

An Ethical Literary Reading of Clytemnestra's Tragedy in the *Oresteia*

Meng Xihua

School of Foreign Languages, Shangqiu Normal University
No. 55 Pingyuan Road, Liangyuan District (476000), Shangqiu, Henan Province, China
E-mail: mengxihua@163.com

Published: 31 May 2020

Copyright © Xihua.

Abstract:

The *Oresteia* is the only surviving trilogy composed by Greek Tragedian Aeschylus. This dramatic works keeps on drawing attention from critics and audiences for centuries. This paper aims at studying this work from the perspective of ethical literary criticism, a flourishing approach to literature at present. In the *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra's tragedy is obviously an ethical tragedy. In ancient Greece, ethics plays the role of laws to keep the society in order, but Clytemnestra violates three aspects of the patriarchal ethics: religious ethics, political ethics, and family ethics. Therefore, she is doomed.

Key words: ethical literary criticism; ethics; tragedy; *Oresteia*;

Introduction:

The *Oresteia* is a trilogy composed by the famous Greek Tragedian Aeschylus, consisting of three plays: *Agamemnon*, *The Choephoroi (Libation Bearers)*, and *Eumenides*. As the first of the three ancient Greek tragedians, Aeschylus has enjoyed great reputation as the father of tragedy for centuries. He was a frequent first prize winner in the Spring Festival when there was a dramatic competition due to his excellent tragedies. The *Oresteia* is the only surviving trilogy among his great tragedies as well as among all ancient Greek trilogies. This trilogy is considered as a landmark which exerts great influence upon later Greek playwrights and their composition of tragedies. "Its dramatic techniques, narrative development and dense poetry changed the course of Greek and hence European drama. It is the play to which Euripides and Sophocles, the other great

surviving playwrights of the fifth century, turned again and again in homage, competition and imitation.” (Goldhill, vii) Its influence even stretches to Shakespeare in the Renaissance and Eugene O’Neill in the 20th century. This long-termed influence shows its greatness and marks its everlasting charm.

Such a great dramatic work keeps on arousing attentions from critics and its audience, even though thousands of years has past since its first performance. Recently, this trilogy has been studied from the perspectives of feminism, existentialism, and so on. These studies try to figure out the essential value and charm of this trilogy and explore its modern significance. It is obvious that new literary theories make great contribution to the development of the study of this trilogy. And also we may find that these theories are not as new as they were and there is no scholars do any research on this work from the perspective of the newly flourishing literary theory: ethical literary criticism, which can be a pity for the study of this trilogy. Thus, we apply the ethical literary criticism to study Aeschylus’s *Oresteia* and aim at providing a new perspective of the reading of this great dramatic work.

Ethical literary criticism is widely received as a new literary theory originated by Professor Nie Zhenzhao. It is an ancient issue in literature study, but now it possesses more modern sense with Nie’s re-definition. In June, 2004, Nie put forward a new critical approach of literature, the ethical literary criticism, in a seminar held in Nanchang, China. “Although there are numerous Chinese and overseas scholars who are inclined to group ancient Chinese literary theories into kind of ethical and moral criticism, Nie should be the first one who advocates the ethical literary criticism as an active critical approach and does systematical study on it at present in China.” (Qiao Guoqiang, 2005: 24) It is extraordinary that this new theory is put forward by a Chinese scholar and becomes a popular tendency of literature criticism all around the world. Ethical literary criticism is based on the idea that “literature appears for ethical and moral purposes at its initial stage” and “ethics and morality can be considered as the drives for the emergence of literature.” (Nie Zhenzhao, 2005: 8) Ethical literary criticism does not tend to give moral judgments of the characters’ acts in the literary works according to modern ethical or moral principles, but to explore the ethical reality in the time when the work was composed. Therefore, this new approach carries certain purposes, that is, “confirming great literary works from its ethical and moral values by such a study, and promoting the advancement of human civilization”. (Nie Zhenzhao, 2004: 19) In ancient Greece, because of the shortage of means of recreation and propaganda, drama became popular. Then political powers start competing on the stage, and every play on the stage in ancient Greece should bear ethical purposes of different political powers. “In Greek literature, Homeric epics and Greek drama are the most representative achievements, and they are the best reflection of the development and evolution of ancient Greek social ethical and moral values”. (Nie Zhenzhao, 2004: 19) In the *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra is killed by her son, but when her son is brought to the court, Athena finally announces his innocence. For a long time, Clytemnestra has been believed as a victim of character or fate, but few scholars pay attention to the ethical reasons for her tragedy. By an ethical literary study of the *Oresteia*, we can find three aspects of the ethical and moral reality in ancient Greece that cause her tragic ending: religious ethics, political ethics and family ethics. Because she breaks ethical taboo in the three aspects, her tragedy is inevitable. It is clear that Clytemnestra’s tragedy “is not only a tragedy of fate, but an ethical tragedy.” (Yuan Xuesheng, 2008: 63)

1. Religious Ethics:

“It is undoubted that among Aeschylus’s surviving plays, religious matter is always at the center.” (Qiao Ge, 2008: 10) The story in the *Oresteia* is adapted from ancient Greek myths, so it can never give up its religious concerns. The Greek people worshiped deities sincerely and led a religious life under the bliss of their deities at Olympus. In ancient Greece, there is no religion in modern sense, but their sincere worship of deities. So deities-worship is their religion, and their life is supervised by this kind of worship in all respects. “There was no sphere of life (or death) in ancient Greece that was wholly separate or separable from the religious: the family, politics, warfare, sport, knowledge.” (Ogden, 2007: 1) As a result, religious influence can be seen in all aspects of ancient Greek life. According to their mythical legends, man must follow deities’ will and be obedient, or retribution would come. No one can challenge deities’ authority, and blasphemy was believed as the greatest sin in religious life. In the *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra’s words shows that she is not a devout woman any more, because her killing of Agamemnon makes her so crazy that she criticizes Agamemnon’s sacrifice to a Greek goddess, Artemis. In this sense, she offends the religious ethics at that time, so her tragic ending can be foreseen here.

In *Agamemnon*, Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon in his palace when the Greek commander returns to his homeland and his own kingdom after the fall of Troy. This murder is the original and direct reason for her later tragic life and for her being killed by her son Orestes. We know the true reason for her murder of her husband may be her will to power and her adultery with Aegisthus. But she dares not reveal these reasons after she kills Agamemnon when she declares this killing in front of the Chorus. She finds a reason to make her murder become a revenge act:

Hear then the sanction of the oath I swear

By the great vengeance for my murdered child,

By Ate, by the Fury unto whom

This man lies sacrificed by hand of mine, (Oates, 1938: 216)

Here, we can see Clytemnestra tries to justify her murder of her husband, but unfortunately, she make another fatal mistake, a more serious one. In her proclaim, she considers her husband as the murder of her daughter Iphigenia, but Agamemnon agrees to sacrifice Iphigenia to appease the wrath of Artemis, the Hellenic goddess of the hunt, wild animals and wilderness. Before the Greek army starts to Troy, Agamemnon kills a deer and boasts that he is so good a hunter that even Artemis is not his match. His pride offends the goddess of hunter, so she stops the wind on the sea. Then, the Greek ships become motionless on the sea. “Agamemnon, after a period of inner struggle, finally gave way, the maiden was sacrificed, and the host embarked.” (Oates, 1938: 163) Now, we see that Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter for the goddess’ will and for the Greek army’s benefit. This even touches the goddess, so that she saves Iphigenia and leaves a deer there to be sacrificed. This event has been highly praised by deities and mortals. Agamemnon further established his leading position in the Greek army after this sacrifice. But Clytemnestra never forgives her husband and finally kills him. In her condemn of Agamemnon, she also condemns the goddess because she asks the sacrifice of Iphigenia. In this sense, she violates the religious ethical principles.

I pray, Let none among the gods look down

With jealous eye on me-reluctant all,

To trample thus and mar a thing of price,

Wasting the wealth of garments silver-worth. (Oates, 1938: 198)

In ancient Greece, religious ethics plays a very important role and deities are the highest

supervisors of their life. No one is allowed to challenge their authority. The demand of deities should be met without doubt and delay. The religious ethics is the highest ethical principle in Greece. But in the *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra does not accept the goddess' arrangement of her daughter's fate and kills her husband in the name of revenge for her daughter. When she tries to prove that her husband deserves the murder, she also declares the goddess' guiltiness. Her offending of deities is against religious ethics, the religious Greek people and playwrights will not let her get a happy ending. So this is the first reason for Clytemnestra's tragic life.

2. Political Ethics:

In ancient Greece, political ethics played a very important role in the administration of the city affairs and the stabilization of political system and social life. "In ancient Greece when the legal system was not advanced, ethical taboo can be considered as a principle or a system, a legal article or a moral code. Even we should call it the law that can restrain people's behavior, which possesses very important value to the society". (Nie Zhenzhao, 2006: 114) Thus, in ancient Greece, ethics played the role of law to maintain the political peace, and moreover, to create an orderly social life for all the citizens. This is the political function of ethics. As we know, the frequent alternation of political head is the root for most political chaos. In order to get a sustainable long-termed political peace, the position of the political head should be out of dispute. Then in ancient Greek political ethics, the most important ethical taboo is regicide, the killing of a king. In the *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra's doing is quite against the political ethics, because she kills the king, Agamemnon.

In *Agamemnon*, the first play of the *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra plots the murder of the homecoming king and kills him by herself. Clytemnestra gets the information of Agamemnon's returning much earlier than any others, so that she can get more time to plan her killing of the king. Her careful and detailed arrangement shows that she plans the plot for a long time. When Agamemnon comes to his palace, the queen asks him to pass in on purples to his home. When he enters the palace, Cassandra, the Trojan prophetess and then a slave of Agamemnon, predicts the death of Agamemnon and herself. After she enters the palace, the chorus hears the screaming of Agamemnon:

O I am sped—a deep, a mortal blow.

... ..

O! O! again, another, another blow! (Oates, 1938: 212)

The murder happens in the palace. The chorus does not know whether their king is dead or not until the queen enters the stage standing on the site where she kills the king by saying:

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; and as he lay,
Once more I smote him, with the last third blow,
Sacred to Hades, saviour of the dead. (Oates, 1938: 214)

Now, Agamemnon is killed by his wife. Clytemnestra kills the king and she says that she will not deny this because she believes her doing is reasonable and correct. She proclaims that she kills the king to revenge her "well-loved" daughter:

... when he held as light

My daughter's life as that of sheep or goat,
One victim from the thronging fleecy fold!
Yea, slew in sacrifice his child and mine,
The well-loved issue of my travail-pangs,
To lull and lay the gales that blew from Thrace. (Oates, 1938: 215)

Even though she tries to defend herself and to prove that Agamemnon is a tyrant, the Chorus calls her a “grim raven”:

Thy very form I see,
Like some grim raven, perched upon the slain,
Exulting o'er the crime, aloud, in tuneless strain! (Oates, 1938: 217)

The chorus is formed by representative wits in the kingdom. They do not accept Clytemnestra's reason for her killing of the king, which reveals that the Greek people do not think she is guiltless. The chorus believes she is guilty by saying:

Thou guiltless of this murder, thou!
Who dares such thought avow? (Oates, 1938: 218)

To defend herself, Clytemnestra finds an excuse for her murder of the king: avenging for her daughter who was sacrificed by the king. Even though in ancient Greece, revenge is acceptable action, her killing of the king is unforgivable because her killing of the king is against the political ethics. To keep political peace in a country when there are no laws, political ethics is very important. The power of the king should be guarded. The hero-cult of ancient Greek people would not let common persons be their political leaders. Heroes are qualified kings, and ordinary people have no right to get the throne. Thus, regicide becomes the first taboo of political ethics. So, Clytemnestra and her lover are doomed to be killed because they commit a serious ethical sin. Their death is foretold by Cassandra in the play:

... This attest
When for my death's revenge another dies,
A woman for a woman, and a man
Falls, for a man ill-wedded to his curse.
Grant me this boon—the last before I die. (Oates, 1938: 211)

3. Family Ethics:

A family is the basic unit of the society, so social peace can be achieved only when every family is kept in order. The story of the *Oresteia* is set in the early stage of the development of patriarchy. It is widely accepted that “the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus as a dramatic depiction of the struggle between declining mother right and rising and victorious father right in the Heroic Age.” (Engels, 2004: 29) The trilogy is always believed as an obvious mark of the triumph of patriarchy over matriarchy. Because of this social reality, the family ethics then should be men-oriented. In the family, men should be superior to women and women must follow men's demands and accepted their subordinate status willingly. Additionally, Greek tragedy came into being with the rising of patriarchy, so it is composed for the sake of confirming men's superior position in the family. “Greek tragedy was written and performed by men and aimed—perhaps not exclusively if women were present in the theater—at a large, public male audience.” (Foley, 2001: 3) Now, we can see Greek tragedies are created for the benefit of men, and thus, women's rights will be ignored and men's rights will be honored on the stage so that the family ethics can be established.

In the *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra violates the established family ethics and thus she is doomed to be punished. Clytemnestra is Agamemnon's wife, so she commits two serious family ethical sins: adultery and murder of her husband. When Agamemnon is absent from home to take part in the Trojan War, she is seduced by Aegisthus. According to the family ethics in ancient Greece, women's chastity is as important as their lives. When a woman commits adultery, she will be severely punished because this is a great insult to her husband, a man. In this sense, Clytemnestra is unethical. Besides, she refuses to accept her doom so that she takes risk to kill her husband in order to avoid being killed by her husband. Finally she kills her husband and boasts her murder:

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. (Oates, 1938: 214)

From these words, we can feel her gloom for being depressed by her husband for so long time. The feminists may share their sympathy to her, but men in the patriarchal society will not free her guilt because they cannot tolerate the murder of a husband in a family. When a wife can kill her husband without punishment, patriarchal system will be overthrown. Men will not allow these murders, and a men-dominated society will not free such women.

In order to encourage the punishment of Clytemnestra and her lover and make other women scared to violate family ethics, the justice here must tolerate the corrector of the wrongdoers. So later, Agamemnon's son Orestes comes to the Grave and meets his sister, Electra. They plan to avenge their father by slaying Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus. Immediately after Orestes kills his mother and her lover, he is pursued and tortured by the Furies. Then, he follows Apollo's advice and comes to Athens, but the Furies and the ghost of Clytemnestra also follow him to Athens. There, the goddess of the city, Athena "creates a court of Athenians who will be competent to judge not only Orestes but also all similar offenders in the future." (Oates, 1938: 165) That is to say, this court verdict will establish a legal principle (in fact, an ethical principle then):

Here to all time for Aegeus' Attic host
Shall stand this council-court of judges sworn,
Here the tribunal, set on Ares' Hill
... ... (Oates, 1938: 295)

In the court, Apollo plays as the counsel for Orestes. To defend Orestes, Apollo expresses his idea about parents, which is the epistemological foundation for the family ethics in a patriarchal society:

This too I answer; mark a soothfast word
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. (Oates, 1938: 294)

Apollo's words convince Athena, and she is willing to support Orestes:

Thus will I not too heinously regard
A woman's death who did her husband slay,
The guardian of her home; and if the votes
Equal do fall, Orestes shall prevail. (Oates, 1938: 297)

Finally, the jury votes and the verdict is that Orestes is free from guilt:

Behold, this man is free from guilt of blood,
For half the votes condemn him, half set free! (Oates, 1938: 298)

The final ending of this play is a happy ending, especially for men. Compared with the murder of a man, the killing of a woman is not so serious a crime. When the killing of a woman is a revenge on her murder of a man, the avenger can be free from guilt. Thus, the patriarchal system of family ethics is formed, and under such family ethics, women cannot look forward to a fair judgment. Clytemnestra seriously violates the family ethics in the patriarchal society, which is a man-made reason for her tragedy.

Conclusion:

In ancient Greece, Religious ethics helps to establish religious order, political ethics can bring in political order, and family ethics can construct social order. Then the society can develop in order. Anyone who dares to violate these ethical principles should get a tragic ending, and then the society can develop peacefully, because tragedies can produce terror and then keep people from violating the ethics. Clytemnestra's tragedy proves once more that: "whoever breaks the new ethical and moral relationship and order, even if he has no intention to do so, will bring in disasters to the society, agony to the soul, and will be severely punished." (Nie Zhenzhao, 2006: 116) Therefore, it is reasonable to say Clytemnestra's tragedy is an ethical tragedy.

References:

- [1] Engels, Frederick. *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Chippendale: Resistance Books, 2004.
- [2] Foley, Helene P. *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton University Press, 2001.
- [3] Goldhill, Simon. *Aeschylus: The Oresteia*. Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Nie Zhenzhao. Ethical Approach to Literary Studies: A New Perspective. in *Foreign Literature Studies*, 2004-05: 16-24.
- [5] Nie Zhenzhao. Talks on Ethical Literary Criticism. in *Foreign Literature Studies*, 2005-01: 8-11.
- [6] Nie Zhenzhao. Ethical Taboos Oedipus' Tragedy. in *Study and Exploration*, 2006-05: 113-116.
- [7] Ogden, Daniel. *A Companion to Greek Religion*. 2007. Blackwell Publishing.
- [8] Oates, Whitney J. and Eugene O'Neill, JR. *The Complete Greek Drama* (vol. 1). New York: Random House, 1938.
- [9] Qiao Ge. On the Theodicy in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. in *Seeking Truth*, 2008-03: 9-13.
- [10] Qiao Guoqiang. Opinions on "Ethical Literary Criticism. in *Foreign Literature Studies*, 2005-01: 24-27.
- [11] Yuan Xuesheng. Ethical Conflicts in Blood Revenge: A Reading of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. in *Dramatic Literature*, 2008-02: 62-66.