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Annotation of Oresteia – Commentary and Notes

After reading and contemplating the Commentary and Notes penned by Fagles and Stanford, I more clearly see the The Oresteia as a epic work in which Aeschylus documents the transition of civilization from a primitive and violent form of retribution to the blossoming of human responsibility and societal justice.

Specifically, I concur with Fagles and Stanford's comment offering a summation of sorts about the trilogy:

"The trilogy ends with a union of energy and order, the way of nature and the way of way. The shackles of the primitive vendetta lend their rigour to the lasting bonds of law. Society takes what Freud has called 'the decisive step of civilization' - Dike turns to justice."

This process of transitioning society from 'Dike' – meaning Might (foisted, in this case by Zeus) makes Right – to a system of courts and law took many steps. Each of the steps is illustrated through some incident or interaction in the dramatic dialogue and action. Each incident prods the sophisticated reader/watcher to examine the underlying decisions and motivations behind the both the action and the consequence

This passage also alludes to Fagles and Stanford's discussion of 'destiny' or 'predetermination' in one's actions (whether for revenge or fate) versus rational decision-making. Over the course of the trilogy, the people evolve into a more a society with clearer understanding of consequences and the cycle of endless retribution ebbs.

Beginning with Agamemnon, haunted by generations of family torment and vendetta and faced with a choice:

“ ‘Pain both ways and which is worse?’ It’s the tragic choice of evils. And it may be predetermined supernaturally by the gods and genetically predetermined genetically by Agamemnon’s nature – being his father’s son, he is bound to choose the worst. But more than a victim of his fate, he is its agent with a vengeance. The more piously he reacts against this outrage, the more he can perform it with impunity, with his own outspoken sense of justice.”

The lessons themselves are garishly violent and dismaying but to serve an end by creating a societal collective conscience which most all cultures reference from time to time. This aggressive “tough love” feeling is reflective in the manner in which the people felt the gods instructed.

“There is the *charis biaios* of the gods, their violent kindness that breaks us into pieces but may leave us open, sentient and prepared.”

The authors allude to Aeschylus’s challenge in addressing the essential topics of justice and defining the parameters of acceptable society in relation to the mythical rules of god and the imperfect rules of man which, cobbled together, form a society.

“Aeschylus is proud to grapple with the concepts that are new, inchoate, mystical, tremendous – like the mind of Zeus, as he tried to penetrate it, “tangled, thickly shadowed stretch the paths of Zeus’s mind, blinding to the power of our words””

The ritualistic nature of the play intrigues me. Both the representation of the “people” through the chorus in relation to the established hierarchy of rulers and also considering how the voice of the public is reflected in such a profound

nature as would be a public performance of the essentials of justice, if at all, in our modern context.