

THE PATTERN OF AESCHYLEAN TRAGEDY

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A major obstacle in the way of an inclusive, unified appreciation and criticism of the work of Aeschylus has been the tendency to study the plays (or trilogies) as discrete entities, related to the other plays only by distance and contrast. Thus the *Persae*, *Septem*, *Supplices*, *Oresteia*, and *Prometheus* have all been regarded, at different times and by different critics, as anomalies in the history of Greek tragedy, as virtually separate genres.

To be sure, a wide-ranging diversity is exhibited in the Aeschylean corpus, one of several ways in which the work of Aeschylus has closer affinity to that of Euripides than to that of his younger contemporary Sophocles. This wide variety is not, as some suggest, merely the growing pains of a nascent art form. If we cannot find a hero in the *Persae* or in the *Agamemnon*, it is not because these concepts were yet to be formulated. There is no hero because Aeschylus was not writing a play about a hero; for precisely the same reason, there is no protagonist in Euripides' *Hippolytus*, a play about victims, not heroes.

A good example of the problems caused by basic discrepancies between the plays of Aeschylus is the debate which has centered on the nature and power of Zeus as he is portrayed in these works. Although Aeschylus' deep religious feeling seems practically the only characteristic of his work as a whole (other than linguistic complexity) upon which most critics have been able to agree, these same critics have been unable to reach anything close to agreement on the meaning of the chief object of his religious feeling.

The best attempt, to date, to establish some sort of unity in our over-all picture of Aeschylus is that of C. J. Herington,¹ who has

¹ C. J. Herington, "Aeschylus: The Last Phase," *Arion* 4 (1965) 387-403.

divided the plays into early (*Persae*, *Septem*) and late (Danaid-trilogy, *Oresteia*, *Prometheus*) on the basis of a change from a static and unified cosmic background (early) to a divided and chaotic cosmos which reflects the impact upon Aeschylus of political and philosophical innovation (late). While the work of Herington provides a valuable perspective, does it mean that there is no larger pattern, which might provide unified insights into plays as disparate as the *Persae* and the *Supplikes*?

The objective of this essay is to suggest and describe such a pattern, the existence of which reflects an enduring concern on the part of Aeschylus and, probably, of the society for which he wrote. In the course of this description, I intend to touch also on the question of the nature of the Aeschylean Zeus.

Briefly, my suggestion is that all of the extant plays of Aeschylus may be fruitfully examined from the standpoint of the *influence of the father upon his children*. Psychologically, we might call this an oedipal pattern; as we shall see, all the tragedies of Aeschylus are to a certain extent the tragedy of Oedipus. This is not to say that the effect of a father upon his children is the most important aspect of each play, or that it is of equal importance in each play. Nevertheless, it is, I would suggest, the most important single element in the total work of Aeschylus. As I will attempt to show, the basic meaning of some of the plays, as well as problems of interpretation in all the plays, can hardly be understood if this element is neglected.

Persae

The play which seems most separate from all other Greek tragedies is, of course, the *Persae*, the earliest extant tragedy and the only one whose subject matter is taken not from myth but from recent history. Accordingly, most criticism of the play has been historically oriented: Is the play historically accurate? Is it about the Greek victory or the Athenian victory? Does it praise the conquering Greeks or does it sympathize with the defeated Persians? While one must reject Golden's strange denial of the status of poetry to the *Persae*,² it still

² L. Golden, *In Praise of Prometheus* (North Carolina 1962) 41.

remains that his statement that "the characters in this play exist simply as vehicles"³ and Lesky's comment that "individuals are kept in the background"⁴ betray a common belief that in this historical drama it is not human concerns, but questions of state, which matter. A salutary corrective is the view of Kitto, that "Aeschylus was not writing a play—epic, patriotic, or anything else—about the victory, but was constructing a religious drama . . . not the tragedy of Persia's downfall, but the tragedy of Xerxes' sin."⁵

This is, I think, the key to the matter: what is the sin of Xerxes? To say simply that he is guilty of hubris is begging the question; there is no concept so badly in need of re-definition, for this play and for all of Greek tragedy, as that of hubris. The exact nature of Xerxes' sin, of his individual, and yet archetypal, act of hubris, is to be found in the relationship between Xerxes, Darius, and Atossa, in the familial tension and domestic tragedy for which international conflict is but the background setting.

Xerxes and his nation are destroyed as a direct result of his efforts to surpass his father Darius. Darius is presented not only as a king, but also as god and father in the eyes of his people and his wife (634, 643, 654, 663, 671, 711, 856). At the expense of historical accuracy, he is pictured as the ideal king, governing wisely in time of peace and always victorious in time of war (852–906). In contrast to the divine rule of the aged king (*γηραιὸς βασιλεύς* 854–55), Xerxes is seen by his father himself as a mere child, in both age and intelligence. Xerxes is *νέος* (782), his thoughts are *νέα* (782), his fall is due to *νέῳ θράσει* (744).⁶

Hubris is indeed a sin against the gods, but, as both Aeschylus and his contemporary Xenophanes perceived,⁷ and as Freud carefully analyzed, gods are made by men and of men. As Freud says,

When the growing individual finds that he is destined to remain a child for ever, that he can never do without protection against strange superior powers, he lends these powers the features belonging to the figure of his

³ Golden 35.

⁴ A. Lesky, *Greek Tragedy* (London 1963) 61.

⁵ H. D. F. Kitto, *Greek Tragedy*³ (London 1961) 38, 43.

⁶ If Groeneboom's interpretation is correct, the chorus also uses *νέος* as a pejorative description of Xerxes in line 13.

⁷ See Herington 399.

father; he creates for himself the Gods whom he dreads, whom he seeks to propitiate and whom he nevertheless entrusts with his own protection.⁸

Darius exemplifies the equation of father, king, and god which lies at the heart of myth and fantasy; it is against this awesome figure that Xerxes commits the sin of hubris.

The yoking of the Hellespont and the invasion of Greece are indeed offenses to the traditional gods, but, as Aeschylus points out on many occasions, these actions and their causes and effects are due to the joint responsibility and causality of men and gods alike. In his official role as pretender to the divine throne of his father (80, 157–58), Xerxes sins against the official gods (e.g., Poseidon 750), but in his role as son, he sins against the god in his own family.

The motivation which lay behind Xerxes' folly is revealed in Atossa's conversation with Darius:

Fierce Xerxes learned these things by associating with evil men. They said that you acquired great wealth for your children by the spear, but that he, because of cowardice, acted the warrior at home and did not increase his father's fortune. Hearing often these reproaches from evil men, Xerxes planned the expedition and the invasion of Greece. (753–58)

Xerxes' sin is here clearly stated: the desire and the attempt to surpass his father. However, equally as important as the content of Atossa's statement is the fact that it is she who makes it, for she had earlier expressed similar sentiments about the effect of cowardly possessions and the failure to use one's power to increase wealth (161–67). Faced with the fact of her son's defeat and confronted by the presence of her husband, Atossa imputes to "evil men" her own vicarious ambitions and involvement in the career of her son. Furthermore, the feelings of Atossa for her son vacillate between proud ambition⁹—even if he is defeated, he will still rule and will not be held to account (213–14)—and the tendency to hold him to account herself (753–58, cf. 726, 846–48). While ambition predominates, Atossa is dependent upon

⁸ S. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* (Standard Edition: London 1954–) 21, 24.

⁹ Atossa's ambitious involvement in the life of a man is related by Herodotus in words that closely parallel her blame of Xerxes in the *Persae*. In her attempt to persuade Darius to invade Greece, Atossa says, "A man who is young and the master of great wealth should appear to be accomplishing something, so that the Persians will know that they are ruled by a man" (Herodotus 3.134.2).

Xerxes, whose presence is, in her opinion, the "eye of the palace" (169). When ambition has been dashed and her son is no longer a man, but is reduced to the role of a child, it is Xerxes who is dependent upon his mother for the needs of a child, clothing and comfort (529-31, 832-38, 849-51).

In this interpretation of the *Persae*, we have seen a son driven to failure by the need to be greater than his father, impelled by a mother who nevertheless is quick to blame him in the instance of failure. This picture accurately reproduces the family situation which, in the view of Slater, dominated the social structure of 5th century Greece and shaped the dramatists' interpretations of myth. The basic components of this domestic situation are the ambivalence of the mother toward her son and the son's inordinate anxiety about becoming greater than his absent father. The important factor in the constellation described by Slater is the mother-child relationship:

Since she alternately accepts him as an idealized hero and rejects his masculine pretensions, one would expect him to develop an abnormal concern about how others view him, and to have an extremely unstable self-concept. He will feel that if he is not a great hero he is nothing, and pride and prestige become more important than love.¹⁰

The result of this situation is the production of "male children who are highly oedipal . . . a vicarious involvement of the mother in the life of her son . . . an emotional overload on the mother-son relationship . . . by forcing the mother to put the son in the father's place."¹¹ At this point, we may ask what it means to be "highly oedipal." For Slater it means "to be oriented toward an unattainable goal . . . to be competitive, dissatisfied, grandiose."¹² But these are secondary symptomatic formations, and we should expect to find in myth and in mythically-oriented art some indications of the basic meaning of "oedipal striving," which can only be the desire to supplant the father and win the mother. These indications are, I believe, to be found in the *Persae*, in the elaborate dream sequence of Atossa (176-200). She dreams of two magnificent sisters, one dressed in Persian robes and

¹⁰ P. Slater, *The Glory of Hera: Greek Mythology and the Greek Family* (Boston 1968) 33.

¹¹ Slater 461.

¹² Slater 461.

the other in Doric clothing. From their paternal inheritance the first sister receives Asia, the second Greece. When they begin to quarrel, Darius appears, attempts to soothe them, and then yokes them to a chariot. One of the sisters is proud of her new role, but the other destroys the yoke and causes Xerxes to fall. Darius then appears, pitying his son, but at the sight of his father Xerxes tears his clothes.

This dream is, on one level, a patent historical allegory of Xerxes' abortive expedition. On a deeper level, however, if we permit ourselves the privilege of regarding a dream as a psychological phenomenon as well as an artistic allegory, a privilege we must certainly extend to Aeschylus also, the dream of Atossa lends itself to interpretation in terms of the familial relationships we have postulated.

Intrapsychic conflict commonly causes a dreamer to dream of himself as two separate persons. In Atossa's dream the two quarreling women represent Atossa's internal conflict, her ambivalence toward her son. Allegorically, they are Asia and Greece; psychologically, they represent Atossa's conflicting desires that her son remain a child, less than his father, through failure to expand his father's possessions beyond Asia, and that her son succeed and surpass his father, who could not win Greece. Allegorically, the sister who does not resist the yoke represents Xerxes' rule over Asia, while the sister who rebels represents his defeat at the hands of the Greeks. Psychologically, they again symbolize maternal ambivalence between the need to please and flatter the son and the need to criticize and derogate him, reflecting "a mother-son relationship in which the most grandiose self-definitions are at once fomented and punctured."¹³

There is one detail of the dream which fits well into the psychological interpretation but not at all into the allegorical. Why are the sisters pictured as having received by lot their father's land? Strict maintenance of the allegory would produce the far-fetched notion that Greece and Asia were under common rule before the time of Xerxes. Psychologically, the two sisters = Atossa = the father's land. In attempting to yoke them together, Xerxes is not only striving for possession of the whole world, but also for that possession which is most valuable in the whole world, his "father's land," the person of his mother.

¹³ Slater 44.

When Xerxes fails, his father appears, at whose sight Xerxes tears his clothes. Allegorically, this foreshadows the actual appearance of Darius' ghost and the actual rending of Xerxes' garments. Psychologically, it signifies the failure of the son's oedipal aspirations and the resultant regression to the original situation; the father returns and is once more dominant, the son is reduced to the level of a child again. Allegorically, the tearing of Xerxes' clothing represents his actual action at the battle of Salamis (468) and upon his arrival in Sousa (1030). Psychologically, this action denotes Xerxes' reduction to childishness and the destruction of his narcissistic desires; concern for one's clothing and other forms of body adornment are basic manifestations of narcissism.¹⁴ Furthermore, the other side of "narcissistic oscillation"¹⁵ may be seen in the utter dejection of Xerxes upon his return, as well as in his need, recognized by both father and mother, to be comforted and soothed.

Finally, let us reconsider the question of hubris in the *Persae*. Jones has said:

The *Persians* is the one play in the entire extant literature—not just in Aeschylus—which is genuinely and fully founded upon *hubris*, and the story of the failure of the Persian expedition against Greece is at one with the work of art's morality—at one in prophecy and in the deed itself and in the quality of the poet's single insights.¹⁶

The hubris of the *Persae* is the hubris of Xerxes, and may be defined as the son's aggressive attempt to eclipse the stature of his father and thereby win the undivided affection of his mother, a definition which accords well with Slater's description of hubris as "fundamentally masculine pride and phallic self-satisfaction."¹⁷

Septem

The *Septem*, which seems at first so foreign to the *Persae* in content, style, and meaning is actually almost identical to it in the light of the oedipal pattern we have postulated. In fact, the entire play may be

¹⁴ See Slater 454–55.

¹⁵ See A. Reich, "Pathologic Forms of Self-Esteem Regulation," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 15 (New York 1960) 215–32.

¹⁶ J. Jones, *On Aristotle and Greek Tragedy* (London 1962) 72.

¹⁷ Slater 45.

seen as the expansion of a single detail in Atossa's dream, Xerxes' desire to subdue the two women who represented his mother, or his father's land. As we might expect in a trilogy about the house of Oedipus, this drama of fratricidal conflict comes time and again to the basic question: who shall acquire the father's possessions?

For the first 652 lines of the play, this question is kept in abeyance. In this part of the play, we are given a picture of Eteocles as the somewhat misogynous but efficient administrator and general. He effectively calms the anxieties of the chorus through his own masculine discipline and, with just the right combination of rhetoric and piety, he appoints champions to defend the gates of Thebes.¹⁸ Nowhere in this section is the real meaning of the conflict at issue. The Curse and Fury of Oedipus, the cause of it all, receives only one passing mention, included in the roster of the gods to whom Eteocles prays for the preservation of the city. After the description of Polyneices and his shield, however, the full force of the Curse breaks out and Eteocles is transformed; almost every line in the remainder of the play contains mention either of the Curse or of the objective for which the sons of Oedipus kill one another.

The Curse of Oedipus is the Fury which brought retributive vengeance to both the father and grandfather of Eteocles and Polyneices. As it appears in the *Septem*, it takes the form of an equal allotment to the brothers of their father's possessions: not equality of wealth, but equality in death. By the time of their encounter, the Curse has taken over the lives and feelings of the brothers to such an extent that the battle for Thebes itself is described in the terms of the Curse, the chief element of which must have been the denial of Oedipus' possessions to his sons. Even in his dreams, Eteocles sees the "division of his father's possessions" (711). The Chalybian stranger is the "bitter divider of possessions" (729-30), but the allotment he has given to the brothers is among the dead, not among the living (731-32). Ares is also a "bitter divider of possessions" (44-45), and in addition he "makes the paternal curse come true" (945-46) by being an "equal" divider.¹⁹ A few lines earlier, the dead brothers are described as

¹⁸ See T. G. Rosenmeyer, *The Masks of Tragedy: Essays on Six Greek Dramas* (Texas 1963) 16-23, 34-38.

¹⁹ Reading ἴσος for κακός (Weil).

having received an equal share of possessions (907-8). From this evidence we may conjecture that the Curse of Oedipus, as it probably occurred in the lost second play of the trilogy, was that his sons would share equally in death that which they could not agree to share in life.²⁰

The "possessions" which are contested by Eteocles and Polyneices must obviously represent Thebes. However, they must represent something else as well, for the brothers are described as "having taken by force the father's house" (877-78), and there is no suggestion of Eteocles having taken, or having attempted to take, Thebes. Thebes figures in the possessions because she is the material object of the conflict and because it is on her soil that the Curse is fulfilled in all three generations. The "possessions" of Oedipus are equivalent to the Fury of Oedipus, his only real possession for most of his life, and the "possessions" which the brothers share in death is the re-enactment of the fate of Oedipus, the compelled repetition of the sins of Oedipus. As Bacon points out,

In taking by force the house of their father, they put themselves in the same relation to Oedipus that Oedipus was in to Laius. When the sons are laid beside their father-brother in Theban earth they share their mother with him, as he shared her with his father, Laius.²¹

We noted earlier that in myth the father and the king are often synonymous; since the king's realm is the city as the father's realm is the mother, we arrive at the similar equation mother = earth = city = that which is possessed by the father. The destruction of the sons of Oedipus occurs for exactly the same reason as the fall of Oedipus—an attack upon the father and an attempt to win his chief possession, the mother. Thus, in the beginning of the play Eteocles puts his appeal to the citizens on behalf of Thebes in terms of the archetypal mother symbol, Mother Earth, "she who raised you as creeping children on her kindly ground, sustaining all the burden of your upbringing" (17-19).

²⁰ H. J. Rose, *A Handbook of Greek Mythology* (New York 1959) 221, n. 28, "Oedipus' curse evidently was, 'Since they cannot dispose aright of their ancestral possessions, may they never dispose peaceably of the kingdom,' or 'Since they cannot rightly divide the meat, may they not divide the kingdom rightly.'"

²¹ H. Bacon, "The Shield of Eteocles," *Arion* 3 (1964) 31.

The engulfing passion, the danger which breaks out from inside, is incestuous rivalry—of Oedipus with Laius, of Eteocles and Polyneices with Oedipus and with each other—over the city, the land, the woman who is the source of their life (*μητρὸς πηγὴν*, the mother spring as Amphiarus calls Thebes, line 584).²²

This interpretation should not, of course, be taken to mean that Eteocles and Polyneices had conceived necrophiliac ambitions toward Jocasta, any more than that Xerxes was in love with Atossa. It does, however, mean that the original repressed meaning of oedipal myths will reappear in metaphoric form in the work of a gifted artist such as Aeschylus. Whether the return of the repressed is wholly conscious or partly unconscious on the part of Aeschylus we cannot say, but it seems clear that we must concur with the judgment of Devereux that Aeschylus, "this great poet of the deepest layer of the psyche,"²³ wrote that kind of poetry in which we can perceive, barely beneath the surface of the drama, the eternally ungratified wishes which are the mainsprings of art and life.

Supplikes

I have attempted elsewhere²⁴ to demonstrate the presence of an oedipal pattern in the *Supplikes*. In brief, my view is that the daughters of Danaus typify fixation in the oedipal situation. Every other play of Aeschylus is concerned with the vicissitudes of dynastic succession—with, in other words, the relationship between fathers and sons. The *Supplikes* is concerned with the opposite aspect of the oedipal situation, the relationship between the father and his daughters. Because of their excessive attachment to their father and their identification with a mother-substitute, they are unable to love other men and are therefore consumed by an incapacitating anxiety concerning sex and marriage. However, Danaus is, as Garvie points out, "superfluous"²⁵ in the action of the plot. This must be interpreted in the light of two important considerations: the decisive role of fantasy in neurotic

²² Bacon 31.

²³ G. Devereux, "Observation and Belief in Aischylos' Accounts of Dreams," *Psychother. Psychosom.* 15 (1967) 130.

²⁴ R. Caldwell, "The Psychology of Aeschylus' *Supplikes*" in *Psychoanalysis and the Classics*, ed. J. P. Sullivan (in press).

²⁵ A. Garvie, *Aeschylus' Supplikes: Play and Trilogy* (Cambridge 1969) 138.

behavior and the significance of Zeus in the *Supplikes*. Danaus is the object of his daughter's tragic fixation, but in their fantasy his place has been taken by an omnipotent and omniscient deity, and by a king whose imagined powers closely parallel those of Zeus. The mother with whom the Danaids identify is their distant ancestor Io, whose situation—a fugitive from a suitor's lust—they are compelled to repeat. In terms of this hypothesis, an economical and coherent set of answers is provided for the major problems of the play: the significance of Zeus, the characterization of Danaus, the role of Pelasgus, the importance of Io and her tortured wanderings, the parthenogenesis of Epaphus, the role of the chorus as protagonist.

Furthermore, a satisfactory analysis of the trilogy which the *Supplikes* begins can now be made. In the Danaids' subjection to their father, and in their relation to Io, their equation of the mother of fantasy with the ancestor of the race, we see a portrayal of the grip in which man is held by the past, whether the individual past which a man begins with his birth or the supra-individual past which includes everything which can still affect the present. As Freud wrote, "the human individual has to devote himself to the great task of detaching himself from his parents, and not until that task is achieved can he cease to be a child and become a member of the social community."²⁶

In the final play of the trilogy, the Danaids' unitary fantasy of themselves as living out the determined repetition of the passion of Io—a fantasy which "is not just a memory, but the hallucinatory re-animation of memory, a mode of self-delusion substituting the past for the present"²⁷—is shattered by Hypermestra, who frees herself from the collective neurosis, liberates repressed Eros, and emerges as an individual. Her refusal to obey her father symbolizes her inner freedom from the father who restricts love and from the desire to have a child by the father. While her sisters continue bound to the compulsive repetition of the past and their pathological attachment to their father, Hypermestra is freed from the burden of her own past and that of her race. The child she desires and the love she feels are no longer products of fantasy, but for the first time are firmly situated

²⁶ S. Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Standard Edition: London 1954-) 16, 337.

²⁷ N. O. Brown, *Life Against Death* (New York 1959) 164.

in reality. As the one sizable extant fragment of the *Danaides* indicates, the Eros which wins over Hypermetra is no private illusion; it is the universal reality which "compels the earth to undergo marriage" and which insures the generation and sustenance of all life (fr.125M=44N²).

Two additional points should be made concerning the relationship of the *Supplices* to the earlier plays. Of all Greek tragedy, the *Supplices* contains the most expansive and absolute statements of the omnipotence of Zeus, a quality which will be denied in the *Prometheus*. On the other hand, Zeus, as Herington points out, "is cursorily mentioned, with no special emphasis, in the *Persians* and the *Seven*."²⁸ In the light of our oedipal pattern, a reason for this drastic difference may be suggested. In the *Supplices*, the power and effect of the father can hardly be presented as such, for both dramatic and psychological reasons, but must be projected onto the god and king with whom, as we have seen, the father is equated in myth and fantasy. In the two earlier plays an opposite process takes place, and the power of a god is invested in the figure of a dead father. The "possessions" of Oedipus are equivalent to the possessions for which Darius shows such great concern, and the divine reputation and position of Darius are as much a living Curse to Xerxes as Oedipus is to his sons, a Curse which accomplishes its purpose as surely and ineluctably as the omnipotent will of Zeus.

It was noted earlier that hubris appears in the *Persae* as an aggressive attempt to replace the father, a definition which also fits exactly the sins of Oedipus and his sons. In the *Supplices* hubris appears as a characteristic of the sons of Egyptus, and is seen not as a particular flaw of the Egyptiads but as the necessary attribute of anyone who would dare to threaten the position of the cherished father. In all these instances, hubris is an act of usurpation against the divine figure of the father.

Oresteia

In the *Oresteia* we return again to the question of the *Septem*: who shall succeed the father? This time the antagonists are not brother

²⁸ Herington 399.

against brother, but mother and lover, who succeed in their attempt, against son and daughter, who replace them in turn. Since a complete analysis of this massive work, even if limited to the oedipal pattern we have been discussing, is far beyond the scope of this essay, I will confine my remarks to a few key factors in the plot, in the hope that this will elucidate both a general interpretation of the trilogy as a whole and the recurrent question of the omnipotence of Zeus.

The death of Aegisthus at the hands of Orestes is, like so much in Aeschylean tragedy, over-determined. He has replaced the father by killing him, as well as by usurping his place in the bed of Clytemnestra. In his effeminacy as in his power, he is a striking symbol of the ambivalence with which the oedipal father is regarded by the son, as the "tall stranger" who has taken the son's place, the holder of unlimited power over the son, and yet unworthy of the mother's love. Furthermore, Aegisthus is the paradigm of the son's oedipal fantasy, the essential basis of all heroic myth: to return from exile, kill the father, and marry the mother. Thus it is for reasons of jealousy, revenge, and his own repressed desires that Orestes kills Aegisthus. For the first time in Aeschylean tragedy (with the possible exception of *Hypermestra* in the lost *Danaides*), a son has been able to overcome his father.

Clytemnestra must die not only because she killed Agamemnon, but also because she betrayed her son and abrogated his rights of succession. In addition, it is through the act of matricide that the ancient taboos of patricide and incest are upheld. Again, it is for a multiplicity of reasons that Clytemnestra dies, but the result seems unequivocal: by murdering his mother, Orestes totally rejects his incestuous desires for her.²⁹ By his matricide, by his reverence for his dead father, by his killing of the man who has, in a sense, committed the sins of Oedipus, by his maintenance of the primary taboos, Orestes earns exoneration from the pursuit of the Furies, the spirits of retribution. If the arguments of Apollo in the *Eumenides* seem specious and based on technicalities, it is because Orestes is only superficially innocent. A very thin line separates murder of a father-figure from patricide, and the conscious act of matricide has an implied incestuous

²⁹ See Joel Friedman and Sylvia Gassel, "Orestes," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 20 (1951) 433.

content.³⁰ The characteristic Greek feeling for the ambivalence of emotions and events is expressed by the tie vote of the human jury. On one level, patricide and matricide are equally reprehensible and equally subject to the vengeance of the Furies. On another level, unconscious is as real as conscious guilt, and Orestes' conscious allegiance to the taboos has been identical with his unconscious violation of them. Orestes reveres his father but kills him in the form of a substitute; he repudiates his mother, but the act in which he kills her is symbolic incest. The meaning of the repressed is revealed in the mechanism of repression, and the conscious act contains its opposite: "the way up and the way down are one and the same" (Heraclitus).

The conflict between the rights of the Furies and the protection of the basic societal taboos, between the unconscious and conscious, instinct and reality, results in an apparent victory for the male principle advocated by Orestes and Athena, but this is neither a real nor a final solution. The true conclusion to the long struggle is based on the acknowledgement that there are two sides to human life, neither of which may be frustrated without dire consequences. This dualism of rational and irrational, male and female, reality and wish, a familiar enough theme in Greek literature, receives in the *Oresteia* two additional dimensions: the instinctual ambivalence which motivates Orestes, and the conflict between unconscious instincts and conscious reality which constitutes his trial. In such a conflict there is neither victory nor defeat; both antagonists must receive a share in a new and inclusive unity. The final solution is symbolized by Athena, who embodies both the male and female principles, by Zeus, who is both father and mother to Athena and whom both Apollo and Athena serve, and by the transformation of the Furies into Eumenides, spirits of fertility and peace as well as of death and vengeance.

In the paradoxical reconciliation of opposites, the synthesis of conflicting claims, Aeschylus moves from the ultimately unsatisfactory result produced by law and reason to a utopian vision of harmony effected by something beyond human power. The agent and symbol of apocalypse, of man's ability to understand and live with both

³⁰ See H. A. Bunker, "Mother-Murder in Myth and Legend," *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 13 (1944) 206.

dimensions of human nature, is identified in the last lines of the play:

Ζεὺς <ὁ> πανόπτας
οὕτω Μοῖρά τε συγκατέβα.

All-seeing Zeus and Moira thus descended together (1045-46). In the partnership of Zeus and Moira, the mutual antagonists of the Prometheus, healing of the "cosmic cleavage"³¹ is effected and reflected; instinct and reality have met in harmony, and the only obstacle to Zeus' omnipotence is removed, as the transformed Eumenides indicate (*Eum.* 918). Yet the Furies had earlier referred to Zeus as the archetype of dynastic upheaval (*Eum.* 640-43), an attitude similar to the characterization of the power of Zeus in the *Agamemnon*. The famous hymn to Zeus which begins "Zeus, whoever he is" (*Agam.* 160) identifies this elusive deity as the most recent victor in the struggle between fathers and sons for cosmic sovereignty (167-75), a cosmic paradigm for the troubles to beset the house of Atreus. After the death of Agamemnon, the chorus ponders the role of Zeus in all that has happened, and, like the chorus of the *Suppliants*, concludes:

τί γὰρ βροτοῖς ἄνευ Διὸς τελεῖται;

For what is accomplished for mortals without Zeus?

(*Agam.* 1487, cf. *Supp.* 823-24)

Thus Zeus appears in the *Oresteia* as a symbol of father right and dynastic violence, as the mysterious cause of all evil or of all-encompassing good, as finally the ambivalent instinctual life no longer at odds with reality. The inference to be drawn from this, as well as from the evidence of the *Prometheus*, is that Zeus was a concept which Aeschylus took from myth and cult and developed for his own dramatic purposes. Depending not upon Aeschylus' putative theological program but upon his observation and understanding of what it meant to be human, "Zeus, and the Furies, are not independent entities but the author's means of sketching the human predicament."³²

³¹ See Herington 398-401.

³² T. G. Rosenmeyer, "Gorgias, Aeschylus and Apatē," *AJP* 76 (1955) 259.

Prometheus

In the *Prometheus*, a play in which the power of Zeus is a constant issue and in which we would expect this power to be clarified, the omnipotence of Zeus is expressly denied by Prometheus (517-18, 769-70, 907-31). That which limits the power of the new Father of gods and men is the necessity of Moira, whose instruments are the Moirai and the Furies (511-16). The ultimate meaning of Moira is not a random and indefinite principle of limitation, but is based on what Freud would call the reality principle, that which forbids divine aspirations to men, those necessities which men perceive as universally operative in their lives and which they project into the cosmos as the eternal guardians and judges of the wish-fulfillment fantasies of myth. In this function, Moira is opposed to those mythical projections which derive from man's instinctual life, especially the oedipal fantasies of love and aggression which lie at the center of myth. The central idea of the *Prometheus* is this confrontation of instinct and reality, the necessity that he who overthrows the Father (or his projection as King or God) becomes the Father himself, and therefore will be overthrown in turn. Thus it is appropriate that Prometheus, who exemplifies this necessity in his stubborn rebellion which is fated to succeed, refers to Hermes, the son of Zeus who demands acquiescence in subordination, in terms which recall Darius' criticism of Xerxes, calling him a "child, and still more mindless than a child" (987). It is Hermes, the god whose role is one of absolute subservience to the Father, who, like the Danaids, says of Zeus, "His every word is fulfilled" (1033). On the other hand, the first words of Prometheus are the same as the last, a passionate invocation of his mother, the perennial ally of the son's conspiratorial fantasy against the father.

We are presented in the *Prometheus* with the familiar oedipal pattern of sons attempting to replace their fathers,³³ but the manner in which the pattern is portrayed is vastly different from that of the other plays of Aeschylus. The power of father and god is no longer unlimited; Prometheus is not the real child of Zeus, as Xerxes is of Darius, Eteocles

³³ See R. Wayne, "Prometheus and Christ," *Psychoanalysis and the Social Sciences* 3 (New York 1951) 201-19.

and Polyneices of Oedipus, the Danaids of Danaus, and Orestes of Agamemnon; the mother of Prometheus has no connection with Zeus, and the wife of Zeus has none with Prometheus. This highly symbolic presentation is indeed what we should expect in a play which Rosenmeyer has rightly perceived as an allegory and yet more than an allegory.³⁴ Furthermore, if we regard the extant plays of Aeschylus as a continuum, the symbolic complexity of the oedipal pattern in the *Prometheus* represents a step beyond the *Oresteia*, just as the *Oresteia* marked a progression beyond the *Supplices*. As Herington remarks, "If there was to be anything beyond the *Oresteia*, it probably had to be this."³⁵

In the *Persae* we had historical persons and an historical family, albeit presented mythically. In the *Septem* the characters are mythical, but the brothers are still the actual sons of their father Oedipus; the mother, however, is symbolically portrayed as Thebes. In both of these plays, controlling power is transferred from god to a man-god, and it is because of this power that sons fail; in neither play, therefore, is the omnipotence of Zeus at issue. The *Supplices* progresses beyond the earlier plays in several ways: omnipotence is transferred from father to god and king, and is of major moment in the play; the characters enmeshed in an oedipal tragedy are not sons but daughters; the influence of the father has still a destructive effect upon his children, but in this instance one out of fifty, Hypermestra, is able to escape from the burden of the past and from paternal subjection; the mother with whom the Danaids identify themselves is not their actual mother (or mothers) but their ancestor Io. In the *Oresteia* omnipotence is again an important characteristic of Zeus and, through the symbolic agency of this power, the escape of Hypermestra is transmuted into a dramatization on a cosmic level of mankind's perennial task of overcoming the social and political, as well as the personal and familial past. This all begins, however, in the same way as the *Persae*, in a son's psychic encounter with his dead father.

In the *Prometheus* the pattern persists, but only formally, since none of the real relationships are present. Zeus is not the father of Prometheus and he is not omnipotent; Prometheus is not his son and

³⁴ See Rosenmeyer, *The Masks of Tragedy* 77-90.

³⁵ Herington 400.

while, like other sons in Aeschylean tragedy he strives to supplant the father, he recognizes his paternal opponent for what he is and exposes him.

The effect of the father upon his children is essentially ambiguous, and as such can produce both beneficial and destructive results. In the plays of Aeschylus, as we have seen, the destructive aspect is continually emphasized, culminating in its embodiment as the Zeus of the *Prometheus*. The fact that Zeus is not the father of Prometheus reveals the pervasive extent of this paternal destructiveness as it touches all human and divine institutions and also enables Aeschylus to use Zeus as a pure symbol of the violence done to man by his subjection to a bitter struggle between fathers and sons, a struggle which accurately mirrors the dynastic upheavals which have brought Zeus to power and made him what he is. By the limitation of the power of Zeus in the present and by his destined fall or change in the future, Aeschylus again affirms the vision of the *Oresteia*—the past need not be forever repeated, the future may be transformed.