THE THEME OF CORRUPTED XENIA IN AESCHYLUS' ORESTEIA

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Discussions of crime and dike in the Oresteia have quite naturally had as their centre of focus the series of murders committed within the House of Atreus. While it is indeed of the greatest thematic significance that these crimes are perpetrated by kinsman against fellow kinsman in vendetta fashion, critics' preoccupation with this particular aspect of the murders has been so consuming that it has not been noted that the connection between murderer and murdered in the trilogy can also be described in terms of successive violations of the unwritten code governing the guest-host relationship.

Since the violation of the code of hospitality was no more condoned than the murder of one's kin), the function of this theme of corrupted hospitality in the Oresteia is to compound the heinousness of the murders while extending their implications beyond the

1) The fullest treatment of the guest-host relationship in the Oresteia is to be found in G.W. Regenos, Guest-Friendship in Greek Tragedy, CB 31 (1955), 49, 52, and Guest-Friendship and Development of Plot in Greek Tragedy, CB 32 (1956), 50-51, which discuss the importance of hospitality as a motif in Greek drama in general.

2) Cf. Eum. 270-71, where the Furies speak of the punishment awaiting any who sin against 'either god or some xenos or one's own dear parents'. Reiterating this warning later on in the drama, they demand that reverence be shown toward parents and the xenos tis / epistrofai xomatos (547-48). At Od. 8.546-47 Alcinous compares the ties of guest-friendship to kinship: ἀντι κασοννήσου ξένους θ᾽ ἕκτις τε τέτωκαν / ἄνερ, ὡς τ' ἔλιγον περ ἐπιφανείας πρακτίσας; likewise, at Il. 9.481-82 Phoenix remarks that Peleus received him and μ' ἔφιλησ' ὡς εἰ τ' πατήρ ὄν πάθος φίλησθι/ μοῖνον. J.P. Gould in his important article Hikeia, JHS 93 (1973), 93, notes that "The analogy with the kin is a natural one since once the due ceremonies of xenia or ἱκετεία are over, the xenos and ἱκετεία have become kin—'spiritual kin' rather than kin by blood or marriage, but nevertheless members of the group. A relationship has been entered into which is inherited and binding." For the seriousness with which the code of hospitality was taken by the Greeks, cf. Od. 14.56-58, Hes. Op. 327-34, Thgn. 143-44, Aesch. Sept. 605-8, Eur. Alc., Aeschin. 3.224.
sphere of the oikos. If adherence to a strict code of behavior toward host, guest, stranger, and suppliant was thought by the Greeks to be that which particularly set them apart from the uncivilised barbarian\(^3\), the crimes perpetrated in the Oresteia come to appear all the more threatening to the fabric of Greek society. The final play of the trilogy, however, reaffirms the sanctity of the Greek code of hospitality and sees its scope widen so as to be relevant in an Athenian civic context. Indeed, certain striking aspects of the Eumenides can only be fully appreciated in the light of this theme of abused hospitality that informs the first two plays of the trilogy.

I. Agamemnon

The importance of the code of hospitality in the Oresteia is immediately evident from the first half of the Agamemnon, with its repeated references to Paris’ violation of the guest-host relationship and the subsequent divinely-sanctioned punishment meted out to the offender and his city. The chorus of Argive elders sing on this theme in the parodos (40-71), the first stasimon (355-428), and the second stasimon (681-762), each of which makes reference to the divine overseer of the guest-host relationship, Zeus Xenios (61-2, 362, 748), and Agamemnon’s herald speaks of his master as having overturned Troy with the spade of ‘Zeus, the bearer of justice’ (525-6) as retribution for Paris’ crime. This repeated emphasis on the violation and vindication of the code of hospitality in the matter of Paris’ offence suggests that these passages do not serve as a mere backdrop for Agamemnon’s homecoming after his victorious prosecution of the war against the Trojans. More important thematically, they adumbrate other transgressions of the code.

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\(^3\) Hence the significance of the Homeric formula used by Odysseus on his wanderings when deliberating about the sort of hospitality he is likely to receive: η ἐπ’ οί γ’ ὀβροται τε καὶ ἄγιοι οὐδὲ δίκαιοι, / τε φιλόξεων, καὶ σφιν νόος ἔστι θεοὺς: Od. 6.120-21 = 9.175-76 = 13.201-2; cf. 8.575-76. The Cyclops, of course, is infamous for his savage disregard of the code of hospitality. Moreover, the episode at Phaeacia partly serves to contrast Greek and alien attitudes towards hospitality: cf. G.P. Rose, The Unfriendly Phaeacians, TAPA 100 (1969), 387-406. This theme is also commonly employed by Euripides: see IT 774-76, 1020-23; Hec. 710-14, 789-805, 1214-16, 1233-35, 1247-51; Hel. 954-58, 1017-21.