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|| CHAPTER V ||

Matricide: Orestes

To mortal men peace giveth these good things:
Wealth, and the flowers of honey-throated song;
The flame that springs
On carven altars from fat sheep and kine,
Slain to the gods in heaven; and, all day long,
Games for glad youths, and flutes, and wreaths,
and circling wine.

[Bacchylides: ii. 7. Symonds trans.]

And as our vineyards, fallows, meads, and hedges,
Defective in their natures, grow to wildness,
Even so our houses and ourselves and children
Have lost, or do not learn for want of time,
The sciences that should become our country;
But grow like savages, as soldiers will
That nothing do but meditate on blood,
To swearing and stern looks, diffused attire
And every thing that seems unnatural.

[Shakespeare, *Henry V*, Act V, scene 2]

Erxias, where is all this useless army gathering to go?

[Archilochus of Paros.]

APOLLO'S CHARACTERISTICS display themselves most vividly in his support of his matricidal protégés, Orestes and Alcmaeon. It is Apollo who suggests the deed in both cases, and it is he who encourages and supports them in carrying

it out, and defends them against the avenging Erinyes when it is done.

Orestes' matricide is the most fully elaborated. It has often been pointed out [cf., e.g., Bunker, 1944, p. 198; Friedman and Gassel, 1951, p. 424] that while Oedipus is the concern of only three surviving Greek tragedies, Orestes is in seven, and is treated by all three of the great dramatists. It could in fact be said that the Orestes myth was the most popular subject in Greek drama, and that the theme of matricide was one with which the Greeks were peculiarly preoccupied.

The Orestes legend has received many thorough and learned analyses, and it may seem tedious to travel the familiar ground once again. Yet aside from occasional rather frivolous interpretations by psychoanalytic writers,¹ it is usually treated as a kind of politico-religious allegory, dealing with the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy and from chthonic to Olympian religion. While this interpretation is undoubtedly correct, it does not entirely exhaust the significance of the myth. Social history may have provided much of the raw material for the Orestes legend, but it hardly accounts for its popular appeal. Athenian audiences had not experienced these ancient conflicts and transitions, but they currently lived amid sexual rancor and could each remember the emotional wrench of leaving the power sphere of the mother and moving into a male-dominated outside world. *This* transition to patriarchy was sustained by male and female alike, although in different ways.

The best illustration of this point is in *The Eumenides*, which is self-consciously directed toward dramatizing the great cultural upheaval associated with the Olympian ascendancy. What saves the trial of Orestes from the utter tedium of an historical pageant is the snarling spitefulness of the struggle between Apollo and the Erinyes—a struggle which is

¹ Perhaps the worst is by Friedman and Gassel [1951]. More interesting are those of Bunker [1944] and Melanie Klein [1963, pp. 23-54].

at once more personal and more universal. Beyond the great social and religious issues lies a simple and profound one—a battle between the sexes, filled with all the narcissistic petulance, the resentful envy, and the underlying queasy dread which always characterize such conflicts. Apollo's attempt to minimize the woman's role in procreation is breathtaking in its unreasonableness:

Not the true parent is the woman's womb
 That bears the child; she doth but nurse the seed
 New-sown: the male is parent; she for him,
 As stranger for a stranger, hoards the germ
 Of life, unless the god its promise blight.

[Aeschylus: *The Eumenides* 658–61.
 Morshead trans.]

This passage resembles the “Reuben and Rachel” song which school children sing—a song in which each sex tells the other how much more satisfactory the world would be in their absence. Yet Thomson quite correctly argues that this dispute over parental primacy is the crux of the entire *Oresteia* [1950, pp. 287–88]. It must be admitted, furthermore, that the victory of the male side does not seem to rest on male debating skill so much as on the frantic prejudice of the Athenians against women, which enabled them to sit through the above speech with a sober countenance.² Indeed, so poor is the reasoning of the “logical” sex that they are frequently forced to fall back upon religious expedients: thus Apollo's ultimate “proof” is that Athene was born from the head of Zeus without female intervention.

The immediate issue of this war between the sexes is

² “And when I say very few human societies have been as able to minimize the mother's role in childbearing, although the Rossel Islanders believe that the father lays an egg in the female, who is regarded as a purely passive receptacle, and the Montenegrins are reported to deny the mother any relationship to the child, this is still arresting, because it is apparent to the reader how much more difficult it is to deny the mother's parental role than the father's” [Mead, 1955, p. 35].

whether Clytemnestra's murder of Agamemnon or her own death at the hands of Orestes was the more heinous crime. A modern jury would have had difficulty in convicting Clytemnestra,³ but the Greeks were terrified of the statuesque, passionate women they portrayed so effectively—Medea, Clytemnestra, Hecuba, Alcmene—and this fear obliged them to exaggerate and punish Clytemnestra's guilt.

A comparison between Clytemnestra and Medea is instructive, since Medea's crime is unrequited. Both women are able, long-suffering, resourceful, and purposeful, capable of great depth and intensity of feeling. The marriages of both were extremely costly—Clytemnestra losing her first husband and son (murdered by Agamemnon), Medea her father, brother, and homeland. Both are married to men who are consistently portrayed, even by the most sympathetic authors, as weak, vain, pompous, selfish, incompetent, and stupid. Both women are ultimately cruel to their children and turn on their erring husbands with savage and vindictive fury.

Why, then, is Medea spared and Clytemnestra murdered for her crimes? Clytemnestra kills only her husband and his concubine, and cannot bring herself to do away with her dangerous offspring; while Medea, with far less provocation, slaughters her brother, her children, two kings, and a princess, and attempts the life of Athens' most famous hero. Does the murder of one's husband, then, outweigh all of these crimes?

The answer is, of course, that it did. The marital bond was the weakest point in the Greek family, and the murderous hatred of a wife for her husband was felt to be the greatest potential danger and had therefore to be guarded against with the most rigid care and punished with the most compulsive severity.

Confirmation of this idea may be found in the horror with

³ Especially in view of our intense feelings about child-murder. To the Greeks, however, the killing of a female child by her father could almost be considered venial, even without divine sanction.

which Greeks regarded the myth of the women of Lemnos, who murdered all their husbands and ruled the island by themselves. To modern readers this is an amusing fancy—one which, after all, ends happily with the pleasant sojourn of the Argonauts and subsequent repopulation of the island [Apollonius Rhodius: *Argonautica* i. 606–909]. Certainly it cannot compare in luridness with the cannibalistic and incestuous doings of Atreus and Thyestes, with the hideous deaths of Pentheus and Heracles, with the crimes and sufferings of Procne and Philomela, of Oedipus, Cronus, and a dozen others. But how the Greeks themselves felt about it may be judged from the following passage:

But the summit and crown of all crimes is that which
 in Lemnos befell;
 A woe and a mourning it is, a shame and a spitting
 to tell;
 And he that in after time doth speak of his deadliest
 thought,
 Doth say, *It is like to the deed that of old time in
 Lemnos was wrought*

[Aeschylus: *The Choephoroi* 631–34.
 Morshead trans.]⁴

⁴ Herodotus also mentions the popularity of the expression “Lemnian deed” to refer to a heinous crime [vi. 138]. He appends to the old tale another, supposedly more modern, story of captured Athenian women raising their half-Athenian children to feel superior to the natives, and one is reminded again of the frequency with which this kind of situation must have arisen in ancient times. In the new tale it is the women and children who are murdered as a “preventive” measure, but one suspects this second incident may merely have been a bowdlerization of the original. The form in which the older story survives, meanwhile, provides motives which are suspiciously fifth century: The Lemnian women are visited with a bad smell by Aphrodite, whose worship they have neglected; their husbands, repelled, reject them and engage in extramarital raids on the mainland. In jealousy the legitimate wives kill not only their husbands but all the males on the island, fearing retaliation [Apollonius Rhodius: i. 607ff.; Apollodorus: i. 9. 17; Hyginus: *Fabulae* 15]. This cumbersome explanation probably masks what was once a simple tale of feminine heroism, as Nilsson suggests: The

Despite this fear and the blind prejudice to which it gives rise, the male contribution to the general unpleasantness is always made apparent. Agamemnon, in his narcissistic pursuits, inflicts so many injuries on Clytemnestra that she is driven to rage—a rage which spills over onto her children.⁵ The usual chain is here interrupted, however, since Clytemnestra and Orestes, unlike the typical Greek mother and son, discharge the greater part of their hate directly onto the original objects.

One of the finest delineations of the Greek marital relationship is Euripides' *Iphigenia in Aulis*. It deals with the opening of the Trojan War in a manner that eloquently conveys the mood of patriotic insanity which overspreads all nations in wartime. When Menelaus asks Agamemnon if he will "not help Greece," the latter responds, in a rare moment of lucidity: "Some god has sent Greece mad and you with her" [Euripides: *op. cit.*, 412]. The drama presents a conflict between affection and ambition set in the context of a perfect

women were slaves captured in war, who ultimately revolted. But the later Athenians had no room in their thinking for such heroics—the mere idea caused a mortal funk. Since they could not identify with the heroines, they grafted onto the story their own gynophobic assumptions of male distaste and female jealousy, but the original plot shines through in the captured women who appear in all versions. Nilsson also suggests that the myth of the Danaides is the same story—a Judith and Holophernes tale on a mass scale. Once again: "The heroism of the [women] . . . had been forgotten in the Greek tradition. The Greek shuddered always in telling the story . . ." [Nilsson, 1932, pp. 64-67].

⁵ This decathexis of the children is far from complete. The dramatists differ as to whether Clytemnestra's sorrow at the reported death of Orestes [Aeschylus: *The Choephoroi* 737ff.; Sophocles: *Electra* 765ff.] is as genuine as the anticipatory agony of Medea [Euripides: *Medea* 1021ff.], but there is, at least, ambivalence. And despite Electra's condemnation of her mother's utter iniquity and cruelty, Euripides has her blandly confident that Clytemnestra will come to her aid when she hears of Electra's confinement [Euripides: *Electra* 651ff.]. This assurance, which startles her fellow conspirators as well as the audience, forces her ultimately to admit her mother's love, and this is later verified by Clytemnestra's arrival and solicitude [*Ibid.*, 1102ff.]. There is perhaps no lovelier illustration of the degree to which maternal nurturance is taken for granted by resentful and accusing children.

frenzy of competing egoisms. Its theme is the progress of this contagious narcissistic mood until almost all the characters are swallowed up in it.

As the play opens, it is primarily the army as a whole and the lesser characters who are infected with the swagger-stick atmosphere. Agamemnon, despite the sardonic comments of Menelaus on his opportunism,⁶ is still moved by feelings other than the desire for self-aggrandizement. He is even briefly able to reclaim Menelaus, and in a scene of rich comic irony, as the two unheroic brothers reflect upon their subservience to the rude mob surrounding them, they point stuffy self-righteous fingers at Calchas: "base, ambitious like every prophet born"; and at Odysseus: "It's his ambition, an evil and a cursed thing, piercing his very soul," and momentarily pretend to an enlightened modesty [*Ibid.*, 513-29].

But a new brand of foppery is now introduced in the form of maternal narcissism. Clytemnestra arrives in camp with Iphigenia and the infant Orestes, not without a certain amount of clucking and preening:

Put him here, Iphigenia, at my feet,
And stand beside me there yourself. The strangers
Will envy me for my rich motherhood.

[*Ibid.*, 627-29. Stawell trans.]

Before long, however, she discovers that she has been hoaxed, and that her daughter is not to be married to Achilles, as she had been told, but sacrificed. At this point the aura of coxcombery is considerably enhanced by the entrance of Achilles, who immediately champions the cause of Clytemnestra and Iphigenia—not, to be sure, from any sensitivity to their feelings or plight, but rather from a kind of self-

⁶

How suave you were, how friendly to each clown,
Doors open to the world, so affable,
Ready to talk with all, even when they would not!
And so you bought your power. But power won,
My lord was changed. He scarcely could be seen,
His old friends friends no more [*op. cit.*, 338-45. Stawell trans.]

conscious chivalry. We find that Agamemnon has drawn on Achilles' personality as well as his own in concocting the story that Achilles was too proud to sail to Troy without having a child of Agamemnon's to wife [*Ibid.*, 100ff.]. For Achilles' main concern seems to be that Agamemnon has used his name in vain [*Ibid.*, 936-51], and he shows a continual preoccupation with issues of "face," appearances, and scandal:

I speak not of my marriage: maids enough
 Woo me, pursue me, but Agamemnon's deed
 Is insult here. He should have asked my leave
 Before he took my name to lure the girl.

[*Ibid.*, 959-62. Stawell trans.]

It is hard to imagine a more obtuse remark to a woman whose daughter's life is at issue. With an oafish vim reminiscent of fifth-century comic characterizations of Heracles, Achilles bustles self-importantly but ineffectually throughout the drama, until Iphigenia decides to immolate herself—a decision which he greets with obvious relief and thigh-slapping approval.

The only person motivated by anything other than vanity is Iphigenia herself. She is obviously attached to her father and greets him with a possessive affection which her mother tolerates indulgently [*Ibid.*, 631ff.]. She is concerned and sympathetic toward Agamemnon and treats the war as an irritating interruption of their loving relationship [*Ibid.*, 656-73]. Indeed, while her mother calls her proud [*Ibid.*, 995], we see no signs of it in the early part of the play. When she learns the awful truth her reaction is a simple horror at her father's rejection and her impending death.

The sun is sweet!
 Why will you send me into the dark grave?
 I was the first to sit upon your knee,
 The first to call you father.

[*Ibid.*, 1218ff. Stawell trans.]

And when he rejects her plea she cries to her mother:

The daylight has died
I have lost the light of the sun!
[*Ibid.*, 1281–1282]

She scorns the vainglory of those around her:

Life is sweet, is sweet!
The dead have nothing. Those who wish to die
Are out of reason. Life, the worst of lives,
Is better than the proudest death
can be.

[*Ibid.*, 1249ff.]

Yet ultimately she is infected by the bombast which fills the Greek camp. Her father having abandoned her, the army in arms against her, she rejects Achilles' offers of assistance and decides that a proud death is desirable after all. Through a desperate "identification with the aggressor" she eventually works herself into a chauvinistic delirium, creating an effect which would be comic but for what has gone before. She points to the soldiers ready to die for their "outraged country" and with the greedy narcissism of the dying cries:

I, savior of Greece,
Will win honor and my name shall be blessed.
[*Ibid.*, 1383–1384. Walker trans.]

Follow me now, the victor,
Follow the taker of Troy!
[*Ibid.*, 1474. Stawell trans.]

What is perhaps the most tragic is the lost opportunity to reverse the vicious circle of inter-sex hostility in the Greek family. Iphigenia's love for her father is one of the few instances of a benign father-daughter relationship in Greek mythology and drama. One cannot help feeling that such an Iphigenia would hold a great deal of promise as a benign wife and mother.

But Agamemnon's lust for glory and honor outbalances his fondness for his daughter, even though she is clearly the one person in his life who genuinely loves him.⁷ One is not, however, surprised by this. Even the alleged anger of Artemis is itself a consequence of Agamemnon's vanity—he having boasted that he shot a deer more skillfully than could the goddess [Apollodorus: *Epitome* iii. 21; Sophocles: *Electra* 566–73]. In a speech of brutal insensitivity, unparalleled even among the Greeks, he patiently explains to his daughter that she must die in order that the soldiers' desire for adventure be not frustrated. He concludes his remarks with some ringing words of patriotism, to the effect that all is done for Greece, to "guard her freedom" and keep foreigners away [Euripides: *op. cit.*, 1258ff.]. This notion that "freedom" is best preserved by the military invasion of other countries has a strangely contemporary ring.

It is rather understandable that we next encounter Iphigenia as the bloody priestess of the Taurian Artemis, piously engaged in slaughtering passing strangers. I refer here to Euripides' rendering of that version of the myth in which Artemis substitutes a hind for Iphigenia at the moment of sacrifice and spirits her off to Tauris. The myth serves both to take some of the sting from Agamemnon's act and, more importantly, to provide an interpretation of the importation and adaptation of a barbarian religion.

But when the mythmaker wishes to clothe with flesh the clattering bones of religious intent, he draws upon the modal tensions of his society. Many might argue that the identity of Iphigenia the sacrificial victim and Iphigenia the priestess is based upon an earlier tradition of a dying and reviving goddess, à la Frazer, or bespeaks a conflict between two religions, as Graves maintains [Graves, 1955, II, pp. 78–79]. The implication is clear that a ritual or historical event which no longer

⁷ *Electra's* retroactive protestations of love merely serve to justify her current hatreds.

has meaning undergoes change—is translated into a story of some sort. But what gives to the story itself sufficient meaning to preserve it intact? Must not any human story, in order to survive, contain some psychological potency? All may have forgotten the historical reason why Iphigenia the priestess is also Iphigenia the victim, but if one simply reads the myth as a human fantasy a new reason emerges immediately. I have already described the eleventh-hour identification with the aggressor displayed by Iphigenia in the Aulis drama. Here we see it carried one step further, in the form of a savage, if deflected, revenge. Sacrificed, she sacrifices; a trusting, naïve visitor, her victims are the same. And as she was killed in the service of Greek jingoism, in Tauris we find her in a position to collect this national debt [See Euripides: *Iphigenia in Tauris* 25–41 and 336–39; cf. also Herodotus: iv. 103].

Iphigenia in Tauris may be viewed, at one level, as a struggle between two alternative solutions to the cruel rejection experienced by the young girl, and the rage which this rejection engendered in her. Will she revenge herself according to the characteristic pattern of Greek women, attacking the male through his infant son? Or will she punish instead King Thoas, who stands in the relation of father to her in her new environment, and thus, though a surrogate, is nevertheless a more “direct” object of revenge than Orestes. For while the supernatural agency both in Aulis and Tauris is Artemis, it is Agamemnon in the former and Thoas in the latter who voice the human demand for blood.

In the end she deceives and betrays Thoas (just as Agamemnon had deceived and betrayed her), choosing to aid Orestes and return to Greece. Indeed, one is never given any obvious reason for expecting otherwise, since she expresses affection toward Orestes frequently, and clearly longs to return to her homeland. Had she sacrificed Orestes, it would have been “unwittingly.”

But we are by now accustomed to the fictional device of

using “involuntary” to signify “unconscious,” from figures such as Oedipus and Deianeira, who subsequently behave as if their involuntary acts had been voluntary. It is possible, then, to view the unfolding of events, of “chance,” as the working out of this conflict within Iphigenia. Her recognition of Orestes is at bottom an acceptance of him, a resolution of her hostile feelings toward him. Without this implicit inner struggle *Iphigenia in Tauris* would become a rather silly melodrama.

As the play opens, Iphigenia has just had a dream which she seems eager to interpret as an indication that Orestes is dead:

I seem'd,
 As I lay sleeping, from this land removed,
 To dwell at Argos, resting on my couch
 Mid the apartments of the virgin train.
 Sudden the firm earth shook: I fled, and stood
 Without; the battlements I saw, and all
 The rocking roof fall from its lofty height
 In ruins to the ground: of all the house,
 My father's house, one pillar, as I thought,
 Alone was left, which from its cornice waved
 A length of auburn locks, and human voice
 Assumed: the bloody office, which is mine
 To strangers here, respecting, I to death,
 Sprinkling the lustral drops, devoted it
 With many tears. My dream I thus expound:—
 Orestes, whom I hallow'd by my rites,
 Is dead: for sons are pillars of the house;
 They, whom my lustral lavers sprinkle, die.

[Euripides: *Iphigenia in Tauris* 42–57.

Potter trans.]

Only as sensitive a dramatist as Euripides could concoct a dream so condensed as this to portray all the complex feelings of an unhappy and bitter girl, betrayed by her father and alone in a foreign land.

The first part of the dream expresses a simple wish—a yearning for home, for the uncomplicated, trustful peace of childhood, when the perfidy of men was unknown. How many Greek girls must have had such dreams! One is reminded of the wedding song of Theocritus, cited in Chapter I, and it is not difficult to imagine how much Athenian brides must have identified with Iphigenia when they dedicated their dolls to Artemis and went off to live with strangers.

But this nostalgic idyll is immediately disrupted by other thoughts and feelings—rage against Greece, rage against Agamemnon, rage against the childish vanity of military men. The dream becomes dark and violent—Argos is shattered, just as her life was shattered. This is a particularly fine piece of condensation, inasmuch as it compresses three separate thoughts into one dream element: (1) “My lovely childhood was suddenly devastated by a terrible upheaval (the war, Greece’s madness, Aulis), I watched my dreams fall to pieces before my eyes”; (2) “My longing for home is undermined by my resentment of my family and my people for casting me out”; (3) “I will avenge myself by utterly annihilating my father’s house, I will stand and watch with grim satisfaction as it crumbles to nothing before my eyes.”

Finally, a third theme enters the dream, in the form of that cruel insight which was shared by so many Greek women: “sons are pillars of the house.” She will wound Agamemnon by destroying his son, so that even his memory will be obliterated. For we must recall once again the importance of the son to the well-being of the father beyond the grave. If funeral repasts were not regularly offered by a descendant in the male line, “the dead ancestor fell to the rank of an unhappy and malevolent demon” [Fustel de Coulanges, 1956, pp. 48–49].

For while they live, thou livest from the dead;
Children are memory’s voices, and preserve

The dead from wholly dying: as a net
Is ever by the buoyant corks upheld.

[Aeschylus: *The Choephoroi* 504-7.
Morshead trans.]

Glorying in her present power, Iphigenia prepares the hapless Orestes for the sacrifice, albeit (like Medea) not without some tears of regret for the infant child toward whom she had felt some fondness [Euripides: *Iphigenia in Tauris* 233-34]. Ultimately it is these affectionate feelings which prevail, but the dream itself betrays the whole familiar sequence of feminine unhappiness and oblique revenge.

Let us now return to Clytemnestra, in Aulis. What is the effect upon her of the "Greek madness"? Initially she seems a rather shallow figure, a bubbling, bustling Westchester matron, flattered by the status to be gained by Achilles' prospective match. She fails to perceive Agamemnon's agitation and brushes aside his attempt to get her to leave the "wedding" in his hands:

Now, by Hera, husband,
Do your man's work and leave the home to me.
[Euripides: *Iphigenia in Aulis* 739-40.
Stawell trans.]

But when she discovers the true state of affairs, a transformation takes place. If Iphigenia is ultimately infected by the narcissistic mania, Clytemnestra becomes a monument of opposition to it, stripping herself even of the vanity with which she entered the camp, as she begs Achilles for assistance:

O goddess-born!
You see a wretched woman at your knees!
All pride has left me. What should I care for now
Except my daughter?

[*Ibid.*, 899-902]

Her true stature is achieved, however, when she confronts the vacillating Agamemnon and pours out her hatred for him:

By force, not of my will, didst thou wed me!
Thou slewest Tantalus my sometime lord;
Didst dash my living babe against the stones,
Even from my breast with violence tearing him.

[*Ibid.*, 1149–1152. Way trans.]

Gone is her concern with feminine diversions as she contemplates the hideous consequences of the games of men. She points out the insanity of sacrificing his daughter for Helen and suggests Helen's own daughter Hermione as a more plausible victim. She contrasts her own fidelity with Helen's and insinuates that he is straining it to the breaking point. She then threatens him with the united hostility of his household:

What will my heart be like, think you, at home
When I look on my daughter's empty chair,
And empty room, sitting there all alone. . . .
What will your wages be when you come back?
We who are left, we shall not want much urging
To greet you with the welcome you deserve!

[*Ibid.*, 1173ff. Stawell trans.]

This speech represents the breakdown of feminine tolerance for the "secrets of men" [Bettelheim, 1955a, pp. 227ff.]. It is as if she were saying, along with all women who have been injured by war throughout the ages, "I will put up with your ceremonies, your puzzles, your contests, so long as you keep it to yourselves. I understand that you must construct situations of glory to cover up your emptiness, that you must destroy because you cannot create. But when your childish game of war strikes at the fruit of our wombs, it is not to be endured. Should our genuine and priceless creations be sacrificed to your artificial and puerile ones?" Military expeditions have always served to drive a wedge of resentment between the sexes, but the fact that it is a daughter rather than a son being sacrificed may also be important. Mothers in Greek drama often become rather carelessly chauvinistic where a

son's life is at issue [cf., e.g., Euripides: *Suppliants* 314ff.]. But sacrificing a *female* for male glory is crossing a sacred boundary.

If you come home,
Will you dare kiss your girls? Or they dare come,
That you may choose another for the knife?
Have you once thought of this? Are you a man?
Or nothing but a sceptre and a sword?

[*Ibid.*, 1191–1195. Stawell trans.]

But while Clytemnestra's point is well taken, Agamemnon is nothing but a sceptre and a sword, and ten years must pass before she can have her final word on this matter.

At home there tarries like a lurking snake,
Biding its time, a wrath unreconciled,
A wily watcher, passionate to slake,
In blood, resentment for a murdered child.

[Aeschylus: *Agamemnon* 154–55.
Morshead trans.]

Aeschylus' drama of the return of Agamemnon epitomizes the Greek theme of the proud man destroyed by the angry woman. One sees him arrive home in triumph, vaunting his achievements with a vanity tempered only by superstitious fears. Since Greek self-esteem was ever a house built on sand, we are not surprised at the expression of these fears, but we should not mistake their import. Agamemnon's pious philosophizing and mock-modesty are no more than amulets to ward off the jealousy of the gods—they represent no change of character. A less narcissistic man would have been more circumspect in returning to his neglected kingdom after a ten-year absence, particularly to a queen who had every reason to hate him and was not devoid of energy and purpose. But the infatuate general marches complacently into the trap, ignoring the twice-offered covert warnings of the elders, and with his captured concubine tactlessly in tow.

The cautions of the elders Agamemnon treats as an abstract issue, and after some boasting about his victory he smugly remarks:

Few are they who have such inborn grace,
As to look up with love, and envy not,
When stands another on the height of weal.

[Aeschylus: *op. cit.*, 832–33.
Morshead trans.]

Nor does he become suspicious when Clytemnestra appears and gratuitously offers weak excuses for the absence of Orestes. Instead, his attention is altogether drawn to Clytemnestra's elaborate flatteries. These he in part accepts as his due, but affects a modest distaste for the red carpet which she has literally rolled out for his welcome:

See too that not in fashion feminine
Thou make a warrior's pathway delicate;
Not unto me, as to some Eastern lord,
Bowing thyself to earth, make homage loud.
Strew not this purple that shall make each step
An arrogance; such pomp beseems the gods,
Not me. A mortal man to set his foot
On these rich dyes? I hold such pride in fear,
And bid thee honour me as man, not god.

[*Ibid.*, 918–25]

Note what rich irony is generated by Agamemnon's timorous vanity. When he receives a warning he echoes the warning with a little homily, but he is not warned; now when he is flattered by Clytemnestra he rails against such flattery, yet is flattered. The crowning irony is his ultimate acceptance of the carpet after all this deprecation—like Caesar or Richard III refusing the crown. Once again he resolves his doubts magically, by reciting the very proverb whose significance he is blindly ignoring (“call none blest till peaceful death have crowned a life of weal”), and making a few more comments

on the envy of the crowd. Finally he lets Clytemnestra coax him for a bit before yielding with a vengeance:

Then, if thou wilt, let some one stoop to loose
Swiftly these sandals, slaves beneath my foot;
And stepping thus upon the sea's rich dye,
I pray, *Let none among the gods look down
With jealous eye on me.*

[*Ibid.*, 944-47]

Whereupon, thoughtlessly committing Cassandra to his wife's tender care, he strides into the palace to his death.

That this is altogether a feminine triumph is made explicit by Aeschylus. It is Clytemnestra who comes out of the palace covered with blood and takes full responsibility for the murder. Scenes such as this, in which a vindictive woman makes a savage, gloating, exultant speech over the downfall of a man, are common in Greek drama [cf. *Medea*, *Hecuba*, *Electra*, *Alcmene*].

The method of killing seems to play upon fears of maternal entanglement:

Even as the trammel hems the scaly shoal,
I trapped him with inextricable toils,
The ill abundance of a baffling robe;
Then smote him, once, again—and at each wound
He cried aloud, then as in death relaxed
Each limb and sank to earth. . . .

[*Ibid.*, 1381-1385]

Thus is the returning warrior enveloped, but, unlike the maternal monster-slayers, he cannot cut his way out, and is destroyed. In her ecstasy, Clytemnestra is transfigured, and becomes a kind of fertility goddess:

Each dying breath
Flung from his breast swift bubbling jets of gore,
And the dark sprinklings of the rain of blood
Fell upon me; and I was fain to feel

That dew—not sweeter is the rain of heaven
 To cornland, when the green sheath teems with grain.
 [*Ibid.*, 1388–1392]

Clytemnestra's lover, Aegisthus, with whom she plots the murder, is made clearly subordinate to Clytemnestra—her instrument and agent. All three dramatists portray him as weak and effeminate:

Thou womanish man [*Ibid.*, 1625].

Was then thy strength too slight to deal in murder?
 [*Ibid.*, 1643].

For he, the man, wears woman's heart [Aeschylus: *The Choephori* 304–5. Morshead trans.]

That abject dastard . . . who fights his battles with the
 help of women [Sophocles: *Electra* 300–2. Jebb
 trans.]

Everywhere in Argos thou wouldst hear such phrases as,
 “that woman's husband,” never “that man's wife.”
 Yet 'tis shameful for the wife and not the man to rule
 the house [Euripides: *Electra* 930–33. Coleridge trans.]

But let me have a husband not girlish-faced like you . . .
 [*Ibid.*, 948–49. Vermeule trans.]

His role is analogous to that of the son used by the mother to destroy the father, and it seems reasonable to guess that the dramatists made unconscious use of this son-model in developing the character.

The stage is now set for the appearance of the actual son, Orestes. We have traced the psychological creation and development of two malignant “mothers”—Iphigenia, who was redeemed, and Clytemnestra, who flourished to destroy Agamemnon. Now let us examine the Orestean response to this maternal menace.

There are a number of peculiarities not present in our first two examples. Like Zeus and Apollo, Orestes is menaced by

maternal serpent-monsters (the Erinyes). But in Orestes' case this occurs after he has killed his own mother, whose relationship with him, far from being the intense and over-involved attachment I have posited as more or less modal for Greek families, is virtually nonexistent. Furthermore, while in the case of Zeus the "good" and "bad" aspects of the mother were expressed through metamorphosis, and in the case of Apollo through the more usual fantasy device of separation into a good human and a bad monster (or step-mother or witch), for Orestes there are three maternal agents, even if one excludes the maternal role played by Iphigenia in the dramas already discussed. There is Clytemnestra herself, the unloving, father-killing mother. There are the Erinyes, the vindictive, devouring, castrating mothers. And finally, there is Electra, the protective and nurturant but also manipulating mother, who uses the child for her own ends.

The reader may feel, at this point, that I have gone wild with my equations, and that I am treating everyone in the plot who lays any claim to femininity as an aspect of the mother. This is perhaps not a problem as far as the Erinyes are concerned, since they are explicit extensions of Clytemnestra [Aeschylus: *The Eumenides* 115ff.]. But one might ask why we cannot simply treat Electra as the sister she actually is. The answer is that it is not I who insist upon this reassignment of roles; it is Electra herself:

Alas for all my nursing of old days,
 so constant—all for nothing—which I gave you;
 my joy was in the trouble of it. For never
 were you your mother's love as much as mine.
 None was your nurse but I within that household.

[Sophocles: *Electra*, 1144–1148. Grene trans.]⁸

⁸ Orestes confirms the claim in another drama, by wishing for her when he believes his death is imminent:

"O, that a sister's hand might wrap these limbs!" [Euripides: *Iphigenia in Tauris* 627. Potter trans.]

The speech from which this quotation was drawn abounds in maternal remarks of this kind. Furthermore, it is Electra, in the Sophoclean version, who saves Orestes from death and sends him away to be reared in exile [cf. also Apollodorus: *Epitome* vi. 24].

It must be admitted that there is very little in either *The Choephoroi* or in Euripides' *Electra* to confirm this position (or to contradict it, for that matter), save perhaps for the fact that it is always Electra who pushes Orestes to do the deed and Orestes who hesitates and seeks advice and support. But in Euripides' *Orestes*, we once again encounter the maternal sister, nursing Orestes in his madness [*op. cit.*, 216ff.]. Perhaps it will suffice to say simply that if anyone represents the Good Mother in the Orestes saga, it is Electra.⁹

Certainly one can find in this myth most of the aspects of the mother-son syndrome described in Part One, from the strained marital relationship to the son's misogyny and madness (to which we will shortly turn). But why do these elements appear in so disconnected a fashion? Why is it Electra, for example, who uses Orestes as the tool of her revenge rather than Clytemnestra? If Clytemnestra can murder Agamemnon, why cannot Electra murder Clytemnestra?

To ask such a question is to ask too much of this mode of interpretation. We must not assume that the entire structure of the myth can be accounted for by some psychological process. The Orestes cycle has unique historical, cultural, and religious origins. We cannot say that each myth emerges full-blown from the family constellation—if we did, we would be hard put to account for the vast differences between them. Rather, I am attempting to show that elements of this constellation have crept into each myth—that each has been colored and molded by it.

I can best illustrate this process by considering the skeleton

⁹ In *The Choephoroi*, the old nurse also seems to play this role [*op. cit.*, 747ff.].

form of the myth and observing the subsequent elaboration of detail. The Orestes cycle, as presented by the Attic dramatists, is fundamentally concerned with the slaying of a mother by her son in revenge for the killing of his father. But this stark theme has a peculiarly Greek development and coda. One may ask, for example, why it is necessary to introduce Electra into the story, and why she comes ultimately to dominate it.

The earliest versions of the myth seem to concern little more than a battle over succession to the Argive throne, with women playing a secondary role. Electra is not even mentioned in the Homeric version, and it is Aegisthus rather than Clytemnestra who initiates the murder of Agamemnon. Orestes is not the infant son and matricide of later versions, but simply the exiled pretender, an early Bonnie Prince Charlie, who comes unaided to claim his throne. It is, as Gomme points out, "a very masculine tragedy" [Gomme, 1937, p. 93; cf. also Thomson, 1950, 247-48]. Homer is rather coy about the matricide, never saying that Orestes slew Clytemnestra, but nonetheless producing her corpse as soon as he has killed Aegisthus [Homer: *Odyssey* iii. 303ff., iv. 524ff. and xi. 405ff.].

But this simple tale of war and politics (Aegisthus was Agamemnon's cousin, a pretender to the throne disputed by their rabid fathers, Atreus and Thyestes) was later transformed into one in which the matricidal revenge was the central theme. Paradoxically (but not really surprisingly), it was the gynophobic Athenians who filled the story with women and made it a tale of family conflict. A people reared in such a culture would obviously be more impressed by the idea of a woman plotting against her husband than by anything else in the story. It would tap their fear of women and lead them to occupy themselves with the process of filial revenge. But given this fundamental concern, why was Electra introduced?

It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the Athenians

could not conceive of the possibility that a man could get the better of a woman without the assistance of another woman. Somehow the man must only be an instrument: the motive force must come from a woman. Furthermore, once having given Orestes a feminine “mover,” it was inevitable that their relationship should begin to incorporate mother-son characteristics. One of these is the fear of envelopment and fusion, which is expressed particularly in Euripides’ *Orestes*. When Orestes cries out that the Erinyes are pursuing him, Electra says, “I will not let thee go; but with arms twined round thee will prevent thy piteous tossing to and fro”; but Orestes is little comforted by this protection and screams: “*Let me go! I know you. You’re one of my Furies too! You’re holding me down to hurl me into hell!*” [Euripides: *op. cit.*, 262–65]. Later, on a less violent note, Electra longs aloud for a womb-like fusion with Orestes, in a kind of inverted reference to their common father and mother: “Oh might the self-same sword, if this may be, slay us, one coffin cedar-wrought receive!” To which Orestes rather unpoetically responds, with an uneasy fit of realism: “That would be an end most sweet; but surely thou seest we are too destitute of friends to be allowed to share one tomb” [*Ibid.*, 1051–1056].

It is interesting that Orestes identifies Electra with his mother’s Erinyes at the moment when she offers encircling comfort and protection.¹⁰ Such an association is inappropriate as regards Clytemnestra, who rejected and abandoned him, but Euripides is more interested in portraying the psychological and interpersonal realities of his time than in clinging to the unique probabilities of the myth. The fear of feminine envelopment is also manifested in other ways, such as the pre-

¹⁰ One could argue that the identification takes place earlier, in line 255, when he speaks to his mother, Electra being the only real person in the room. It is significant that Orestes’ attack occurs when he is telling Electra not to be like Clytemnestra [lines 251–52]. The very thought is enough to unhinge him—to start him talking to his dead mother and accusing Electra of being an Erinys—for it threatens his entire defensive structure.

occupation in the Orestan plays with the net, or sleeveless robe, used by Clytemnestra to swaddle Agamemnon; the contempt for women expressed by Orestes and Pylades; and the peculiar ambivalence which permits both Electra and Clytemnestra to be called masculine, the former as a compliment, the latter as a criticism [Euripides: *Orestes* 1204-1205; Aeschylus: *Agamemnon* 10-11 and *The Choephoroi* 630].

The most striking expressions of the oral-narcissistic conflict appear in Aeschylus' *The Choephoroi*, which is filled with references to devouring and encircling serpents and other oral themes. Orestes calls Agamemnon "our eagle-sire, whom to his death a fearful serpent brought, entwining him in coils" [*op. cit.*, 246-49]. Later, in a long speech [*Ibid.*, 980-1006], he refers repeatedly to the "mesh which trapped his hands, entwined his feet!" and says of his mother:

what venom'd thing,
Sea-snake or adder, had more power than she
To poison with a touch the flesh unscarred?
[*Ibid.*, 994-96. Morshead trans.]

Finally, when pursued by the Erinyes, he garnishes them with serpent forms [*Ibid.*, 1048ff.].

This maternal serpent is matched by the infant serpent of insatiable hunger, which appears in Clytemnestra's dream:

LEADER: . . . her womb a serpent bare.
ORESTES: What then the sum and issue of the tale?
LEADER: Even as a swaddled child, she lull'd the thing.
ORESTES: What suckling craved the creature, born full-fanged?
LEADER: Yet in her dreams she proffered it the breast.
ORESTES: How? did the hateful thing not bite her teat?
LEADER: Yea, and sucked forth a blood-gout in the milk.
[*Ibid.*, 527-33. Morshead trans.]

Orestes interprets the dream as referring to himself, an insight which comes to Clytemnestra only when he is about to kill her [*Ibid.*, 928]:

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.

[*Ibid.*, 542–50. Lattimore trans.]

Thus, just as she fed, bathed, and swaddled her victim, Agamemnon, so she fed, bathed, and swaddled her murderer, Orestes. But at a more elementary level, this circularity expresses the emotional cycle inherent in the mother-child relationship: as she sows, so shall she reap, as she rejects, so shall she be rejected, as she poisons, so shall she be poisoned. The vicious oral sadism of the dream-Orestes reflects the maternal deprivation he has experienced.

But it is not only Orestes who displays this insatiable and vindictive hunger: it is a motif which dominates the entire drama. As it opens, one finds that even the earth, and the dead it contains (particularly Agamemnon), cries out for nourishment. It is rather fitting that the play derives its name from the libation-bearers, who seek thus to “soothe the ire of dead men angered” [*Ibid.*, 13–15]. The earth must be appeased in order that it shall not slake its thirst with the blood of the living. As Electra pours Clytemnestra’s libations on the ground she says, “Lo! the earth drinks them, to my sire they pass” [*Ibid.*, 164].

Similarly, all appeals made in the play are oral ones. When Apollo wishes to impress upon Orestes the necessity for carrying out the matricide, he tells him that if he fails he will receive no libations after he is dead—“no lustral bowl . . . no spilth of wine” [*Ibid.*, 291ff.]. When Orestes seeks the aid of his father’s ghost he threatens him in a similar manner, saying that so long as he brings success to his children:

So shall the rightful feasts that mortals pay
 Be set for thee; else, not for thee shall rise
 The scented reek of altars fed with flesh
 [*Ibid.*, 483–85. Morshead trans.]

Later, Clytemnestra makes her final plea for mercy by baring her breasts¹¹ to her son and crying:

Stay, child, and fear to strike. O son, this breast
 Pillowed thine head full oft, while, drowsed with sleep,
 Thy toothless mouth drew mother's milk from me.
 [*Ibid.*, 896–98]

But Orestes reminds Clytemnestra that far from having been the nurturant mother she portrays, she had cast him out in his infancy [*Ibid.*, 900ff. and 913]. A child so starved of maternal affection is not inclined to be generous or forgiving: “Her children’s soul is wolfish, born from hers, and softens not by prayers” [*Ibid.*, 420–22]. Euripides also captures this hunger in his *Orestes*. When Menelaus pleads with the hero for Hermione’s life, Orestes can only respond repeatedly with, “What about me?” [*Orestes* 1613–1616].

Finally, the drama ends with a reminder that the entire saga was set off by an act of cannibalism, when Atreus, Agamemnon’s father, served his brother Thyestes a stew composed of the latter’s children [*Ibid.*, 1068ff.].

The Orestes myth, then, in its fifth-century form, has become a story of sex antagonism and mother-son conflict. This conflict is “solved” by the killing of Clytemnestra. And yet the story continues—the solution is ineffective, the feelings remain. When Menelaus asks him if the matricide did not slake his thirst for blood, Orestes replies: “I can never have my fill of killing whores” [Euripides: *Orestes* 1590], a sentiment frequently expressed by sex-killers, and one which reveals again

¹¹ This is the only tinge of maternal seductiveness in the drama. It appears also in Euripides [*Electra* 1206ff.], and is reminiscent of Helen’s use of the same device to coax Menelaus from slaying her [Aristophanes: *Lysistrata* 155].

the importance of maternal seductiveness in generating pathology.

To understand this quenchlessness one must recognize the peculiar significance of the matricide. For while Bunker lumps together explicit matricide and any slaying of a she-monster, the two motifs are distinguishable in certain respects. The she-monster represents only the Bad Mother, or the oral-narcissistic conflict itself, and once it is dispatched the hero marries and lives happily ever after. The matricide, on the other hand, is trying to destroy the total mother—to extinguish all her passions simultaneously. He attempts to deal with his ambivalence toward her by abolishing the relationship altogether. This solution fails to provide a means of satisfying the positive, or at least dependent, feelings the hero has toward his mother. Hence, the matricide, unlike the monster-slayer, is afterwards troubled with longing and guilt. In Orestes' case these feelings are betrayed by his chronic dependence on feminine assistance (despite the misogynistic attitudes which he and Pylades affect), and by the Erinyes' persecution.

There are three extant plays which deal in a major way with Orestes' life after the matricide. In *Iphigenia in Tauris*, as I have mentioned, he is saved from death and enabled to accomplish his mission (i.e., stealing the statue of Artemis) by Iphigenia. In *Orestes*, he is protected and nursed by Electra, and it is her bold stratagem which rescues him from death at the hands of the Argives and forces Apollo's intervention, after Orestes and Pylades have exhausted their resources and are preparing themselves to die [Euripides: *Orestes* 1177ff.].¹² In *The Eumenides*, it is Athene who saves him from the Erinyes by casting her deciding vote in the trial and by paci-

¹² In characteristic Greek fashion, when Electra has offered this solution to the two hapless males, she is rewarded by being told she has the mind of a man [Euripides: *Orestes* 1204]. Socrates compliments the unfortunate wife of Ischomachus in the same way for one of her dutiful answers to her husband [Xenophon: *Oeconomicus* x. 1].

fyng them when they threaten revenge. Apollo, his sponsor, instigator, and much-touted protector, is in fact unable to rescue his protégé.¹³

In other words, the mother-rejecting solution blindly ignores the intense, frustrated craving for maternal love and protection. An unrecognized force is all the more potent, and the repressed yearnings make themselves felt in Orestes' psychosis, as well as in his continued dependence on female figures. How to placate the maternal rage and bring back maternal love is the theme of the psychosis, while how to find nurturant substitutes is the theme of his overt interpersonal responses.

Unfortunately, there is no simple solution to ambivalence. A craving so intense leads, as we have seen, to fears of being utterly swallowed, and cannot, therefore, be permitted free expression. Thus far from selecting motherly figures to satisfy his dependent longings, Orestes chooses three notorious virgins: Electra, Iphigenia (priestess of Artemis), and Athene herself. We have seen that virgins are unconsciously experienced by men as less feminine, more neuter, and therefore less threatening to masculine narcissism than are sexually mature women. In *The Eumenides*, Apollo even goes so far as to say that Agamemnon would not have been dishonored had he been killed by an Amazon in battle, since the slayer would have been less feminine [*op. cit.*, 625ff.]. A "real woman" required of a man a more secure masculinity than Greeks of the classical period felt able to muster.

But there is still another twist to the Orestean nightmare. Nurturant virgins may be found, but can they make him proof against the fears which this very nurturance arouses? Iphigenia threatens his life, and Electra seems to turn into

¹³ This is a consistent feature of Greek myth: males are supposedly more bold and clever, but are seldom able to manage without feminine help; male gods are more trusted and more often invoked, but seldom seem to be around when needed, or, if present, as in *The Eumenides*, able only to mitigate but not remove the threat.

Clytemnestra. And does not Athene herself wear the snake-festooned Medusa head upon her aegis? And what of the Erinyes themselves, the “Gorgon shapes” with snaky hair? Are they not also virgins?

Thus this avenue of escape is only an apparent one. Since the hungry serpent is inside, it seems to be everywhere. The maternally deprived child feels so impoverished that he cannot give, and because he cannot give, even the most simple and legitimate emotional demand placed upon him by another person will make him feel as if he were in danger of being gobbled up. Because his own needs are so insatiable he pictures everyone else as equally voracious. Orestes’ fantasy of the less womanly but helpful virgin simply conjures up the image of a greedy, affection-starved “serpent” like himself. The following speech by the loveless Erinyes conveys this image of the devouring female, and divulges the Greek male’s fear of being swallowed up through sexual intercourse:

Yea, from thy living limbs I suck it out,
 Red, clotted, gout by gout,—
 A draught abhorred of men and gods; but I
 Will drain it, suck thee dry;
 Yea, I will waste thee living, nerve and vein.
 [Aeschylus: *The Eumenides* 264–67.
 Morshead trans.]

Or, to make it even clearer that the issue is one of emotional hunger:

Not as a victim slain upon the shrine,
 But living shalt thou see thy flesh my food.
 [*Ibid.*, 305–6]

In other words, the worst punishment a Greek male could conceive was being set upon by his exact counterpart in the opposite sex, a love-starved but man-hating female. But the Erinyes are “unconflicted” over the oral-narcissistic dilemma—they show no need to withdraw and keep separate, but sat-

isfy both their demand for love and their resentful hatred by feeding upon others. Now this, it will by now be obvious to the reader, is precisely the kind of double-barreled pressure that unhappy Greek mothers placed upon their sons. No matter where the fancy turns to elude the conflict, it reappears, since it is internal. Its victim is like the fox ceaselessly trying to outdistance the dog's bell tied to his tail, in Pergaud's "Tragedy of Goupil."

Although the oral-narcissistic conflict itself cannot be solved, the particular set of fears represented by the Erinyes fantasy can be appeased by a counter-fantasy—the one encountered in Chapter II. If the male child feels set upon and threatened by omnivorous feminine sexual cravings, he is beforehand, and incapacitates himself, removing himself from the arena. Should he feel hated and pursued by virtue of his manhood, he unmans himself. This is the last, disastrous attempt at solution of the conflict; and it is in this sense that we should interpret the story that Orestes, during one of his mad intervals, bit off a finger to placate the Erinyes, which turned them white and restored his sanity [Pausanias: viii. 34. 1-3].¹⁴

The reason for the success of this stratagem becomes evident when one notes the intolerance of masculine narcissism manifested by the Erinyes themselves:

And the proud thoughts of men, that flaunt themselves full high under the heavens, they waste away and dwindle in dishonour 'neath the earth at our sable-stoed assault and the vengeful rhythm of our feet.

[Aeschylus: *The Eumenides* 368-71. Smyth trans.]

¹⁴ No psychoanalytic symbolic substitutions are required to indicate that this "finger" was phallic, for the story is told to explain a conical stone marker on a tomb-mound. Now, there is no particular reason for a finger to appear on a tomb, but fertility symbols are common tomb ornaments, for the usual reason. As Jane Harrison puts it, "The chamber of death was crowned by the primitive symbol of life." Furthermore, the "Finger's Tomb," on which the story is based, is simply a Dactyl monument, and hence partakes of the Dactyls' phallic nature [Harrison, 1962, pp. 401-3].

This theme of the castrating female is also prominent in the descriptions of Clytemnestra's slaying of Agamemnon, and in the chorus' diatribe in *The Choephoroi* against the wickedness of womankind, Clytemnestra and the Lemnian women are compared with Scylla and Althaea: Scylla who cut off her father's immortal lock, and Althaea who burned the brand in which rested the life of her son [Aeschylus: *The Choephoroi* 602ff.].

But Orestes' conflict is never really solved. After years of madness (and the implementation of the various clumsy devices I have discussed) he finally achieves a modicum of peace and a relatively normal and successful life, but he dies in a fashion which reflects the persistence of the problem—not, as he had feared, by strangling in Athens [Aeschylus: *The Eumenides* 746], but by a snakebite in Arcadia [Apollodorus: *Epitome* vi. 28]—a serpent, serpent-slain.

The Greeks, nevertheless, were proud of Orestes. Indeed, if dramatic preoccupation be an index, he was their greatest hero. This pride shows most clearly when he is contrasted with a foreigner, as in the *Orestes*, when he is given a comic dialogue with a Phrygian eunuch [Euripides: *Orestes* 1506ff.]; or in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, when Iphigenia tells Thoas of Orestes' matricide, and Thoas exclaims: "O Phoebus! This hath no barbarian dared" [*op. cit.*, 1174]. The nature of his achievement is made clear in his speech to the Argives in *Orestes*:

Pelasgians in ancient times, and later Danai, I helped you no less than my father when I slew my mother; for if the murder of men by women is to be sanctioned, then the sooner you die, the better for you; otherwise you must needs become the slaves of women [*Orestes*, 932–37. Coleridge trans.].

Yet on the whole, Orestes is not a heroic figure in the Heracleian sense. He does not slay monsters or rescue maidens or liberate cities. His principal accomplishments are in the

emotional and psychological arena, and even here success is not complete. Perhaps the primary reason that the Greeks held him in such affection and esteem was that the solution he adopted—total rejection of the mother and devotion to the father—was most peculiarly their own. None of the modes of response we are examining (with the possible exception of Apollo's, with which it is closely allied) will be quite so close to the classical Greek norm as this one; and there is no character in Greek mythology who seems to epitomize the fifth-century Athenian as fully as does the hero of Euripides' *Orestes*. Whatever kind of run-of-the-mill swashbuckler he may have been in earlier days, the dramatists molded Orestes in their own image, and with his tribulations the Athenians must have experienced an emotional empathy unmatched even in so powerful a repertory.