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Antiquity and the Making of American Myth: *The Oresteia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*[1]

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Throughout recorded history, the tales and stories, which once had theological, historical and philosophical significance and are called myths have dominated human experiences. Theatre in the Western world has been, above all, a mixture of ritual, imitation and myth. The need for ritual survives to the present day in many cultures, as can be seen in wedding ceremonies, various festivals, church services and even in some sports events. The need to imitate, or the 'mimetic instinct', is one of man's oldest and most basic instinctive characteristics. Out of ritual and imitation came the need to create or regenerate myth. Myths served as the basis for rituals by which the early perceptions and predictions of humanity and those of nature could be psychologically reconciled. "Myths have their historic time and meta-historic time; the time in which they came into being and their universal validity outside of time. They are intelligible in translation-from language to language, from one civilization to another, from one religious system to another" (Kott 241-242). Thus, myths and rituals are still operative in theistic and cultural hierarchies of the world. Studying a myth or a series of myths is simultaneously studying difference and commonality of a culture in question.

Modern drama has turned to ancient myths in varying attempts and purposes because of an interest in the reinterpretation of traditional themes and motifs in the light of modern cultural, psychological, political and aesthetic preoccupations, as conspicuously seen in the adaptation of Aeschylus' the *Oresteia* into an American version, Eugene O'Neill's *Mourning Becomes Electra*. The adaptation of the *Oresteia* is O'Neill's attempt to construct the Athenian model and define its variable realizations particularly in America. Aeschylus' dramatic form was classical history of Attic drama and it was a form which could be imitated to O'Neill's purposes of search for aesthetic dramatic form and reinterpretation of myth, psychology and culture in relation to social criticism.

Aeschylus, who lived from 525 to 456 B.C., is the first important Greek dramatist, and is often regarded as the founder of Western drama. "He wrote largely about traditional themes, based on myths and Olympian law" (Cassady 3). Aeschylus' most cited work today is considered to be the *Oresteian Trilogy* (458 B.C.), which is based on Greek mythology, and "is the only extant trilogy by any Greek dramatist" (Cook and Dalin xxxv). The plays (the *Agamemnon*, the *Choephori* and the *Eumenides*), which make up the trilogy deal with the concept of revenge, the record of crimes and their inevitable punishment (judgment) in the house of Atreus. The legend of the house of Atreus portrays the experiences of the characters and the relationship of the Pelops family with the gods. The details of the *Oresteia* start with

the struggle of the sons of Pelops, Atreus and Thyestes, over Thyestes' seduction of Atreus' wife, and more importantly, over the throne of their father. The series in the trilogy start before the action of the story begins: Atreus has kept his brother Thyestes from the throne of Argos and driven him out of the country. The conflict between two brothers is not only a personal revenge but also a dynastic struggle and the results of the action "extend to the whole society and into the dimension of the gods" (Porter 29).

In the *Agamemnon*, the first play of the *Oresteia*, Thyestes' son Aeghistus and Atreus' son Agamemnon face the dilemma of blood vengeance, central to the action. Aeghistus, in order to avenge his father's (Thyestes') murder, seduces Agamemnon's wife Clytemnestra; they together murder King Agamemnon and take hold of his throne. In the *Choephori*, the second play of the trilogy, Orestes, the third generation continues the dilemma and avenges his father, Agamemnon's murder by murdering both Aeghistus and Clytemnestra. The curse in the house of Atreus, that moral violence which provokes further violence starts from before the beginning of the trilogy and continues on in the first two plays. "Agamemnon is the sinner who meets his doom, Clytemnestra is the sinner who continues the chain of evil; the characterization of each and the relations between them are limited to what this conception requires" (Leeming 70). The theme is that men of violence do things which outrage justice, bring retribution and provoke further deeds of violence. The situation as a whole and in broader sense is that the past is an active factor as a living and controlling element in the present. The past is a prediction of the entire set and the dramatic destiny of Orestes.

In the third play, the *Eumenides*, the cosmic powers engage in the action and hereditary blood vengeance is ended. In Greek religion it is the Olympian gods, notably Phoibos Apollo and Pallas Athena who are particularly associated with the practices of civic life. Aeschylus solves the dilemma in favor of the social system and Athenian democracy with an establishment of a new court. In the trial Apollo, the god of law and order, uses a successful theory as an advocate of Orestes and supports it by myth. He takes the responsibility of the murders of Orestes and promises to protect his agent. In any case, there is an avenger who is not following evil desires of his own. He is instead reluctant and is directed by the command of Apollo in his awful deed of murdering Aeghistus and Clytemnestra. Apollo, however, is barely able to keep his promise by himself against the Furies or the Erinyes who, as prosecuting counsel, defend that the murder of a mother is intolerable. In the *Eumenides*, Aeschylus gives us the obvious dramatic excitement of the Furies and of the trial. The presentation of the voting in the city-state becomes the pattern of justice in the trial, and Aeschylus makes Athena a member of that jury which is the prototype of all Athenian councils. Justice will be secured neither blindly through further crime by Orestes, nor by Apollo's divine plan of ceremonial purification, but by an impartial trial. "Orestes takes refuge at Athena's altar, and the succession of thrilling scenes continues-Athena's appearance, the pleas, the institution of the trial, with accusation, defense, testimony, voting and verdict" (Kitto 94). At the end of the play, the jury of citizens' vote and Athena adjudicate to acquit Orestes who returns in triumph to Argos.

In American drama, it is O'Neill, as one of the first modern dramatists, who experimented with theatrical devices by using the works of major forefathers of the Greek theatre such as

Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. O'Neill's dramatic career is a series of experimental efforts to find a dramatic form that could best convey his purposes and messages he wanted to share with his public. When he started his career by working in amateur theatre companies, the mainstream American dramatic tradition was of melodramatic and romantic strain. After the Revolutionary eras and the Civil War, melodrama still continued its existence especially with the perspectives of history and folk myth. O'Neill was never satisfied with these dramatic forms and his experimentalism included various approaches that ranged from melodrama, realism and expressionism to adaptations of Greek and Renaissance stage conventions. The adaptation of the *Oresteia* to an American situation was, in a way, a result of his experiment with the Greek dramatic form. O'Neill was attracted to Greek tragedy because "it dealt with the 'Mystery' within a conventional structure; it came out of a relatively homogenous culture and was well supplied with legendary themes" (Porter 28). On the other hand, he tried to convert the Greek myth into modern psychology in *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

O'Neill borrowed both form and the content based on Greek myth in order to create modern psychological drama. His purpose of adjusting the Greek text into his own style stems from his interest in metaphysics and human psychology in relation to social paradoxes. The social dimension of O'Neill's action in *Mourning Becomes Electra* extends into the Puritanism, in particular. In broader sense, however, it extends into the spiritual evils of human relations and experiences.

Mourning Becomes Electra follows the general outlines of the *Oresteian Trilogy*. O'Neill borrows the three divisions of the *Oresteia* (changes them as *Homecoming*, *The Hunted* and *The Haunted*), and fits them into his plot structure. Before the action of the first play, Abe Mannon (Atreus) dispossesses his brother David Mannon (Thyestes) because of David's seduction of, and subsequent marriage to, Marie Brantome whom Abe himself desired. Abe avenges his brother by ruining the family house, in which the seduction took place, and building a new one for himself. Abe Mannon's hatred of his brother is the start of the fated family life of the Mannons. In *Homecoming*, the first play, David Mannon's son Adam Brant (Aeghistus) seeks vengeance for his father's death and seduces Christine Mannon (Clytemnestra) away from her husband, Ezra Mannon, Agamemnon of the play. The Mannon family awaits the return of Ezra Mannon from the Civil War. Christine who falls in love with Adam Brant kills her husband by giving him poison instead of a medicine on his return. But Christine's daughter, Lavinia (Electra), herself in love with Adam, discovers the truth of this relationship. In *The Hunted*, Lavinia convinces her brother Orin (Orestes) about the reality of her father's death and the nature of the relationship. Orin murders Brant and confronts his mother with the fact of Brant's death, upon which she commits suicide. And the last play, *The Haunted* is about a judgment on Orin and Lavinia, the last Mannons of the play. Orin, however, can no longer live within the situation because of his role in the destruction of his mother. Thus, he concludes by killing himself and leaving Lavinia with her 'Furies'.

O'Neill models his work, *Mourning Becomes Electra*, on *Oresteian Trilogy* by adapting the plot structure into a modern context to convey his own messages to his audience. Plot, in Aristotle's terms, is the arrangement of the incidents. It is also the structural principle, which

defines the limits of the action within the limits of the cultural pattern, and provides a form, which the dramatist can use to present his ideology. O'Neill follows the sequence of events of the *Oresteia* especially in the first two plays but the third play; *The Haunted*, differs in some respects from Aeschylus' model. As Patrick Roberts notes, "the circumstances of blood-feud are remote enough from the modern audience's experience, especially in the context of a totally different age and culture" (179). It is obvious that the complex of Hellenic and Christian values is in sharp contrast. O'Neill changes the personalities and the motivations of the characters in the action, and thus replaces the traditional Greek cultural pattern of blood revenge and Olympian theology with modern psychology and Puritanism. As the cultural situation changes, the significance of the traditional pattern is modified. O'Neill modifies the myth in the *Oresteia* and provides a key to the meaning of the action in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. So, the tragic patterns in Aeschylus and O'Neill relate very differently to the overall meaning of the plays in question.

The first setting of the first part in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is the exterior of the Mannon house, built in imitation of Greek style with the white pillars in front, which creates a functional irony for the New England setting with its Puritanical view. "The self-destructive fatalism of Greek theatre, symbolized by the furies, is transmuted into a Calvinist conscious which makes the self its own enemy" (Bigsby 80). Argos in the *Oresteia* becomes the New England of 1865 in the play and New England with notions of sin, guilt and punishment is a perfect setting for such a trilogy. Through the external walls of the 'tomb-like Mannon house', we move to the interior and symbolically from the social to the psychological, from the public to the private. O'Neill's purpose of changing the situation and the setting from Athens to New England is also his search for expressing the human condition related to his own culture. The main incident of the plot in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is, then, given a name, Puritanism, as O'Neill visualizes it.

The heritage of Puritanism in *Mourning Becomes Electra* is apparent in both the stage setting and in the attitudes of the characters in the house of Mannon. Apart from Christine who 'ain't the Mannon kind' with her attitudes and possessions, the members of the Mannon family as Anglo-Saxon, old settlers, successful merchants, in short, Puritans "the elect" are preoccupied with death, the cold remainder of Calvinist dogma. O'Neill's attraction to a Greek drama which involves issues of life and death in relation to mythical and spiritual contexts of that society finds expression in *Mourning Becomes Electra*. Death instinct becomes the impulsion and dramatic structure of both plays. In Olympian theology, death is linked with social convention; moreover it is an expression of the will of the gods. In Puritanism, redemption is not possible for the sinner; once damned (fallen from grace), neither society nor God can help the sinner. The reprobate is isolated forever. O'Neill's concern with death in the play stems from the criticism of the view of death in Puritanism. His intention is to present and criticize the concept of death in Puritan theology.

> Ezra Mannon:.Death made me think of life. Before that, life had only made me think of death! … That's always been the Mannon's way of thinking. They went to the white meetinghouse on Sabbaths and meditated on death. Life was a dying. Being born was starting to die. Death was being born. That white meetinghouse. It stuck in my

> mind-clean-scrubbed and white-washed-a temple of death!
> (O'Neill 92).

The Mannons think in Puritan categories and act with a Puritan mentality. Along with the preoccupation with death, one of the other dominant symbols of the Mannon's Puritanism is their attitude toward love and sex. The problem of love and sex starts even before the beginning of the play with Abe Mannon's hatred of his brother, David Mannon when he declared his secret love affair with Marie Brantome. It is also the start of the family curse and continues in different ways throughout the play, because their Puritan conscience dominates the romantic aspect of their characters in their static world. Though Ezra and Christine's marriage is based on romance, it soon turns into disgust, as Ezra Mannon expresses his dissatisfaction:

> Ezra: What are bodies to me? …Ashes to ashes, dirt to dirt! Is that your notion of love? Do you think I married a body? …You made me appear a lustful beast in my own eyes! -as you've done since our first marriage night (O'Neill 102).

Puritans were the strict guardians of public morality, and sexual indulgence was one of the most degrading sins among them. O'Neill's observation, however, is that they were associated with a repressive attitude towards sexual impulses. In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, a dominant symbol of love is degenerated by Puritan values into lust. Lavinia who feels a sort of romance to Captain Brant tries her best not to reflect her feelings and declares that she 'hates love'. Physical love is dirty and degrading in Puritan category. In this sense, it is impossible to deny Freudian psychology to motivate the action in the play, especially in the areas on the sex drive to life adjustment, the dangers of repression and more importantly on the 'Oedipus complex' that every male is attracted to the woman who resembles his mother and every female desires a man who resembles her father. Though Freudian hypothesis explains the complex of attitudes of Orin and Lavinia, as directed at parents of the opposite sex, it is not the intention of this article to evaluate Freudianism of the play. So, apart from implied 'oedipal fantasies' (Orin's love for his mother, further transmuted to his sister, Lavinia) and 'electra complex' (Lavinia's love for her father), Christine's sense of love for Brant and Lavinia's secret love for him all end up with self-destruction and deaths. Love, as the only life force, turns out to be the agent of death rather than a cure for the Mannons. The values in the Mannon family are so distorted that there is a sexual and psychological deformity, which is the mark of their Puritan heritage, as O'Neill's interpretation of Puritanism.

O'Neill interprets his community experience making use of the mythic and ritualistic nature of Greek drama. In other words, he replaces the cultural components of Athenians (as the Olympian dimension and supernatural powers), which are contradictory to twentieth century American way of thinking, with Puritanism, Anglo-Saxon non-conformism and Freudian psychology, the heritage of Western culture. Though the tragic patterns differ considerably from Athenians to New Englanders, their outlines persist in the heritage of Western culture which offers both conventional imagery and motifs to Western drama, such as revenge, the problem of evil, the significance of light and darkness and the Furies.

The Furies stand either as realities or as phantoms (subconscious, hallucinations); they are so intense that both plays revolve around them. In fact, the Furies (just as the past guilt) in

both plays are at the heart of a complex humanity. In Aeschylus, the Furies first appear as expression of Orestes' guilty conscience; they are real only to him: "I know you do not see these beings; but I see them; I am lased and driven! I can't bear it! I must escape!"(Aeschylus 143). In the *Eumenides*, they act as prosecuting counsel in Orestes' trial and finally become guardians of the Athenian heritage. Thus, Hellenic culture emerges out of the darkness of the past, not by denying the Furies but by reconciliation with them. O'Neill replaces these mythical figures with hallucinations and representations of certain unconscious fantasies. They are presented as his analysis of the spiritual ills of the modern Western heritage and as disorders of the social system. It would be difficult, however, to suppose that social disorders would not be paralleled by disorders of a culture, at large.

O'Neill incorporates the cultural situation of his community into the material he uses in his play, just as Aeschylus draws on materials that are part of his audience's cultural heritage. The tragedy of the Mannons involves Puritan heritage and Freudian psychology; relatively opposing forces melt into a unity and each supplies motivation for the action. The tragedy of Pelops involves war and politics as well as a domestic triangle and these aspects are unified in the same way: "... the successive murders of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra and her lover, the madness of Orestes are seen in the context of wider issues of war, politics and religion" (Roberts 152). Compared to the realities of the Western world, Aeschylus had, at least, the possibility to convey the cruelty and injustices to the Athenian audience. As Steiner notes: "The landscape of terror was entirely familiar to the audience, and this familiarity was both a spur and a limit to the poet's personal invention" (319). The prominent difference in both plays stems from the uses of cultural components of respective communities, in particular.

The difference of the resolution of both Aeschylus' and O'Neill's versions makes the cultural determinants clear. The subjects of both plays are on "judgment". Aeschylus' resolution well fits into the cultural attitudes and working of fifth century Athenian mind. In this respect, the*Oresteia* involves a hero in the sense of a member of a larger group rather than a separable being. "In concluding movement of the drama, the hero is purged of all guilt and "reborn", a new society is initiated and the cosmos is ordered on all levels" (Porter 31). It is mainly because of this unique process that the hero (mostly presented as a part of particular ruling family who has a social importance in the shared substance of myth) is a character of necessity and is not isolated altogether. "What the form then embodies is not an isolable metaphysical stance, rooted in individual experience, but a shared and indeed collective experience, at once and indistinguishably metaphysical and social, which is yet capable of great tension and subtlety…" (Williams 18). In Athenian theological process, suffering leads to a new life for the individual and community.

O'Neill, however, concludes with a self-judgment by the two remaining members of the house of Mannon, Lavinia who punishes herself with a living death, and Orin who commits suicide. Though order, form and meaning are restored in the *Oresteia* at the end, Mannons are subjected to punishment and death in *Mourning Becomes Electra,* because Puritanism does not provide a way of purging guilt. This guilt cannot even be confessed or publicly admitted. There is no salvation, escape or possibility of regeneration within the Puritan system. At the end, the crimes progressively isolate Mannons from the community, whereas Orestes' crime does not. O'Neill's criticism of Puritan society is that it is an arbitrary institution which leads

the individuals to isolation and self-destruction. Puritan society does nothing to prevent the individuals from destroying each other, and when the isolated persons meet, in so-called relationships, their exchanges are inevitably forms of struggle.

The *Oresteia* conveys a relationship between the individual and society. The solution to Orestes' dilemma is rooted in the history of the Athenian nation. The *Oresteia* includes 'rebirth' in which the hero is purified by both society and the gods. Thus, Orestes' purgation is sanctioned by the gods, because his guilt is more than a social convention; it is an expression of the will of gods. It is his fate that Orestes must murder his mother to avenge his father. Inner doubts and hesitations will threaten him with a divine (Apollo's) punishment if he neglects his duty. This ideology is active in justifying Orestes himself to Clytemnestra, "It will be your own hand that strikes you dead, not mine" (Aeschylus 137).

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, on the other hand, the crimes are rooted in the Puritan heritage and in the characters' subconscious. So, the Mannons shut up inside themselves and, for them, there is no escape from complex or heritage. Orin's suicide, for instance, is the judgment leveled by his Oedipal complex. He cannot face life with the burden of causing his mother's death. Orin commits suicide mainly because of an active madness of bloodguilt for the death of his mother. As for Lavinia, it is the judgment of her Puritan heritage and a struggle with her past. She accepts her fate with Puritan spirit and locks herself in the Mannon house to live with ghosts of the past in expiation for all the crimes. As Lavinia finally returns to the house of Mannon at the end of the play and shuts herself off from the world, she moves to an encounter with the past, as O'Neill indicated, "... (Man's) struggle used to be with gods, but is now with himself, his own past…" (111). Lavinia's attempt to escape from the ghosts of the past (avenging Furies) and, in a way, her inevitable fate is no less tragic than those who struggle with the gods in Greek mythology. At the end of the play she devotes herself not to the gods, but to self-punishment:

> And there is no one left to punish me. I'm the last Mannon. I've got to punish myself! Living alone here with the dead is a worse act of justice than death or prison! I'll never go out or see anyone! I'll have shutters nailed close so no sunlight can ever get in. I'll live alone with the dead, and keep their secrets, and let them hound me, until the curse is paid out, and the last Mannon is let die! (O'Neill 287-88)

In *Mourning Becomes Electra*, O'Neill deals with the traditions, ideals, attitudes and values of a part of his own community and he uses Greek myth in order to shape the plot and character types. O'Neill sees a rich source of material in ancient myth for his study of human nature. He also attempts to create a mythicizing procedure by elevating the status of the Mannon family to a classical model in regard to universally shared human feelings and emotions such as ambition, hatred, revenge, love, etc. Yet, the play holds references, marking the American Puritanism in 1865, which, unlike the ancient Greek idea of communally shared guilt and redemption, charges the individual with sin and punishment. This aspect of the play is neither the replica of an ancient model nor other popular or popularized American myths, but a myth original in itself fulfilling the O'Neillean function of tragedy to warn the common public about the evils of the non-questioning attitude to what is seemingly wrong and right. Consequently, the working of the myths in overall meaning of both plays, differs in terms of

cultural determinants of Athenians and New Englanders, as seen in Aeschylus' and O'Neill's vision and interpretation.

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