

Record: 1

Title: The Oresteia and the Act of Revenge: of Desire and Jouissance.**Authors:** Tor, Dana (1)**Source:** PSYART: A Hyperlink Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts 2022; 26: 58-73. PsyArt Foundation.**ISSN:** 1088-5870**Document Information:** *Publication Type:* Journal Article
Language of Publication: English**Accession Number:** EIS161317320**Database:** MLA International Bibliography with Full Text**The Oresteia and the Act of Revenge: of Desire and Jouissance**

The Aeschylean Trilogy, the Oresteia, contains precious psychoanalytic knowledge about the origins of revenge. The Oresteia is not only a great myth that has garnered myriad interpretations, but it also illuminates some of the most critical psychoanalytic themes that Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan engaged with throughout their teaching: the murder of the father, the neurotic's debt, the impulses, myth, jouissance, desire, and das Ding.

This article argues that "revenge," a signifier that appears at the center of the Aeschylean Trilogy, represents an act, an impulse, and perhaps a desire. Examining the concept of revenge from a Freudian and Lacanian point of view, this essay inquires whether revenge is an act that is based on castration (i.e., that is in the direction of desire and subjectivity) or an act that is dipped in ravaging, repetitive, destructive jouissance, and raises the question of whether the latter contradicts the former. Lacan developed the term desire in the first years of his teaching in Seminar VI, where he explores the meaning of desire via his reading of the play Hamlet. Jouissance is a term that was present throughout Lacan's teaching but received a new sense in his later teaching, particularly in Seminar XX: Encore.

I follow Lacan and Freud's constructions of Totem and Taboo (Freud), Oedipus Rex (Sophocles), and Hamlet (Shakespeare) in my reading of the myth of the Oresteia, uncovering the logic of the relationship between desire and jouissance. Based on the Oresteia, I explore the convergence of desire and jouissance in an interpretation of Lacan's later teaching. I analyze how the myth of the Oresteia and the act of matricide uncover the psychic picture of revenge and draw conclusions that aim to serve as a compass in the psychoanalytic clinic.

Keywords: revenge; the Oresteia; Freud; Lacan; jouissance; desire; father; mother; Oedipus; Totem and Taboo; Hamlet

To Cite As:

Tor, Dana, 2022, "The Oresteia and the Act of Revenge: of Desire and Jouissance," PsyArt 27, pp. 58-73.

Revenge and feminine jouissance**Reading Freud's articles on femininity and Lacan's Seminar XX.**

Lacan discusses the concept of revenge in his article "The youth of Gide, or the Letter and Desire," where he recounts the act of revenge performed by Gide's wife, Madeleine, referred to by Lacan as the act of a "true woman" (640). Madeleine Gide, the wife of the great French writer Andrei Gide, took revenge against her husband for his love affairs with young boys by burning his most precious object, the love letters he wrote to her, which he considered his greatest artistic creation, and which he referred to as his children (Lacan, "The Youth of Gide" 640). Other famous examples of revenge by real women that Lacan mentions are taken from Greek tragedies: Medea, who takes revenge on her cheating husband by killing her sons, and Philomela, who did the same (Lacan, "The Youth of Gide" 640).

What unites these acts of revenge is that both involve the killing of kin-the woman's flesh and blood [1]. These extreme cases of revenge raise the question of whether revenge can be understood as an affect that is at the core of feminine jouissance, a woman's unlimited destructive enjoyment. They also raise questions about what Lacan means when he refers to these women as "true women" in relation to the act of revenge.

In Seminar, XX Lacan presents his formulas of sexuation, or more precisely, his formulas of two types of enjoyments, or two types of jouissances (5-7). According to Lacan, jouissance is the subject's enjoyment of his own body as foreign or other (Seminar XX 4). Jouissance, for Lacan, comes from the superego, and its aim is pure pleasure. Feminine jouissance, moreover, is jouissance without limits-so limitless is this enjoyment that it can be destructive for the subject. The logical rule of this formula is that this jouissance is not entirely under the phallic law of desire; it is not subject to the group that obeys the Name-of-the-Father. The second formula of sexuation articulates Phallic jouissance. Phallic jouissance is the jouissance that follows the rules of the symbolic order, of what can be articulated in words, and remains in the realm of signifiers. Phallic jouissance is the jouissance of the male organ; it belongs to what follows the Law-of-the-Father, the latter being the only one allowed to enjoy without law. Phallic jouissance has a limit, namely, castration.

Feminine jouissance is one of Lacan's significant findings, and it is based on Freud's articles on femininity: "Femininity" (112-136), "Female Sexuality" (221-244), and others. Freud took notice that there is something in the feminine experience that does not follow any "post signs"-in order words, there is something that cannot be articulated in words because it goes beyond sense ("Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety" 212). Lacan articulated this experience as feminine jouissance, an experience that goes beyond phallic jouissance and the Name-of-the-Father, being "not all" under the phallic function (Seminar XX 72). Feminine jouissance is characterized by not knowing satisfaction, having no boundaries, and being in a certain void and emptiness. It goes back to the earliest relationship of the child with her mother. This phase was designated by Freud as Pre- Oedipus and may also be referred to as pre-genital because it is the phase in which the child still does not observe the anatomical difference between the sexes. Lacan characterizes this phase in the case of women with "ravage," a sort of destruction or disaster, which is implicated in the girl's relationship with her mother (L'etourdit 12). Indeed, this ravage figures prominently in the psychoanalytic clinic and is manifested in different clinical phenomena, including in a woman's complaints against her mother. The latter is often described with such intensity and closeness as if she were the patient's partner.

Jealousy is the main feature of the ravage that returns in the girl's Oedipus complex. Both are alive in the feminine jouissance that knows no satisfaction and seeks to destroy everything that takes away from the object of primal satisfaction (the mother). It is noteworthy that these acts of revenge of "real women," as described by Lacan, are performed by women who are betrayed somehow; their jealous rage is executed in the revenge that goes beyond the phallic function. All three of those above "real" women take away from their husband something that is part of his being, his phallus, in an act that may be interpreted as a ravaging act that originates in feminine jouissance and jealousy of the other woman or in the case of Gide, the other men.

These acts also include a sacrifice of those women's children and, in the case of Gide, his love-child letters. In this manner, this is also self-sacrifice, a sacrifice of something of the phallic object of the woman herself. In this manner, revenge seems to be entirely destructive, a pure death drive, aiming to ruin anything and everything of the woman and her loved one as the outcome of the ravaging jealousy.

However, this is not all that Freud and Lacan's teaching offer about revenge. Revenge also plays a prominent role in the theory of psychoanalysis, specifically concerning three myths that have to do with the murder of the father, as will be described below.

Patricide and Revenge in Hamlet, Oedipus and Totem and Taboo

Reading Lacan's Seminar VI and Seminar XVII

The killing of the father is the theme that connects Totem and Taboo, Oedipus Rex, and Hamlet. However, this killing functions differently in each of these tales, and in Seminar XVII, Lacan compares the murder of the father in each of these literary works (102-118). In what follows, I consider how revenge-an affect that exists between desire and jouissance- plays a central role in these myths, which are at the heart of Lacan and Freud's teachings.

Hamlet

Lacan picks up on the theme of revenge in Seminar VI, entitled Desire and its Interpretation (330). There, Lacan speaks of revenge in the context of the act at stake for Hamlet-namely, the killing of his uncle Claudius as demanded by his father's ghost at the beginning of the play (Shakespeare 1.5.11-1.5.90). Hamlet is called upon to act, yet he procrastinates this act with hesitations and guilt about his being, the consequence of which is the death of most of the characters at the end of the play. In the seven lessons Lacan gives on Hamlet, he analyzes Hamlet as the character that teaches us about desire and its condition: castration or lack (Seminar VI 233-354). In Hamlet, the act of revenge is conditioned on Hamlet's having "assumed responsibility" (Lacan Seminar VI 247). This responsibility is accepting the symbolic debt one must pay for his being and desire, the debt of inheritance. The "Symbolic debt" is the debt of each subject born into language, into the net of signifiers inherited in his legacy from his lineage and society. Accepting this debt means accepting (the Other's) lack or castration, i.e., acknowledging that the Other is missing something and that you are missing something. This acceptance enables the pursuit of desire to replace this lost, missing object and opens up the possibility of being in the place of the lost object for the Other. Lack, castration, is thus the condition to act towards one's desire; it is the seed from which the flower of desire blossoms.

In Hamlet, revenge takes center stage. The protagonist encounters castration at the very beginning of the play when he inherits it in the whisper of his father's ghost, who was murdered by being poisoned by his brother while sleeping. Lacan says that "succession proceeds from castration" (Seminar XVII 141); only after accepting castration can Hamlet kill Claudius and inherit his father's throne. What is at stake for Hamlet in the murder of his uncle is the phallus; to be or not to be, says Lacan, is to be or not to be the phallus (Seminar VI 234). In Hamlet, the question about the "justice" of the revenge is not raised; once Hamlet realizes it is Claudius who killed the king, the law of desire is clear, and the question becomes one of "when"-a question of logical time that Hamlet, unfortunately, answers only when it is too late.

Lacan shows that the reason for Hamlet's inaction is his guilt about his Oedipal wish to do what his uncle did in reality (Seminar VI 280). He feels guilty about his desire, hesitates, and turns away from his beloved, Ophelia, who takes her own life. It is only when he mourns Ophelia, takes upon his name as the Prince of Denmark, and gets wounded at the hands of Laertes that Hamlet can give the final blow of his being-only then he can act, live, and be in the Name-of-the-Father (Lacan, Seminar VI 288, 353).

In Hamlet, we see that revenge and desire coincide: the Name-of-the-Father requires Hamlet to avenge his father's death, and the castration Hamlet accepts at the end of the play allows him to kill Claudius. In Hamlet, therefore, revenge is dependent on and related to castration and desire and not jouissance. Jouissance is present in the play in the procrastination of Hamlet, in his non-action, rather than in the act itself.

Oedipus

Inspired by Lévi-Strauss's article, "The Structural Study of Myth" (428-444), Lacan transposed the Freudian Oedipus complex from myth to logic. In Lacan's terms, as expounded in Seminar IV, the logic of the Oedipus complex is the paternal metaphor of the mother's desire that limits the mother's jouissance and thus constitutes the law (articulated in a matheme as NP/DM) (Miller 83). By murdering his father, Oedipus gained access to his mother's jouissance. Returning to the kingdom as a foreigner, Oedipus takes the throne and seeks revenge for the one who killed the former king, his father. The revenge he seeks is in the Name-of-the-Father, but the fulfillment of this revenge would require him to take his own life, as Oedipus is the one who murdered his father.

Based on Freud's minor footnote in The Interpretation of Dreams, Lacan compares Hamlet and Oedipus (qt. In Seminar VI 280). The difference between Hamlet and Oedipus, Lacan tells us, is knowledge: Hamlet knows, which is why he does not act, while Oedipus acts because he does not know. In the end, both characters pay the price for their (in)actions (Lacan, Seminar VI 282-284). In Oedipus Rex, revenge becomes a sort of absurdity. Oedipus' search for the man who killed the king is motivated by the need to punish and avenge the death of his father, whom he himself executed. Oedipus is split, becoming both the prosecutor and the one being prosecuted-the one who wants revenge and who committed the act to be avenged. In this way, desire and jouissance coincide here with the act of revenge, in the split between Oedipus' conscious and unconscious. As the king's son and heir, Oedipus' revenge is equated with Hamlet's. Moreover, as the one who murdered his father to gain access to the mother's jouissance, his act is similar to that of the sons in Totem and Taboo; namely, revenge against the father that takes away from his jouissance, as will be presented as follows. Oedipus does not take his own life, which would have been the act par excellence in his case, but when knowledge reaches him, he pays the price of castration by plucking out his eyes. Then, the curse on the city comes to an end (Sophocles 1311-1684).

Totem and Taboo

In Totem and Taboo, revenge is also present, even if more allusively. The men of the primordial herd, who suddenly discover they are brothers, revenge their father for his unlimited jouissance. They kill the father and take jouissance to themselves but become afflicted with guilt, and the law of prohibition is born. Lacan calls Totem and Taboo an "impossible myth" (Seminar XVII 123), a myth that contains something of the real. Both Totem and Taboo and Oedipus Rex show that the father's killing is a condition for jouissance (Lacan, Seminar XVII 120-123). Lacan calls the dead father jouissance itself, but he is also what guards against jouissance because evidently, the brothers' guilt is what reinstitutes the law of the father (Seminar XVII 120-123). In Totem and Taboo, revenge is aligned with jouissance instead of desire. At the same time, however, according to Freud's myth, it also leads to the constitution of the law of prohibition, i.e., to the introduction of castration or lack. In Seminar XVII, where the shift in Lacan's paradigm from desire to jouissance is initiated, Lacan claims surplus jouissance "takes body" via loss (124). This suggests that in his analysis of Totem and Taboo, Lacan shows that the brothers' revenge against their father creates access to both jouissance and desire. However, the question remains which type of jouissance is at stake here.

The Oresteia: Analysis of myth and logic

One myth is missing in this group of myths dealing with the murder of the father and the concept of revenge. The missing myth is, in fact, a trilogy: the Oresteia, which ties the three myths described above together. The Oresteia tells the story of the house of Agamemnon in the aftermath of the Trojan war. Revenge, passed from father to son for generations, is the motive of the three plays Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, and The Eumenides. To investigate the question of revenge between desire and jouissance and its relation to parricide, I turn to read this trilogy and propose to locate it in relation to the myths of Oedipus Rex, Hamlet, and Totem and Taboo. The Oresteia adds another component to the question of the connection between revenge, desire, and the murder of the father as the mother's jouissance.

The Oresteia by Aeschylus begins with the murder of King Agamemnon by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus, who is also Agamemnon's cousin. Both characters have reason to revenge Agamemnon: Clytemnestra avenges Agamemnon for having sacrificed their daughter Iphigenia to the gods in the war with Troy, and Aegisthus, for the murder of his brothers by Agamemnon's father. The revenge that transfers from father to son in the house of Atreus is at the center of this trilogy until it reaches Orestes and Electra, the children of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, who manage to end the curse. The question arises as to what exactly causes the curse to end.

This trilogy is unique because it includes a particular act of revenge, which, as I will show, comprises both feminine jouissance and the payment of the neurotic's debt to his being and desire. In what follows, I will review the topics and issues presented in this trilogy, frame the psychoanalytic questions that arise from it, and attempt to articulate possible answers to these questions.

Revenge in the Oresteia

The spirits of revenge hover over all three plays of the Oresteia in various forms, constituting the object a that moves the play forward.[2] The ancestor of the house of Atreus, the family that is in the center of this trilogy, is Tantalus, son of Zeus. Interestingly, the name Tantalus bears close homophony to Thanatos, Freud's symbol of the death drive. Indeed, this trilogy teaches us that revenge is an immediate neighbor of the death drive and perhaps even a manifestation thereof. In Aeschylus's first tragedy of the trilogy, Agamemnon, we are introduced to an incredibly complicated family history of the house of Tantalus. The sin and the feud date back a few generations to Tantalus himself; however, to be concise, I will only describe it here from the age of Agamemnon's father, Atreus.

Atreus and Thyestes were two brothers and heirs to the throne. Atreus was the one to receive the sign from Zeus that made him king, but Thyestes refused to give up on the throne. Instead, he lured Atreus's wife and stole the kingdom from his brother in the act of trickery. The goddess of the sun witnessed this and restored things to order, making Atreus the king and banishing Thyestes. In revenge for his brother's deception, Atreus invited Thyestes back to the palace and served him the famous "Thyestean Feast," where Thyestes's sons were served to him as a meal. After this event, the versions of the myth diverge: in one of them, Aegisthus, Thyestes's son, is the fruit of incest between Thyestes and his daughter, conceived to avenge the death of his older brothers by Atreus, and in the other, he was already born during the bloody feast. Aegisthus was brought up by Atreus before he learned the truth about his birth father, and his heritage is to avenge the house of Atreus, now ruled by Agamemnon, his cousin.

Indeed, the kingdom of Agamemnon is cursed, and the crime (and punishment) is transferred from father to son. However, unlike in Hamlet, in Agamemnon, another crime is born at the hands of Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife. Our trilogy begins when Agamemnon returns from the war (Aeschylus, Agamemnon 776-805). Clytemnestra greets her husband with a red carpet that leads to his brutal death by her own hands, plotted by her and her lover Aegisthus as an act of double revenge: her revenge on Agamemnon for taking the life of her daughter Iphigenia, which he sacrificed in the war to release his people from the siege, and Aegisthus's revenge for the blood feast of his brothers hosted by Agamemnon's father (Aeschylus, Agamemnon 1372- 1673).

The killing of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra- in The-Name-of-the-Father?

Clytemnestra and Aegisthus reigned for seven years until Orestes, the son of Agamemnon, who was smuggled away as a baby after his mother chose her father's cousin for a lover, returned to take vengeance for his father's death (Aeschylus, The Libation Bearers 1-21). The gods will not rest until justice takes the throne, and Orestes and Electra, his sister, mourn the death of their father and plan the end of the murderous couple. The Libation Bearers opens with Orestes at his father's grave, offering a lock of hair to symbolize his mourning (Aeschylus 1-21). This act of cutting a lock of hair is intriguing and has gained various meanings in the literary tradition. For example, in The Rape of the Lock, the lock symbolizes innocence and virginity (Pope, 115-125). In the bible, Samson's locks symbolize his strength (KJV, Judges 13.5, 13-16). Therefore, the cutting of a lock may be deemed a symbol of castration, of giving up something that is an intimate possession of the subject. The mere act of grieving was not performed by Clytemnestra, not unlike Hamlet's mother, who is described as having married her dead husband's father in a rush: "[] The funeral baked meats / Did coldly furnish forth the marriage table/ (Shakespeare 1.2.180-1).[3]

This act of grieving teaches us about the intentions of Orestes and Electra to respect their father and act in his name. Mourning, in this case, is an act that has to do with accepting loss, castration, and the initiation of the symbolic-phallic order, which enables to act for desire. Hamlet indicates this relation between mourning and castration: Prince Hamlet can act only after mourning Ophelia and acknowledging his love for her (Lacan, Seminar VI 245-248).

As opposed to Hamlet, where "castration - is missing in the original" (Lacan, Seminar VI 248), castration is present in the myth of the Oresteia, specifically in The Libation Bearers in the insistence of Orestes and Electra to stand for their father's memory. Electra rejects the new king and queen, refuses to live in harmony with her murderous mother and lover, and waits and prays for Orestes to come and avenge them (Aeschylus, The Libation Bearers 118-151). The Oresteia, in this sense, is also a sort of reversal of the Oedipus myth: Orestes comes from afar, returns from anonymity, to avenge his father's death and claim his inheritance (Aeschylus, The Libation Bearers 1-21). In comparison to Oedipus, who does not know that it is he who killed the king, and in contrast to Hamlet, who knows but does not act, Orestes comes in precisely at the right moment to perform the act that is required of him in The-Name-of-the-Father, namely, to kill his father's killer.

But even before Orestes enters the scene, Electra's acts of mourning are emphasized and are reminiscent of Antigone's persistence to bury her brother. Lacan indeed mentions them together, calling Electra "Antigone's double," as her acts of persistent mourning and sacrifice for the Name-of-the-Father follow the ethics of Antigone, the ethics of desire (Seminar VII 217). The mourning ceremonies performed by Orestes and Electra stand in contrast to Clytemnestra's lack of mourning, perhaps setting the background for justifying the murder of their mother.

The revenge that is demanded from Hamlet by his ghost-father, the murder of his uncle Claudius, is almost identical to the revenge required by Orestes in the Oresteia, except for one difference: in the Oresteia, it was Clytemnestra herself that murdered her husband (in some version together with Aegisthus, in others, all by herself), and thus, the revenge must also be directed towards her, not only Aegisthus. However, one must not forget Clytemnestra's reason for murdering her husband: he sacrificed her daughter Iphigenia, her own flesh and blood, to the gods, in the war of Troy.

In his seminars, Lacan occasionally mentions the myth of The Oresteia but does not analyze this myth as he does Hamlet in Seminar VI: Desire and Its Interpretation (233-354) or as he does Antigone in Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis (243-289). Lacan refers to Clytemnestra as the phallic mother who lets her child fall (Seminar X 68). By avenging the sacrifice of her daughter Iphigenia in the war, the taking of what was "rightfully hers," she loses all her other children and her life. It is here that ravage takes place; here that Clytemnestra's feminine jouissance destroys her most precious thing in the world, her children, just like Madeleine Gide, Medea, Philomela, etc. Clytemnestra laments the fact that her daughter Iphigenia, who came out of her body, was taken from her as if she were her possession. Not agreeing to separate from her daughter and properly mourn her loss, she gives in to ravage and kills Agamemnon. In her act, Clytemnestra follows the logic of the real woman, the woman who acts from her ravaging feminine jouissance. In this context, it is interesting to note that the prefix of the name Clytemnestra is homophonous to the name of the woman's genitalia: the clitoris, which also comes from Greek (Harper "clitoris").

Thus, the questions that arise from this trilogy are: Was the murder of Agamemnon by Clytemnestra a "just" murder (i.e., according to the law of the gods), or was it a betrayal of the marriage vows between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon? Moreover, was Orestes and Electra's revenge an act of "just" revenge to honor their father, or was it a despicable deed to kill the woman who gave birth to them? In psychoanalytic terms, are the murders in the center of this trilogy acts of desire in the-Name-of-the-Father, or are they acts of uncontrollable raging jouissance?

The story of the murder of Clytemnestra by her son and daughter has received numerous interpretations. The play was told by the three greatest Greek tragedians: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, all of whom followed Homer, Stesichorus, and Pindar. It is well-known that Carl Gustav Jung wanted to call the feminine Oedipus complex the Electra complex, while Freud tenaciously rejected this term (Laplanche et al. 126). Psychoanalysts from different schools did not fail to recognize the importance of this tragedy, its possible contribution to psychoanalytic theory in general, and its relevance to mother-daughter relations in particular. For example, some of these papers considered possible psychological reasons for Electra to kill her own mother, such as part of her path to individuality (Bernstein D. 101-143), while others focused mainly on the development of feminine sexuality based on this myth (Halberstadt-Freud 41-56 and Bernstein, P. 601- 628). Melanie Klein considered this myth as representing two powers that operate in the human psyche, prosecution and the inherent splitting of the object/mother into a good one and a bad one (Alford 1-27).

From a Lacanian perspective, one can say that the relationship between Electra and Electra's scheme to kill her mother (together with Orestes) demonstrates the ravage between mother and daughter, which is the destructive, never-ending battle of their relationship described above. However, I would like to treat Orestes and Electra as two parts of one split subject, similar to how Freud analyzes and deems Lady Macbeth and Macbeth in "Some Character Types Met with in Psychoanalytic Work" (322-324). Freud shows how fear that arises in Macbeth before the crime develops in Lady Macbeth afterward, and it is she who "sleeps no more," while it is he who did the murder ("Some Character Types" 323). In the same manner, I examine the act of matricide performed by the brother and sister and its consequences. Moreover, rather than viewing the Oresteia as representing the development of feminine sexuality in women, I analyze the motives for this act of Matricide as representing the psychic individuality that is comprised of both feminine jouissance and phallic desire. I do not attribute this act of Matricide to Orestes or Electra alone but to Orestes and Electra together. The spirits of revenge may prosecute Orestes, but Electra was an equal accomplice in the act, as the readers are well aware, and it is thus perplexing to see that she is not prosecuted, and the Furies only chase Orestes. It seems that psychoanalysts who analyze the matricide only from the perspective of Electra's feminine sexuality fail to recognize the duality of the payment of the symbolic debt of desire and of jouissance that is involved. The origins of revenge, I suggest, are entrenched both in the payment of the symbolic debt and in feminine jouissance and its ravage, meaning that the matricide rests both on the petals of desire (derived from a subjective, psychoanalytical-ethical stance), and in the deep, pre-genital love-hate jouissance of the girl and boy towards their mother. Feminine sexuality is depicted by the ravage between mother and daughter but exists in male subjects in various forms, and the same is true regarding phallic desire.

In Aeschylus's Oresteia, Orestes kills "the one who bore him" to avenge her murdering his beloved father (Aeschylus, The Eumenides 476-9). The act of murdering Clytemnestra and Aegisthus caused the end of the curse on the house of Atreus, as will be described in the following section. This ending is an indication that the debt of the neurotic to castration, which Lacan designates in Seminar VI as the condition for the act, takes place in this play (248-252). However, the question remains about the role of jouissance in leading Orestes (and Electra) to murder their mother, concerning the castration we assume enabled this act.

Jouissance and Das ding in the act of matricide

According to Lacan in his reading of Freud's Project for a Scientific Psychology, das Ding is the strange feature that the movement of representation, the symbolic ring, circles around (Seminar VII 44-49). Clytemnestra is a representation of das Ding, not only because she is a mother and therefore, the first forbidden object for both Orestes and Electra, but also because she instigates the movement of the plot and is the only character who is present in all three plays of the trilogy, constituting the gravitation of its unconscious, as Lacan defines das Ding (Seminar VII 61-62). das Ding or the thing can be interpreted in various ways: I would designate it as the mother's penis, the ultimately lost object that can never be attained. The mother as a sexual partner of the child, both the son and the daughter, is thus das Ding. The object of desire and the possibility of desiring is built on losing this thing (Ding), even though one never truly had it. The killing of the mother is, therefore, in many ways, the killing of das Ding, which is necessary to constitute desire. Still, this killing, this matricide, is also das Ding itself, as there is something incestuous in murdering one's mother, as is indicated in the dream of Clytemnestra that is abundant with sexual connotations.[4]

Regarding das Ding, it is also interesting to think about the relation between the word that kills the thing, i.e., the signifier that kills jouissance, in Lacan's early teaching, and language as jouissance in Lacan's later teaching. Lacan's early teaching emphasizes the signifier; Lacan follows Ferdinand de-Saussure and builds upon the split between the signifier and the signified to better articulate the Freudian unconscious as constructed from a network of signifiers ("The Subversion of the Subject" 676-677). Lacan constructs the symbolic order of language based on Freud, Jacobson, and de-Saussure, and mainly leans on Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." In this text, Freud observes a little child, who happens to be his grandson, starting to utter sounds of words to symbolize the presence and absence of his object, a wooden reel he plays with (14-15). Freud recognizes that the child's game with the wooden reel represents his mother, designating his separation from his ding and symbolizing her presence and absence. Presence and absence are symbolized by the child's utterance of the words "fort" and "da," which mean "come" and "go" in German this is what enables the constitution of the subject of the unconscious, the subject in language, and desire. It is from this constitutive Freudian text that Lacan constructs the symbolic-linguistic order: "Thus the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject's desire" (Lacan, "Function and Field" 262). By replacing the mother with the wooden reel, and the words he utters, the child kills das Ding (Lacan, "Function and Field" 262).

The story of Clytemnestra's death in Orestes's hands embodies Lacan's theory: by killing his mother, his thing, and thereby revenging his father's death, Orestes constructs the symbolic order with the birth of the law, as will be explained in what follows. The killing of the mother's jouissance is thus the condition for language, which is constituted by agreeing to replace the first object with the metaphor of language. The symbolic order is also the social order and the social pact.

However, in Lacan's Seminar XX, where Lacan articulates his theory of feminine jouissance as described above, he introduces this other type of jouissance, which is not killed by the word but enjoys it. There, Lacan says "it" (id) enjoys, "It enjoys itself only by corporatizing the body in a signifying way" (Seminar XX 23), or in another place:

"Where it speaks, it enjoys" (Seminar XX 115). To put it simply, the body enjoys the word. Feminine jouissance, the pivotal invention of Lacan in Seminar XX, extends beyond phallic jouissance and the symbolic order in the order of the real of the body. One way to solve these seemingly contradictory theories of the relation between the word and jouissance is to say that even if the word (the symbolic) does kill the thing, in Seminar XX, it becomes clearer that a residue of jouissance always remains in the body, which the body never ceases to enjoy. The murder of Clytemnestra by Orestes and Electra also includes this residue of jouissance in killing one's mother, performing an act closest to the murder of the thing in the real. Thus, it is an act that includes both desire and jouissance.

Areopagus: the birth of the Law in the Oresteia vs. in Totem and Taboo

If Hamlet crumbles before the mother's jouissance, not being able to kill her new husband (Lacan, Seminar VI 282), Orestes murders this jouissance, not with a word but with a sword.[5] However, this stabbing (which I have already indicated can be interpreted as incestuous) does not stop Clytemnestra from sending the spirits of feminine vengeance from the dead (Aeschylus, The Eumenides 120). These spirits, the Furies, are these remainders of jouissance who come to claim Orestes's debt for killing his own mother. And so, after the murder of a mother by her son, the Furies chase Orestes in the Name-of-the-Mother all over the country until he finds shelter with Pallas Athena, the goddess of justice. Athena announces a trial between the Furies and Orestes, in which Apollo serves as Orestes' advocate, as Orestes was Apollo's messenger in committing the murder. This means that the gods also support Orestes; Apollo represents the Law-of-the-Father. The question of the just vengeance that is the fil rouge of the play, the question of the act of revenge between desire and jouissance, receives the answer of a tie at the end of the trial. Was the matricide according to the law of desire or not? And what is more sacred, a marriage bed or a connection between mother and son? (Aeschylus, The Eumenides 209-220). The jury does not reach a verdict, but Athena decides to acquit Orestes.

Lacan tells us that Freud's myth, Totem and Taboo, explains how the prohibition on jouissance started but notes that it cannot have taken place in reality (Lacan, Seminar XVII 143). This means that the law (of prohibition) is a myth, but a myth that is the basis of society, which one must obey to function and to have access to desire and being. One of the consequences of the law of the prohibition of jouissance is the sexual non-rapport, articulated by Lacan in Seminar XIX (4-6). The sexual non-rapport means that there is no 'match made in heaven:' no two pieces are made to complement each other, as the phallus is imaginary. The sexual non-rapport presents itself in the Oedipus myth as the enigma that Oedipus represses by sleeping with his mother; there, in the incestuous relationship, there is a match. In what follows, I will argue that the dilemma posed by the act of matricide in the Oresteia and the questions that the final myth of the trilogy poses also have to do with the enigma of Oedipus and the impossibility of Totem and Taboo, i.e., with the impossibility of sexual relations, and with the prohibition on incest that is the law of the father that gave birth to civilized society.

The Eumenides is, in fact, a myth about the birth of the law; the trial of Orestes leads Pallas Athena to declare the constitution of the human court (Aeschylus 692- 721). The entire scene of Areopagus indicates that the law is not clear in this impossible situation of honoring the Name-of-the-Father by killing the mother. Even Orestes himself turns to Apollo to ask him whether his act was just (Aeschylus, The Eumenides 615-616).

Athena may have acquitted Orestes in respect of the law of the gods, but the Furies rejected the decision; they are not satisfied until the matricide is avenged. This tells us that the paternal metaphor, the Name-of-the-Father, cannot stand alone and is not sufficient to limit the mother's jouissance. The Furies threaten to burn the entire land with their rage and hatred and destroy humanity (Aeschylus, The Eumenides 792-800). The court that was just born is not enough vis-à-vis the jouissance of a real woman, here manifested as the spirits of a mother's vengeance. The mother's jouissance, in other words, goes beyond the law. But perhaps, it also indicates that desire is not included entirely in the Name-of-the-Father; the act of desire also includes jouissance and thus also demands payment. In addition, these spirits of vengeance are not only made of jouissance: they are also the spirits of the past, a representation of das Ding, which is the origin of desire, and the ones who protect the bond of a woman to her children, flesh of her flesh.

In a psychoanalytic act, Athena manages to appease the Furies by giving them a new function, namely, by turning them into benevolent spirits of prosperity: The Eumenides. She listens to them, understands what they need, and promises them honor and reverence throughout the human world. Eventually, they accede to the proposal, their rage is cast away by Athena, and the curse on the house of Atreus is lifted. The tragedy can now come to an end. It is only by receiving a new function that the spirits of vengeance agree not to haunt the Athenians; it is not that justice is not with the spirits of revenge, but it shows that justice is not all; it does not provide an answer for this impossible murder of a mother by her son.

In a certain respect, Totem and Taboo can be deemed a version of the Oresteia, but one that includes the father's jouissance only. In Totem and Taboo, the totemic animal symbolizes the dead father, around which the tribal society is organized; the guilt for the father's killing is represented in the totemic monument they erected for him. In honor thereof, the jouissance of the brothers who formed a pack is limited, and the prohibition of incest is kept alive. In the Oresteia, Orestes's killing of Clytemnestra is according to the Law-of-the-Father. Still, it does not consider the mother's jouissance and her prerogative as a mother not to be murdered by her children. Orestes, therefore, experiences feelings of guilt about his act of killing his mother and turns to Apollo for answers. His remorse can be equated with the brothers' feelings of guilt, even though Orestes' questioning does not rise precisely to the level of guilt. The mother's jouissance remains; the mother's totem in the Oresteia is the Furies, whose name must be honored subsequently to preserve the land and enable society to prosper.

Freud's myth thus explains the birth of the father's law. Still, it does not explain, nor does it consider, feminine jouissance, the jouissance of the mothers and sisters, for example, in the imaginary sequel of Totem and Taboo. But Totem and Taboo do not require a sequel because The Oresteia preceded it. Totem and Taboo provides the opportunity to interpret the Oresteia in view of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, contributing to its development. From comparing the Oresteia to Totem and Taboo, the Oresteia adds something, which provides knowledge about feminine jouissance, and considers the jouissance of women (who are also men), which is not all phallic. Totem and Taboo is a myth that explains how phallic jouissance is limited, controlled by the Name-of-the-Father. The Oresteia gives an answer to the impossibility of both the father and the mother's jouissance, explaining how feminine jouissance, which the law cannot limit, is controlled by receiving another function: the libido is transferred from rage to prosperity by acknowledging the Furies, giving them a place in society.

Feminine Jouissance and Desire in the Resolution of the Trilogy

From reading the Oresteia, I draw a condition for performing the act of revenge (which is an act that is born from castration): feminine jouissance. My reading suggests that this myth tells us something about the impossibility of desire without jouissance and perhaps also about the impossibility of desire included in its entirety within the law.

In the trilogy, Orestes inherited the debt of castration from Agamemnon, but he also inherited feminine jouissance from his mother. Both are a condition to act. In the play, we see desire and jouissance tied together hand in hand like curls from the same hair. By killing Aegisthus, Orestes accedes to castration and pays his father's debt, but he also takes his feminine jouissance upon himself by killing his mother. The one who avenges the murder of his father, the one who, unlike Hamlet, acts in time, avenges his mother in an act that may be interpreted as an act of jouissance, but at the same time, it is an act of desire. By killing his mother, Orestes gets his

revenge and, together with Athena's solution of the Furies turning to Eumenides, he ends the curse on the house of Atreus. The revenge of Orestes and Electra is very particular. We see that other acts of revenge that took place in the cursed house in the past generations did not manage to end the curse and did not stop the deadly repetition in this family. Orestes and Electra manage to stop the curse by killing das Ding, feminine jouissance embodied in the character of Clytemnestra, and doing something with its leftovers.

According to Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan turns the two mythologies of Freud into logic: Oedipus is turned into the logic of the phallus, and the myth of the impulses becomes the logic of object a (87). In other words, phallic and feminine jouissance are both Lacanian logics born from myths. I believe that the tale of The Oresteia allows a rereading of these two logics as one, meaning that desire and jouissance are inseparable. However, it also raises another question about desire: if jouissance and desire are inseparable, and there are two types of jouissances, doesn't this mean that there are two types of desire as well- phallic and feminine?

As I have shown, the Oresteia is a myth that considers the mother's feminine jouissance, as articulated in Lacan's later teaching, particularly Seminar XX. The solution of turning the Furies into the Eumenides, spirits that contribute to the prosperity of the land and the fulfillment of people's hopes, is another articulation of turning das Ding into an object of desire; it seems that Athena was able to read something of the desire of the Furies, to be respected and revered by the people of the land. The Oresteia, therefore, gives an indication for two desires: desire that is born from the Name-of-the-Father, depicted in the Oresteia through the acceptance of castration and inheritance by Electra and Orestes, who avenge their father's death, and desire that is transmuted from the jouissance of the mother, expressed in the transformation of the Furies into the Eumenides.

The Oresteia presents the answer to my primary question about revenge, namely, is the origin of revenge desire or jouissance? By comparing the Oresteia with Hamlet, Oedipus and Totem and Taboo, I have shown that revenge may derive both from the payment of the neurotic's debt to desire (i.e., the fulfillment of the Law-of-the-Father as the verdict of Athena indicates) and from feminine jouissance, as the incestuous act of killing one's own mother and the never-ending fury of the mother, suggest. The Oresteia, therefore, shows us that revenge includes both desire and jouissance, two main themes in Lacan's theory that were developed and underwent transmutations throughout his teaching. It implies that even an act of revenge made of desire, like that of Orestes, leaves a leftover jouissance, excess libido, that has to be transformed into something else. Therefore, the Oresteia is a constitutive myth that not only brings together desire with jouissance but also Freud's teaching with Lacan's.

ENDNOTES

1. As Gide's love letters were written to Madeleine, they can be thought of as her children as well.
2. Object petit a is one of Lacan's primary inventions, which received various meanings throughout his teaching. For the current analysis, object a constitutes both the object of desire and the cause of it.
3. This ironic passage by Shakespear proclaims that the food from the funeral of King Hamlet was served also for the wedding of Hamlet's mother with his uncle, as only a short period passed between the two events.
4. In *The Libation Bearers*, Clytemnestra dreams about a baby suckling at her breast, turning into a bloodsucking snake (Aeschylus 479-584),
5. In reference to *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, where Oscar Wilde writes that "Yet each man kills the thing he loves / . . . / The coward does it with a kiss, / The brave man with a sword!" (37-42), as if anticipating the theory of Freud and Lacan about das Ding.

References

- Aeschylus. *Oresteia: Agamemnon. Libation-Bearers. Eumenides*. Edited and translated by Alan H. Sommerstein. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.
- Alford, C. Fred. "Greek Tragedy, Confusion, and Melanie Klein: Or, is There an Oresteia Complex?" *American Imago* 50, 1993, 1-27.
- Bernstein, D. "The Female Oedipal Complex" In *Identity Conflict in Clinical Practice*. Aronson, 1993, 101-143.
- Bernstein, P. Paula. "Mothers and Daughters from Today's Psychoanalytic Perspective." *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 24, 2004, 601-628
- Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." Freud, Sigmund. *Standard Edition* Vo. 19. Hogarth Press, 1942. 1-64.
- _____. "Female Sexuality." Freud, Sigmund. *Standard Edition* Vol. 21. Hogarth Press, 1931. 221-244.
- _____. "Femininity." Freud, Sigmund. *Standard Edition* Vol 21. Hogarth Press, 1953. 112-136.
- _____. "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety." Freud, Sigmund. *Standard Edition* Vol. 20. Hogarth Press, 1959. 75-126.
- _____. "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work." *Standard Edition* Vol. 14. Hogarth press, 1916, 309-333
- _____. "Totem and Taboo: some points of agreement between the mental lives of savages and neurotics." Freud, Sigmund. *Standard Edition* Vol. 13. Routledge, 1919. vii-162.
- Halberstadt-Freud, Hilda. C., "Electra Versus Oedipus: Femininity Reconsidered." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 79, 1998, 41-56
- Harper, Douglas. *Online Etymology Dictionary*, "clitoris", <https://www.etymonline.com/clitoris>. Accessed on February 26, 2022.
- King James Version. BibleGateWay.com, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Judges%2013-16&version=KJV>
- Jacques, Lacan. "L'etourdit." *The Letter* 41. Translated by Cormac Gallagher, 2009, 31-80.
- _____. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VI: Desire and its Interpretation*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Bruce Fink, Polity Press, 2019.
- _____. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Dennis Porter, W.W. Norton, 1992.

- ____. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book X: Anxiety*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by A.R. Price, Polity Press, 2016
- ____. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Russel Grigg, W.W. Norton, 2007.
- ____. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XIX: . . . or Worse*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by A.R Price, Polity Press, 2018.
- ____. "The Youth of Gide or the Letter and Desire." *Ecrits*. Edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Bruce Fink, N.Y and London: W.W Norton and Company, 2006. 623-645.
- ____. "The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis." *Ecrits*. Op. cit. 197-269.
- ____. "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire." *Ecrits*. Op. Cit. 671-703.
- Laplanche, et al. *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*. Karnac Books and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1988, 126.
- Miller, Jacques-Alain. «Cours de Jacques-Alain Miller Les Divins Details.» Miller, Jacques-Alain. *L'orientation Lacanienne*. Jonathanleroy.Be, 2018. Accessed on November 23, 2020.
- Pope, Alexander. *The Rape of the Lock*, edited by Geoffrey Tillotson, Taylor & Francis Group, 1990. ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/tau/detail.action?docID=179102>. Accessed on February 26, 2022.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2016.
- Sophocles. *Oedipus Rex*. Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Wilde, Oscar. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Poets.org, 1881. Accessed on February 12, 2022.

~~~~~

By Dana Tor

---

This article is copyrighted. All rights reserved.

**Source:** PSYART: A Hyperlink Journal for the Psychological Study of the Arts