

The Old versus the New in Greek Drama

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Course: Honors 311

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Assignment: Reflective Essay

In the fifth century B.C., Greece experienced a period of economic growth and internal conflict among the city-states on the peninsula. As Greek drama developed into one of the ancient world's most important legacies, playwrights and philosophers alike explored the human psyche and shook the foundations of Greek society. These new discoveries and ideas brought forth by the intellectualists challenged traditions that had held Greece together for centuries. In their plays *The Eumenides* and *The Clouds*, both Aeschylus and Aristophanes, respectively, address the balance between old and new—between traditional and new ways of life—through the obstacles faced by their protagonists Orestes and Strepsiades.

In *The Eumenides*, the final play in Ancient Greece's only surviving trilogy, Aeschylus uses the fantastic trial between Orestes and the blood-thirsty Furies as a symbol of the tension between old and new in society. Aeschylus, an advocate of social change and philosophical innovation, uses the primal ruthlessness of the Furies to demonstrate important human concepts, such as mortality and justice. The Furies represent tradition, and they encourage the continuation of the cycle of vengeance and disregard the idea of justice. The flaw in the Furies' philosophy is that there is no end to the blood crimes or the curse on the House of Atreus. Progress in a society cannot be made while revenge continues to instigate more revenge and violence. To emphasize this point, Aeschylus introduces the character Apollo, the god of reason, who champions Orestes and challenges the Furies' uncivilized tradition. In the end, justice wins, and the Furies lose their power and become the Eumenides, the Friendly Ones, thereby implying that justice will lead to a happier and more prosperous future. Orestes' victory over the Furies symbolizes Aeschylus'

support of justice, instead of blind blood crimes and the endless cycle of revenge. The Furies' transition from instinct-driven brutality to a righteous existence mimics Greece's progression into a modern society. *The Eumenides* encourages change into a better, more enlightened, and more sophisticated world, in which man is punished for his crimes by law and reason, not with hate, devastation, and more blood.

Unlike *The Eumenides*, which shows an excessive devotion to tradition, *The Clouds* proposes change at an extreme level and reveals the foolishness of such a radical movement through the trials and suffering endured by Strepsiades. *The Clouds* presents a humorous look at the world of academia, but the play also sheds light on serious issues that affected Greece during this time. Although considered a comedy, Aristophanes' play also was used as a warning to his readers of the risk in committing to change and forsaking the comfort of tradition. As Strepsiades learns firsthand, there is no guarantee that new philosophy will bring improvement or success to society. Aristophanes creates an unstated line of respect and morality that should not be crossed, and Socrates and his band of sophists step beyond this line and negatively impact society.

In the beginning, Strepsiades, like Athens, is amazed with Socrates' and the sophists' innovative thought, and he encourages his son to attend Socrates' school. However, at this school, Strepsiades' son is won over by the weaker, new logic. Truth and morals are lost to him, and he begins to belittle women and to disrespect his parents. When Strepsiades tries to convince his son to revert to their old ways of reason, principle, and logic, it is already too late. The over-dramatic and pretentious world of academia, exemplified in Socrates' flamboyant descent from the heavens, convinces and manipulates the common man into believing in the new ways of life, even when it goes against both common sense and natural law. Academia makes a fool of Strepsiades, who represents the common man, as it forces him to strip his clothes, and, in effect,

strip away all his old values and ideals, in order to enter the Thinkery. There, Strepsiades discovers that all Socrates' teachings completely negate Greece's traditions and heritage. Socrates even replaces Zeus, the pinnacle of the Greek gods, with a new, obscure deity called the Vortex. Enraged at his son's disrespect, Strepsiades sets fire to Socrates' school, and the play ends with the punishment of new thought. Through the character Strepsiades, Aristophanes condemns the radical, irreverent changes of Athens, and he mocks the foolish, pretentious academia for changing society beyond the point that serves the greater good.

Aeschylus and Aristophanes both analyze an important issue that Greece faced as it began to grow as a society with city-states that drastically differed in ideals and principles; specifically, the country then encountered conflict between strictly adhering to tradition and trusting new values and changes in culture. Both playwrights agree that the only way to improve a society is through progress, but also feel that the lines between morality and immorality, as well as honor and disrespect, should not be crossed. This issue is important because it continues to affect the world today; namely, with new technology, such as genetic engineering, and the conflict between the customs of different cultures, the modern world is faced with the same challenges and questions as Ancient Greece long ago. By looking at history and literature that document the past, such as *The Eumenides* and *The Clouds*, philosophers of today are better able to understand the steps that need to be taken in order to improve the modern world.

Dr. Dorrill's Comments: *For their first paper in Honors 311, Ideas in Conflict: Ancient and Classical, students were asked to write an essay reflecting on an idea or concept expressed in one or more of the works we had read to that point. Samantha Perez did an excellent job juxtaposing two works that are not regularly juxtaposed, The Eumenides and The Clouds. Her*

prose style is lucid, and her ideas are sophisticated. She provides a succinct summary of important ideas in the plays and shows how reading these plays can help us with modern problems. I enjoyed reading her paper very much and am sure that many others will enjoy reading it as well.