'The royal road': a psychoanalytical reading of the *Oresteia*

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> In plays like *Hamlet* or the *Agamemnon* or the *Electra* we have certainly fine and flexible character-study, a varied and well-wrought story, a full command of the technical instruments of the poet and the dramatist; but we have also, I suspect, a strange, unanalyzed vibration below the surface, an undercurrent of desires and fears and passions, long slumbering yet eternally familiar, which have for thousands of years lain near the root of our most intimate emotions and been wrought into the fabric of our most magical dreams.[1]

It is to this 'undercurrent' of 'unanalyzed vibration' that my discussion is addressed. Of course, since the above was written, the vast proliferation of literary theory has produced a myriad of readings of Greek tragedy, some of them psychoanalytically orientated. Yet here the trend of recent years has been to focus on the post-structuralist concerns of analyst-theoreticians such as Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva. My interest lies rather with the earlier 'classical' psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein. Using their twin models of human psychological development as my rhetorical framework, and writing as a sympathizer rather than as an ideologue, I aim to investigate just what these nineteenth- and twentieth-century citizens of Vienna and London might profitably have to say about the 'long slumbering yet eternally familiar' work of a fifth-century Athenian.[2]

The Birth of Tragedy

Freud's theories of early childhood development centre around three well-known but often misunderstood concepts: the 'pleasure principle' and 'reality principle'; the 'topographic model' of the psyche, with its division into id, ego and superego; and the three phases of psychosexual development. Any new-born infant is

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dominated by the 'pleasure principle', the process by which pleasure is striven for and unpleasure withdrawn from:

> If [the child's] wishes are unsatisfied it expresses unpleasure and then hallucinates the satisfaction it has been denied (as in later life we fulfil our wishes in dreams). But repeated non-satisfaction leads to the abandonment of hallucination and the registration of what is *real* – in this case real deprivation. This is the introduction of the reality principle. But the reality principle by no means takes over from the pleasure principle . . . For instance, the pleasure principle remains dominant as a means of translating reality, in phantasy, in children's play, in adult day-dreaming... All people not only retain the pleasure principle but also . . . are constantly engaged in unconscious processes, both in their untenable desires and in their frequent flights from and refusal of reality, their daily acts of repression.[3]

This opposition between the pleasure and reality principles, elsewhere termed the 'primary processes' of the unconscious and the 'secondary processes' of the conscious, is, for Freud, fundamental to human life; it is the job of the fragile ego, or self, to seek to balance its unconscious demands for pleasure with the cultural constraints of external reality. Thus the 'id' refers to the instinctual drives springing from the infant's needs/wants (the two are indivisible prior to the acceptance or semi-acceptance of the reality principle), while the ego is the 'realistic' agency springing from the id which aims to co-ordinate and regulate the satisfaction of such self-serving desires, if necessary by suppressing immediate gratification in the interest of its future attainment. In turn, part of the ego develops the self-critical activities of the 'superego', the result and representation of parental and social influences upon the drives. What differentiates ego from superego is the latter's marked severity, deriving as it does in part from the violence of the subject's own unconscious id-feelings in early infancy: the self-attacking tendency of the superego provides an outlet for the individual's aggressive impulses. Thus the superego contains elements both of the id-centred infantile past and the ego's higher, more self-reflective functions.

What may be termed the individual's psychosexual development is intimately linked to the above notions of the pleasure/reality dyad and the tripartite construction of the psyche. The infant sucking the mother's breast (or its artificial substitute) discovers that not only is this action necessary/nourishing, but that it is independently

pleasurable as well. Freud argues that this infant is 'unindividuated', not really aware that it is separate from the mother, possessing as it does no means towards objective/subjective differentiation and thus assuming the desired breast to be part of itself. The conflict arising from the unindividuated or 'symbiotic' infant's desire for continuous access to this pleasurable object, and the mother's inability to provide it, is resolved by the formation of the ego-mechanism of reality testing and rationalization described above. Nevertheless, libido, or the sexual desire that becomes the id's principal pleasure-seeking goal, has been born:

> The baby's mouth becomes not only an organ of its physical survival but an 'erotogenic zone', which the child might reactivate a few years later by sucking its thumb, and a few years later than that by kissing ... [This] 'oral stage', as Freud calls it, is the first phase of sexual life, and is associated with the drive to incorporate objects. In the 'anal stage', the anus becomes an erotogenic zone, and with the child's pleasure in defecation a new contrast between activity and passivity, unknown in the oral stage, comes to light. The anal stage is sadistic, in that the child derives erotic pleasure from expulsion and destruction; but it is also connected with the desire for retention and possessive control, as the child learns a new form of mastery and a manipulation of the wishes of others through the 'granting' or withholding of the faeces. The ensuing 'phallic stage' begins to focus the child's libido (or sexual drive) on the genitals.[4]

Leaving the infant midway through its convoluted sexual development, I turn to the *Oresteia*. The most prevalent type of psychoanalytical reading applied to this trilogy or indeed any Greek tragedy, and certainly the only one to have found widespread currency, centres on the most strikingly idiosyncratic 'content' of the plays, namely their presentation of anthropomorphic deities upon the stage.[5] Euripides' use of either crude or ironic *deus ex machina* resolutions to some of his plays has often been perceived, rightly or wrongly, as agnostic or atheistic scepticism, from which it is but a short step to interpret the gods as projections of human psychological processes, representatives both of the id and superego that pull the frail human subject or ego first one way, then another. Zeus is the prime example of this ambivalence, at once the harsh, pleasure-seeking id-tyrant within Agamemnon which requires the death of Iphigeneia for its own selfish ends, and yet also the superego-upholder of all normal social and parental bonds:

πῶς λιπόναυς γένωμαι
ξυμμαχίας ἁμαρτών;
παυσανέμου γὰρ θυσίας
παρθενίου θ' αἵματος ὀρ-
γᾷ περιόργῳ σφ' ἐπιθυ-
μεῖν θέμις. εὖ γὰρ εἴη.

Pain both ways and which is worse?
Desert the fleets, fail the alliance?
No, but stop the winds with a virgin's blood,
feed their lust, their fury? – feed their fury! –
Law is law! – let all go well. (*Agamemnon* 212-17)[6]

The superego's 'law' is not antithetical to the id's 'fury'; rather, the one has grown out of the other and been re-channelled. In much the same way, Athena, the embodiment in the *Eumenides* of Fury-neutralizing superego law, is born from the literal splitting of Zeus' head. The Erinyes themselves become the 'Kindly Ones' only by redirecting much of their chthonic rage back against themselves, unwilling to subsume their pleasure principle beneath the contingencies of the new Athenian reality, and forced to accept a far more limited role in a society coming to reject their essentially infantile blood-for-blood mentality. Just as the redirected source of the superego's power is the id itself, so too is their transformation facilitated, not by Athena's secondary reason, but by the primary rage from which it was born:

οὐκ ἔστ' ἄτιμοι, μηδ' ὑπερθύμως ἄγαν
θεαὶ βροτῶν κτίσητε δύσκηλον χθόνα.
κἀγὼ πέποιθα Ζηνί, καὶ τί δεῖ λέγειν
καὶ κλῆδας οἶδα δώματος μόνη θεῶν
ἐν ᾧ κεραυνός ἐστιν ἐσφραγισμένος.

You have your power,
You are goddesses – but not to turn
on the world of men and ravage it past cure.
I put my trust in Zeus and . . . must I add this?
I am the only one who knows the keys
to the armoury where his lightning bolt is sealed. (*Eumenides* 824-8)

It is worth noting that the id-ego-superego progression is an apt metaphor for the trilogic construction of the plays themselves. In the *Agamemnon*, the principal characters ignore the common restraints of the reality-principle which citizenship of any *polis* entails: witness the prohibitions against infanticide, regicide and fratricide violated by Agamemnon, Clytaemnestra and Aegisthus respectively, and the hubristic dishonouring of the gods enacted by Agamemnon as he walks on the sacred purple tapestries. Here one sees the ascendancy of the pleasure-seeking id. In the *Agamemnon*, again, every spouse breaks the adultery-taboo: Helen leaves Menelaus for Paris, Agamemnon is unfaithful to Clytaemnestra with the admittedly unwilling Cassandra, and Clytaemnestra consorts with the king's half-brother, itself perilously close to a violation of the incest-taboo upon which many anthropologists maintain society is founded. This is par excellence a play of broken or non-existent restraint. In the *Choephori*, by contrast, the skilfully executed plan of Orestes for vengeance embodies a willingness to delay immediate gratification (the false news of his death and the lengthy invocation of the dead father are prime examples) in order to attain it more fully in the near future. Any such intrigue-play involves a triumph of the ego: the coordination of desire with the opportunities for its satisfaction. The *Eumenides*, in turn, marks the ascendancy of guilt and the recognition that there is often a price well worth *not* paying in any act of solipsistic gratification. With its literally judicial ending, the *Eumenides* therefore comes to stand as the superego.[7]

In this reductive equation of literary form with the basic principles of psychoanalytic theory one can go further:

> Watching his grandson playing in his pram one day, Freud observed him throwing a toy out of the pram and exclaiming *fort*! (gone away), then hauling it in again on a string to the cry of *da*! (here). This, the famous *fort-da* game, Freud interpreted in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) as the infant's symbolic mastery of its mother's absence; but it can also be read as the first glimmerings of narrative. *Fort-da* is perhaps the shortest story we can imagine: an object is lost, and then recovered. But even the most complex narratives can be read as variants on this model: the pattern of classical narrative is that an original settlement is disrupted and ultimately restored. From this viewpoint, narrative is a source of consolation: lost objects are a cause of anxiety to us, symbolizing certain deeper unconscious losses (of birth, the faeces, the mother), and it is always pleasurable to find

> them put securely back in place . . . Something must be lost or absent in any narrative for it to unfold: if everything stayed in place there would be no story to tell.[8]

The 'original settlement' disrupted and then restored is the 'just' order of the *oikos* or familial household, which through the successive generations of Tantalus, Pelops and Atreus has been perversely and murderously reversed, with father butchering son, son butchering nephews, in a seemingly endless stream of atrocity and retribution of which the deaths of Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra are the awful terminus. Yet this savage taboo-breaking cannot be contained: it spills out of the palace at Argos, into the city, all the way to Troy. The Areopagus established at the end is a necessity not just for the Atridae, but for all Greeks:

> The attempt to separate public and private spheres rigidly (few societies in history have had a more strict separation than Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.) is based upon repression . . . of all those aspects of the self represented by the *oikos*: its need for intimacy and consequent vulnerability; its need to nurture and be nurtured; its fear of death. Furthermore, such repression does not work, as powerful frustrated needs and anxieties express themselves in perverse, often aggressive ways. More than anything else, the tragedies are about this: the way in which the *oikos*, realm of the family, will not let the public alone. Disorder in the family is constantly overflowing to pollute or otherwise disorganize the *polis*.[9]

This ambivalent public/private interaction is nowhere better illustrated than in the formal separation between the tragic actor and chorus. The palace interior located behind the theatrical *skênê* is an ominous presence throughout the *Agamemnon*; the horror that takes place within, though strictly the preserve of the private *oikos*, inevitably contaminates the society around it, just as the *skênê* doors are opened at the end to reveal Clytaemnestra publicly proclaiming her joy over the body of her dead husband. From a psychoanalytical point of view, the stage convention that separates the chorus from active involvement in the physical course of events serves to symbolize the confused reactions of a community whose leaders (parent-figures) have violated taboos, with a collective moral laxity the inevitable outcome. Whatever censorious opinions the chorus-members hold, their negative attitudes are hardly ever manifested as open hostility. The Argive elders of the first play at

first only criticize Clytaemnestra behind her back, and when they hear their master's cries from within, a sense of moral equivocation sets in, with their frail collective persona disintegrating as they mill about unwilling and unable to do anything to help (*Agamemnon* 1343-71). Failure of the 'parents' to set the correct moral tone has led to an insufficiently strong introjection of external concepts and values. The third play, by contrast, has the Erinyes spectacularly asserting themselves on stage and thus marks the move from such immature, collective symbiosis to fully-realized individuation.

Talk of individuation brings us to the work of Melanie Klein, in whose theories of pre-Oedipal development it is a key concept:

> Recognized as the source of food, on which his life depends, as well as love, the mother in her good aspects is made part of the infant's inner world by the process of introjection, a process by which 'the outer world, its impact, the situations the infant lives through, and the objects he encounters, is not experienced merely as external influence but is taken into the self and becomes part of his inner life'. At the same time, the frustration and pain attendant upon existence also enter into his feelings about his mother and may be experienced as persecution, for 'the young infant ... feels unconsciously every discomfort as though it were inflicted on him by hostile forces'. Moreover, these hostile impulses – envy and destructiveness in conflict with love and gratitude – are immensely strengthened by the infant's discovery of separation and dependence, that his mother is not part of him but that she can, and does, go away, despite the fact that he is dependent on her.[10]
>
> In seeking to handle [this aggression], according to Klein, the infant deflects [it] away from itself and projects it into the outside world – specifically, towards its mother's body . . . Caught up in fantasies of attacking and destroying the female body (principally the breast), and in turn suffering paranoid anxieties that it too will be destroyed . . . the infant must 'split' the mother into good and bad objects, thereby displacing the pain of destructive unconscious fantasy. This splitting of the world into good and bad is what Klein calls the 'paranoid-schizoid' position.[11]

Depressive anxiety and the ambivalent swing from love to fear are nowhere better illustrated than in another of the trilogy's thematic concerns, the supposed justice

of the gods. The chorus especially is obsessed with doubts about this justice, even during their ostensibly celebratory 'Hymn to Zeus':

> Ζεύς, ὅστις ποτ' ἐστίν, εἰ τόδ' αὐ-
> τῷ φίλον κεκλημένῳ,
> τοῦτό νιν προσεννέπω·
> οὐκ ἔχω προσεικάσαι
> πάντ' ἐπισταθμώμενος
> πλὴν Διός, εἰ τὸ μάταν ἀπὸ φροντίδος ἄχθος
> χρὴ βαλεῖν ἐτητύμως . . .
> δαιμόνων δέ που χάρις βίαιος
> σέλμα σεμνὸν ἡμένων.
>
> Zeus, great nameless all in all,
> if that name will gain his favour
> I will call him Zeus.
> I have no words to do him justice,
> weighing all in the balance,
> all I have is Zeus, Zeus . . .
> From the gods enthroned on the awesome rowing-bench
> there comes a violent love. (*Agamemnon* 160-6, 182-3)

'Violent love' is what Klein's pre-Oedipal child feels for its mother, just as the chorus's affirmation of faith is also an invoking of doubt, their gods at once split into the good and bad objects described above. What we see at work throughout the trilogy, therefore, is once again an infantile conception of morality. Badness is experienced by the child, according to Klein, as the fear of being vulnerable to predators, just as the chorus's gods are good when they protect their city, and bad when they attack it. In much the same way, questions about whether the Trojan War was good or bad, whether vengeance is justifiable or not, are answered according to the success of the venture, nothing else (*Agamemnon* 573-82, 1560-4). From Argos to Areopagus, what Aeschylus comes to depict, therefore, is the progression from this crude 'might is right' mode of reasoning to a more mature moral sense, the shift from the archaic and infantile to the contemporary and adult.

Turning to another Kleinian phenomenon, one of the standard interpretations of the plays, especially the *Choephori*, involves regarding the Furies of Orestes as

projections.[12] This is surely misguided: to project one's unconscious fears or fantasies onto another, there must necessarily be a tangible object to 'receive' them. As the chorus makes clear at the end of the second play, only Orestes himself can see the hideous Erinyes (*Choephori* 1048-52, 1061-2). Moving from form and content to pragmatic responses, however, one might ask: what is Aristotelian *catharsis*, if not a projective identification with the fictional characters who act out the spectator's unconscious and repressed anxieties, tensions and fears? Aristotle is at pains in the *Poetics* to point out that the best tragedies are those which focus exclusively on *family* relationships, but, as with the notoriously enigmatic definition of *catharsis* itself, he neglects to tell us why (1453a5-8, 1453b6-11). A psychoanalytic reading provides some sort of answer. We find the 'tortures, woundings and the like' inflicted by son on mother enjoyable to watch not because of our *distance* from them, but rather, through projective identification (pity, sympathy, empathy) and our own deeply repressed infant desires of doing something similar, because of our unconsciously fantasized *proximity* to it all. Against Bernays' nineteenth-century conception of catharsis as some form of physical purgation, therefore, his twentieth-century nephew Freud sees it as a psychical 'letting off steam'.[13] The unconscious wishes and fears which have been repressed since early infancy are rechannelled and released into culturally acceptable avenues of expression. Without transgression, the breaking of prohibitions (which become inhibitions only when successfully introjected), there is no plot to hang a tragedy on. Without the desire to transgress, stemming from the id's self- and pleasure-centred resentment at having had to introject such artificial taboos in the first place, one might hazard that there would be no audience. Against the inclination to regard this as an over-pessimistic and violent theory of audience response, I would point forward to the example of imperial Rome, where the Greek enthusiasm for morbid *mimêsis* was taken to its grim but logical conclusion. The Colosseum was a popular place.[14]

Oedipus Wrecks

At about five years of age, according to Freud, the child enters the 'phallic stage', when the pleasures derived from the oral and anal stages are augmented by the growing awareness of genital sexuality and stimulation. Allied to this is the inquisitive child's dim perception of parental sexuality, together with evidence of male and female sexual difference:

> [After] the initial separation from the mother's body, the love of the mother remains dominant in the early formative years. Inevitably, according to Freud, a perception of the father as rival in this love becomes insistent for the boy-child to the point where he is drawn into fantasies of the killing of this rival and of possessing the mother. This is the Oedipus complex. The way out of it is provided by the fears of the castration complex. The father is experienced as the source of all authority, all direction of desire, and thus as capable of castrating the boy-child, who unconsciously believes this to be the reason for the absence of the penis in the girl. The boy thus abandons his love for the mother and moves towards identification with the father, with the understanding that he too can in time occupy such a position of power. The trajectory for the girl-child is not so straightforward. In her case the complexes work in reverse, and the castration complex ushers in the Oedipus complex. She interprets the absence of a penis as a failure in provision on the part of the mother. Under the influence of this disappointment she turns away in hostility from her mother, but in the unconscious the wish for a penis is not abandoned: it is replaced by the wish to bear the father a child. Hence the girl becomes the rival of the mother for the father's love. Freud saw the fading of the Oedipus complex in the girl-child as a more uncertain process, because the identification with the father's law, facilitated for the boy-child by the anticipation of power, is not so secure.[15]

To my mind, there are two separate reasons why these ideas, in stark opposition to the pre-Oedipal theories outlined above, can *not* be applied to the *Oresteia*. The first centres on the disparity between the account given by Freud and those fictional family relations depicted by Aeschylus. Put simply, the Oedipus complex as it is commonly (if incompletely) understood consists of the desire to do away with one's father and possess, in every sense of the word, the mother; it is, unsurprisingly, difficult to reconcile this with the story of a son who venerates his father and murders his mother. Electra certainly worships her father, but 'familiarity breeds contempt' seems the likelier explanation for this; when the trilogy opens, Agamemnon has been absent from her life for at least a decade, during which time Electra has idolized him to the same disproportionate extent as she has resented the adultery of her bereaved mother. Orestes himself is sent away and, more importantly, we discover that he was neither nurtured nor raised by his mother: these jobs fell to the nurse Cilissa and Orestes' faithful tutor respectively (*Choephori*

734-65, *Agamemnon* 881). Thus the physical proximity and interaction of both partners (or two similar figures), specifically envisaged by Freud as the prerequisite for the development of the child's Oedipus complex, is lacking. When Clytaemnestra, therefore, bares her breast to Orestes in one last attempt to save her life (*Choephori* 896-8), critics are doubly wrong to see in it an attempt to activate her son's latent Oedipus complex and the concomitant buried desires for the mother.[16] Furthermore, even had Orestes been raised by Agamemnon and Clytaemnestra together, the diagnosis of Oedipal desires would still hinge on the timing both of Agamemnon's departure and the sending away of Orestes: if either occurred before Freud's Oedipal period of roughly five years of age, the complex could hardly be expected to develop. Prosaic as this response may sound, the problem here is that the text just does not provide the information necessary for the formulation of such hypotheses. Indeed, as critics hostile to psychoanalytic readings have never tired of pointing out, the fictional figures Hamlet/Orestes/Oedipus *never had a childhood* – there comes a stage when psychoanalytic readings of literary characters reach an *aporia* from which it is foolish to seek to proceed.

The second reason for discounting the Oedipus complex centres on flaws in the theory itself. Freud makes no allowance for parenting systems at variance with his nineteenth-century Viennese 'norm' of large families. What of children raised by only one parent? Or of only children who remain ignorant of their non-existent brothers' and sisters' genitals, and of those unexposed to those of their parent/s? Matrimonial and sexual segregation was the norm in ancient Greece: Freud's ideas do not legislate for such eventualities. In the face of those theoretical obstacles actually perceived by Freud, such as the phenomenon of homosexuality, the tentative explanations offered – that the 'condition' is the result of a narcissistic love of self projected on to a similar other –[17] are dubious at best, and at worst downright offensive. Finally, and most important of all, the biologically deterministic conception of the woman as a penis-envying, castrated, defective male, while sanctioned by Apollo and Athena (*Eumenides* 657-65), seems less than wholly credible in today's post-feminist era.[18] The conditions of the female characters, and Clytaemnestra's extremely affirmative action to change them, are less the result of biological determinism, and more a *political* reaction to the social and material constraints of institutionalized patriarchy. I take the Kleinian view that it is the pre-Oedipal period which is fundamental to psychic structure and emerging sense of self. Such theories, by positing a core sense of gender identity – which is

no more and no less than the acknowledgement of the empirical fact that the male and the female are in some respects *born* differently – sidestep many of the obstacles Freud ran up against in seeking to demonstrate both how the man is made and how the woman is produced defectively in his image.

The Genealogy of Morals

> I cannot escape the notion . . . that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different to what it is in men. Their superego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Character traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women – that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great necessities of life, that they are more influenced in their judgements by feelings of affection or hostility – all these would be amply accounted for by the modification of their superego which we have already inferred.[19]

For Freud, the male and female child's differing abilities to internalize the father's prohibitive standards during the resolution of the Oedipus complex culminate in two sharply divergent levels of superego-conscience, with the male possessing a more developed moral sense than the female. I have already demonstrated my opposition to this theory. Nonetheless, and whatever our feelings regarding the censorious, even contemptuous tone of Freud's theory, it would be wrong to ignore the fact that both modern research, and certainly the *Oresteia* itself, does lend some credence to the view that women possess 'less sense of justice than men'.

Turning to modern experimental research first, one cannot but notice a sharp difference between the sexes in their conceptions of morality:

> In the process of listening to what each of twenty-nine women had to say about her decision to abort or not to abort her foetus, what [was] discovered was that no matter what their age, social class, marital status, or ethnic background, all of these women had a conception of the self different from that of the typical man. Whereas men tend to see the self as an autonomous, separate being, women tend to view it as an interdependent being whose identity depends on others. These different views of the self account for at least four empathetic differences between the way in which men and women make moral decisions. First, women tend to stress the moral agent's

> continuing relationships to others, whereas men tend to stress the agent's formal, abstract rights . . . Second, when making a moral decision, women espouse a somewhat more consequentialist point of view, calculating the effects of the moral agent's action on all who will be touched by it, whereas men espouse a more nonconsequentialist point of view, according to which principles must be upheld even if some people get hurt in the process. Third, women are usually more willing to accept excuses for a moral agent's behaviour, whereas men generally label behaviour as morally inexcusable just because it is morally unjustifiable. Finally, women usually interpret a moral choice within the context of the historical circumstances that produced it, whereas men usually abstract the choice from its particularities and analyze it as if it represented some universal type of moral choice.[20]

It is striking how the sexual differences highlighted above are mirrored by the male and female characters of the *Oresteia*. The chorus's description of the sacrifice of Iphigeneia is especially revealing: the dilemma facing Agamemnon is eventually resolved by appeal to the nonconsequentialist, abstract concept that 'law is law', whatever personal cost this may entail. Iphigeneia, on the other hand, understandably makes a play for the emotive and interpersonal:

> λιτὰς δὲ καὶ κληδόνας πατρῴους
> παρ' οὐδὲν αἰῶνα παρθένειόν τ'
> ἔθεντο φιλόμαχοι βραβῆς·
> φράσεν δ' ἀόζοις πατὴρ μετ' εὐχὰν
> δίκαν χιμαίρας ὕπερθε βωμοῦ
> πέπλοισι περιπετῆ παντὶ θυμῷ
> προνωπῆ λαβεῖν ἀέρδην

> 'My father, father!' – she might pray to the winds;
> no innocence moves her judges mad for war.
> Her father called his henchmen on,
> on with a prayer,
> 'Hoist her over the altar
> like a yearling, give it all your strength!' (*Agamemnon* 228-35)

The daughter's 'judges' have made a case for the impersonal and logically

infallible: if she lives, setting sail for war will be impossible, ergo she must die. For Clytaemnestra, though, the terrible *consequences* of the *particular* case are paramount:

νῦν μὲν δικάζεις ἐκ πόλεως φυγὴν ἐμοί,
καὶ μῖσος ἀστῶν δημόθρους τ' ἔχειν ἀράς,
οὐδὲν τότ' ἀνδρὶ τῷδ' ἐναντίον φέρων,
ὃς οὐ προτιμῶν, ὡσπερεὶ βοτοῦ μόρον,
μήλων φλεόντων εὐπόκοις νομεύμασιν,
ἔθυσεν αὑτοῦ παῖδα, φιλτάτην ἐμοὶ
ὠδῖν', ἐπῳδὸν Θρηκίων ἀημάτων.

And now you sentence me? –
you banish *me* from the city, curses breathing
down my neck? But *he* –
name one charge you brought against him then.
He thought no more of it than killing a beast,
and his flocks were rich, teeming in their fleece,
but he sacrificed his own child, our daughter,
the agony I laboured into love
to charm away the savage winds of Thrace. (*Agamemnon* 1412-18)

Nowhere is the difference between the sexes more apparent than in the monumental pronouncement of the hitherto silent Pylades when Orestes says he dreads to kill his mother; his terse comments crucially serve to direct the entire course of history for not only the House of Atreus but, as the *Eumenides* demonstrates, the Athenian *polis* itself:

ποῦ δαὶ τὸ λοιπὸν Λοξίου μαντεύματα
τὰ πυθόχρηστα, πιστά τ' εὐορκώματα;
ἅπαντας ἐχθροὺς τῶν θεῶν ἡγοῦ πλέον.

What of the future? What of the prophet God Apollo,
the Delphic voice, the faith and oaths we swear?
Make all mankind your enemy, not the gods. (*Choephori* 900-2)

While certainly consequentialist, Pylades' comments have an impersonal, epigrammatic quality – indeed, 'as if [they] represented some universal type of moral choice' – quite at odds with the emotive personal relationship invoked by Clytaemnestra. In some sense, then, Freud is right to say that women possess a more limited sense of justice than men. Electra remains wholly unaffected by the prospect of her mother's murder: it is Orestes who later runs screaming from the stage. This society's prohibitive taboo against matricide means little in the context of Electra's own individual case: *her* mother killed *her* father, and the matter has been settled with Orestes carrying out *her* own particularized definition of justice. The female Furies search out Orestes, not Clytaemnestra, because the interpersonal blood-bond between mother and son is of far more import than that between man and wife. Conversely, Apollo and Athena (the least 'female' of all the goddesses) find it in themselves to forgive Orestes for the reason that *any* woman is but a receptacle to *any* man's seed, an abstract definition bereft of emotive considerations and interpersonal ties.

That Freud considered the one mode of reasoning superior is clear:

> Under the influence of external factors into which we need not enter here and which are also in part insufficiently known, it came about that the matriarchal social order was succeeded by the patriarchal one – which, of course, involved a revolution in the juridical conditions that had so far prevailed. An echo of this revolution seems still to be audible in the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus . . . This turning from the mother to the father points in addition to a victory of intellectuality over sensuality – that is, an advance in civilization, since maternity is proved by the evidence of the senses while paternity is a hypothesis, based on an inference and a premiss. Taking sides in this way with a thought process in preference to a sense perception has proved to be a momentous step.[21]

This is sexism of the highest order, and dubiously speculative at that: quite what 'matriarchal social order' existed to be overthrown by the guiding light of male intellect is unknown. To acknowledge the existence of a *general* trend for the male to perform moral reasoning by appeal to the abstract, immutable concept, and the female to use a more subjective, interpersonal approach, is not to assert the superiority of one over the other. Difference, as any (post)modern theorist will tell you, does not necessarily entail a binary opposition of superior-inferior. And to

mistake the Areopagus-like institutionalization of one approach over the other for sufficient evidence of its superiority, is not, one might hazard, one of the greatest triumphs of intellectualism in any case.

On Dreams

> Many a man has dreamt as much. Such things
> Must be forgotten, if life is to be endured.[22]

Jocasta's sentiments, spoken to her husband-son Oedipus, were shared by Freud: 'the interpretation of dreams', he declared famously, 'is the royal road to a knowledge of unconscious activities of the mind'.[23] The tensions of the libidinal and aggressive drives, though rarely acknowledged by the conscious mind, permeate the unconscious and resurface within the dream in symbolic form:

> Dreams for Freud are essentially symbolic fulfilments of unconscious wishes; and they are cast in symbolic form because if this material were expressed directly it might be shocking and disturbing enough to wake us up... [The unconscious] will condense together a whole set of images into a single 'statement'; or it will 'displace' the meaning of one object on to another somehow associated with it, so that in my dream I am venting on a crab an aggression I feel towards someone with that surname... The 'raw materials' of a dream, what Freud calls its 'latent content', are unconscious wishes, body stimuli while sleeping, images reaped from the previous day's experiences; but the dream itself is the product of an intensive transformation of these materials, known as the 'dream-work'. The mechanisms of the dream-work . . . are the unconscious techniques of condensing and displacing its materials, together with finding intelligible ways of representing it. The dream which is produced by this labour, the dream we actually remember, is termed by Freud the 'manifest content'.[24]

The sheer number of dreams recounted in the *Oresteia* is striking: there is the monologue of the Watchman (*Agamemnon* 15-21); the first dialogue between Clytaemnestra and the chorus, after which the leader questions whether the news of the fall of Troy might just be the dream of a typically 'gullible', 'wonderstruck' woman (*Agamemnon* 274-80, 489-92); the return of Agamemnon, when Clytaemnestra recounts the awful dreams that have supposedly haunted her

throughout her husband's protracted absence (*Agamemnon* 887-94); and the dream of the Erinyes, in which a wrathful Clytaemnestra appears and upbraids them for not avenging her death (*Eumenides* 94-139). The most sustained account of a dream, however, and by far the most fruitful for a Freudian analysis, is that of Clytaemnestra in the *Choephori*. Many, if not all, of the issues thus far discussed are condensed into its eight lines:

Χο. τεκεῖν δράκοντ' ἔδοξεν, ὡς αὐτὴ λέγει.
Ορ. καὶ ποῖ τελευτᾷ καὶ καρανοῦται λόγος;
Χο. ἐν σπαργάνοισι παιδὸς ὁρμίσαι δίκην.
Ορ. τίνος βορᾶς χρῄζοντα, νεογενὲς δάκος;
Χο. αὐτὴ προσέσχε μαστὸν ἐν τώνείρατι.
Ορ. καὶ πῶς ἄτρωτον οὖθαρ ἦν ὑπὸ στύγους;
Χο. ὥστ' ἐν γάλακτι θρόμβον αἵματος σπάσαι.
Ορ. οὗτοι μάταιον ἂν τόδ' ὄψανον πέλοι.

LEADER: She dreamed she bore a snake, said so herself and . . .
ORESTES: Come to the point – where does the story end?
LEADER: . . . she swaddled it like a baby, laid it to rest.
ORESTES: And food, what did the little monster want?
LEADER: She gave it her breast to suck – she was dreaming.
ORESTES: And didn't it tear the nipple, the brute inhuman –
LEADER: Blood curdled the milk with each sharp tug . . .
ORESTES: No empty dream. The vision of a man. (*Choephori* 527-34)

The most obvious interpretation of the above is, of course, to regard the snake as a phallic symbol – Freud himself refers to it as the 'most important symbol of the male organ.[25] Clytaemnestra's forced succour of a snake can thus be seen to reflect deep-seated fears, both of Agamemnon's predatory sexuality and of that of the son she rejected at birth, handing Orestes over to Cilissa rather than feeding him herself. Being bitten by a snake can represent coitus; the blood that flows from the wound represents not only the hostility that Clytaemnestra feels toward the act, but has overtones of defloration.[26] This would help explain her choice of partner to replace the virile, rapacious Agamemnon: the cowardly Aegisthus, too effeminate to fight in the Trojan war, and threatened even by the old men of Argos, is not the sort to give his queen sexually threatening nightmares.

Yet concentration on the manifest content of the dream can only provide a partial, if highly suggestive, interpretation. The equally important latent content seems also to reflect the guilt and self-punitive impulses related to Clytaemnestra's inadequacies as a mother. The snake's manifest role in symbolizing the predator is augmented by deeper anxieties, as its swaddling clothes reflect. Dreams of uncompleted tasks are extremely common, and this is a prime, maternally orientated example. Clytaemnestra knows later that her last-ditch, motherly appeals to Orestes will be fruitless, for in her dream she has already tried to make reparation for something she never did. Her choice of partner is further explained: what inhibited maternal instincts Clytaemnestra does possess are redirected onto a weakling whom she is obliged to defend and protect at all times. The one difference, of course, is that she is not required to nurse Aegisthus: the 'infant' biting its mother's nipple shows Clytaemnestra to be one of a recognized type of woman who dreads nursing, commonly encountered in modern paediatric and psychiatric medicine.[27] Thus the 'vulgar Freudian symbolism' of a given and rigid code in which all images have a specific bodily association, and which here interprets the snake as phallus and Clytaemnestra its unfeminine, unwilling recipient, while suggestive, fails to give the whole story. She is also suffering from Klein's 'persecutory anxiety'; the depression and guilt she feels after the dream leads her to send libations to the tomb of her murdered husband. Orestes' projective interpretation of the dream clearly has Kleinian significance:

ἀλλ' εὔχομαι γῇ τῇδε καὶ πατρὸς τάφῳ
τοὔνειρον εἶναι τοῦτ' ἐμοὶ τελεσφόρον.
κρίνω δέ τοί νιν ὥστε συγκόλλως ἔχειν·
εἰ γὰρ τὸν αὐτὸν χῶρον ἐκλιπὼν ἐμοὶ
οὗφις ἐφ' ἁμὰ σπάργαν' ἡλελίζετο,
καὶ μαστὸν ἀμφέχασκ' ἐμὸν θρεπτήριον
θρόμβῳ τ' ἔμειξεν αἵματος φίλον γάλα,
ἡ δ' ἀμφὶ τάρβει τῷδ' ἐπώμωξεν πάθει,
δεῖ τοί νιν, ὡς ἔθρεψεν ἔκπαγλον τέρας,
θανεῖν βιαίως· ἐκδρακοντωθεὶς δ' ἐγὼ
κτείνω νιν, ὡς τοὔνειρον ἐννέπει τόδε.

I pray to the Earth and father's grave to bring
that dream to life in me. I'll play the seer –

it all fits together, watch!
If the serpent came from the same place as I,
and slept in the bands that swaddled me, and its jaws
spread wide for the breast that nursed me into life
and clots stained the milk, mother's milk,
and she cried in fear and agony – so be it.
As she bred this sign, this violent prodigy
so she dies by violence. I turn serpent,
I kill her. So the vision says. (*Choephori* 540-50)[28]

This passage confirms more than anything how it would be wrong to see in the serpent image only the traditional phallic and Oedipal significances. Snakes, besides being penetrative creatures, are first and foremost *devouring* ones – the oral associations thus point still further back into the unconscious, to the pre-phallic stages of early infancy. The dream repeats the Kleinian cycle of sadistic oral-attacks the nursing child fantasizes against its mother, as its desire for constant fulfilment is frustrated over and over. This 'paranoid-schizoid' position, with the infant fantasizing a 'good breast' and a 'bad breast', and projecting its feelings of guilt and rage into the bad object, is here regressively adopted by the adult males, who project all their infant hate onto the bad mother Clytaemnestra. Orestes in particular seems to lose sight of the fact that it was not Clytaemnestra who nursed him in the first place, willing his own regression to an infant mentality whereby nursing gums are transformed into viper's fangs at the first sign of hurt, fear or other displeasure. The incessantly oral demands of hunger and thirst dominate the trilogy, as the (admittedly post-Aeschylean) title of the second play (*Libation Bearers*) reminds us. Apollo threatens Orestes with 'no share in the wine-bowl' should he fail to commit matricide; and for Orestes himself the price he must pay for his dead father's help is a 'sacred feast' and a steady stream of Electra's 'bridal wine' (*Choephori* 291-4, 483-8).

The infant's fear of its mother, then, is never completely overcome after nursing. Yet ultimately the tragedies afflicting the House of Atreus stem from the fact that the individuation that this self-same fear helps bring about is never fully realized either. The seemingly endless cycle of intrafamilial violence to which the Atridae are prone stems not just from an unwillingness to forgive, but from an infantile, symbiotic inability to let the parent go:

> To this conflict between the desire to merge and the desire to be free and separate, I have applied the rather cumbersome title, 'oral-narcissistic dilemma'. It originates in a failure to negotiate successfully the transition from the infantile state of total narcissism and total dependence to one involving an awareness of the separate existence of others. As this awareness grows, one's sense of narcissistic integrity and one's dependency needs are simultaneously violated. The child who is comfortable in a strong but non-intrusive and relatively unconditional parental love can effect a new equilibrium, with a less inclusive definition of personal boundaries and a greater independence. Without these advantages both the need for dependence and the need for autonomy become too desperate, and the contradiction too absolute. Total fusion and stratospheric isolation become equally essential and equally terrifying.[29]

Orestes and Electra are unable ever to forsake the internal 'good' parent Agamemnon, just as they vilify and reject their bad mother. 'Total fusion' is what they childishly desire above all else – as Orestes says as he summons the ghost of his father: 'be with all you love!' (*Choephori* 456). This, I would suggest, is why Aristotle believed that the best tragedies focus on the fortunes of a single family. Ontogeny really does recapitulate phylogeny. The child's inability ever to shake off the formative influences of the parent ensures that the parent's characteristics, no matter how terrible, return in the child:

> νῦν δ' ὤρθωσας στόματος γνώμην,
> τὸν τριπάχυντον
> δαίμονα γέννης τῆσδε κικλήσκων·
> ἐκ τοῦ γὰρ ἔρως αἱματολοιχὸς
> νείρᾳ τρέφεται· πρὶν καταλῆξαι
> τὸ παλαιὸν ἄχος, νέος ἰχώρ.
>
> Three generations
> feed the spirit in the race.
> Deep in the veins he feeds our bloodlust –
> aye, before the old wound dies
> it ripens in another flow of blood. (*Agamemnon* 1475-80)

Permeated with images of pregnancy, childbirth and nursing, the *Oresteia* is concerned with exactly the same fundamental issue as psychoanalysis itself: the growth of the fragile self in the face of the adverse and hostile conditions generated by the other (usually the parent).[30] The attempted solutions to the problems arising from this universal situation are in both instances interventionist, whether they involve the superhuman agency of a deity or a civic ideal, or the equally god-like figure of the analyst himself. If Freud used Greek tragedy as a metaphor for psychoanalysis, it is because he knew that dramatist and doctor alike address themselves to many of the same interminable, and contagious, conditions.

NOTES

1 G. Murray, 'Hamlet and Orestes', in *The Classical Tradition in Poetry* (Oxford 1927).

2 Freud's vast output is collected in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London 1953-74). From this, the most significant works are: *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900, *S.E.* IV and V); *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905, *S.E.* VII); *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1916-17, *S.E.* XV and XVI); and *The Ego and the Id* (1923, *S.E.* XIX 1-66). Two volumes of Melanie Klein's collected writings, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* and *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-63*, were published in London by the Virago Press, 1988.

3 J. Mitchell, *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (Harmondsworth 1974) 13.

4 T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford 1983) 153.

5 In analysing the *Oresteia*, I make use of M.H. Abrams' division of literary-critical approaches into the Mimetic, the Objective, the Pragmatic and the Expressive, first expounded in *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York 1953). Mimetic theories are those taking as their focus of interest the given work's 'imitation of aspects of the universe' (8), what might commonly be termed its 'contents'. Objective approaches focus on literary form, analysing the work 'as a self-sufficient entity constituted by its parts in their internal relations' (26). Pragmatic and Expressive theories centre on the work's relation to the audience and author respectively.

6 The Greek text used throughout is that of Page (OCT), unless otherwise indicated; the English translation is by Robert Fagles (Penguin Classics *Oresteia*, Harmondsworth 1977).

7 Against the charge that such equations are simplistic, I would point to Hegel's equally spare conception of the trilogy as the progression from thesis and antithesis to synthesis, which has found widespread acceptance. Indeed, one might be inclined to see in the hierarchical ascendancy of id-ego-superego exactly the same dialectical processes at work.

8 Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 185.

9 C.F. Alford, *The Psychoanalytic Theory of Greek Tragedy* (New Haven 1992) 57.

10 P. Roberts, *The Psychology of Tragic Drama* (London 1975) 16. The Klein quotations are from the essay 'Our adult world and its roots in infancy' (1959), repr. in *Envy and Gratitude*, 247-64.

11 A. Elliott, *Psychoanalytic Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford 1994) 27, 77-8. Klein herself offers a useful, if slightly more complex summary of her life's work at the start of her 1963 essay, 'Some reflections on the *Oresteia*', repr. in *Envy and Gratitude*, 275-300. Some care needs to be taken here, however, as the essay was incomplete at the time of her death and subsequently published in its unrevised form. While many of the points made are stimulating and provocative, much else seems

confused and contradictory.

12 See e.g. G. Devereux, *Dreams in Greek Tragedy* (Oxford 1976) 157; Roberts, *Tragic Drama*, 159.

13 Freud's own words, quoted in A. Green, *The Tragic Effect: The Oedipus Complex in Tragedy*, tr. A. Sheridan (Cambridge 1979) 225. On Freud, Bernays and catharsis see e.g. the remarks by D.W. Lucas in his edition of Aristotle, *Poetics* (Oxford 1968) 289.

14 Tableaux of popular plays and pantomimes, such as the first-century A.D. *Laureolus*, were regularly enacted in the amphitheatres, with condemned men and women literally suffering deaths that were originally only imitated.

15 E. Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism* (London 1984) 14-15. Freud's own writings on the Oedipus complex are to be found principally within his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (*S.E.* VII 123-246), and the *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (*S.E.* XV and XVI).

16 See Devereux, *Dreams in Greek Tragedy*, 205-10.

17 Freud, *S.E.* XIV 78.

18 Freud himself takes it as self-evident that not only is the female inferior, but that from an early age she perceives herself to be: 'they [little girls] notice the penis of a little brother or playmate, strikingly visible and of large proportions, at once recognize it as the superior counterpart to their own small and inconspicuous organ, and from that they fall victim to envy for the penis' (*S.E.* XIX 252).

19 Freud, *S.E.* XIX 257.

20 R. Tong, *Feminist Thought: a Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder, Colorado 1989) 162-3.

21 Freud, *S.E.* XXIII 113-14.

22 Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus* 981-3; trans. E.F. Watling (Harmondsworth 1947).

23 Freud, *S.E.* V 608.

24 Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 157, 180. Freud's interpretation of dreams is, in many ways, exactly the opposite of that of his II A.D. predecessor, Artemidorus. Manifest sexual content is here regarded as symbolic of the latent, and more pressing, concerns of security and status. Thus Artemidorus' interpretation of a man who dreamt of having two penises is that he will accrue more wealth than he could possibly desire. Similarly, in Herodotus VI.107, Hippias' 'Oedipal' dreams of intercourse with his mother are interpreted as the desire to restore his former power over Athens.

25 Freud, *S.E.* VI 389.

26 Devereux, *Dreams in Greek Tragedy*, 193-4. Apollodorus 3.9.15 recounts how Alcestis' bridal chamber was full of snakes.

27 See Devereux, *Dreams in Greek Tragedy*, 194-5, for clinical evidence, as well as numerous cross-cultural representations of the child as threat to the parents. Whether the belief that the female viper is killed by the young eating their way out of her womb, referred to by Pliny in his *Natural History* X.82, was current amongst the ancient Greeks as well as the Romans, is unknown.

28 Text in 544 after Wecklein and Metzger: cf. Garvie *ad loc.*

29 P. Slater, *The Glory of Hera: Greek Mythology and the Greek Family* (New Jersey 1968) 88.

30 Other violent images of child-rearing include: the omen of the eagles devouring the pregnant hare (*Agamemnon* 114-39); Helen's comparison with a lion-cub snatched from its mother's breast and subsequently turning on its breeders (*Agamemnon* 716-36); the chorus's allusion to Cronus, who swallowed his own children and castrated his father Uranus (*Agamemnon* 160-75); and Cassandra's account of the cannibalistic history of the Atridae (*Agamemnon* 1090-7).