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'Sharper than a Serpent's Tooth': on Political and Domestic Clashes Between Parents and Children in Athenian History, Drama, and Comedy

"Sharper than a serpent's tooth is an ungrateful child": so the saying goes. In Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Athens is continually needled by rebellions among her many colonies. The author's detailed emphasis on these uprisings, and the parallels between them, suggests that Thucydides – the "human scientist" – is trying to get a point across. He thinks of history as a cyclical process driven by the way human beings tend to react to certain situations, and sees in the process of a daughter colony's rebellion the foundation for one of his paradigms or "rules" of human behavior: the young will almost invariably come to resent the power of their parent, be it a person or an empire, "as happens and always will happen while human nature is what it is" (H 82). In each *agon* between parent and child, "there may be different degrees of savagery, and . . . the general rules will admit of some variety"(H 82). Still, the similarities between these clashes are striking, and every new clash brings deeper insight into the Athenian psyche. Revolts are frightening and militarily inconvenient. The question is whether or not they are at all acceptable or perhaps even justified. In most cases, the rebels are severely punished, and their actions are seen as treason. However, their reasons for rebelling are usually fairly compelling, and in some cases (in Mytilene, for example), it is extremely difficult to pass judgment. Conflicts between children and parents also loom large in the Athenian plays of the time. The theater was the conduit for a deep spiritual communion between the playwright, illuminator of the city's soul, and the public: Aristophanes and Aeschylus, then, have a sensitive finger on the pulse of the city. When one examines both its history and its art/ritual, is it possible

to reconcile Athens' democratic principles with her status as a superpower (and her treatment of the colonies)? And does nurturing one's progeny with such principles make inevitable, or even encourage, such clashes?

The answers to these questions are hinted at in all the plays we have read, but most strongly in Aristophanes' *The Clouds* and Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers* and *The Eumenides*. In the work of both playwrights, a parent "suffer[s] wrong" (LB 930) at the hands of a son who is richly "justified" in what he does. However, far from being "clean" crimes, these are still tainted by the dreadfulness of the act itself. All recognize this: Orestes knows he must "turn snake to kill"(LB 550) his guilty mother, and is prepared to die for the very act of avenging his father, the hero Agamemnon. The play is full of such serpentine imagery— Orestes is compared to a treacherous viper, nursing at his mother's breast. He bites her, and drinks the blood and the milk together, and this dreadful consummation cries out so loudly for justice that the very gods of the underworld pursue him through Greece. Then, like each rebelling colony in the *History*, he is tried by a jury of Athenians—with Athena herself sitting in judgment—and sentenced accordingly. The Furies are certainly convinced of his guilt; and as they seem to represent the darker, older impulses of mankind, it is essential for Athena, as well as for her city's audience, to take their view into account. In wartime, such irrational (feminine, chaotic, passion-driven—the fuel Medea runs on) instincts tend to come to the fore, and the Athenian public for which the play was written was more than familiar with war. In *The Clouds*, too, it is clear that Pheidippides has crossed a line by shamelessly beating his father, and promising to do the same to his mother—even if his father is a scheming, vindictive idiot who represents the worst grasping tendencies of the Athenians. In Athens, as reflected in the plays, rebellion against a parent (however depraved or ridiculous that parent may be) is still deeply taboo. If the gods are to mankind somewhat like a parent is to a child, the weight of the cultural stigma against such rebellion becomes clear: rebelling against those who should be as gods is futile and almost suicidal. The Athenians had only to recall the stories of Prometheus, Hephaestus, the Titans, or any number of other tales to

remind them of that. (In *The Symposium*, Plato later recalls the theme by having Aristophanes tell his own story of how love came to be.)

Still, it would be more than a little disingenuous for an Athenian to act shocked at such audacity on the part of a child or colony. After all, they hold their city up as "an education to Greece" (H 41) because of the very democratic principles that encourage dissent and the replacement of old ideas with new by reasoned trial of their worth. Also, to cite mythology again, the most powerful gods (Kronos and Zeus) had established themselves by means of unabashed patricidal gestures. However, Athenians understood that the gods did not really provide models of human behavior, and moreover, that the city's experiment with democracy counted on its citizens *not* to emulate divine dictators. Indeed, the system depended on a certain stifling of the ambitious and the old-fashioned – those who wanted power concentrated in fewer hands. To understand whether Athenian values can withstand the contradiction between encouraging the youth to question, and the civic discipline and unity that war and empire demand, we have to understand what "Athenian values" are to begin with. In Thucydides, many different characters, Athenians and Peloponnesians alike, define Athens and its people: their "character" is so central to his study of the events of the war. A Corinthian, speaking to a Spartan assembly, warns that "if they aim at something and do not get it, they think that they have been deprived of what belonged to them already; whereas, if their enterprise is successful, they regard that success as nothing compared to what they will do next . . . Of them alone it may be said that they possess a thing almost as soon as they have begun to desire it"(H 70). The Athenians, he says, are intensely civic-minded, selfless in giving their bodies and minds over completely to the service of the state and prone to let their daring "outrun their resources"(H 70).

This seems to ring true – Pericles, in his funeral oration, invokes the total devotion of the dead (and their ancestors before them) to the great institutions of Athens, and mentions with pride how their "adventurous spirit has forced an entry into every sea and into every land; and everywhere we have left behind us everlasting memorials of good done to our

friends or suffering inflicted on our enemies"(H 41). The Athenians are a go-getting bunch, obsessed with competition and eager for conquest. By this logic, anyone should be fair game to compete with. The audience is clearly supposed to laugh at Strepsiades the fool being beaten, and to be intensely satisfied when Orestes emerges from the Paraskaena, dripping with his adulterous, murderous mother's blood; but could an Athenian audience really sit through such a scene without one twinge of discomfort? Such intense agonism in a culture means that the same belligerence that drives people to the forefront of human politics often bleeds into relationships that *nomos* dictates should remain sacred and peaceful, such as the respect of a child for its parent (or in other plays, respect of a wife for her husband and for her role in society). A purely "democratic" (ie, extreme egalitarian) take on discipline, for example, would lead to children beating their elderly parents, which common decency, then and now, does not permit. The Athenian experiment with democracy opens the door to many such "heresies" against *nomos.*

The Clouds, which is most contemporaneous with the war, illustrates this tendency most strongly: the same greed and drive for advancement that characterizes the city leads Strepsiades into ruin when his son learns to surpass him in both aggression and sophistry. In the same way, the inhabitants of the colonies, having inherited the "adventurous spirit" and will to power of Athens, quite naturally begin to question their mother city, and when her hold on them tightens in the lead-up to the war, feelings of disenfranchisement set in. Like Pheidippides, they turn on their overbearing parent. The violent suppression of the revolts in the colonies is an indication of how far the Athenian wartime empire seems to have strayed in its external policies from the rosy internal ideals of Athens the democracy. But if Athens is indeed a "tyranny" now, as Cleon asserts during the Mytilenian debate, it is certainly not the monarchy of one of Herodotus' "Asiatic tyrants." Even treacherous colonies are granted trials of a sort: to someone reading the disputes over Epidamnus, Mytilene and many others, it seems that there is a constant battle between the original values of the Athenian experiment (justice and democracy) and the new demands of national security (realpolitik solutions to make *sure* no one rebels again). The

latter, while constituting a painfully rational solution to the problem, also taps into the paranoid, vengeful side of "human nature." Carefully thought-out deterrent strategy is borne into battle on the backs of the Furies, and this new hybrid cavalry becomes a major player in the conflict that tears at the civil fabric of Athens throughout Thucydides' *History*.

Is it possible to sustain democratic, just, colonial rule when a government must simultaneously exercise control and encourage dissent? The answer appears to be no, according to Thucydides. Is it possible, in a superpower of a *polis*, to reconcile justice and *thymos* (both in itself and in its colonies)? Also, probably not. Absolute power still has the tendency to corrupt absolutely, and the wrath of the Furies at Orestes' matricide is not dissimilar to the rage of Cleon at the ritual matricide at Mytilene (a revolt against Athens is an attack on the motherland). The need to deter such an abomination from occurring again, as both Cleon and the Furies remind us, seems to justify the harsh measures each desires. The might-makes-right approach is tempting, and Thucydides portrays both Cleon and Alcibiades as men sorely tempted by it. Indeed, as the war limps on, a transition to Athens as a dictatorial military state seems inevitable. Even Pericles is willing to admit it. Thucydides' prognosis for Athens the democracy seems grim. However, Aeschylus has already presented, as a sort of etiology of the Athenian judicial process, a sort of metaphorical solution. It is impossible to banish the old "gods" of vengeance, *eros,* and *thymos* – they are powerful; and without them there would be little opportunity for the kind of mad unreason that allows people to continue making babies (erotic love), or the "adventurous spirit" and semi-suicidal bravery that allows them to conquer nations. What would Achilles have been without his *menis* (indeed*, menin*)? Aeschylus and the Athenians had the wisdom to know that human nature cannot be changed: such demons cannot simply be expelled by reason, as was attempted in later totalitarian states, which attempted to tame the human being itself. He offers no Cultural Revolution or Foucaultian utopia of docile, harmonious bodies. *The Eumenides* simply puts forth a proposal for compromise: tame part of the psyche so that the rest can function. Athena brokers a deal by which the Furies will reside in a realm of their own, underground, so

long as they nourish and bless the city of Athens. As a playwright, Aeschylus' mission is to map the contours of the Athenian psyche, so all this can be taken as a metaphor for how the collective "mind of the past" (Eu 838), with all of its chthonic darkness and dangerous potential, has been "driven under the ground" (Eu 838) and tamed. It now exists below normal operating levels of the body politic, which continues to whirr along above ground, fueled by daylight and manly reason. This appears to the playwright to be the true "Athenian" way (as dictated by Athena herself) of reconciling the two forces: civilization means shoving the basest (most ardent but most archaic) impulses down deep to allow for rational discourse and fairness up above. But the wise man, Aeschylus seems to suggest, would do well not to underestimate or take the Furies for granted. One must live with both, trying always to keep the rational, manly side on top, but never forgetting that human beings (between the beasts and the angels, according to Aristotle) can at times benefit from the wantonness the Furies have to offer.

Where, then, does this leave the strained relationship between parent and child? Thucydides tries not to moralize too overtly on the colonial rebellions in the *History*, and Aeschylus stops short of passing ultimate moral judgment on Orestes' case. Although Athena is in the hero's favor, the jury of Athenians is split down the middle. There is still great tension between our perception of the wickedness of the act and of the necessity of the act (of strife, or agonism in general) for growth, justice and progress. Mytilene's fate hangs in the balance between these two contrary impulses, and the town is spared a total massacre only by the very human indecision of the Athenians (we cannot all be Athena). The Melians, associated with the Persians, are slaughtered. These foreign agitators, who represented all that Athens had learned to hate and fear in the barbaric figures of Medea and the Furies, are not heard out by Athena's city. It turns out that both sides always have their own Furies: the Mytilenian deities, for instance, who drive a colony to rebellion, and the Athenian ones who foam at the mouth for its destruction. A more jagged, more complicated version of Athena's deal emerges: spare the rebellious child, but castrate him of his Furies, while indulging your own. In this case, "Orestes" does not walk away

unscathed, and Athens' Furies continue to walk the streets, uncontained and unsated. Aeschylus' vision of Athens begins to seem more like a dream. What once was a city of youth and new ideas has begun, like Kronos, to devour its own children, and with them her hope of future greatness.

Simple common sense dictates that one generation must eventually replace the previous one. There *must* be conflict in that transition, because it is almost unmanly *not* to become a man by surpassing one's father (and this is where Freud steps in). Any attempt at preventing the development of one's children leads almost inevitably to one's own downfall. A society that permits no audacity from its young grows stagnant and saps the very force that made it possible in the first place. The Greek perspective on this is that all empires, like all generations, have a lifespan beyond which fate does not allow them to continue. The Athens are of the opinion that their city is different, but by the end of the *History,* the suspicion is creeping into Thucydides' prose that even Athens may be ephemeral (*et in Athenia ego?*). To date, no one has really solved the problem of the "ungrateful child." Neither, for that matter, has any empire I know of learnt to age gracefully and unselfishly in relation to its own growing progeny.

Guide to citations:

H – Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*

(cited by section number)

LB – Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers*

Eu – Aeschylus' *The Eumenides*