

VENGEANCE IS MINE, SAITH EVERYONE

Douglas LeBlanc on Societal and Personal
Judgment

Though the theme of ‘vengeance’ is clearly everywhere in Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, it is hard to know what exactly is meant by the term. Is vengeance a type of justice or a kind of revenge, and who or what decides?

A host of vengeful characters sets up the dilemma. Initially, Agamemnon returns from Troy and thanks the gods and his people, saying, “[T]hey helped me in the vengeance I have wrought on Priam’s city.”¹ Next, Clytaemestra kills Agamemnon for “the child that shall be avenged,” meaning her daughter Iphigenia, who was sacrificed by Agamemnon that the Greeks might cross to Troy.² Aegisthus, Clytaemestra’s lover, joins her and

¹ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, trans. by Richard Lattimore, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 4, (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 63.

² *Ibid.*, 55.

“plots vengeance” for the “meat [his] father tasted of,” meaning his brothers, who had been cooked and served to their father.³ Additionally, Cassandra, the prophetess, goes to her death with at least the small consolation to “die not vengeless by the gods.”⁴ Then there is Orestes, the central protagonist, who prays, “Zeus, Zeus, grant me vengeance for my father’s murder,” and his sister prays similarly.⁵ Lastly, the Furies seek “to be a vengeance” on behalf of the ghost of the dead Clytaemestra, who is killed by her son Orestes.⁶

Clearly, great evil has been experienced by everyone, and everyone wants their own slice of vengeance. This vengeance, though, is not always a great evil in turn. During the course of the three plays, vengeance is sometimes justified and sometimes not. For example, Clytaemestra’s vengeance, in the form of killing her husband, is admitted to be wrong, even by the Furies

³ Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 68.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵ Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers*, trans. by Richard Lattimore, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 4, (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 75.

⁶ Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*, trans. by Richard Lattimore, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 4, (Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993), 94.

themselves.⁷ Meanwhile, the god Apollo and the goddess Athena believe that Orestes's actions are righteous, and Athens ultimately pronounces innocence on Orestes's act of vengeance, the killing of his mother. Though in Clytaemestra's case there is crime and in Orestes's case there is innocence, both cases are examples of characters seeking 'vengeance', characters seeking something they feel is owed on account of wrongdoing.

Retribution, restitution, reparation, atonement — we have many similar words in English, all implying a 'take and give' mentality. It is in this vein that vengeance seems to fall. When Electra asks for guidance in forming a prayer, the chorus suggests that she pray for "one to kill [Clytaemestra and Aegisthus], for the life they took."⁸ It is a type of exchange; a life for a life. Electra acquiesces: "[F]ather, I pray that your avenger come, that they who killed you be killed in turn, as they deserve."⁹ Electra's prayer is clearly rooted in a perception that the bloody exchange is rooted in justice. The chorus itself prays further, "The spirit of Right cried out aloud and extracts atonement due: blood stroke for

⁷ Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*, 98.

⁸ Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers*, 76.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

the stroke of blood shall be paid.”¹⁰ Again, we see a call for payment, an exchange of a life for a life taken. This is not a mere tit for tat. Vengeance is not a simple matter of revenge; vengeance is a type of exchange by force — a forced restitution.

If vengeance is indeed forced restitution, it leaves us with another question: When is this force just, and when is it unjust? One possible answer is that vengeance is just when it is temperate rather than excessive. Electra prays for this, saying, “And for myself, grant that I be more temperate of heart than my mother; that I act with a purer hand.”¹¹ The chorus too hopes that “those who struggle hard to see temperate things done in the house win their aim in full.”¹²

There are doubtlessly more justifications than temperance alone, and to clearly discover them we would need a deeper view of ancient Greek culture than can be gleaned from three plays. However, the *Oresteia*'s main point strikes at a more central stipulation for the righteousness of vengeance. Speaking of Orestes's case, Athena says, “The matter is too big for any mortal man who thinks he can

¹⁰ Aeschylus, *The Libation Bearers*, 79.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

¹² *Ibid.*, 85.

judge it.”¹³ Here, perhaps, Athena is stating that individuals are not to take vengeance into their own hands. Instead, there need to be measures for justice, measures “laid down unto the rest of time.”¹⁴ Namely, a trial by jury. “I shall select judges for manslaughter,” she explains, “and swear them in, establish a court into all time to come.”¹⁵ Thus, Athena removes righteousness from personal vengeance. Vengeance is no longer an individual quest. Instead, vengeance is to be decided by the “finest” of citizens.¹⁶ That is, vengeance is to be a social responsibility rather than a personal vendetta. Even the Furies themselves, converted in the end, pray for an end to unjust vengeance: “Let not the dry dust that drinks the black blood of citizens through passion for revenge and bloodshed for bloodshed be given our state to prey upon.”¹⁷

In summary, the *Oresteia* shows us that vengeance is a deep human desire to make right an unrightable wrong, and that this desire — untempered — leads to cycles of darkness. The best

¹³ Aeschylus, *The Eumenides*, 96.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 103.

way to temper this vengeance is to bring all claims before a just court, a tribunal rooted in the laws of the just Judge. Vengeance, or forced restitution, should never be brought about by one's own will. To do so is to unleash fury, bringing about a curse on one's life and posterity.

Bibliography

"Vengeance is Mine: Saith Everyone"

Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*. Translated by Richard Lattimore, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 4. Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993.

---. *The Eumenides*, Translated by Richard Lattimore, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 4, Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993.

---. *The Libation Bearers*. Translated by Richard Lattimore, in *Great Books of the Western World*, 2nd ed., vol. 4, Chicago: Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 1993.