

Student Handout

The Rule of Law

Read the following excerpts from Aeschylus play, Eumenides; paraphrase them briefly in the spaces provided to prepare for a class discussion.

Orestes:

*...An Argive am I, and right well thou know'st
My sire, that Agamemnon who arrayed
The fleet and them that went therein to war -
That chief with whom thy hand combined to crush
To an uncited heap what once was Troy;
That Agamemnon, when he homeward came,
Was brought unto no honourable death,
Slain by the dark-souled wife who brought me forth
To him, enwound and slain in wily nets,
Blazoned with blood that in the laver ran.
And I, returning from an exiled youth,
Slew her, my mother-lo, it stands avowed!
With blood for blood avenging my loved sire;
And in this deed doth Loxias bear part,
Decreeing agonies, to goad my will,
Unless by me the guilty found their doom.
Do thou decide if right or wrong were done
Thy dooming, whatsoever it be, contents me.*

Athena:

*Too mighty is this matter, whosoe'er
Of mortals claims to judge hereof aright. ...
...Yet, as on me Fate hath imposed the cause,
I choose unto me judges that shall be
An ordinance forever, set to rule
The dues of blood-guilt, upon oath declared.
But ye, call forth your witness and your proof,
Words strong for justice, fortified by oath;
And I, whoe'er are truest in my town,
Them will I choose and bring, and straitly charge,
Look on this cause, discriminating well,
And pledge*

The Furies:

*Now are they all undone, the ancient laws,
If here the slayer's cause
Prevail; new wrong for ancient right shall be
If matricide go free.
Henceforth a deed like his by all shall stand,
Too ready to the hand:
Too oft shall parents in the aftertime
Rue and lament this crime,
Taught, not in false imagining, to feel
Their children's thrusting steel:
No more the wrath, that erst on murder fell
From us, the queens of Hell, ...*

Athena:

*O men of Athens, ye who first do judge
The law of bloodshed, hear me now ordain.
Hereto all time for Aegeus' Attic host
Shall stand this council-court of judges sworn, ...*

*Thus I ordain it now, a council-court
Pure and unsullied by the lust of gain,
Sacred and swift to vengeance, wakeful ever
To champion men who sleep, the country's guard.
Thus have I spoken, thus to mine own clan
Commended it forever. Ye who judge,
Arise, take each his vote, mete out the right,
Your oath revering. Lo, my word is said.*

The Furies:

*Woe on you, younger gods! The ancient right
Ye have o'erridden, rent it from my hands.
But heavily my wrath
Shall on this land fling forth the drops that blast and burn,
Venom of vengeance, that shall work such scathe
As I have suffered; where that dew shall fall,
Shall leafless blight arise,
Wasting Earth's offspring, Justice, hear my call!
And through all the land in deadly wise
Shall scatter venom, to exude again in pestilence on men.
What cry avails me now, what deed of blood, unto this land what dark despite?
Alack, alack, forlorn
Are we, a bitter injury have borne
Alack, O sisters, O dishonoured brood
Of mother Night!*

Athena:

*And nevermore these walls within
Shall echo fierce sedition's din,
Unslaked with blood and crime;
The thirsty dust shall nevermore
Suck up the darkly streaming gore
Of civic broils, shed out in wrath
And vengeance, crying death for death!
But man with man and state with state
Shall vow the pledge of common hate
And common friendship, that for man
Hath oft made blessing, out of ban,
Be ours unto an time.*
