." Thus, at one stroke he was able to rid his drama of the meddlesome Oreste, transforming him into the dead brother, Polyneices (or is it Eteocles?), and thereby thrusting Electre-Antigone into direct and unassisted confrontation with the "uncle"--Egisthe-Creon. Since Creon's wife, Eurydice, plays almost an incidental role in the Antigone mythos and since Ismene is never more than the "weak sister," we are left with the stark, one-to-one conflict of Antigone versus Creon. Instead of a game four can play, Anouilh now has a game only two can play.

The parallels with the Oreste fragment are most evident in the opening lines of the prologue to Antigone. As in Oreste the curtain rise reveals all of the characters in tableau, and one among them steps forward to say, "Well, here we are. . . . These people are about to act out for you the story of Antigone." A key difference is that the speaker is no longer Egisthe-Creon but the Chorus, who, though just as jaded and worldly wise as Egisthe, is not a participant in the action. Thus, when he comments upon Antigone, much as Egisthe comments upon

Electre, he is able to remain aloof:

That thin little creature sitting by herself, staring straight ahead, seeing nothing, is Antigone. She is thinking. She is thinking that the instant I finish telling you who's who and what's what in this play, she will burst forth as the tense, sallow, willful girl whose family would never take her seriously and who is about to rise up alone against Creon, her uncle, the King.⁴⁴

The "bursting forth" suggests Electre's intrusion in Oreste, and indeed the inference here is that Antigone's entrance into the action will somehow be an intrusion upon the Chorus, who at this point is merely the speaker of the prologue. Having characterized Antigone as a "tense, sallow, willful girl," the Chorus then goes on to call attention to her tragic side:

Another thing she is thinking is this: she is going to die. Antigone is young. She would rather live than die. But there is no help for it. When your name is Antigone, there is only one part you can play; and she will have to play hers through to the end. (p. 3)

Clearly, we have the same role-playing situation that we have in Oreste. All that Anouilh has done is, so to speak, to change the name of the game. In fact his controlling metaphor now is not really a game at all but a play. In both cases the characters are players, but in Oreste they are players in what seems to be a rather grotesque and tragic tennis match:

A terrible game where every hit is good. Four players and a red ball that one returns to

⁴⁴Trans. Lewis Galantiere in Jean Anouilh (New York, 1958), p. 3. Subsequent quotations are from this translation.

oneself tirelessly and that burns the hands and bloodies the earth where one flounders; a land soaked in blood. Two men and two women or rather one man and one woman--and two children. And the outcome of the match written for all eternity on an immense panel behind the players in letters as tall as men. It is like that that one performs well.

In Antigone, on the other hand, the "players" are of the Shakespearian sort; they are actors in a play. They are, as the Chorus tells us, about to "act out" the story of Antigone, and as for Antigone herself, there is, we are told, only one part she can play, and she will have to play it through to the end. The play metaphor is so obvious it hardly seems to be a metaphor at all, but there can be little doubt that Anouilh is using it deliberately to achieve what he may not have been able to achieve with the more unusual metaphor of the tennis game. Just as he is trying another mythos to express his theme so is he trying a similar but perhaps more appropriate controlling metaphor. Evidently, both metaphors have the same function: they both present human action as being mere role-playing, on the one hand, and as being predetermined, on the other. That Anouilh has to "fix" (in more than one sense) the tennis game so that its outcome is already known is evidence that the predetermined aspect is just as essential to him as the role-playing.

Since both the role-playing and the predeterminism in Anouilh are subject to distortion and misinterpretation--the one suggesting theatricalism and the other,

fatalism--we should examine these two aspects separately and carefully to see just what Anouilh means by them. The theatricalism, of course, is not exceptional in our group of French plays. As we have seen, Gide, in his Oedipe, calls attention to the play qua play, and he does so much in the same way as Anouilh does in Antigone, i.e., through the prologue, which in Gide's case is uttered by Oedipe himself and through the Chorus, who, we recall, tells us that "the action of this drama could not proceed unless we give you a most lamentable piece of news." To have a prologue speak of the play qua play is, to be sure, a well-worn tradition of the theatre going at least as far back as the Romans--the Greek prologues differed in that they alluded not to the coming play and its actors but to the coming action and its personages--but both Gide and Anouilh go beyond this in drawing attention to the play even while it is progressing. In Antigone Anouilh accomplishes this exclusively through the Chorus, whom he brings in again in the middle of the play. The closest ancient parallel may be the parabasis of an Aristophanic comedy in which the Chorus interrupts the action to express itself directly to the spectators on such subjects as why the comedy deserves first prize. For obvious reasons, it is essentially a comic rather than a tragic device. It is clear, too, that the Chorus, both in Aristophanes' case and in Anouilh's, seems to speak for the author himself. Thus we have the Chorus of

Antigone appearing at a crucial point in the action and presenting us with Anouilh's views on the virtues of tragedy over melodrama. It is probably this passage in particular that has prompted one critic, Robert Champigny, to remark that "Anouilh undermines the theatrical illusion, the sacred drug of the myth, by putting himself on the stage."⁴⁵ Regardless of whether it is absolutely correct to say that the Chorus stands for Anouilh, it is true that the "theatrical illusion" is momentarily obliterated.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that Anouilh's intention is always to make the play a metaphor for human action. Thus, when the Chorus makes such a statement as this--"There is a sort of fellow-feeling among characters in a tragedy: he who kills is as innocent as he who gets killed: it's all a matter of what part you are playing" (p. 24)--he is not just talking about this play; nor is he just talking about tragedies in general; he is, by implication, talking about life itself. The same is true when the Chorus closes his "parabasis" by saying, "The play is on. Antigone has been caught. For the first time in her life, little Antigone is going to be able to be herself" (p. 24). In the context of the whole speech, the Chorus is not merely saying that this play, i.e., Antigone, is about to resume; he is saying that because Antigone's fateful act has now

⁴⁵"Theatre in a Mirror: Anouilh," Yale French Studies, Vol. 14, p. 60.

been discovered, the actual tragedy is just beginning; the play is now "on" for the first time. The word "play" is thus ambiguous; it may mean more than (or less than) the play that we see on the stage. The same ambiguity is present in three different remarks that Creon makes to Antigone:

1. You have cast me for the villain in this little play of yours. (p. 33)
2. My part is not an heroic one, but I shall play my part. (p. 37)
3. I want you to know what took place in the wings of this drama in which you are burning to play a part. (p. 39)

Obviously, Creon is speaking metaphorically. In the first statement he is saying that Antigone is behaving as if she were directing a play in which she had cast him as the villain. In the second he is admitting his own actions are like acting a part, and in the third he is implying that the over-all situation in which they are both involved resembles a play. The implied comparisons are so commonplace that we barely notice them; clearly, there is no "undermining of theatrical illusion" here. And yet, as I say, the statements are ambiguous, for there is at least a slight sense in which they can be taken literally rather than metaphorically, i.e., as allusions to this play. What Anouilh is doing, of course, is cutting it both ways. He is using the "play" primarily as a metaphor for human action, but he is also taking advantage of the fact that this particular metaphor,

unlike that of the fixed tennis match, can also be taken literally to refer to the very medium he is utilizing.

Now what does Anouilh mean by the play metaphor? What comment is he making on life? First of all, he is not necessarily suggesting, as Shakespeare was fond of doing, that all of life is a play--that the whole world is a stage. Nor is he laying any stress on the transiency and absurdity of man's existence--the poor player who struts and frets his time upon the stage. Nor is he emphasizing, in the Pirandellian manner, the illusory nature of life. The element of the play that Anouilh is singling out is the actor's part--the role that he must play. This is why it is more accurate to say that the play, for Anouilh, represents human action rather than something more vague and inclusive called "life." Just as the actor is actually playing his role only when he is out on the stage, so is one in life only playing his part when he performs a significant action. Hence, for the Chorus the "play is on" when (1) Antigone defies Creon's edict by attempting to bury her brother and (2) when Creon discovers that the act has been done. It is now that the roles have to be played: Creon's being admittedly unheroic but not villainous either and Antigone's being that of the tragic heroine. The implications of Anouilh's oft-used expression "playing one's part" are many, but he certainly is not suggesting that any form of hypocrisy or even self-deceit is involved.

Indeed, quite the opposite. We are made to feel that one is truly himself only when he begins to play his role. As the Chorus says, "For the first time in her life, little Antigone is going to be able to be herself." One may infer from this that prior to her decisive act Antigone was in some sense deceiving herself; she was, to use Sartre's expression, living in bad faith. But such an inference is open to question. All that Anouilh is overtly emphasizing is that once one has chosen a certain course he must assume the inevitable consequences of that choice. He must, in brief, play his part.

We now have to confront the thorny question of inevitability--the predetermined nature of the part that one plays. What is Anouilh saying about freedom when he tells us, through the Chorus, "When your name is Antigone, there is only one part you can play; and she will have to play hers through to the end"? I believe that such a statement has potential significance at four different levels. Let us call them the four levels of necessity. The first level is the play itself. Antigone has only one part to play because that is the way it is written; it is the way that the author, Anouilh, has set it down. Deeper than this, however, is the level of the ancient mythos. The reason our heroine must play this particular role is that her name is Antigone, and it is written for all time--"for all eternity" as Egisthe puts it in Oreste--that Antigone brought about her own immurement and death

by defying her uncle-king. One may say that this is a necessity imposed not only on the Antigone of this play but on its author. The third level of necessity may be that of life itself. That is, Anouilh may be suggesting that beyond her part in the play and beyond her part in the mythos Antigone has her part in life simply because she is a human being. It is at this level that Anouilh can be accused of fatalism or determinism, for the implication is that in life, too, our parts are already written. Certainly, much of the Chorus' speech that I have called the "parabasis" would reinforce this notion of fated action. He begins, for example, with imagery that is most reminiscent of Cocteau's Infernal Machine: "The spring is wound up tight. It will uncoil of itself." And a moment later: "The rest is automatic. You don't need to lift a finger. The machine is in perfect order; it has been oiled ever since time began, and it runs without friction" (p. 23). However, even though Anouilh is probably consciously echoing Cocteau, he is certainly not playing upon the theme of entrapment the way Cocteau does throughout with his imagery and his stage devices. When the Chorus does allude to entrapment, it is in quite a different context: "Tragedy is restful; and the reason is that hope, that foul, deceitful thing, has no part in it. There isn't any hope. You're trapped" (p. 24). It is tragedy--not a machine-like fate--that is the central concept here. Thus, I have to disagree with Grossvogel

when he says, of Antigone, "Actually, there are no heroes at all and no villains from which to distinguish them-- there are merely sacrificial parts in a flawless and more important machine,"⁴⁶ and therefore agree with Champigny, who says that the development of the play "bears no resemblance to the silent, precise working of a machine,"⁴⁷ and points out that "Antigone dies because she chose to be the heroine of a tragedy."⁴⁸ Anouilh is merely adding the image of the unwinding machine to reinforce the aura of inevitability that has set in now that Antigone has chosen to play her tragic role.

Before getting into what I believe to be the fourth level of necessity, let us examine what the Chorus has to say about tragedy, for it is most pertinent in the context of the first three levels. As in most discussions of tragedy, it is possible to speak of it both as drama and as life. Anouilh, characteristically, appears to be doing both. First, he, or rather his Chorus, speaks at the level of drama, distinguishing tragedy from melodrama largely on the basis of inevitability: "Death, in a melodrama, is really horrible because it is never inevitable. . . . In a tragedy, nothing is in doubt and everyone's destiny is known" (pp. 23-24). It is not

⁴⁶Op. cit., p. 180.

⁴⁷"Theatre in a Mirror," p. 61.

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 62.

difficult to see the high degree of validity in this distinction, particularly as it applies to Greek tragedy, in which oracles, prophecies, and premonitions contrive to convey an all-pervading sense of inevitability. Indeed, Anouilh's Chorus serves somewhat the same function in this respect as a Delphic oracle or, more precisely, one of Euripides' gods delivering a prescient prologue. The modern Frenchman also follows the Greeks, of course, in utilizing the second level of necessity by following a known mythos such as that of Antigone. But even as Anouilh thus distinguishes tragedy from melodrama, we get a sense that he is also alluding to life. Death, in a melodrama, is, to be sure, never inevitable, but in life it is undoubtedly the greatest inevitability of all. Thus, when the Chorus then goes on to speak in terms that are less specifically associated with drama, we can be sure that he is expressing a tragic view of life. Since in tragedy we are trapped and without hope, the only thing we can do, says the Chorus, is shout:

I did not say groan, whimper, complain. That, you cannot do. But you can shout aloud; you can get all those things said that you never thought you'd be able to say--or never even knew you had it in you to say. And you don't say these things because it will do any good to say them: you know better than that. You say them for their own sake; you say them because you learn a lot from them. (p. 24)

It is this passage that rescues Anouilh, just barely, from mere pessimism or fatalism, for to shout is to act. It is even implied that this act involves a free choice--one has

the alternative of groaning, whimpering, complaining, or, of course, remaining silent. The Electre of Oreste quite literally shouts, and so does Antigone, more figuratively. Antigone says what she feels she has to say even though she knows that there is not the slightest possibility of its bringing about any change for the better. It is this quality in Antigone--what the Greeks might call "noble" and what the Chorus, more restrainedly calls "kingly"--that makes this play a tragedy, for no true definition of tragedy can ever stop with the notion of inevitability but must go on to show that even within the bounds of necessity there exists the possibility of human action, even heroic action. The combination of necessity and freedom is a central paradox of tragedy, a paradox that is probably best resolved through Sartre's concept of the theatre of situation.

Indeed, the only way to explain adequately the way in which Antigone is both free and not free is to say that she is free in situation. We have already analyzed Sartre's major points on this (Ch. IV), so there is no need to reiterate them here. However, it is worth keeping in mind that Sartre's article "Forgers of Myths," which is his delineation of this concept for the American public, presents Antigone as the prime illustration of the theatre of situation, and I think it can be shown that Sartre's interpretation applies quite well to this play. As we have seen, the kind of trap that the Chorus describes is

one in which the person entrapped is still in some sense free, and we recall Sartre's claim that the heroes of the theatre of situation are to be thought of as "freedoms caught in a trap." "Each situation," says Sartre, "is a trap--there are walls everywhere."⁴⁹ In this context the apparent contradiction of the Chorus saying that "Antigone has been caught" and then in the very next breath telling us that she is now able "to be herself" is easier to resolve.

What, then, is to be said about Antigone before the machine-like tragedy commences, before, in other words, she is caught in the trap of her situation? Superficially, one might expect her to be freer before she takes the crucial step than she is afterwards. However, Antigone herself seems to belie this notion when, in response to Ismene's remonstrance that "Creon will have us put to death," she says,

Of course he will. That's what he's here for. He will do what he has to do, and we will do what we have to do. He is bound to put us to death. We are bound to go out and bury our brother. That's the way it is. What do you think we can do to change it? (pp. 10-11)

Clearly, Antigone's own sense of necessity is quite strong at this very early point in the play, and on the surface the passage might suggest that even Antigone's supposed "choice" to bury her brother is a necessary act. The passage contains two ironies, however, which considerably

⁴⁹What Is Literature, loc. cit., p. 287.

alter its significance. One, a dramatic irony which the spectators may be aware of from their prior knowledge of the legend, is that obviously one of them, Ismene, is not "bound" to bury the brother, for she in fact chooses not to. Even as her sister speaks, Ismene releases her hand and draws back from her; and her reply is "I don't want to die," as if to point up the irony in Antigone's use of the word "we." The other irony is hidden until revealed later with dramatic suddenness: Antigone has already committed the act of which she is speaking. When after Antigone's conversations with Haemon and the Nurse, Ismene returns to plead with her once again not to do it, Antigone tells her, "You are too late, Ismene. When you first saw me this morning, I had just come in from burying him" (p. 20). The effect of these two ironies is to deny any kind of absolute necessity. Evidently, if Ismene is not bound, absolutely, to commit the act, neither is Antigone bound to do it, or if she is bound, it is only because she has already done it; the act is necessary not because it is destined to happen but because it has indeed happened. Beyond this there is a deeper sense in which Antigone is "bound" in a way in which Ismene never can be: Antigone is "bound" because she is committed. Thus, in Antigone's case we have a fourth level of necessity that might be termed inner necessity. She does what she does because she is what she is. As one

writer has put it, "Antigone is her own fatality."⁵⁰

The interesting thing about this internal form of necessity is that there is little to distinguish it from Sartre's concept of existential freedom. In other words, to say that one acts out of inner necessity is not to say that one's character determines one's destiny. This would only apply if Anouilh had carefully constructed a whole personality for Antigone and then showed how her actions revealed that personality. We would then have what Sartre calls a theatre of character. By the same token, if Anouilh had placed more emphasis on Antigone's revealing her true self, Sartre would undoubtedly criticize Anouilh on the same basis that he criticized Giraudoux, viz., on the grounds that he was allowing essence to precede existence. Unlike Giraudoux's *Electre*, however, Anouilh's heroine is not revealing herself but being herself. We do not think of her as stripping off a veneer in order to lay bare her true essence but as creating her being through her actions. As Sartre puts it, Antigone is "a free woman without any features at all until she chooses them for herself in the moment when she asserts her freedom to die despite the triumphant tyrant."⁵¹ In choosing her features, Antigone is, of course, choosing

⁵⁰Henri Perruchot, "Le Theatre Rose et Noir de Dean Anouilh," Synthèses, no. 49 (juin, 1950), 60. Translated and quoted by Leonard Cabell Pronko, The World of Jean Anouilh (Berkeley, 1961), p. 64.

⁵¹"Forgers of Myth," p. 325.

her situation just as we all choose our situations. This is what makes Anouilh's machine metaphor, which is superficially so close to Cocteau's, fundamentally quite different, for here it is Antigone herself who has wound up the spring, not Cocteau's "infernal gods." Perhaps Antigone's choosing of her situation can best be seen in relation to Ismene. Much in the manner of Sartre's illustration of the mountain climber, Antigone has decided to make her dead brother's burial part of her project; she therefore has to confront all the obstacles and dangers that adhere to this project. Ismene, on the other hand, by not having decided on this project, is not confronted with the same situation. This is made manifest later when Ismene tries to break into Antigone's situation by asking Creon to kill her, too. Antigone, recognizing the inherent falseness of Ismene's attempt, exclaims, "Oh, no, Ismene. Not a bit of it. I die alone. You don't think I'm going to let you die with me after what I've been through? You don't deserve it" (p. 44).⁵² Antigone, then, chooses her situation and with it, paradoxically, her freedom.

Before we inquire more fully into the nature of Antigone's freedom, we should examine her rather troublesome quality of almost perverse childishness.⁵³ In an

⁵²Anouilh, of course, is following Sophocles on this point. See Ch. VII.

⁵³Cf. the inane dialogue between Antigone and "Nanny" concerning the dog "Puff" (p. 15).

earlier chapter, we suggested that Antigone appears as a willful and perverse creature because a more mature and responsible and, therefore, more obviously heroic Antigone would not get past the Nazi censors. Beyond this, Anouilh is obviously playing up his heroine's childish qualities in order to lend an aesthetic tone to a conflict that is basically moral.⁵⁴ It must be realized, however, that Antigone is not so much childish as childlike, a far less pejorative term. Perhaps the major device used by Anouilh to emphasize the childlike nature of Antigone's actions is that of the toy shovel. As the Guard informs Creon, "The corporal found a shovel, a kid's shovel no bigger than that, all rusty and everything. Corporal's got the shovel for you. We thought maybe a kid did it" (p. 21). This revelation seems to have a strong effect on Creon, for he holds forth at length on the possible ramifications of a mere child committing this rebellious act, and the scene ends with him exclaiming over this aspect:

A child! (He looks at PAGE.) Come along, my lad. . . . (PAGE crosses to side of CREON. CREON puts his hand on PAGE'S shoulder.) Would you be willing to die for me? Would you defy the Guard with your little shovel? (PAGE looks up at CREON.) Of course you would. You would do it, too. (A pause. CREON looks away from PAGE and murmurs.) A child! (CREON and PAGE go slowly upstage center to top step. PAGE draws aside the curtain, through which exit CREON with PAGE behind him.) (pp. 22-23)

⁵⁴E.g., contrast Antigone's rather pure and esthete world with the practical, earthy world of the garlic-smelling, beer-drinking guards. The conflict between the two worlds becomes overt in the scene between Antigone and the Guard when she dictates a letter to him (pp. 49-50).

It would seem that Anouilh has added the Page to his drama solely for the purpose of giving the child-image a corporeal form. Since the Page is the last to exit at the end of the scene, it is his visual form as "Child" that lingers with the audience along with the hovering sound of the word itself. When, after the "parabasis" of the Chorus, Antigone is dragged out by the Guards, she of course confirms that she did the deed and, further, that she did it with "a toy shovel we used to take to the seashore when we were children. It was Polynices' own shovel; he had cut his name in the handle. That was why I left it with him" (p. 28).

Clearly, Anouilh is not merely being précieux in the manner attributed to Giraudoux. His purpose here is to point up the child-parent or youth-adult nature of the play's basic conflict between Antigone and Creon. Whereas Sophocles tends to call attention, particularly through Creon's tirades, to the fact that Antigone is a "mere" woman, Anouilh, often through the words of Creon, stresses her youth. For example, at the end of a long speech when they first confront each other Creon reminds Antigone, "Don't forget that the first doll you ever had came from me" (p. 31). Even more indicative of his attitude toward her is his ludicrously parental command in the same speech: "You will go to your room, now, and do as you have been told . . ." (p. 31). Antigone, too, is very conscious of her own youth, as when she exclaims to

Ismene, "Understand! I don't want to understand. There'll be time enough to understand when I'm old. . . . If I ever am old. But not now" (p. 12). It is a theme that is picked up by Creon, as in the following exchange with the Page at the play's end:

Creon. . . . In a hurry to grow up, aren't you?

Page. Oh, yes, sir.

Creon. I shouldn't be if I were you. Never grow up if you can help it. (p. 52)

If we combine these allusions to youth and age with Creon's own emphasis on the childlike nature of the crime, we can see the outlines of the conflict. To be young is simply to act--to act impetuously perhaps but also to act precisely as one should. It is to act purely with no misgivings. To be old, on the other hand, is to understand. Antigone clearly senses this when she speaks to her sister, and Creon later demonstrates in their dialogue together that he does indeed understand just about everything. But as Creon himself well knows, to understand is to render one incapable of acting purely, in the manner of youth. The only act an adult can perform is, as Creon puts it, the "dirty work"--the unpleasant jobs that always have to be done. Again, we have two worlds separated by a gulf--what is called, in one of the catch phrases of our day, the generation gap. The conflict is a commonplace one, and yet Anouilh's accentuation of it makes his play especially relevant in mid-twentieth century when this age-old conflict of the generations

appears to be taking on dimensions it never had before.

Beneath the conflict of youth versus age but closely associated with it is the more basic conflict of no versus yes. Stated thus this conflict has the abstraction of a mathematical formula, and yet in context the connection is clear. As Creon tells Antigone, he could not have said no to taking the kingship: "I should have been like a workman who turns down a job that has to be done. So I said yes" (p. 35). To which Antigone replies, "So much the worse for you, then. I didn't say yes. I can say no to anything I think vile, and I don't have to count the cost. But because you said yes, all that you can do, for all your crown and your trappings, and your guards--all that you can do is to have me killed" (p. 35). For Creon, to say yes is to take on the "dirty work" with all of its impurities. Antigone, with her no, does not have to deal with impurities--with "anything I think vile." In saying yes, Creon has, in Sartrean terms, chosen his project. As Antigone puts it, "You said yes, and made yourself king. Now you will never stop paying" (p. 36). However, Antigone, in undertaking her defiant act, has also determined her project, and as she herself is aware, it is a project that points toward death. "I am not here to understand," she tells Creon. "That's all very well for you. I am here to say no to you, and die" (p. 37). Thus, for Anouilh, the yes-no conflict takes on a much deeper

dimension, for ultimately to say no is to choose death and to say yes is to choose life. Naturally, it is Creon, the one that "understands," who points this out:

It is easy to say no. To say yes, you have to sweat and roll up your sleeves and plunge both hands into life up to the elbows. It is easy to say no, even if saying no means death. All you have to do is to sit still and wait. Wait to go on living; wait to be killed. That is the coward's part. No is one of your man-made words. Can you imagine a world in which trees say no to the sap? In which beasts say no to hunger or to propagation? (p. 37)

It is perhaps this speech, as much as any that redeems Creon from the role of villain, for his yes is, ultimately, an affirmation of life. It is the spirit of Odysseus, whose meeting in the Underworld with the shade of the dead hero Achilles only confirms his belief that it is better to live by whatever means than to die for a principle.

What redeems Antigone, however, and, in fact, makes her an existential heroine is that she is not dying for a principle. As she points out to Ismene early in the play, "I don't want to be right" (p. 11), and her dialogue with Creon reveals that her act has no real justification, that it is, in fact, absurd. As Creon is quick to point out, Polynices' body is, after all, dead; all Creon has refused it is "the wretched consolation of that mass-production jibber-jabber" which constitutes its "grotesque passport" to the other world (p. 32). He gets Antigone to admit that the whole thing is absurd and that she did what she did for nothing and for nobody but herself. The absurdity

is then compounded by Creon's revealing, first, a little of Polynices' sordid youth--"a cheap, idiotic bounder, that is what he was" (p. 39)--and, secondly, that the two brothers were almost indistinguishable in character--"everything that Polynices did, Eteocles had plotted to do" (p. 40)--and finally, the supreme absurdity, that Antigone may have buried the wrong body:

They were mashed to a pulp, Antigone. I had the prettier of the two carcasses brought in and gave it a State funeral; and I left the other to rot. I don't know which was which. And I assure you, I don't care. (p. 40)

These sordid revelations have the effect of shaking Antigone in her resolve, for although she had not acted before out of any external principle she did have her faith, which is now lost (p. 41). For the first and only time in the play, she appears to give in; she begins to say yes:

Creon. . . . Go and find Haemon. And get married quickly.

Antigone. (in a whisper). Yes.

Creon. All this is really beside the point.. You have your whole life ahead of you--and life is a treasure.

Antigone. Yes. (p. 41)

As in Sophocles, the marriage to Haemon becomes the symbol of that life she is rejecting, and Creon, here, makes another of his eloquent speeches in celebration of life. By having Antigone waver at this point, Anouilh stresses that Antigone is indeed free to make the other choice. But when Creon mistakenly ends his speech with an allusion

to happiness--"Life is nothing more than the happiness that you get out of it" (p. 41)--it is all over. Antigone now realizes that she must say no to that kind of happiness. She, as it were, reaffirms her initial project, but the difference is that now she is acting on the basis of absolutely nothing--neither principle nor faith. As she says of her father, Oedipus, "When all hope was gone, stamped out like a beetle. When it was absolutely certain that nothing, nothing could save him. Then he was at peace; then he could smile, almost; then he became beautiful" (p. 43). Antigone's final truth, then, is the one which, incongruously, she reveals to no one but the Guard, when in her "letter" she confesses, "I don't even know what I am dying for" (p. 50). Stated thus, her act seems pathetic and meaningless, but the fact that it is without external justification is also its strength. As Leonard Pronko says,

She acts gratuitously, with no apparent motivations, only becoming herself as she meets the particular situation in which we see her. Her actions are intuitive rather than rational, and represent what Bergson might call the ensemble of her intimate feelings, thoughts, and aspirations. She asserts her freedom to choose, and because she has never said yes to life she feels she remains free.⁵⁵

It is her freedom, within a tragic situation, that makes her the existential heroine that she is. As Sartre puts it, she "represents a naked will, a pure, free choice; in

⁵⁵The World of Jean Anouilh (Berkeley, 1961), pp. 63-64.

her there is no distinguishing between passion and action."⁵⁶

⁵⁶"Forgers of Myths," p. 325.

CHAPTER VII

THE BLINDING HAND: THE EXISTENTIAL HERO IN SOPHOCLES

It is my contention that the differences between Gide's Oedipe and Sophocles' Oedipus and between Anouilh's Antigone and Sophocles' Antigone are not nearly as striking as their similarities. Certainly, as has been shown in the two preceding chapters, Gide's Oedipe is rather more urbane and self-conscious than his prototype, and Anouilh's Antigone is much more naive and impulsive than Sophocles' sterner and more assertive heroine. Also, there are decided differences in the nature of the conflicts. Although both Oedipe and Oedipus the King can be said to involve the conflict of ignorance versus knowledge, Gide lends a social emphasis to his version that is not found in Sophocles, viz., the conflict of institutions such as the Church versus the individual. Likewise, Sophocles gives his Creon-Antigone conflict both theological and feminist overtones whereas Anouilh makes his a conflict between generations. Both plays, however, involve, also, the conflict of state and individual, and both stress Antigone's option for death over life, though Sophocles expresses this motif primarily through imagery of marriage-tombs, etc., while Anouilh conveys it through dialectic.

The significant similarity among all of these works

is their emphasis on the protagonist's existential freedom. As we have seen, both Gide's hero and Anouilh's heroine, when trapped in an existential situation, perform what amounts to an acte gratuit. I am now prepared to argue that both Sophocles' Oedipus and his Antigone do the same. The discussion that follows, then, will treat the existential nature of these two plays, but it will also include within its purview all of Sophocles' other extant plays with the exception of Electra, which we have already analyzed in comparison with Euripides. We will begin at that point where we ended our discussion of Gide, i.e., with Oedipus' self-blinding.

When Oedipus enters the stage newly blinded, the Chorus, in their pity and terror, ask him how such an act could come to be.

Doer of dreadful deeds, how did you dare
so far to do despite to your own eyes?
what spirit urged you to it? (ll. 1326-1328)⁵⁷

And Oedipus answers them,

It was Apollo, friends, Apollo,
that brought this bitter bitterness, my sorrows
to completion.
But the hand that struck me
was none but my own. (ll. 1329-1332)

Both parts of this answer are clearly true: it was the god Apollo who caused Oedipus to suffer, but "the hand that struck"--"the blinding hand" (in the Fitts and Fitzgerald version)--was indeed his own. He alone was

⁵⁷ Trans. David Grene. All quotations of Sophocles are from The Complete Greek Tragedies, ed. David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, Vol. II (Chicago, 1959).

responsible for this, the very last of his "dreadful deeds." The earlier deeds--the parricide and the incest--can be ascribed to fate, but the last is an act of freedom.

It is the element of fate that has traditionally been felt to be uppermost in Oedipus the King. To be sure, all of Greek tragedy has been and, I suppose, still is, in the popular view, "tragedy of fate." But as Thomas Goodell once pointed out in a refutation of the idea of dominant fate in Greek tragedy, "The 'Oedipus' does, however, lend more color to the dogma than any other tragedy, because . . . all is in fact done before the play opens."⁵⁸ Goodell might also have mentioned the important role of the Delphic Oracle in this drama. True, the oracles are prevalent all through Greek tragedy. In Sophocles they are a predominant force or presence in The Women of Trachis, Philoctetes, and Oedipus at Colonus. But in Oedipus the King, the Pythian oracle is most omnipresent. Not only has it predicted actions of the past, first, to the King and Queen, secondly to Oedipus himself; it also exerts a control on the present, for it is the command of the oracle that the murderer of Laius must be found if Thebes is to rid itself of the plague. As William Green points out, one of the important alterations Sophocles makes in the legend is to transfer "the chief supernatural element in the story from the Erinyes

⁵⁸Athenian Tragedy: A Study in Popular Art (New Haven, 1920), p. 138.

to Apollo, whose oracles he makes dominate each critical moment of the action."⁵⁹ Thus, Oedipus is pointing the finger squarely when he says, "It was Apollo, friends, Apollo. . . ." Greene continues,

What gives this play an especially fatalistic tinge is the fact that at the moment when it opens the warning oracle given to Laius and later to Oedipus about parricide and incest has already been fulfilled. Thus both the general outline of the story, fixed before Sophocles took it up, and the oracular interpretation of it which he emphasizes conspire to give us the impression that what has occurred could not have been otherwise, that it was all fated.⁶⁰

As Green's words suggest, however, what is fatalistic is the peculiar atmosphere of this play. It does not necessarily follow that Oedipus the King is a "tragedy of fate" rather than a "tragedy of character."

A look at the other half of Oedipus' reply about the blinding should be enough to convince us that he is at least partially a free agent. Like the emphasis on the oracles the incident of the self-blinding is apparently Sophocles' own innovation in the existing myth. As many critics have pointed out, Sophocles did not customarily remake a myth in the manner of Aeschylus or Euripides in order to make a point. G. M. Kirkwood puts it very well when he says that Sophocles--unlike Aeschylus, who uses the myths creatively, and Euripides, who uses them critically--"thinks mythically," somewhat in the manner of

⁵⁹William Chase Greene, Moirai: Fate, Good, and Evil in Greek Thought (New York, 1944), p. 155.

⁶⁰Ibid.

Homer.⁶¹ When Sophocles does make changes, says Kirkwood, he does so not to alter the direction of the myth but to heighten the dramatic emphasis of certain of its integral features.⁶² Such is the case with his handling of the Oedipus saga. It is instructive here to compare Homer's version as given in Ulysses' account of Hades:

I also saw fair Epicaste mother of king Oedipodes whose awful lot it was to marry her own son without suspecting it. He married her after having killed his father, but the gods proclaimed the whole story to the world; whereon he remained king of Thebes, in great grief for the spite the gods had borne him; but Epicaste went to the house of the mighty jailor Hades, having hanged herself for grief, and the avenging spirits haunted him as for an outraged mother--to his ruing bitterly thereafter.⁶³

To my knowledge Homer's is the only extant pre-Sophoclean account of this part of the myth;⁶⁴ so the difference would definitely seem to be the result of the dramatist's own innovations. Most significant, perhaps, is that in Homer it is the gods that "proclaimed the whole story to the world"--a point we shall return to when we examine Oedipus the King more fully. Of interest here is it that in Homer Oedipus "remained king of Thebes" and evidently did not blind himself. Thus what in the play is a free act on the part of its hero is also, in the handling of

⁶¹A Study of Sophoclean Drama (Ithaca, New York, 1958), p. 16.

⁶²Ibid., pp. 24-25.

⁶³Odyssey XI, ll. 271-280, trans. Samuel Butler.

⁶⁴See Sir Richard C. Jebb, Sophocles: the Plays and Fragments, Vol. I (Cambridge, 1893), p. xii.

the myth, a free act on the part of its author. In paraphrase of himself Sophocles could say that the hand that wrote these words was none but his own.

Much has been made of the fact that the fifth century Athenians already knew the stories that they were to see performed at the tragic festivals, but it is quite likely that many of the tragedians' innovations caught them by surprise. Such undoubtedly was the case when the messenger proclaimed in graphic terms that Oedipus had torn the brooches from Jocasta's dress and gouged out both his eyes. Jocasta's suicide they were familiar with through Homer, but this additional catastrophe must have come as a shock. And yet for those alert enough to catch the signs along the way it could only have been a shock of recognition, for the motif of eyes and blindness runs all through the play, and the angry Tiresias prophesies somewhat enigmatically (and not without sarcasm) that a curse will drive Oedipus out of the land "with darkness on your eyes, / that now have such straight vision" (ll. 418-419). Thus, dramatically and symbolically, the self-blinding has a certain inevitability, but the act itself is free. Richard B. Sewall observes, in an excellent essay on Oedipus, that Oedipus himself gives several possible motives, both in the closing of this play and in Oedipus at Colonus. It seems obvious, then, that no one of these motives, nor a combination of them, will suffice. Sewall concludes that it is as an act of freedom that

Oedipus' blinding is "creative." "Whatever he may have thought he was doing, the act stands in the play as his culminating act of freedom, the assertion of his ability to act independent of any god, oracle, or prophecy."⁶⁵

The kind of freedom described here has a distinct existential quality, and, in fact, Sewall's whole discussion of Oedipus the King has existential overtones, as when he says, "No play ever presented more starkly the terms of existence, 'what it means to be.'"⁶⁶ Other writers have spoken of this tragedy in similar terms. Thus we need not be surprised when we come upon an essay by Richmond Y. Hathorn titled "The Existential Oedipus." For the purposes of his discussion, Hathorn defines existentialism "as including all thinking that by a method of introspective empiricism throws particular emphases on the ethical issues involving the individual self."⁶⁷ This, of course, is broad enough to cover much of the great literature of the Western world, but Hathorn then goes on to outline what he believes to be the specific emphases of existentialism. "These emphases," he says, "are placed on the following":

on a rigorous inspection of concrete, primary experience--experience, that is, as it presents

⁶⁵The Vision of Tragedy (New Haven, 1959), p. 41.

⁶⁶Ibid., p. 40.

⁶⁷Tragedy, Myth, and Mystery (Bloomington, Indiana, 1962), p. 80. "The Existential Oedipus" also appears in the Classical Journal, LIII (Feb., 1958), 223-230.

itself to the individual, as opposed to the interpreted, secondary data of science and abstractive reflection; on the actual situation in which the individual finds himself, la condition humaine; on the individual's personal commitment or lack of commitment of himself to that situation, his willingness or lack thereof to become engagé, "involved, committed"; on the peculiarly human character of pledges, promises, and loyalties, which constitute the ethical life of human beings in contrast to the life of the lower animals; on the individual's relationship to fate and freedom; on the emergence or nonemergence of what may be called a Self.⁶⁸

The essential terms of this interpretation are (1) concrete experience, (2) situation, (3) commitment, (4) pledges, (5) freedom, and (6) Self. By and large these are the very aspects of existentialism that we have observed in the French dramas, and I think it can be demonstrated that they are also to be found in all of the extant tragedies of Sophocles. We shall return to Hathorn's own existential analysis of Oedipus the King after we have examined some of the other dramas, always, of course, emphasizing freedom. For the moment it should at least be evident that there is a strong element of existential freedom even in this peculiarly "fatalistic" play.

Before we look at Ajax, which is presumed to be the earliest of the extant plays, I want to quote one of the more cogent refutations of Sophoclean fatalism. To consider Sophocles a complete fatalist, says John A. Moore,

⁶⁸Ibid.

would imply the resignation of his characters to whatever might come: Antigone to the disgrace of her brother's corpse, Ajax to yield basely to the Atreidae, Philoctetes to be pressed into the service of the Greeks. No playwright ever created so many characters to contradict this notion as Sophocles did; and the number and strength of them is proof enough that not only they, but the poet as well, were the very reverse of fatalists.⁶⁹

Of course it could be argued that to say that an author of a work or a character in it is fatalistic is not quite the same thing as saying that the work itself is a tragedy of fate. Could not, one may ask, the elements of fate be very strong without the protagonist necessarily resigning himself to them? I think not, for in such a case fate is not really the controlling factor. As has been pointed out elsewhere, what we really mean when we speak of a hero "fighting against his fate" is that he is refusing to resign himself to his situation. It is the situation that places such severe obstacles in the way of the hero's freedom, but the situation does not prevent the hero from being free in the existential sense. Ajax is free to yield to the Atreidae and live a long life, dishonorable as that life might be. Sophocles may be deliberately pointing up this alternative in that enigmatic but moving speech in which Ajax appears to yield, just before he goes off to the beach and falls on his sword (ll. 644-692). This is not to say that Sophocles is creating suspense

⁶⁹Sophocles and Arete (Cambridge, Mass., 1938), p. 58.

over the outcome--Ajax' suicide was a known fact of the legend and the whole movement of this first part of the play is toward it--but merely to suggest that he may have introduced this speech, in part, to show that there is another way, that in not yielding Ajax is making a free choice.

The situation is all-important in Ajax. Characteristically, Sophocles has chosen a form of the original myth that serves to heighten the drama and the horror of Ajax' situation. As John Moore points out in his introduction to the play, Pindar utilized a version of the myth in which Ajax merely committed suicide over disappointment and grief for being refused the honor of Achilles' armor. In Pindar, says Moore, "There is no hint of any attempt by Ajax to murder the Greek chieftains, no lunacy, and assault upon the livestock."⁷⁰ In retaining these features, Sophocles naturally casts Ajax in a much more negative light, but, as Moore points out, the playwright manages to play up the ignominy of Ajax' situation while allowing us to forget his original criminal intentions. The reason for this, I feel, is that Ajax' guiltiness is of far less importance to Sophocles than the degradation and horror of his situation. Indeed, as far as Ajax' murderous intent toward the Atreidae is concerned, it is still very much in evidence even as he is

⁷⁰The Complete Greek Tragedies, Vol. I, p. 209.

about to die when he calls upon the Furies to

mark my end,
 How Atreus' sons have brought me to my ruin,
 And sweep upon them for their ruin too.
 They see me falling now by my own hand;
 So too by loved and kindred hand may they!
 (11. 837-840)⁷¹

Forgiveness of one's enemies is not a characteristic trait of the existential hero! Nor is contriteness. What is important, as Moore stresses both in his book on Sophocles and in this introduction to Ajax, is the hero's nobility or aretē; hence the degradation of this nobility depicted in the opening scene, i.e., the mad rejoicing of Ajax among the slain animals, is all-important both dramatically and thematically. I feel that Moore sums this up excellently:

The disclosure of Ajax in his tent, fouled by the animals he has insanely tormented and killed, is more than a powerful coup de théâtre; it is a fearful and summary image of total degradation not merely of heroic, but of all human, value. The process by which this image is transformed and Ajax' disaster irradiated by his recovery of his heroic strength and human relatedness is the true action of the play.⁷²

Perhaps the most poignant point along the way to Ajax' recovery is that one when he first begins to recover his sanity and thereby his consciousness of his situation, for it is only then that he truly begins to suffer. As his slave-wife, Tecmessa, expresses it,

Ajax, so long as the mad fit was on him,
 Himself felt joy at all his wretchedness,

⁷¹Trans. Moore.

⁷²Op. cit.

Though we, his sane companions, grieved indeed.
 But now that he's recovered and breathes clear,
 His own anguish totally masters him
 (ll. 271-275)

Anguish, of course, is vital for what may be called the existential experience. One must feel anguish to experience the situation concretely, and one must be fully conscious to feel anguish. Insanity is one form of escape. At first the anguish "totally masters" Ajax, but through it he is able, finally, to transcend it and experience the freedom that is his. The transformation of Ajax' image, described by Moore, continues to take place, of course, long after his death. The gradual recovery of his nobility is attested to throughout the drama--all the way to its closing lines, which are spoken by his brother Teucer and call to mind strikingly Fortinbras' speech at the end of Hamlet:

Come now, come, everyone
 That claims to be his friend,
 Begin, proceed, and bear him up,
 This man of perfect excellence--
 No nobler one has ever been than he:
 I speak of Ajax, while he lived. (ll. 1415-1420)

As Hathorn suggests (above), the tragic situation in which the hero finds himself is not, according to the existentialists, special or peculiar; it is simply one form--albeit an extremely dramatic form--of the human situation, viz., la condition humaine. In Ajax this universality of the situation is pointed up for us with great poetic force when Odysseus says of Ajax,

I think of him, yet also of myself;
 For I see the true state of all us that live--

We are dim shapes, no more, and weightless shadow.
(ll. 124-126)

"The true state of all us that live"--there could be no more apt expression of la condition humaine. That the situation is important in all of Sophocles' tragedies I do not think any critic would deny. G. M. Kirkwood aptly calls the typical situation of the Sophoclean hero a "crucial situation." Thus his definition of Sophoclean tragedy is "a serious play in which a person of strong and noble character is confronted with a crucial situation and responds to it in a special way."⁷³ The last part of this is, no doubt, unnecessarily vague. The "special way" in which the character responds needs to be stated more concretely, as it has been by such critics as J. C. Opstelten, who says that in the work of Sophocles

the hero reacts upon the crisis--the conflict into which he is plunged--with a mental and spiritual activity. He who has not discovered in Sophocles' dramatic art the passionateness of this inward activity which so stubbornly resists the idea of suffering, has remained outside the wall within which its fire glows.⁷⁴

This same combination of inwardness and activity in the Sophoclean hero is stressed by Cedric H. Whitman throughout his important book on Sophocles.⁷⁵ These two

⁷³Kirkwood, p. 10.

⁷⁴Sophocles and Greek Pessimism, trans. J. A. Ross (Amsterdam, 1952), pp. 84-85.

⁷⁵Sophocles: A Study of Heroic Humanism (Cambridge, Mass., 1951). Whitman frequently cites two books in German that are said to give Sophocles an existentialist interpretation: Karl Reinhardt, Sophokles (Frankfurt, 1933), and Heinrich Weinstock, Sophokles (Leipzig, 1931).

qualities, which lie at the heart of existentialism, are far removed from fatalism and resignation.

Antigone, Sophocles' most famous heroine, is probably the clearest example of the character who refuses to bow to the situation. As Moore points out (above), Antigone, like Ajax, could yield; she could allow herself to accept the disgrace of Polyneices' corpse. All the forces about her pressure her to do just that; arrayed against her are not only Creon's decree but the solicitous advice of Ismene and the Chorus. Just as in Ajax Sophocles makes it clear, through his hero's departing speech, that there exists a genuine alternative, so does he in Antigone with the introduction of Ismene as a foil to his heroine.⁷⁶ It is not enough, of course, for Ismene to offer her headstrong sister some prudent advice. What makes her a true foil to Antigone is that she is faced with the same precise problem--though she does not recognize it as a problem until her sister compels her to--and she chooses the other course, the course of yielding to authority and abandoning their brother's corpse. Later, of course, out of loyalty to her sister she tries to accept joint responsibility for the deed, but Antigone rightly chastizes her, admonishing her not to "make your own / that which you did not do" (ll. 546-547).⁷⁷ The harshness

⁷⁶Another one of Sophocles' significant alterations of the mythos. See Kirkwood, p. 24.

⁷⁷Trans. Elizabeth Wyckoff.

of Antigone's reaction to her well-intentioned sister has bothered some critics, but in the existentialist view her points are well-taken. As Anouilh's heroine also makes clear (see Ch. VI), one is his deeds; he is not his expressed intentions. He can take neither credit nor responsibility for something that he did not in fact do. Ismene is trying, when she says, "I did the deed, if she agrees I did" (l. 536), to have the responsibility without the act. The responsibility involves the supreme penalty, to be sure, but it also involves honor. "Don't fence me out from honor," Ismene begs her sister, "from death with you, and honor done the dead" (ll. 545-546). But it is not Antigone who has fenced her out; it was her own refusal to participate in the act when she had the opportunity. As Antigone told her then, "You soon will know / if you are noble, or fallen from your descent" (ll. 37-38). This is not to discredit Ismene, or to suggest that she is somehow the villain of the piece. She is, after all, behaving as most of us would under the same circumstances. She is not, however, an existential heroine. And Antigone is.

It has been observed by some critics that a typical feature of the Sophoclean hero is his isolation. In Antigone's case she is isolated not only by the refusal of Ismene to join her but by the fact, pointed out by William Greene, that the Chorus is of the opposite sex.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Greene, p. 144. It is worth noting that Antigone

Moreover, the Chorus--representing as they do the Theban Elders whom Creon has called together as his counsellors--are not in the least alligned with Antigone, though they tend to become more sympathetic to her cause and more critical of Creon's actions as the drama progresses. The only character who defends Antigone is Haemon, her husband to be, and he does so on purely rationalistic grounds and only after assuring his father of his respectful obedience to his authority. Moreover, as Greene has again pointed out, Sophocles contrives to keep the two lovers from meeting on stage, thereby accenting further Antigone's isolation from her world. Her isolation is, of course, a part of her situation, and it is through her isolation that she achieves her nobility.

One of the most troubling passages in Antigone is that in which she speaks her final words before going off to a living death and final suicide in the "prison-tomb" of the cave. Her kommos with the Chorus ends with a poignant lament of her fate:

Unwept, no wedding-song, unfriended, now I go
 the road laid down for me.
 No longer shall I see this holy light of the sun.
 No friend to bewail my fate. (ll. 878-881)

This expression of self-pity seems "out of character" after her early confidence and singleness of purpose, and

is the only one of Sophocles' extant dramas where this is the case. However, in the Theban plays, the Chorus, though of the same sex as Oedipus, remains rather independent of him. See Kirkwood, p. 187.

yet, the existentialist will ask, what does it mean to be "out of character"? As the Chorus sings in the famous second ode of Antigone, "Many the wonders but nothing walks stranger than man" (l. 332). Part of man's strangeness is his very freedom; unlike the beast he walks freely and unpredictably through the world. William G. McCollom, to whom I am indebted for this allusion to the second ode, says that the "spiritual evolution" within Antigone is "wholly credible but hardly predictable." Arguing against the doctrine of "inevitability" in tragedy--a close relative of the doctrine of fate--McCollom makes a good case for existential freedom:

. . . the hero cannot exist without the power to choose. Even where he must choose what his nature requires, that nature is constantly being redefined by his conscious action. And though the hero prepares us for what he does, he continues to astonish.⁷⁹

Like Oedipus at the moment of his blinding, or like Ajax in his "yielding" speech, Antigone astonishes us with her sadness and apparent misgivings, but we sense, perhaps, that this is her own grasping of the full meaning of this the final step in her isolation. "Unfriended," she now will go off to where, as she says a few lines earlier, she will be "alive to the place of corpses, an alien still, / never at home with the living nor with the dead" (ll. 850-851). Whether she chooses to die or, as Creon puts it, live a "buried life," "she is exiled from our life on

⁷⁹Tragedy (New York, 1957), p. 89.

earth" (ll. 888 & 890).

But stranger than this lament is Antigone's next speech, in which she offers some rather spurious logic and false sentiment in justification of her deed, viz., that she would not have broken the decree for a husband or a child because she could always have another whereas another brother she could not. Scholars have argued that this whole section of the speech (ll. 904-920) is not Sophocles' and that the thought is borrowed from Herodotus.⁸⁰ If so, it is not, as Kirkwood, for one, points out,⁸¹ the only time that Sophocles would have been indebted to Herodotus for some of the sentiments expressed in his dramas. Moreover, it seems quite possible, as Kirkwood and Kitto argue, that Sophocles has deliberately given his heroine a rather frigid logic here because no rationalization can adequately account for her deed. Says Kirkwood,

It is neither surprising nor inappropriate that her logic is poor. She acted in the first place from instinctive feeling rather than reasoned principles. To find logical justification for intuitions is by no means easy, and it is made much more difficult for Antigone when her first and most natural articulation of her intuition has, apparently, failed to convince.⁸²

He is referring, of course, to Antigone's moving defense before Creon, in which she appeals forcefully to "the gods'

⁸⁰ It is, for example, omitted entirely from the Fitts and Fitzgerald translation. See also Whitman, who calls it an "actor's interpolation," p. 92.

⁸¹ Kirkwood, p. 163.

⁸² Ibid., pp. 164-165.

unwritten and unailing laws" (l. 455). But even this has not been her only stated reason for acting, for as Kitto points out, in her initial conversation with Ismene she does not stress religious duty so much as filial loyalty and brotherly love.⁸³ The necessary conclusion, I believe, is that Antigone, very much like her twentieth-century counterpart, has no real "reason" for her act; she simply feels she has to do it. Thus, it is a free, existential act. To be sure, we must not allow our conversance with Anouilh's version to color our perception of that of Sophocles--as has been pointed out, there are significant differences in the characters of the two heroines--but it is my belief that Sartre's characterization of Anouilh's Antigone as "a naked will, a pure, free choice" applies equally, if not more, to the Antigone of Sophocles.

I am not prepared to argue that Deianira in The Women of Trachis is an existential heroine of the same sort as Antigone. It has been maintained by some critics that she is not a heroine at all. Michael Jameson, in his introduction to the play, claims that it would be misleading to insist on either her or Heracles as being the "true hero,"⁸⁴ and Bernard Knox excludes the play entirely from a book-length study of Sophocles' heroes,

⁸³Greek Tragedy (New York, 1950), p. 133.

⁸⁴The Complete Greek Tragedies, Vol. II, p. 271.

saying, "Of the seven extant tragedies, six are named after the central figure; only one, the Trachiniae, after the chorus, and that is the only one of the seven which is not clearly based on the figure of a tragic hero."⁸⁵ Whitman, on the other hand, makes a good case for Deianira as a tragic heroine in some ways similar to Oedipus.⁸⁶ Certainly, she dominates the stage as much as Ajax or Antigone, if that is any criterion, but it is true, as Knox also points out, that she is not faced with the same sort of choice between compromise and possible destruction as are each of the other six heroes.⁸⁷ She is not one who acts freely and with inner conviction in the trueness of her action; rather, she acts impulsively and under the indirect compulsion of the centaur Nessus, and she instantly regrets her action when she sense that it may have tragic consequences. She is noble and loving and good, and, finally, pathetic if not tragic; but she is not existential. What is existential about this drama is not she but her situation; for Sophocles has presented here one of his most pessimistic dramatizations of la condition humaine. We see in The Women of Trachis that the innocent suffer, that even with the best intentions men are able to inflict great hurt upon one another. We see, as Whitman emphasizes, that knowledge can be tragic,

⁸⁵The Heroic Temper: Studies in Sophoclean Tragedy (Berkeley, 1964), p. 2.

⁸⁶Whitman, pp. 103-121.

⁸⁷Knox, p. 8.

for it can cause great pain or it can come too late. As for the ultimate cause of such irrational evil, where else can it lie but with the gods? As Hyllus says at the play's close,

You see how little compassion the Gods
have shown in all that's happened (ll. 1266-
1267)⁸⁸

And then, turning to the leader of the Chorus,

Maiden, come from the house with us.
You have seen a terrible death
and agonies, many and strange, and there is
nothing here which is not Zeus. (ll. 1275-1278)

Such is the metaphysical context within which all of Sophocles' heroes function, i.e., in the midst of gods that are indifferent to, and somehow responsible for, human suffering. What sets Deianira apart from those who are truly heroes, in the existential sense, is that she is unable to cope with the situation, whereas the others, even those who go to their destruction, can understand it and somehow transcend it.

In the case of Sophocles' next-to-last extant play, Philoctetes, it is again instructive to understand what innovations Sophocles made in the legend. As with Electra we are fortunate in being able to compare Sophocles' treatment with those of Aeschylus and Euripides, for these tragedians also wrote, before Sophocles, their own Philoctetes, and even though the plays are lost, scholars

today are able to tell us a little about them. Of two features that most distinguish Sophocles' version from the other two, one is that the island, Lemnos, on which Philoctetes is abandoned by the Greeks, is totally uninhabited.⁸⁹ Thus, we see how Sophocles has once again intensified the isolated situation of his hero. At the commencement of the dramatic action, Philoctetes is living in a forced exile from humanity that is almost as extreme as that faced by Antigone and threatened against Electra. The only redeeming feature of his exile is that he is not cut off from (in Antigone's words) the "holy light of the sun." He does live in a cave, but, as Odysseus informs Neoptolemus, it is "a cave with two mouths."

There are two niches to rest in, one in the sun when it is cold, the other a tunneled passage through which the breezes blow in summertime. (ll. 16-19)⁹⁰

Not as severe as a "prison-tomb," perhaps, but we must remember that Philoctetes has lived in such a state for nine years. His exile, moreover, is doubly an ordeal, for in spite of the cruelty that has been inflicted upon him, he still loves his fellow man and desires communion with him. When he first sees Neoptolemus and the sailors, he says,

Take pity on me; speak to me; speak,
speak if you come as friends. No--answer me.

⁸⁹See Opstelten, pp. 106-107.

⁹⁰Trans. David Grene.

If this is all
that we can have from one another, speech,
this, at least, we should have. (ll. 228-233)

Coupled with the dramatic irony of "if you come as friends," there is a special poignancy in this implicit suggestion of the impossibility of true communion between human beings. Sophocles is calling attention, here, to the kind of psychic isolation between men that is seen as a vital problem by the existentialists. The whole action of this play turns on the attempts of Philoctetes and Neoptolemus to reach a true understanding.

The second, and most important, innovation on the part of Sophocles is Neoptolemus himself. He is apparently non-existent in the dramas of Aeschylus and Euripides, who allow Odysseus the brunt of the task of getting Philoctetes to return to Troy.⁹¹ Sophocles does not, however, utilize him as a foil, in the manner of Ismene and Chrysothemis; as I have already suggested, he has Neoptolemus play a much more significant role in the dramatic action. He is, however, much like the two "weak sisters" in his attempt to persuade Philoctetes to be "sensible" and in his respect for authority. Like Chrysothemis, his early action has been learned; Odysseus has taught him how to capture Philoctetes by craft. But the all-important difference is that Neoptolemus has a

⁹¹Though Euripides has Diomedes accompany Odysseus to help persuade Philoctetes; also, to heighten the political drama, he introduces Trojan ambassadors, led by Paris, to try to dissuade Philoctetes from aiding the Greeks. See Kirkwood, pp. 36-39.

basic integrity that causes him to balk, from the very first, against the deceitful assignment imposed upon him by Odysseus and to respond to the noble and heroic nature of Philoctetes. Thus, what we see, as the action progresses, is first a rising doubt about the wisdom of carrying out the deceit and then a gradual strengthening of resolve to help Philoctetes until the significant moment when he returns the bow. Now that genuine trust and friendship is established between the two, Neoptolemus attempts to persuade the intractable Philoctetes to win victory for the Greeks as the Oracle predicted and to cure the great, festering wound in his foot. A natural "happy ending" would be for Neoptolemus to succeed through friendship where he had failed through deceit, but Sophocles, instead, has Neoptolemus won over by the noble nature of Philoctetes, to whom he agrees in fact to what he had originally proposed in fiction: to return the sick and lonely exile to his home.

It is then, of course, that Heracles appears--deus ex machina, as it were--and delivers Zeus' command that Philoctetes shall join the Greeks together with Neoptolemus and win victory with the bow. Philoctetes answers,

Voice that stirs my yearning when I hear,
 form lost for so long,
 I shall not disobey. (ll. 1445-1447)

As the language implies, the "voice" that Philoctetes hears is, in a sense, from his own heart. Heracles' epiphany is not a deus ex machina in the pejorative sense,

for, as several critics have pointed out, Philoctetes is shown to be intimately linked with Heracles throughout; his bow, for example, derives its special power from belonging originally to the great, god-like hero. Thus, as Whitman, especially, has shown, it is actually Philoctetes' free decision that he must join the Greeks. One of the oracles states (ll. 610-613) that Philoctetes should be persuaded to come of his own free will, but Odysseus, in his zeal, tries first to capture him by craft, then, failing that, by force, and, finally, merely tries for the bow. But none of these ploys can work; not even Neoptolemus' honest attempt at persuasion can work. For the only way Philoctetes can uphold the integrity of his position is to refuse to give in to the very last, and only then make the free, existential choice to go with the Greeks. It is at this moment that he most clearly reveals the existential freedom that has characterized his actions throughout. Says Whitman,

In refusing the world, Philoctetes has maintained his freedom with the utter-most fortitude, and is now free to change, if he desires, and accept the world.⁹²

This he does, and on his own terms. Like Electra, he achieves a victory through his existential freedom.

When we see Oedipus in Oedipus at Colonus he is in a form of exile as extreme as that of Philoctetes, for

⁹²Whitman, p. 155.

not only is he ostracized from his own country but he is blind. He has lost completely the "holy light of the sun." Sophocles' emphasis elsewhere on the light of the sun as a kind of symbol of life among men helps us to get the full force and significance of this blindness. In Oedipus the King, just as he has learned the tragic truth and he turns to enter the palace, he cries, "Light of the sun, let me / look upon you no more after today!" (ll. 1184-1185). Now, blind, old, and, except for Antigone, alone, he wanders as an isolated outcast in the midst of the world. The curious paradox of his situation is that he is both abhorred and sought by the world. Like Philoctetes, he has the stain and curse of the "wound" coupled with the mysterious power of the "bow." Oedipus' "wound" is of course his monstrous crimes against his father and mother; his "bow" is the ability attributed to him by the Delphic oracle to bring blessings on others both in life and in death. As Oedipus says, near the play's beginning, he has the power of

Conferring benefit on those who received me,
A curse on those who have driven me away. (ll. 92-93)⁹³

According to Kirkwood, the structure of Oedipus at Colonus could properly be termed "deductive," for the entire action of the play is in a sense an illustration of this thematic statement concerning Oedipus' special powers to bless and curse.⁹⁴

⁹³Trans. Robert Fitzgerald.

⁹⁴Kirkwood, p. 60.

As the action progresses, we see Oedipus exercising the negative facet of his power--the power to curse--first in the conflict with Creon and secondly in the conflict with Polyneices. Creon is very much like Odysseus in that he would like to use Oedipus without truly accepting him; he would like to seize the "bow" and ignore the man. Such is the motive behind his intent to have Oedipus reside just outside the border of Thebes. Likewise, Polyneices, though undoubtedly more sincere than the crudely obvious Creon, wants to use his father's power in order to gain blessings for his cause. Oedipus of course perceives the selfishness that underlies his son's entreaties; nor does he forget that Polyneices is one of those who have "driven me away." Thus, old and blind and physically helpless as he is, he stands against both Creon and Polyneices with an inner strength and ferocity comparable to that of Ajax, Antigone, Electra, or Philoctetes at their strongest and angriest moments, and he hurls his terrible curses upon them. This propensity to hate one's enemies--as Ajax does when he curses the Atreidae before his death; as Electra does throughout; as Philoctetes does in his unmitigated anger against Odysseus; and as Oedipus does here--is hard to accept on ethical grounds. Yet it is human, and perhaps it is even, at times, necessary. As is said in Ecclesiastes, "There is a time to love and a time to hate." In any event, the power to hate evil is an undeniable quality in the

existential hero. Compare the Electra of Sophocles:

Evil is all around me, evil
is what I am compelled to practice. (ll. 308-310)

And the Electra of Sartre: "An evil thing is conquered only by another evil thing . . ." (Act II, Scene i).

Oedipus' power to bless "those who received me" is of course demonstrated at the drama's end, when the blind man guides the others unerringly into the heart of the sacred grove of the Eumenides and dies his strangely divine death after imparting his mysterious secret to Theseus. Of more thematic importance than the blessing itself is the heroic nature of Oedipus. Theseus, like Neoptolemus, is noble enough himself that he is able to recognize Oedipus' essential greatness and accept him and protect him in spite of his terrible past. What is important to realize, in terms of our discussion, is that Oedipus acquires his heroic power through his freedom. As in Oedipus the King, his fate appears to be conditioned by the oracles, but in reality he is free. He is free to resign himself to the "fate" of living and dying a blind, wandering beggar; he is free to return to Thebes and live out the remainder of life in comparative comfort and security. Indeed, one almost feels at the end, that he is free to live or die, as he chooses. The power ascribed to him by the oracles would mean nothing if he did not believe in it himself; his strength of purpose comes from within. The point is that at this stage in his life he

is far from passive, far from being "retired"; he is still acting with a purpose--what Sartre would call a "project" --which is to confer benefit on those who receive him and a curse on those who have driven him away. And he is acting, now, for a change, on the side of the gods.

This final tragedy by Sophocles is generally considered to be, in part, a vindication of the younger Oedipus of Oedipus the King. Such certainly seems to be the case, for not only does the elder Oedipus have the sanction of the gods and the acceptance of the Athenians, but his innocence in respect to the actual "crimes" of parricide and incest is proclaimed several times in the course of the play. It would seem that Sophocles might have felt that the audience appraisal of the first Oedipus was too critical--too ready to see his "crimes" and his "faults" and not understand his truly heroic nature--so the dramatist tried in his next play on the subject to insure that his fellow Athenians would give his hero the same welcome that their fictional counterparts do on stage. It is easy to think of Oedipus the King as a type of crime-and-punishment story, if we fail to remember that the "crimes" are really things of the past and that they were committed in ignorance. As many modern critics--such as Whitman, Opstelten, Moore, and Kirkwood--have observed, it is profoundly misleading to try to find some hamartia, some flaw of temper, for example, in these past acts. If Oedipus has a weakness, it lies elsewhere.

Hathorn writes, in the essay cited at this chapter's beginning,

Oedipus' blind spot is his failure in existential commitment; a failure to recognize his own involvement in the human condition, a failure to realize that not all difficulties are riddles, to be solved by the application of disinterested intellect, but that some are mysteries, not to be solved at all, but to be coped with only by the engagement, active or passive, of the whole self. Oedipus' punishment, then, is not really punishment at all, but the only means by which the gods may enlighten blindness of such density. Sophocles was not concerned to tell a crime-and-punishment story; this is shown by leaving the "crimes" out of the action.⁹⁵

Hathorn puts the case for Oedipus' lack of commitment too strongly. From the beginning he is committed to the search for the truth. As Whitman puts it, "the quest for knowledge is itself the tragic action."⁹⁶ To be sure, he does not realize, at first, that the truth he is seeking is his own tragic truth, and in this sense it would be fair to say that he is not totally committed. But as the search goes on, he very gradually, almost imperceptibly, becomes dimly aware that it is he himself who is guilty. Whitman points out that this process begins at Jocasta's mention of the "place where three roads meet" (l. 716), but it may actually be earlier. What is going on in Oedipus' mind, for example, when, after the Chorus entreats him to spare Creon, he says, "Do you know what you ask?"

⁹⁵Hathorn, p. 87. Elsewhere, Hathorn cites the theory of Christian existentialist Gabriel Marcel that the human condition is a mystery rather than a problem.

⁹⁶Whitman, p. 138.

(l. 655). Later, it is clear that the truth is hitting him with more certainty: "What have you designed, O Zeus, to do with me?" (l. 738). Finally, as the tragic recognition approaches, he answers the Herdman's exclamation: "O God, I am on the brink of frightful speech" with "And I of frightful hearing. But I must hear" (ll. 1169-1170). As his awareness grows, he continues to press the search more aggressively than ever. It is precisely in this that his courage and his freedom lie, for he is free at any point along the search to give it up. Thus when at the moment of truth he strikes himself with the "blinding hand," it is indeed "more than a punishment," as Hathorn says; it is the culminating act of his existential freedom. As Whitman puts it, "The action of the play . . . is motivated by the free will of the hero, which culminates in the act of self-blinding."⁹⁷

⁹⁷Ibid.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

If in this comparison, which has now taken us through seven chapters, we had only analyzed Sophocles' Antigone and Oedipus the King, we might well be accused of proceeding in a circle, i.e., of choosing the two Sophoclean dramas that seem to have been selected as prototypes for modern French plays because of their existential appeal and then demonstrating that they do indeed have the existential elements for which they were chosen. It is of much more consequence to show, as has the analysis in the last chapter, I believe, that the existential strain is strong throughout all of Sophocles' work and that it is therefore no mere happenstance that his two most famous plays seem to contain it. As to why Sophocles, long considered rather conventional and pious, should be expressing an existential Weltanschauung hundreds of years avant la lettre, Richmond Hathorn has a plausible explanation:

Sophocles, of course, was not an existentialist philosopher. But it would perhaps not be too anachronistic to maintain that he wrote at a time when the intellectual situation was somewhat analogous to our own, that his reaction to it was somewhat similar to that of our existentialists, and that consequently his works deal with issues that are substantially the same as those treated in modern existentialist literature.⁹⁸

⁹⁸Hathorn, p. 82.

An insight into what this intellectual situation was like is given us by Richard Sewall, who calls attention to the "dangerous freedom" that resulted from the lack of a rigid system of beliefs.

This "dangerous freedom" [continues Sewall] added a unique terror to the Greek tragic vision but at the same time made the Greek drama possible. The terror lay in this: that, in extremity, individual man was singularly unaccommodated and alone; he could not trust in the goodness of God or abide under the shadow of the Almighty; he could expect no recompense for a blameless life, nor, if he had sinned, could he put any hope, like Job's Counselors, in repentance and a contrite heart.⁹⁹

Superficially, Sewall's description would seem more applicable to the modern era than to the ancients, but I believe it aptly characterizes the mood of the Classical Greeks.

To be sure, not every writer and thinker in Athens reacted to his times existentially as Sophocles did. As we have seen in our comparison of the two Electras in Chapter II, Euripides, for one, reacted quite differently from his older colleague. Though he was more openly skeptical of the gods and his society than was Sophocles, when it came to the possibility of action he was almost a total pessimist. In the phrase of those young people who harbor similar feelings today, he was a "drop out." He had a great sympathy for, and psychological understanding of, the individual man and woman, but he had

⁹⁹Sewall, p. 27.

little faith in man's ability to take action against suffering and injustice. Aeschylus, on the other hand, was, as we have seen in his Oresteia (Ch. I), an optimist in this regard. One might term him a theological humanist, for though he was liberal and unorthodox in his religious beliefs, he did believe, and though he was as acquainted with human suffering and injustice as were Sophocles and Euripides, he also believed in man's ability, eventually and collectively, to work out solutions. It is undoubtedly significant that Aeschylus reached his maturity when the Athenian Golden Age was on the ascendance, whereas by the time Euripides reached his manhood it was already declining to its ruin. Sophocles, on the other hand, lived to see both Athens' nobility and its tragedy. But, as our comparative analysis has shown, all three dramatists reacted to their age in some fashion and did so through their plays; thus, they all were, in this sense at least, engagé writers. And of course our four Frenchmen--Giraudoux, Anouilh, Gide, and Sartre--were also engagé. Sartre, being the leading exponent of litterature engagé, would be expected to demonstrate this approach through his creative writing, particularly, perhaps, his plays, but such social commitment is a little more surprising in Giraudoux or Anouilh or even Gide. Nevertheless, I think we have observed through our analysis of their dramatic treatments of the two legends that each playwright is, in his own way, "engaged" and that, furthermore, each is

committed in some manner to the theme of human freedom, though Giraudoux less so than the others. Cocteau, of course, serves as the perfect foil, demonstrating to us that it is possible for a twentieth-century French playwright to take one of the same legends and adapt it to entirely different ends, viz., his peculiar blend of theatricalism and fatalism.

Thus, the thematic emphasis of this entire comparison has always tended to be on similarities rather than differences, especially when comparing French with Greek. It might be worthwhile now to summarize some of the differences as well, for every comparative study is necessarily concerned with both similarities and differences. However, let me call attention once again to the special nature of this comparative study. Fundamentally, comparisons between modern dramas and classical dramas on ancient legends can be made at three levels. At the first level we base our comparison on the simple fact that both the moderns and the ancients utilized the same legends. At this level, of course, what we take note of are the similarities. Thus, Anouilh's Antigone, unlike, say, Miller's Death of a Salesman, has this particular element--the legend itself--in common with Sophocles' Antigone. At the second level we base our comparison on the fact that one group of plays was written in one era and the other group in another, far removed, era. Here, what becomes most obvious is the differences. In spite of the lip service

that we students of literature pay to the "universality" of great works, we tend to recognize that authors in one era will convey a different world outlook from authors in another era. It is when we get to the third level that we return to those similarities that are not so obvious because they arise not out of the legend itself so much as the author's treatment of it. It is these similarities that I have felt the need to emphasize precisely because of the historical gap, which would appear to make a bridge of common themes unlikely.

However, in stressing this third level, I have neglected the second, so let me try now to summarize those differences that are clearly due to the gap between one culture and another. First of all, if we take the two figures whose similarities I have probably stressed the most--Sophocles and Sartre--it is obvious that there exist certain "givens" for the one that do not exist for the other. One obvious "given" for Sophocles is the legend itself. I would not try to pretend that Sophocles approached the mythos of the House of Labdacus with the same kind of intellectual detachment as did Sartre 24 hundred years later. Sophocles, to be sure, was detached enough to mold the legend to his own ends, but it undoubtedly had a reality for him that it could never have for someone living after, say, the birth of Christ. The same is obviously true of such things as the gods and the oracles. Sophocles was detached enough from the

latter to have his characters, such as Jocasta, profess skepticism toward them, but they were nevertheless always there as a "given" that he had to contend with. Likewise, he might have his characters question the actions of the gods, but the gods still acted. He never could have been as ironical in his treatment of the gods as Sartre is in The Flies. Of course Sophocles' younger contemporary Euripides was moving toward greater ironic detachment, but even he had to contend with the gods, much as Gide had to contend with the Christian God in the twentieth century.

For the modern writer the classical gods are merely one more element to be utilized; they are a part of the "package" that comes with the ancient legend. But for the Greek playwrights they were, along with the oracles, prophecies, myths, etc., a part of the living context in which they set the action for their plays. Thus, even though the thematic differences among Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are quite real, there is no question but that these three speak the same language, in the figurative as well as the literal sense.

By the same token, there are the "givens" that underlie the world views of the French playwrights. There is, first of all, the whole history of Christianity, which not only pervades Gide's work but even that of Sartre, who claims to have rejected God and religion utterly. There is, secondly, the social-political situation of France in mid-twentieth century. As I have tried

to show in Chapters III and IV, there is much in Giraudoux's *Electre* that relates to pre-war France and even more in Sartre's The Flies and in Anouilh's Oreste and Antigone that relates to the situation of France during the war. There is no need to belabor the fact, here, that not only France but the whole of Europe was undergoing a cataclysm in the first half of this century that brought about radical changes in the life and thought of its people. Thus, the modern French playwrights also speak a common language, figuratively as well as literally. Implicit in their approach to the world are the horrors of war as well as the revolutionary ideas of Darwinism, Freudianism, Marxism, and Existentialism, and most of what is said in their plays has these twentieth century overtones.

But when the vast differences between the two eras are granted, we are still left with the remarkable similarities in thought and feeling that have been called attention to throughout this study. To a degree these similarities exist because the two eras, as Hathorn maintains, are not as far apart in intellectual thought as is commonly supposed. But they also exist because the men who wrote these plays were perceptive thinkers as well as imaginative artists. They all probed to the center of the human condition, and they utilized the same ancient legends to express, concretely, what they discovered there.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX

*ORESTE BY JEAN ANOUILH

Bare walls of the Argos Palace beneath the sun.

On stage, at the rise of the curtain:

ELECTRE, ORESTE, EGISTHE and CLYTEMNESTRE

EGISTHE comes forward

So. Here we are, all four of us, beneath the sun in this narrow and stinking shade at the foot of the Argos walls, and we are going to play the game of Electre and Oreste--the game of Egisthe and Clytemnestre. A terrible game where every hit is good. Four players and a red ball that one returns to oneself tirelessly and that burns the hands and bloodies the earth where one flounders; a land soaked in blood. Two men and two women or rather one man and one woman--and two children. And the outcome of the match written for all eternity on an immense panel behind the players in letters as tall as men. It is like that that one performs well. As for me, I am Egisthe, the lover of Clytemnestre.

CLYTEMNESTRE

I am Clytemnestre.

ORESTE

I am Oreste.

* Translated from the version appearing in the appendix to Robert de Luppe, Jean Anouilh (Paris, 1959), pp. 101-116.

ELECTRE shouts

I am Electre!

EGISTHE

She shouted it. She will shout during the whole contest. She is too young. She doesn't know yet how to play the game. She still believes that one has to shout for it to be terrible. In vain, is she sure of winning; in vain, has she known from time immemorial that it is the queen and I who are going to die directly, that it is agreed once and for all, for always There she is like a little fury, with all her insults already prepared.

ELECTRE shouts

I hate you, Egisthe!

EGISTHE gestures

Directly There are two other characters whom you will not see. Both characters are dead. First, Agamemnon, the king of kings, the one that we killed with Clytemnestre, his wife. A man tall and strong with a beard, a sort of great ox harnassed and gilded for the sacrifice--noble and heavy in his great armour.

ELECTRE shouts

Mighty and gentle!

EGISTHE gestures again

Directly Then, the old man who raised Oreste in the mountain after his father's murder. He suspected that I was going to get Oreste in his room

without telling his mother. And she would only have known it in the evening in bed, too late . . . she would have wrung her beautiful hands a little, her beautiful perfumed and too white hands; she would have hated me. She would have played the queen until early morning. Then she would have cried a little, but to herself, and her head against my shoulder. And then it would have been as if the little one were dead from illness Four years old! A little monkey, black and scorched, with huge eyes, who never wanted to say anything. However, I showed him my weapons; I made him mount my horse; I spoke to him as his father never spoke to him. I did not know yet why he fascinated me, this little one. But I had cause to be tender, more tender than with his mother--his eyes ever upon me . . .

ORESTE dully

I knew all. I had seen you once, both of you.

CLYTEMNESTRE shrugs her shoulders

You were four; you were never alone!

ORESTE

One time I escaped; I was alone all morning in the garden. No one mentioned it because no one wanted the slave to be punished. I trampled the flowers; I killed all the little animals that I could catch!

CLYTEMNESTRE

Already you thought to do evil!

ORESTE

I had too much anguish in that still sun, in that death of noon. Yes, I had to do evil. I had too much evil within myself.

CLYTEMNESTRE

At four years!

ORESTE

Yes, at four years. I saw you on the cushions by the window and I thought you were fighting each other. And yet, I didn't call anyone; I didn't cry, "Egisthe is beating my mother." I didn't cry, "The slave Egisthe is beating the queen, my mother!" I could have warned the guards; they were my friends. They used to carve me animals out of pieces of wood with their knives. Something told me that there was no need to call them, that it wasn't necessary for others to be there besides myself, as witnesses of this shameful wrestling. Something told me that that woman--who was moaning with my mother's voice--was not truly afraid, nor truly harmed. . . . In fact, that evening, at dinner, you smiled at Egisthe when he entered. So, I, I never again smiled at anyone.

EGISTHE

A little black monkey with large, unseeing eyes which alighted on you and which budged no more. And when you rose at the end of the meal and turned toward him, they were still there as if they had done nothing but watch you.

CLYTEMNESTRE

He never ate anything. We always had to beg him to take something.

ORESTE shouts

You begged me? You?

CLYTEMNESTRE

I had women who occupied themselves with you; I had a palace, a position to maintain, a responsibility

. . .

EGISTHE

Sometimes, at the turn of a corridor, there he was, in a dark corner watching me pass. I would stop, wishing to say something, but I would find nothing under that gaze and I would go on, alone among my guards However, when I learned that the old one had taken him away, I didn't send my men to beat the mountain. I never liked to kill children very much and then something told me that that one must live, that he must live to be a man.

ELECTRE shouts

You let me live, too, Egisthe!

ELECTRE

Doubtless out of contempt, eh? You said to yourself: a girl can't do anything. She will be made to do the dishes, she will be treated as a servant and later she will be married to a peasant who will give her a dozen stupid boys like a litter of rabbits. Husband, children, housework--just try to remember in the midst

of all this that you are the daughter of an assassinated king and of a queen! All failed, Egisthe.

EGISTHE

Yes, all failed.

ELECTRE

Because of me! Because of the little Electre, the little pest Electre that you allowed to live!

EGISTHE gently

Because of you. Because of me, also.

ORESTE comes forward

That's enough, now speak. Let's begin.

EGISTHE gestures

Begin.

ELECTRE

At last!

EGISTHE

How you are in a hurry, both of you! How you long for it to be finished! Nevertheless, it is we who have to die this evening and every evening until some other men, in another world, forget this story at last. Come, you wanted to begin. Begin, son of Agamemnon! Come back from your mountain with the teachings of an old man full of hatred for all knowledge; come back from your youth with your large boy's hands, empty and beast-like, at the ends of your arms, in order to kill me. We are going to enter this palace with your mother, and we shall come out quietly when you call us to die.

ELECTRE comes forward

No! I come first! From the start I have been alone. I, Electre, alone; since I was quite small, and for always. I was not taken away--I, the daughter. I was allowed to live. I was left here. And I did not need any faithful old man to teach me hate. I learned it all alone. At first this wasn't true; they didn't make me do the dishes. They didn't force me to get water from the well; it was I, it was I who did everything deliberately in order to have it said: "Look; they treat poor Electre, the Queen's daughter, like dirt."

EGISTHE

You admit, at last, that you did it deliberately!

ELECTRE

Yes, I admit it. I didn't wash; I didn't comb my hair. The robes that my mother gave me I let become torn, and when I was alone, quite small still, I pulled at the tear with my finger. I rubbed myself on the walls like a leper.

CLYTEMNESTRE

You made me ashamed, always. Your cousins would arrive shining, fluffed up, like real dolls with their ribbons, and I, I had nothing to show but this dirty, mute little she-monkey who refused to say good day. Ah, I was not a happy mother!

ELECTRE

Now I've heard everything! And I suppose that I

was a happy daughter?

CLYTEMNESTRE

You could have been the happiest, the most spoiled of little girls; you didn't have to lift your little finger.

ELECTRE

My dirty little finger, with the questionable nail, you see me raising it one nice morning in the middle of your palace and saying, "Pardon, Mama; pardon, Egisthe; pardon, assassins of my father, I would like very much to be happy in my castle." I bit my little finger, you never knew? I bit it until it bled, in order not to scream my pain when I saw the other girls, the happy girls, the girls who didn't have a father to avenge, with their nice clothes, their pink ribbons, their perfumes. And their long laughter, heads together, on the evening promenades--and their mirrors. But I was dirty, my hands red from washing dishes, my arms skinned from sawing wood, and my feet sore and swollen in their wooden shoes in winter; I was alone, always alone. And no mirror in my little garret--it might have made me afraid.

CLYTEMNESTRE

You wanted it, all of it!

ELECTRE

Yes, I wanted it, with all my strength. More than all your dresses, jewels, or cosmetics, more I wanted it.

CLYTEMNESTRE

That garret . . . that servant's room, which we could never get you to leave.

ELECTRE

Don't pity me. I was paid whenever the others said, "They put her in the attic with the kitchen maids," whenever I said to myself, especially in the evening before going to sleep or in the morning on waking up, on looking at my mangy walls, "Under the eaves with the dish washers, little Electre, daughter of the king whom they killed."

EGISTHE

And that was good, wasn't it? Also to become low, also to be poor?

ELECTRE

Yes, it was good. How did you know? Bitter and good. In winter I shivered under my roof; it was good. In summer I was too hot, and it was still good. And when I was bigger, the stable boys who began, at first, by being afraid, would come to knock at my door and tell me, "Electre, you little whore, open up; you want it. Open up, then; open up, then, Electre, you little whore; it'll be good fun." I would think: "One night, they'll break open the door, and I'll cry out in vain; they'll put their big dirty hands on my mouth and rape me, little Electre, daughter of the king of kings on her straw mattress; and afterwards I'll kill myself."

EGISTHE

Come, enough talk. Begin, little harpy, since you wish to begin. Begin to wait for him, your Oreste.

ELECTRE

Is it you who's in a hurry, now?

EGISTHE

Yes.

ELECTRE

Are you afraid, already?

EGISTHE

Make haste.

ELECTRE comes forward

Well, yes, every evening, when the others went to bed, alone at the edge of the road . . .

EGISTHE

With the street urchins who believed she had a rendezvous and who made fun of her . . .

ELECTRE

Who told you that?

EGISTHE

I watched you waiting every evening until the darkness effaced you. I, also, was waiting.

ELECTRE

For whom?

EGISTHE

Whom did you want me to wait for, if not Oreste, like you.

ELECTRE shouts

And I didn't know it! You were waiting for Oreste, you were waiting for the knife stab of Oreste every evening; you were afraid in the darkness close to me every evening, and I didn't know it!

EGISTHE

I was not afraid; I was waiting, from the first day. Until that evening, that evening which nevertheless had an atmosphere identical to all the others . . .

ELECTRE

That brilliant evening where nothing had the same odor, the same sound, and where a step began to increase in the distance on the deserted road. It was not the first time, during the so many years that I waited, that a step had advanced like that on the road; it was not the first late traveler who regained Argos after the curfew, and yet, on that evening, I suddenly ran, I suddenly ran like a madwoman to meet that step . . .

She runs and throws herself in the arms of Oreste.

EGISTHE

And I listend to you go away running on the road and I went back into the palace strangely tranquil for the first time.

He has just seated himself in the shade below on a bench near the queen.

CLYTEMNESTRE

And you were good, that evening. You went to bed

near me all dressed, without that crease of bitterness that was getting deeper and deeper at the corner of your lips, without those hard words that were always escaping from you toward the end; I wanted to touch you then. It was young Egisthe who had returned to stretch out on my bed.

EGISTHE

How calm that evening was. Ah, how in the palace all had been made miraculously silent. In the kitchens, the last servant had closed the last shutter; the last dog had growled one last time in his kennel at one last shadow crossing the court--even to the birds which were silent in the darkened sky, to the wind which had fallen. It was truly a night that had come for the first time, my first night in a long while and my first rest.

CLYTEMNESTRE

Yes, that last evening, it seems to me that you didn't hate me as much. You lay your head on me and you went to sleep like a pardoned child.

EGISTHE

I knew that Oreste was there. I could sleep at last!

ELECTRE

Don't listen to them; don't listen to them, Oreste! They are acting this repose, this trust, this human tenderness all of a sudden. They are taking possession of innocence, this evening, as they did of your father's

kingdom another time. Don't look at them: this ridiculous, living tableau, it is not they. I'm going to tell you the truth. At this moment, they know you are there and they are green with fear, white with rage, tight the one against the other in their room, like all the assassins of the world when they feel trapped. They are ready to defend themselves like rats; they are ready to kill us, you and me, to kill everybody in this palace for both to live a little longer, for both to enjoy life a little longer. Not apart from each other, be reassured, that is finished. They see themselves growing old, the cold eye, at each awakening; they don't desire each other any more; they hate each other. Oh indissoluble sanctity of marriage! Do you think it's odd? They are bound only by my dead father. My dead father married them with his blood-full grin, his wounded hands. He stood between them a second, already a corpse, and he united them before collapsing stiff in his armour with that enormous noise of old iron that the whole palace heard. You were too small, you could forget, but I still have in my ear that sinister noise of casseroles! His whole length, on the paving stones, our father, who was so tall! And I hate them also for that, for that ridiculous fall, that great stupid noise; you understand, Oreste, my little brother, they didn't only kill our father; they made him fall the whole of his length.

EGISTHE below, his head in Clytemnestre's lap.

I have killed others, however, others who looked at me astonished--others who suddenly took on, at the moment when the sword touched them, appearances of little children who don't understand what is happening--and under those false beards, under those masks of old soldiers or of old traitors, behold they were little boys whom one slaughtered. I killed others--yes. Does one live without killing? But his woebegone grin and then his great triumphant noise on the paving stones, it's true, I never cease hearing it.

ELECTRE

Sometimes at night, I used to go down into the kitchen, I took all the pans, all the iron plates, and I let go of all of them at once onto the stone . . .

*EGISTHE smiles in spite of himself

Little pest!

ELECTRE shouts at him

Did you hear them, Egisthe? Did you hear them in your room?

EGISTHE gently

Yes. But they didn't make as much noise as my memory.

.....

*In the Luppe edition this reads ORESTE, but EGISTHE must be correct.