

Aeschylus says, Black Lives Matter.

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When someone says “Ancient Greece”, what is the first thing you think of? I’d guess the Parthenon on the Acropolis. Maybe you picture the Disney *Hercules* film. Maybe you see what you think is a toga? So we’re clear: togas are Roman. If it’s Greek it’s called a chiton. Given this is my area of expertise, some who know me may be surprised that the first thing I think of is the rendition of Beethoven’s *Pastorale* in another Disney film, *Fantasia*. I like the colors, okay? I love the baby flying horses, I love the fat stupid Bacchus (he is *not* Dionysus, they are different), I love the baby angels sliding down the rainbow, I certainly do not love the “pickaninny” centaur (she’s edited out of later releases, but Google is your friend), and I especially love the portrayal of the old Olympians. It’s colorful and fun and everything I wish Ancient Greece was. Rainbows and drunk gods. What a world. I am all too aware that *Fantasia* is nothing of what Ancient Greece was. We know now that it was more colorful than we previously understood it to be, and we have named this the Myth of the White Marble. Not necessarily the myths of Ancient Greece we are usually familiar with, but important. But it was rocky and filled with turmoil. Whether fighting between the city-states or against the Persian Empire, Greece of Antiquity was certainly not all rainbows and drunk gods.

It is remarkable how much we know, whether it be because of archeology, literary studies, or just plain luck. As a dramaturg, nothing amazes me more than the survival of the dramatic works. I look at my bookshelf, and I have way more Euripides than I thought I did. Which is great, because I truly regard him as the best of the dramatists from the period. But there

is a lot of conversation these past few months about justice, and I think the best plays to help us reflect on the meaning of justice are actually by Aeschylus, with his play cycle *Oresteia*.

As with the Theban Plays by Sophocles, were they meant to be performed together, *Oresteia* is a cycle of three plays collected around one family. The family is that of Mycenaean king Agamemnon, a hero of the Trojan War, and an absolute assface. The first play is named for him. It begins with the announcement of the fall of Troy and orders by Queen Clytemnestra for celebrations. Agamemnon returns with the Trojan princess Cassandra as his concubine. This understandably makes the Queen upset. So she murders him. She murders Cassandra too, which I am less on board with. She did not do anything wrong, in her life, ever! The Queen's lover enters the scene, ready to take his place at the Queen's side and rule Mycenae together. Clytemnestra seems to have no remorse for her actions. The second play, titled *The Libation Bearers* introduces us to Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, for whom the play cycle is named. He plans to return to Argos to carry out revenge on his mother for the murder of his father. His sister, Electra, is the titular bearer of libation, as a means to soothe her mother's bad dream by presenting the libations to Agamemnon's grave. Electra agrees with Orestes' plan. He then kills the Queen's lover (he has a name but he's really not important), and then hesitates to kill his mother, but is reminded that Apollo has ordered the matricide. No one refuses orders from the gods themselves. Orestes carries out the murders, and then flees, knowing that the wrath of Furies is right behind him. The conclusion of the cycle, titled *The Eumenides*, is the debate of justice for which the cycle is famous. Eumenides, in Ancient Greek, means "The Gracious Ones" which is a euphemism for the Furies. The Furies are goddesses of vengeance and justice. They torment Orestes for the crime of matricide. Exhausted from trying to escape, Orestes begs Athena for help, and she decides to put him on trial. Recognizably, Athena assigns herself as

judge and selects twelve Athenians as jury. The legends say this was the first courtroom trial. Arguments are made by the Furies and Apollo. The jurors' votes are tied, and Athena makes the final decision, calling for Orestes not to be killed. She further rules that all future trials be dealt with in court instead of personal vengeance. As for the Furies, they become guiding spirits for the people of Athens, only seeking vengeance against evil doers, and helping the people of Athens prosper.

So, what can a 2500-year-old play about the ethics of matricide teach us about 21st-century American justice? Athena grants Orestes his life, not because he was proven not to have killed his mother beyond a reasonable doubt, but because Athena wanted to end the cycle of violent vengeance. Athena is the Greek goddess of wisdom and battle strategy. She is unequivocally the most qualified being to make this call. The play cycle assumes the audience has more knowledge about the events of the play than what takes place in front of them. The curse of the House of Atreus, the tragedy of Iphigenia, everything that happened in Troy--many events had led up to how Agamemnon returned home. But we, in the 21st century, don't necessarily need all of this background information. The theme around the play cycle is clear: what really is justice? I believe our lady Athena is on to something, that ending cycles of violence is the justice we need, even if it's not the one we want.

I am assuming that most Americans reading this will make the connection to conversations about defunding police and Black Lives Matter. This is the biggest conversation about justice in our zeitgeist currently. We hear chants: Justice for Breonna Taylor. Justice for George Floyd. Justice for countless names, all the way back to Emmett Till, all the way back to 1619. This is our curse of the House of Atreus as Americans, especially those of us who are white Americans. But our curse cannot be solved by divine intervention, we must do it ourselves.

But I do believe there is something that Aeschylus writes that makes the most sense to me in our current world.

Athena made her judgment because she is a goddess of wisdom. She is not a wanton for punishment. And I believe this is where most Americans go wrong. We *love* punishment. We revel in the idea of someone getting what they deserve. But the problem with this line of thought is the violence that it perpetuates; rectifying our thirst for justice, shouting “arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor” while in the next breath touting the defunding of the police. I believe we cannot have both. We cannot use a broken system when it suits us and demolish it simultaneously. Athena’s judgment of Orestes, who never denied killing his mother, was that violence begets more violence, and it is more important for violence to end than the Furies’ thirst for justice be satisfied. We, the American people, are the Furies. We seek vengeance, whether carried out in a vigilante style, or through catchy titles like “instant karma”, or by the state, but Americans love our own kind of vengeance. We are also Orestes, stuck in a cycle of violence that began before many of us were born, and are actively participating in. The curse of the House of Atreus was begotten by violence, and it was passed on through the generations, and it ended with Orestes, but most importantly, not of his own volition. Someone wiser and more experienced than he responded to his call for help, and decided enough was enough.

This is not to say that someone is going to save us. We must somehow become Athena while also already being Orestes and the Furies. We perpetuate our own violence then immediately after we thirst for vengeance, which is itself a kind of violence. Because while as a collective I believe American are simultaneously Orestes and The Furies, there are certainly those who identify with Clytemnestra, seeking personal vengeance for the loss of a child. Or maybe some identify with Agamemnon, carrying out violence as a means of honor. But for the

sake of this argument, I have assigned roles based on who participates in Orestes' trial. The clearest answer to amending our need for vengeance and ending the cycle of violence in our world is the abolition of American police systems. Police are the public servants that beget the most violence on civilians populations. We need to disband and investigate the unions. Create specific law enforcement legislation that outlines regulations and expectations. Create a mental health division that does not depend on social service departments. Reallocate funds from police budgets into public health. These are just some of the ideas on how to save ourselves from our House of Atreus. What this requires is a wisdom in self-reflection, not as individuals, but a self-reflection of the system at large. To see that our thirst for justice is a thirst for vengeance, and that the state helps in perpetuating this thirst. We need to rectify our need to remove and rehabilitate bad actors from society with how those needs are actually carried out. Athena ended the cycle of violence in the House of Atreus. We can end the cycle of violence in our own justice system too.