Irigaray, the Pre-Socratics, and Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*

Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* is a mythologization of the historical transition between an economy of familial vendetta and polis-mediated justice, but it is also the story of a human being finding his way from disintegration to mental health. And, as Athena herself tells us in the final scene, it is “a well mind [that] breeds what we all love and pray for”, namely, an inclusive and peaceful society. As such, as the history of a man and a society, the *Oresteia* is fruitfully examined in the light of the writings of Luce Irigaray, feminist philosopher and psychotherapist.

According to Irigaray, Western thought since the Greeks has been based unconsciously on a binary sexual model—male/female-- imbibed in earliest childhood. Out of this preconscious sense of the world, which she calls the ***imaginary*,** is articulated the***symbolic***, a set of conscious models expressed in art, myth or religion. Although the matrix of all conscious symbolizing is the **imaginary**—the formless, inarticulate and non-linear, associated with the feminine—Western cognitive systems, beginning with the Greeks, have valorized the conscious, linear and rational, the **symbolic** as masculine, at the expense of the imaginary. As a result, real women themselves have been devalued, seen only as for-men, the Other, only as the matter/matrix of the symbolic/intellectual. Even before Plato, this symbolization of the “bounded” as masculine and good, and the “formless” as feminine and bad, is clear in the Pythagorean writings (Arist. Meta. 986a22).

For Irigaray, the little boy achieves his identity by identifying what he is not: he is not like his mother, who is a hole, a void. Thus all women come to symbolize mother/other/death for men, who strike out against death to affirm their being: like Orestes, they “kill” their (m)other. For the girl child, there can be no such separation. She is condemned simply to *be* her mother for the next generation: to be simply “woman”-for -men. In the *Oresteia*, Electra disappears: her sole purpose in the trilogy is to identify/reflect Orestes. Irigaray speaks of this elision of all females into one Feminine-for-men as the absence of a matrilineal genealogy. It is this lineage of “red blood” that the Furies guard, and which, broken by Iphigeneia’s death, Clytemnestra attempts to avenge with her husband’s murder.

In Irigaray’s words, “the whole of our culture in the West depends upon the murder of the mother (CAC),” that is, upon repressing or denying the value of the imaginary, or, on the social scale, naturalizing it: that is, failing to recognize that it is a function of the male subject’s symbolizing mind and projecting it upon real women. Athena proclaims openly that mothers are of less value than fathers because mothers, whose sole worth lies in producing children, are not even necessary to creating a child: she herself had no mother. But in fact she and Zeus simply appropriate to the father the maternal role. Thus real mothers are devalued, and the Furies fear that they, too, the guarantors of the maternal genealogy, will be repressed.

The cure, for society and for the individual, lies in the recognition of the role of both “parents” in the creation of a sound mind: in “love,” the *philia* of Empedocles: the attraction or cooperation of the elements that creates the cosmos. Strife (feminine) among the elements leads to chaos and dissolution; the parental strife of the king and queen bring stasis to Argos, and the attempt to repress the imaginary leads Orestes to madness.

Orestes, like his society, identifies himself wholly with the father, the rational, linear, symbol-wielding intellect. He cannot find within himself any part of the mother. When Orestes is ordered by god to kill his mother, to individuate himself, he does not understand that the “maternal” he must deny is within and he acts externally on a real person. To be healed, he must make himself a suppliant, become feminized and displaced, unbounded (Carson, 158).

The conclusion of the play is not a celebration of patriarchy’s victory over the maternal, but the dawn of a new cooperation: Irigaray’s love, Empedocles’ *philia*. The Furies preside henceforth over the fruitfulness of marriages. The role of the imaginary in creating the “well mind” and “what it breeds” has been given full recognition: the values of family, blood, and polis are integrated. The Athenians have set themselves up to produce great art as well as great philosophy, the fluid, imaginative and intuitive as well as the linear and exclusionary, Aeschylus as well as Plato.

Aristotle. *Metaphysics*.

Carson, Anne. “Putting Her in Her Place.” (1990)

Empedocles. *On Nature*.

Irigary, Luce. *Le Corps a corps avec la mere.* (1981)

 *That Sex Which is Not One.* (1978)

 *Speculum of the Other Woman.* (1985)