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Aeschylus The Furies Sparknotes

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Understanding Aeschylus The Furies: A Comprehensive Sparknotes Guide

For readers diving into the world of Greek tragedy, few works carry the weight and complexity of Aeschylus' final play in the Oresteia trilogy. **Aeschylus The Furies Sparknotes** offers students and literature enthusiasts a structured path through this dense, powerful drama. The play represents a pivotal moment in Western literature, transitioning from the old world of blood vengeance to the new order of civic justice. This guide breaks down the key elements, themes, and characters that make The Furies an enduring masterpiece.

The Context of The Furies in the Oresteia Trilogy

The Furies, known in Greek as the Eumenides, is the third and concluding play of Aeschylus' Oresteia trilogy, first performed in 458 BCE in Athens. To fully grasp the significance of The Furies, one must understand its place within the larger narrative arc that begins with Agamemnon and continues through The Libation Bearers. The trilogy traces the curse of the House of Atreus, exploring cycles of violence and the eventual establishment of legal justice.

The Furies picks up immediately after the events of The Libation Bearers, where Orestes has killed his mother Clytemnestra to avenge his father Agamemnon's murder. Now, Orestes finds himself hunted by the Furies—primordial goddesses of vengeance who torment those guilty of blood crimes against family members. The play follows Orestes' journey to Delphi and eventually to Athens, where a trial by jury determines his fate.

The Significance of the Title

The play carries a dual title that reflects its central tension. The Furies, or Erinyes in Greek, are terrifying goddesses who represent the ancient system of blood retribution. The alternative title, The Eumenides, means "the kindly ones" and refers to their transformation at the play's conclusion. This shift from terrifying avengers to benevolent protectors encapsulates the thematic movement from primitive justice to civilized law.

Key Characters in The Furies

Understanding the characters is essential for any **Aeschylus The Furies Sparknotes** analysis. Each figure represents different forces at work in the play's exploration of justice.

- Orestes - The protagonist who killed his mother Clytemnestra. He is pursued by the Furies and seeks purification at Delphi before facing trial in Athens.
- The Furies (Erinyes) - Ancient goddesses of vengeance who relentlessly pursue Orestes. They represent the old system of blood justice and familial retribution.
- Apollo - The god who commanded Orestes to kill his mother and who protects him throughout the play. Apollo represents patriarchal order and divine reason.

- Athena - The goddess of wisdom who establishes the court of the Areopagus in Athens. She embodies reason, fairness, and the new civic order.
- The Ghost of Clytemnestra - Appears early in the play to rouse the Furies against her son. She represents the demands of the dead for vengeance.
- The Chorus of Furies - Functions as both character and commentary, driving the emotional intensity of the pursuit and later transformation.

Detailed Plot Summary for Aeschylus The Furies Sparknotes

Scene One: The Temple of Apollo at Delphi

The play opens at the sanctuary of Apollo in Delphi with the Pythian priestess preparing for her prophetic duties. She enters the inner chamber and is horrified to find Orestes huddled at the altar, surrounded by the sleeping Furies. The priestess describes the terrifying sight of the black, snakelike creatures who radiate menace and pollution. She retreats in fear, leaving Apollo to address the situation directly.

Apollo commands the Furies to leave his sanctuary and purifies Orestes from the blood guilt. He instructs Orestes to travel to Athens and seek protection from Athena at her sacred statue. Orestes departs as Apollo promises to support him. The ghost of Clytemnestra appears to the sleeping Furies, rebuking them for abandoning their duty to pursue her son. Awakening, the Furies express their rage at Apollo's interference and resume their relentless hunt for Orestes.

Scene Two: The Temple of Athena in Athens

Orestes arrives in Athens and clings to the ancient statue of Athena, begging for her protection. The Furies track him down and surround him, preparing to exact their punishment. They engage in a binding song, a ritual chant meant to enclose Orestes in their power. Their lyrics are haunting and primal, emphasizing the ancient authority they claim over blood crimes.

Athena enters and questions both sides. She listens to the Furies' argument that Orestes committed the worst crime by killing his mother, and she hears Orestes' defense that Apollo commanded the act and that Clytemnestra herself killed his father. Athena decides that the matter is too grave for one goddess to judge alone. She establishes a court of Athenian citizens—the Areopagus—to hear the case and render a verdict.

Scene Three: The Trial on the Areopagus

The trial scene represents the dramatic and philosophical climax of The Furies. Athena presides as judge, while Apollo appears as a witness and advocate for Orestes. The Furies serve as the prosecution. Both sides present their arguments with passionate intensity.

The Furies argue that Orestes' crime is unforgivable because the bond between mother and child is sacred and primal. They claim that his act pollutes the entire natural order and demands retribution. Apollo counters by arguing that the father is the true parent, with the mother serving merely as a vessel for the father's seed. He points to Athena herself, born directly from Zeus's head, as evidence that a mother is not necessary for procreation. This argument reflects the patriarchal values of classical Athens.

Athena calls for the jurors to cast their votes. At this critical moment, she declares that she will vote for Orestes, stating that she favors the male in all things and that no mother gave birth to her. The votes are counted and result in a tie. Athena announces that a tie vote means acquittal, declaring Orestes free.

The Transformation of the Furies

Orestes thanks Athena and Apollo and departs for Argos, promising eternal alliance with Athens. The Furies, however, are outraged at their defeat. They threaten to unleash their wrath upon the land of Athens, bringing infertility, plague, and suffering. Athena, in a masterful display of diplomacy, does not dismiss or destroy them.

Instead, she offers them a new home beneath the earth of Athens, where they will be honored as protectors of the city rather than avengers of blood.

Athena promises them priestesses, sacrifices, and a permanent place in Athenian religion. She renames them the Eumenides, meaning "the kindly ones" or "the well-disposed." The Furies gradually accept this offer, their anger transforming into blessing. They sing songs of prosperity and protection for Athens, and the play ends with a grand procession as they are led to their new subterranean home.

Major Themes in The Furies

The Transition from Vengeance to Justice

This theme stands at the heart of the play's meaning. The Furies represent the ancient system of blood feud, where wrongs are answered by wrongs in an endless cycle. Orestes' trial and acquittal demonstrate the establishment of a new system where a community, through its courts and laws, determines guilt and punishment rather than leaving justice to individual families or tribal vendettas. The transformation of the Furies themselves symbolizes the integration of primal forces into civilized society.

Gender and Patriarchy

Gender dynamics permeate The Furies. The conflict between female and male deities structures the entire trial. The Furies are female and represent matrilineal values of blood and birth. Apollo and Athena represent patriarchal order, prioritizing the father's role and civic institutions. The play's resolution suggests that patriarchal justice must, to some degree, incorporate and honor feminine powers rather than simply suppressing them.

Pollution and Purification

Greek religious thought held that certain crimes created a state of pollution, or miasma, that endangered the entire community. Orestes' crime of matricide generates profound pollution that drives the plot. His purification at Delphi and his subsequent trial represent the social and religious processes necessary to restore order after traumatic violence.

The Founding of Civic Institutions

Aeschylus presents the establishment of the Areopagus court as a defining moment in Athenian democracy. The play suggests that law and reason must govern human affairs, but that these institutions must also acknowledge the emotional and primal forces that the Furies represent. True justice, the play argues, requires both rational deliberation and the recognition of deep, irrational human needs.

Symbols and Imagery in The Furies

For a thorough **Aeschylus The Furies Sparknotes** analysis, examining the play's symbolic language proves essential.

- The Furies themselves - Symbols of conscience, guilt, and the inescapable consequences of violent acts. Their physical appearance as black, snakelike creatures evokes the chthonic, or earth-bound, powers of the ancient world.
- Binding songs - The Furies' chants represent the power of ritual to enclose and control. These songs echo the binding magic of ancient Greek religion and emphasize the Furies' authority.
- The Areopagus - The hill of Ares in Athens becomes a symbol of reasoned judgment and community decision-making. Its establishment marks a new era in human governance.
- Athena's vote - Her casting ballot in favor of Orestes symbolizes the intervention of wisdom and order into human affairs, though it also raises questions about fairness and bias.
- Procession at the end - The final march of the transformed Furies to their new home symbolizes the

integration of old powers into new structures, a hopeful image of reconciliation.

Literary Devices and Stylistic Features

Aeschylus employs several distinctive literary techniques in The Furies. His use of the chorus is particularly notable. The Furies themselves form the chorus, making the traditional choral voice into an active character. Their songs are among the most powerful in Greek tragedy, combining ritualistic repetition with vivid, terrifying imagery.

The play's language alternates between the formal, legal rhetoric of the trial scenes and the primal, emotional poetry of the Furies' chants. This stylistic contrast mirrors the thematic tension between reason and emotion, order and chaos. The final transformation of the Furies is accompanied by a shift in their language from curses to blessings, demonstrating the power of words to create reality.

Historical and Cultural Context

To fully appreciate The Furies, readers should know that Aeschylus wrote during a period of political reform in Athens. The Areopagus court had recently had its powers reduced as part of democratic reforms, and the play can be seen as a commentary on these changes. The play celebrates Athens as a center of justice and reason, reinforcing civic pride and democratic values.

The play also reflects Greek religious beliefs about pollution, purification, and the relationship between human and divine justice. The transformation of the Furies into the Eumenides mirrors actual Athenian religious practices, where ancient, potentially dangerous forces were incorporated into the state cult and given honored positions.

Why The Furies Matters Today

The Furies remains relevant for modern readers for several reasons. Its exploration of the relationship between vengeance and justice speaks to contemporary debates about criminal justice, restorative justice, and the death penalty. The play's treatment of gender and power continues to resonate in discussions about patriarchy and the role of women in society.

Additionally, the play's ending offers a hopeful vision of conflict resolution. Rather than destroying the Furies or simply defeating them, Athena negotiates a solution that honors their power while redirecting it toward constructive ends. This model of integrating opposing forces rather than eliminating them offers a powerful lesson for personal and political life.

Key Quotes from The Furies

1. "There is a place where fear is good, and must remain, a sentinel upon the mind." - The Furies, speaking about the necessity of healthy fear in society.

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