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reflection

The trial of Orestes: the original ancient Greek courtroom drama reinterpreted for the 21st century

John H. M. Crichton

The trial of Orestes, the most ancient of courtroom dramas, is startlingly reinterpreted in Robert Icke's acclaimed new version of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Themes of homicide, gender, power and mental disorder are explored in the story of a loving father compelled to kill his daughter for the greater good, the homicidal revenge of his wife and the resulting homicidal derangement of his son. The guilt of the son is decided not by the gods but by the vote of an Athenian court. Icke adds a first Act to the original with Agamemnon resembling a psychotic parent convicted with certainty his child must die. A change of wind follows Iphigenia's death appearing to confirm the necessity of her death and sending the fleet to war. Faithful to the original trilogy, but with a clock marking deaths in real time, Agamemnon returns to his kingdom after the siege of Troy with his prize, the beautiful Cassandra. Cassandra is presented as delirious, but her speech becomes clearer and it becomes apparent she has a premonition of their mutual fates – both are killed by Clytemnestra who puts on a show of welcome but has many reasons for seeing her husband dead, not least his sacrifice of their daughter.

Their son, Orestes, is caught in a double bind. He must upset the natural order either by letting his father's death go un-avenged or by killing his mother. Such upset would rouse the Furies – demons of vengeance from the underworld – here represented by an unrelenting blind accusing figure. Following Clytemnestra's death, Orestes suddenly finds himself in a courtroom and it becomes apparent that all that has gone before has been evidence presented at trial. We the audience are the jury. His earlier conversations with his surviving sister Electra are revealed as hallucinations.

A key message to Aeschylus' play was that blood feuds are self-perpetuating and end in misery but a trial offers an enlightened solution to resolve a homicide case. Even the gods bow to the justice of an Athenian homicide trial, but in the casting vote of the goddess Athena there is a balance of power demonstrated between the old and new order. This contemporary version of *Oresteia* revisits the ancient story, helping us recalibrate what matters, and to see the world from a new perspective. Deliberately, there is a somewhat incomplete and unsatisfactory ending. Having been acquitted, the mentally unwell homicide perpetrator finds himself in an emptied courtroom asking, 'What now?' The task of recovery is not simply accomplished by the finding of legal innocence or even the treatment of an underlying mental illness. It is about the rebuilding of a life burdened by the consequences of actions beyond the control of the actor. That might be considered an enterprise of redemption where suicide represents a failure of hope. It most likely will involve restricted liberty, at least at the beginning, but ultimately it is about setting someone free.

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