THE ORESTES MYTH IN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY DRAMA

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The most striking aspect of the Orestes myth is undoubtedly the murder of Clytaemnestra by her son. Every dramatist treating this myth has to give a plausible version of the events leading up to this act. This depends especially on the way in which the principal characters are portrayed, whether Clytaemnestra is a sympathetic character or not, and whether Orestes' motives are clearly explained.

In Aeschylus and Sophocles Clytaemnestra shows no remorse for the murder of Agamemnon, but in Euripides she is an affectionate mother who would like to forget everything connected with the killing of her husband. In his *Agamemnon* Seneca went much further in portraying her as a woman torn by conflicting emotions — her passion for Aegisthus and her respect for Agamemnon. This conception of Clytaemnestra is extremely popular with later dramatists, but does not make it easier to justify the matricide. Orestes, in Aeschylus, is a purposeful character who executes his plan of vengeance in a competent manner and only hesitates for a moment when he faces his mother. Later dramatists, however, portray him as a character who is unable to cope with the situation in which he finds himself and has to be guided by others. Electra's role is interesting. In reality she has no active part in the killing of Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra, and in Aeschylus she disappears after the first half of the play. In Sophocles, however, she is the principal character and all the events are seen through her eyes. Sophocles does not really try to analyse Orestes' motives. Later dramatists have followed him in giving a prominent part to Electra and frequently portray her as a much more forceful character than Orestes. In the portrayal of the other two principal characters we do not find much variation. Pylades is the faithful friend who assists Orestes in all he does, and Aegisthus is the unscrupulous tyrant.

Apart from the matricide, there is also an element of suspense in this myth. The story of how Orestes and Pylades, with only one or two supporters, succeed in killing a powerful tyrant, is really very thrilling. They are in constant danger of being discovered and arrested. Therefore they need some pretext to enable them to enter the palace without arousing suspicion. In Aeschylus they pretend to be strangers bringing the news of Orestes' death, and this stratagem has been adopted by nearly all later dramatists. Even so, from a realistic point of view, it is rather improbable that they would have succeeded so easily in killing Aegisthus without any interference from his bodyguard. Euripides realised this and gives a completely different

version of the death of Aegisthus and Clytaemnestra: Aegisthus is killed while sacrificing outside the city; when his soldiers threaten to seize Orestes, he reveals his identity and wins them over to his side. Clytaemnestra, too, is killed outside the city when she pays a visit to Electra.

Although the seventeenth century was the heyday of classicism in Europe, no dramatist seems to have treated this myth. Orestes is one of the characters in Racine's *Andromaque*, but there he figures as a desperate lover rather than as a matricide. In the eighteenth century we find several dramatisations of this story, but the majority of the dramatists do not dare to present the matricide as a deliberate act. M. Patin expresses the opinion that, since modern dramatists cannot accept the authority of the gods as justification, the matricide has to be involuntary and accidental.[1] But Orestes' act can also be explained psychologically and later dramatists have preferred to do this. In the eighteenth century, however, dramatists did not have the courage to portray a son deliberately killing his mother; it was incompatible with 'good taste'.

In Crébillon's *Electre*, therefore, Orestes intends to take vengeance on Aegisthus only and he even orders one of his friends to look after Clytaemnestra and keep her out of danger. She slips away and when she tries to prevent Orestes from killing Aegisthus she herself is fatally wounded. Orestes is unaware of what he has done and one of his friends has to tell him. On hearing it he is filled with the greatest horror and threatens to commit suicide.

Treated in this way, the matricide becomes a kind of appendage which plays no role in the greater part of the drama. The dramatist could not show Orestes deliberating as to whether he should kill his mother or not. Such an inner struggle between duty and inclination, however, was greatly favoured by dramatists of that period. These dramatists also regarded a love theme as one of the essential elements of a good play. Crébillon adroitly combined both these requirements. He created two new characters, both children of Aegisthus by a previous marriage — the virtuous princess Iphianasse and the brave prince Itys. Electra, of course, falls in love with Itys and Orestes with Iphianasse. This love of theirs is clearly contrary to their duty to avenge their father's death — which introduces the necessary inner conflict.

Whereas Electra realises that she has no right to love Itys and tries to suppress her passion, Orestes' situation is much more complicated. Until the third act he does not know that he is Orestes; he regards himself as the son of Palamède, the old man who rescued him from Aegisthus. Palamède has called his own son by Orestes' name and has pretended that Orestes is his son in order to protect him from Aegisthus' plots. When they return to Argos to take vengeance, their ship is wrecked. Palamède's son is drowned

1. *Études sur les tragiques grècs*, III, p. 362.

and he himself is separated from Orestes. Orestes is saved by Itys, falls in love with Iphianasse and, moved by gratitude and love, defends Aegisthus against the attacks of his enemies. He believes that his love is not entirely inadmissible. Why should he sacrifice his happiness in the interests of a quarrel which is not his own? Then Palamède unexpectedly reappears and reveals the truth. From this moment Orestes suppresses his passion and thinks of nothing but vengeance.

The main stress in the play falls on the struggle between love and duty in the hearts of Orestes and Electra. Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus only appear in the first and last acts; in the other acts all attention is concentrated upon Orestes and Electra. The most impressive scenes are those in which they face their lovers or in which Palamède exhorts them to forget their love and to devote themselves wholeheartedly to the duty of taking vengeance. This motif, however, is a foreign element added to the myth; it is not the development of an idea of which the germ is already present in the myth.

The next dramatist who tried his hand at this theme was Voltaire, whose *Oreste* appeared in 1750. His attitude towards Greek tragedy is interesting. He admires it but also thinks that French tragedy surpasses it in several respects, especially in the handling of the plot. 'Les Grecs auraient appris de nos grands modernes à faire des expositions plus adroites, à lier les scènes les unes aux autres par cet art imperceptible qui ne laisse jamais le théâtre vide, et qui fait venir et sortir avec raison les personnages.' Further on he adds: 'Le choc des passions, ces combats de sentiments opposés, ces discours animés de rivaux et de rivales, ces contestations intéressantes, où l'on dit ce que l'on doit dire, ces situations si bien ménagées, les auraient étonnés.'[2] He admits, however, that the glory of French tragedy was somewhat diminished by the presence of the love theme which spoiled many plays. He wittily criticised Crébillon's *Electre* because of the 'partie carrée' which it contained, and determined to avoid this fault in his own play. There is no love theme and Orestes and Electra have no other interests to distract their attention from their duty of taking vengeance. Voltaire also represents the matricide as an accident, but tries to prepare us for this event. Whenever Orestes meets his mother he is filled with horror and cannot endure her presence; although she does not recognise him, she is similarly affected. Their first meeting is particularly impressive. While Orestes is paying tribute to his father's grave Clytaemnestra rushes in. Immediately he sees the Furies rising out of the earth between them and experiences an irresistible desire to lift up his hand against her. Unfortunately Voltaire does not develop this motif further and for the spectator the matricide at the end is an unexpected shock, something which does not arise naturally from the course of events.

2. *Dissertation sur la tragédie ancienne et moderne*. Prefixed to *Sémiramis*.

Since Voltaire cannot use the matricide as his central theme, and dispenses with the love theme, he concentrates much more upon the element of suspense. The plan of vengeance does not succeed as easily as in other dramatists. Orestes and Pylades meet with all kinds of obstacles and until the last moment it is uncertain whether they or Aegisthus will triumph. The story really starts before they land in Argos. Aegisthus had ordered his son Plistène to go to the Peloponnesus to kill Orestes, who was reputed to be hiding there. Orestes managed to kill him in the fight which followed and set sail for Argos, taking with him an urn containing the ashes of Plistène. The ship is wrecked and only Orestes and Pylades reach the shore. There they meet the faithful servant Pammène who welcomes them with great joy. When Aegisthus sees them, however, his suspicion is immediately aroused. They reassure him by telling him that Orestes is dead and show him the urn containing the ashes of his own son. But soon Aegisthus receives the news of his son's death and orders the arrest of the two strangers. Electra, who has in the meantime recognised her brother, now appeals to Clytaemnestra to save her son. Aegisthus already suspects that one of the two is Orestes and his suspicion is confirmed by the entreaties of mother and daughter. Finally he orders both Orestes and Pylades to be executed. Orestes then reveals his identity to the soldiers and persuades them to revolt against Aegisthus.

In this way Voltaire has written a thrilling drama with plenty of action. But he does not limit himself to external action. He orders his scenes in such a way that they arouse a great variety of emotions in his principal characters, giving them the opportunity for long, eloquent speeches 'où l'on dit ce que l'on doit dire'. This is especially noticeable in the case of Clytaemnestra and Electra. Clytaemnestra cannot choose between her children and Aegisthus. She does not boast of her part in the murder of Agamemnon and even rejoices in the fact that no children have been born to her and Aegisthus. She sympathises with her two daughters, Electra and Iphise, and protests against Aegisthus' plans to assassinate Orestes. But when Electra mentions the possibility of Orestes' return she becomes furious. In the second act she tries to persuade Electra to marry Aegisthus' son, naively regarding such a marriage as a perfect solution to all their problems. When she is informed of Orestes' death her grief is genuine. In the fourth act this inner conflict reaches a climax when Orestes and Pylades are arrested and Electra entreats her to save her son's life. She consents to do this although she realises that she is acting against her own interests. But immediately afterwards, when Aegisthus' life is in danger, she rushes to his side and defends him even at the cost of her own life. In this way Voltaire has developed the conception of a woman at war with herself which we already find in Seneca. Voltaire himself regarded this portrayal of Clytaemnestra as his most important contribution to the interpretation of this myth:

'Rien n'est en effet plus dans la nature qu'une femme criminelle envers son époux, et qui se laisse attendrir par ses enfants, qui recoit la pitié dans son coeur altier et farouche, qui s'irrite, qui reprend la dureté de son caractère quand on fait des reproches trop violents, et qui s'apaise ensuite par les soumissions et par les larmes.'[3]

The same variety of emotional reaction is found in the case of Electra. Here Voltaire has borrowed some incidents from Sophocles but has used them in his own manner. Like other dramatists he portrays Electra as the faithful daughter who is always lamenting her father. But his Electra also shows great sympathy for her mother and attempts to persuade her to abandon Aegisthus. Only when Clytaemnestra exhorts her to marry Plistène does she turn against her mother and bitterly reproach her for delivering her daughter into the hands of her enemies. This callous proposal finally convinces Electra that Orestes is dead. In the following scene, however, her sister Iphise joyfully announces that she has discovered offerings on Agamemnon's grave and draws the conclusion that one of the two strangers must be Orestes himself. This scene is clearly modelled upon the scene in Sophocles in which, just after Electra has heard the description of Orestes' death, Chrysothemis rushes on the stage with the news that she has discovered offerings on her father's grave. Unlike her Sophoclean counterpart Voltaire's Electra receives the news with the greatest excitement and forgets all about her sombre premonitions. The way in which this scene has been judged by contemporaries is interesting. La Harpe, a well-known commentator, has the highest praise for Voltaire's treatment in giving Electra new hope: 'Cette espérance passagère, démentie dans la scène de l'urne, fait passer dans l'âme des spectateurs tous les mouvements qu'éprouve Electra.' He criticises Sophocles for not making proper use of the situation! Electra's hope is short-lived, for soon afterwards she hears the news of Orestes' death from the stranger himself. She seizes the urn and tries to keep it, but Aegisthus orders it to be taken from her. In this scene again, Voltaire imitates Sophocles, but his Electra is not really given the time to lament her brother's death.

In order to give Electra more chance to display her emotions, Voltaire has added a curious scene in which she tries to kill her brother. Orestes, pretending to be a stranger, not only tells the story of his own death but also claims to be the man who killed him. He is not allowed to reveal himself to Electra for the gods have forbidden him to do it. Although he protests vehemently against this command, his friends persuade him to obey it. The news of her brother's death drives Electra to such despair that she decides to avenge herself on his murderer. Fortunately Orestes succeeds in warding off her blow. In the circumstances he is practically forced to reveal his identity and a joyful recognition follows. This is an extremely

3. *Épître dédicatoire à la duchesse du Maine.*

melodramatic episode which even La Harpe cannot defend.

Electra's joy at the recognition soon turns to despair when Aegisthus arrests her brother and Pylades. She makes an eloquent appeal to her mother and when the prisoners' execution seems imminent she humbles herself to the extent of falling at Aegisthus' feet and imploring him to save her brother. Even then Electra is spared no emotion, for the news of Orestes' liberation is immediately followed by the matricide. Thus, when we study Voltaire's Electra it becomes clear why he criticises Sophocles and asserts that, if Athenians of good taste had lived in the eighteenth century, they would have remarked 'qu'il ne fouillait pas assez dans le coeur humain.'[4] Voltaire indeed tried to remedy this defect by leaving no possible emotion in Electra unexpressed!

We also find in this play a strange attempt to justify the gods. Orestes receives no divine command to kill his mother, but it does not seem just that they permit him to kill her accidentally. Therefore Orestes must have disobeyed the gods in some respect. With this end in view Voltaire invents a divine command which forbids Orestes to reveal himself to Electra. Orestes disobeys this command and is punished when he accidentally kills his mother. In this way the gods are justified. That the divine command is extremely arbitrary and that Orestes is forced by circumstances to reveal himself does not seem to trouble Voltaire at all.

As has been pointed out, Voltaire admired the Greeks but thought that he could improve upon their technique. Therefore he has put more variety and more action into his play. Nevertheless he sincerely believed that he had imitated the simplicity of the Greeks: 'Je me suis imposé sur-tout la loi de ne pas m'écarter de cette simplicité, tant recommandée par les Grecs, et si difficile à saisir.'[5] We are inclined to judge differently. Everything in Voltaire is a little too facile; the characters are too ready to express passionate feelings or pious sentiments. Behind all this we miss a sincere conviction which would make the play more than a clever dramatisation of the myth.

Alfieri's tragedy *Oreste* (1778) is remarkably sober when one compares it with the work of Crébillon and Voltaire. There are only five characters — Aegisthus, Clytaemnestra, Electra, Orestes and Pylades — and the structure of the first three acts is impressive by its very simplicity. In the fourth act the element of suspense begins to dominate the action, making it more sensational. The dramatist concentrates especially upon the portrayal of Clytaemnestra and Orestes. Clytaemnestra is a woman torn by inner conflict, much more so than in Voltaire's tragedy. Her marriage with Aegisthus is not at all happy, for he clearly shows that he does not love her and that her continual lamentation irritates him. She realises that he only pretended to love her in order to revenge himself on Agamemnon, and she

4. *Épître dédicatoire.*
5. *Épître dédicatoire.*

bitterly regrets her part in the murder. She loves her children but she cannot hope for any sympathy from her daughter. She also tries to save Orestes' life when his identity is discovered. But when Aegisthus is in danger she renounces her children and tries her utmost to save his life.

Alfieri devotes most of his attention to Orestes. He is represented as an extremely impulsive young man who is completely dominated by the idea of vengeance and incapable of restraining himself. He naively thinks that it will only be necessary to call out his name; Aegisthus will immediately lose courage and the people will rally to his side. Pylades has great trouble in persuading him that it is more advisable to tell a false story of his death. Even after he has agreed to this plan he cannot restrain himself at critical moments. When they meet Clytaemnestra Orestes openly shows his contempt for her and Pylades only just succeeds in leading him away before he wrecks the whole plot. The greatest test comes when they have to tell their false story to a sceptical Aegisthus. Orestes rails at him in such a way that Aegisthus' suspicion is aroused and he orders their arrest. Pylades still tries to save the situation but Electra, who comes on the scene just as Orestes and Pylades are being led away, thinks that everything has been revealed and implores Clytaemnestra to save her son. Thus Aegisthus discovers that one of the two is Orestes himself.

Until now the action has developed quite naturally since every new development is largely caused by Orestes' reactions. The play has been a study of how an impulsive young man, who has dreamed of nothing but revenge, reacts when he is faced by reality. But now the action tends to become melodramatic. Pylades claims to be Orestes in order to save his friend, but Orestes passionately insists that he is the real Orestes. Clytaemnestra, too, offers to take the place of her son. Finally the soldiers and the people revolt against Aegisthus — a development which is completely unexpected since Alfieri has given us no hint of the existence of a party favouring Orestes. When Orestes is freed, however, the dramatist can again concentrate upon his reactions. He is literally blinded by rage as he rushes over the stage looking for Aegisthus; he does not even recognise Electra for he is quite beside himself. Thus it is easy to believe that when he kills Aegisthus, he also strikes his mother without even noticing it.

The portrayal of Orestes as a young man who is obsessed with the idea of vengeance and whose personality has been completely warped by it, is the most interesting aspect of this tragedy. It is a pity that Alfieri did not try to explain the matricide as a natural result of this state of mind. Throughout the play Orestes has no sympathy with his mother, not even when she is deeply affected by the news of his death. After his first meeting with his mother he remarks to Pylades that at first he experienced an impulse to kill her and then wanted to embrace her. It would have been easy to represent the matricide as a deliberate act committed under the influence of the over-

whelming feelings aroused by the occasion. But Alfieri did not have the courage to do this and his Orestes also kills his mother by accident. Nevertheless he most nearly approaches a psychological motivation of the matricide and his portrayal foreshadows future developments in the interpretation of this myth.

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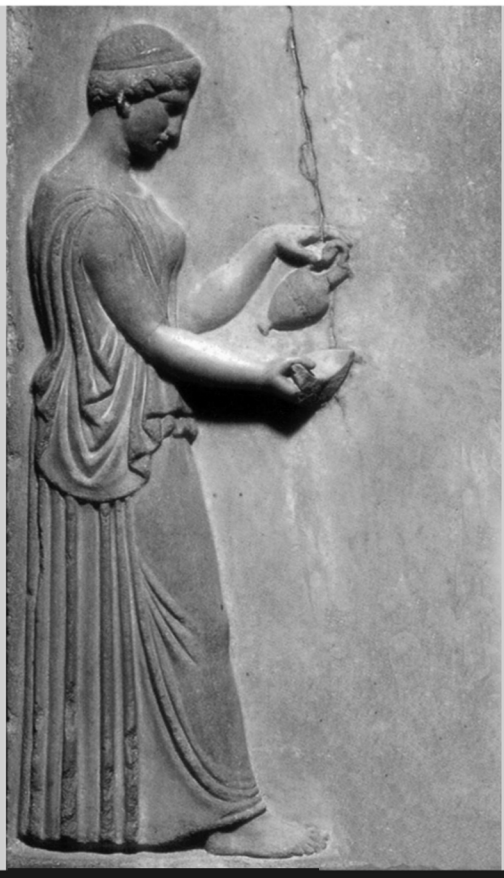

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