

MINUTES
of the Meeting of
The Novel Club of Cleveland
December 3, 2013

Host: Siobhan Lukowsky

Novel: The Electra Plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides

Papers:

Biographical: James Saunders

Critical: George Weimer

Members of The Novel Club gathered at the home of Siobhan Lukowsky on an unseasonably warm December evening. Convivial conversation and a fine spread of refreshments launched the meeting. President Leon Gabinet called the meeting to order at approximately 8:20. There were no guests or committee reports. George Weimer presented the minutes from last month's meeting, which were approved as read. Jay Siegel also presented a humorous account of last month's *Freaky Deaky* discussion.

Clyde Henry presented the biographical paper about Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, which was prepared by James Saunders. This biographical paper took the form of a narrative spoken by a citizen of ancient Athens who attended the Dionysian contest in the year when all three of the famous dramatists were alive at once. This narrator commented on the setting and presentation of the three Electra plays. Aeschylus, who is thought to have died at around age seventy, had won many prizes for his dramas but had not competed in about a dozen years. Sophocles was at that point a relatively recent entry on the drama competition scene, as was Euripides. According to legend, Aeschylus was ordered to write tragedies by an appearance of the god Dionysus, and he introduced into the drama new techniques such as expanded use of dialogue and fuller development of plot and character.

Sophocles, twenty years younger than Aeschylus, won his first drama prize the first time he entered the contest, and went on to win even more prizes than Aeschylus had won. Sophocles trained as a priest in his youth, though his drama is not especially religious in content. He also did military and government work during his long life. Sophocles added a third character to the plays, and made great strides in character development through the use of this device. His most famous plays may be those making up the so-called Oedipus "trilogy," whose three elements (*Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*) were actually written at different times.

Euripides (scholars say) was born at Salamis, son of a merchant, and was sent to study philosophy by his father. He wrote about ninety plays of which nineteen survived, and many won prizes in the drama contests.

George Weimer presented the critical paper on the three plays—*The Libation Bearers* by Aeschylus and the two entitled *Electra*, one by Sophocles and one by Euripides. He began by noting that many features of the classical plays are unfamiliar to modern audiences, but affect us powerfully nevertheless.

Important as background is the fact that audiences in ancient Greece were very familiar with the historical/legendary background of these plays—the Trojan War and the sacrifice of Iphigenia which motivated the murder of Agamemnon (and Cassandra) by Clytemnestra, and the subsequent murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus by Electra and Orestes. The three plays all deal with that plot material, but offer different treatments. They begin at different points in the drama (both in scene and plot); all present the dilemma of Orestes—that Apollo requires Orestes to avenge his father's murder, but that Orestes can do this only by murdering his mother.

George suggested as an aside that *The Libation Bearers* would work better if read in context of Aeschylus' entire Oresteia trilogy, and suggested this combination as a consideration for another Novel Club season.

In our current set of three "Electra plays," all three deal with Electra's hearing the false report of Orestes' death and subsequently being convinced that he has returned on the basis of the appearance of his lock of hair and footprints by Agamemnon's tomb. But each play takes different angles on the characters' reactions to various plot elements. All three plays are concerned with the issues of law (both human and divine) and justice.

George also commented on the effectiveness of recent translations which put the stories into very contemporary conversational language, though he personally prefers older translations which present a more stately drama. He also noted that each of these tragedies would have been followed by a satyr play, which would have contrasted with the impressive and possibly even frightening presentation of the tragedies themselves. Discussion focused on George's questions:

1) How are the three Electra characters different in terms of personality and function in the plays? How about the three different Orestes characters? ...Clytemnestras?

This question yielded considerable comment. One reader noted that the Aeschylus play focuses especially on Electra's virginity (married but unbedded); another noted that Electra's material fortunes were treated differently—Euripides and Sophocles emphasizing her poverty more than does Aeschylus. Another pointed out that while Freud especially liked these plays because they deal with dilemmas of life and how they may be resolved, Euripides in contrast is particularly interested in social classes (emphasizing the class of Electra's farmer husband).

In context of this question, we should note that since, atypically for the time, the plays of Aeschylus were presented more than once, it is likely that Sophocles and Euripides would have been familiar with Aeschylus' version, whether or not they had access to each other's.

Electra comes across quite differently from one play to another. The "evolution" of her character through the three plays is interesting—for example, in Euripides, she is more sympathetic and further developed than in the earlier plays because her womanhood has been taken from her by the enforced marriage to the farmer, a man entirely outside of her class. Also notable is that in Euripides the characters of Electra and Orestes show some self-doubt, not notably present in the other versions.

Readers found that Sophocles' version deals most with the moral ambiguity of Electra's position, avenging her father's death while not allowing for Clytemnestra's right to avenge the death of Iphigenia. On this issue the three playwrights take different angles—Aeschylus and Euripides do not give as much attention to Clytemnestra's justification. Rather, a more central concern is, since the family bears a curse, "how does one deal with the blows of fate?"

2) How does the absence of Aegisthus in the Euripides version change the story? Why does the playwright leave him out—except as a dead body?

Here, readers noted that in a dysfunctional family like this one, the stepfather often shows up badly. Included is the question of whether Aegisthus was an aider/abettor in the murder of Agamemnon.

3) What does the introduction of Chrysothemis in Sophocles do to the overall drama? Why does the playwright introduce her?

Chrysothemis was thought to introduce the reasonable person's point of view, thus presenting an important argument which runs through the play and introduces a psychological dimension lacking in the other plays. This added perspective expands the stage and the scope of the drama.

4) Regarding different endings chosen by the three playwrights—resolved by trial of Orestes and disposition of the Furies, or by shifting responsibility to the gods, or left indeterminate—"How do these different endings resolve the drama—or do they?"

Here, most of the discussion was on interpretation of Aeschylus' trial scene. Is it more important that gods are included in the jury, or that humans are included? Is it a religious or a civic resolution? How would

such a fact pattern resolve in contemporary society, and what does that say about comparison/contrast of civilizations?

With regard to the effectiveness of limiting violence to offstage occurrences, readers differed—some thought words can suffice to convey or even imaginatively heighten the effect of violence, where others thought visible violence moves an audience more. As to contrasting choices of opening scene, consensus was that Aeschylus' opening before the tomb set a more moving tone and clearer focus on moral questions of the play.

In closing, George read a segment from a 50 year old translation, to illustrate his assertion that it is more majestic than more recent ones which are perhaps designed for the "television generation." Other closing comments included noting the effective development of the Chorus as a character, and special compliments to James Saunders for his creative approach to the biographical paper. Additional refreshments and conversation closed out the evening.

Respectfully submitted,
Carol Fox