Analysis of Matriarchy to Patriarchy in *The Oresteia*

The shift from matriarchy to patriarchy in Aeschylus’s ancient Greek tragedy *The Oresteia* happens gradually. The trilogy’s first play ends with a strong sense of matriarchy, portrayed by Clytemnestra after she murders her husband Agamemnon. The trilogy then shifts into a short state of relative limbo after Clytemnestra is murdered by her son Orestes and Orestes exiles himself from his home, leaving no one to assume power. Finally, patriarchy is re-established through the trial of Orestes by Athena. Throughout the play, this power shift can be seen not only on the mortal level but the divine level as well, with the play ultimately culminating in a new societal structure centered around democracy enforced by the restructuring of the Furies into the Eumenides.

*Agamemnon*, the trilogy’s first play, begins with Clytemnestra forcefully taking power from her husband Agamemnon who has just returned from overthrowing Troy. She does not do this without good reason, however. Before heading off to war, Agamemnon ritualistically sacrificed their virgin daughter Iphigenia, viewing it as a necessity for his army’s success in the battles to come. The sacrifice of their daughter solidifies Clytemnestra’s hatred for her husband, and she begins plotting his destruction over the ten years that he is gone. She murders Agamemnon within his palace, shortly after his arrival in Argos. After this act of bloodshed, she announces to the chorus surrounding the palace that her lover Aegisthus will rule over them now. This announcement is quickly proven to be empty, as Clytemnestra immediately begins directing Aegisthus’ actions, showing who is truly in charge in their relationship. Her behavior challenges the ideals of what the quintessential ancient Greek woman was supposed to represent. Not only that, but her desire to rule over Argos goes against fundamental ideas about rule in ancient Greece. Clytemnestra epitomizes the flaws feared by ancient Greek men. She allows her emotions to cloud her judgement, and she refuses to abide by ancient Greek societal expectations of her gender.

Matriarchy was a foreign and unaccepted concept in ancient Greece. The idea of women holding a seat of power is something that counteracts the political structures in place at the time, one in which men held political and societal authority while women remained complacent, submissive, and uneducated. The reason for the political structures being the way that they were revolved around not only the societal gender roles in place, but the beliefs of how the minds of men and women worked in ancient Greece. Men were regarded as logical and rational in their decision making, something that was vital for someone in a position of leadership. Women, on the other hand, were regarded as illogical, irrational, and prone to letting their emotions rule over their judgement. Because of these “flaws”, women were deemed unfit to rule or hold any leadership positions in their society. Instead, they were expected to have children, remain at home, and take care of the household. Clytemnestra challenges all the societal norms of women in ancient Greece, and thus her matriarchal rule is doomed from the beginning. The basic beliefs in how Greek society should be ruled are challenged in the last play of the trilogy. However, before that takes place the political climate in Argos is thrown into turmoil during the aftermath of Orestes’ vengeful murder of Clytemnestra.

Orestes’ actions in *The Libation Bearers* bring Clytemnestra’s tyranny to an end. After hearing of his father’s death at the hands of his mother, Orestes returns home seeking justice and vengeance for his father’s death. He travels to Argos under the guise of a traveler, and spreads the lie to his mother that Orestes had died. This gained him entrance to the palace where his mother resided, and he murders her and her lover Aegisthus after revealing his identity. However, after murdering his mother, Orestes becomes racked with guilt for the act he has committed. This intense, primal emotion of guilt and remorse brings forth the Furies, who immediately begin to hound him, appearing to him wherever he looks. He chooses to exile himself from his homeland because of his remorse, leaving Argos without a leader. At this point in *The Oresteia*, the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy is in a metaphorical limbo. The matriarchy lead by Clytemnestra has been toppled, but Orestes refuses to take up the mantle of ruler that is rightfully his. And in his absence, no man (or woman for that matter) chooses to take control and lead the people of Argos. During his exile, the Furies continue to haunt Orestes, preventing him from re-establishing the patriarchy that his father had in place before his demise. *The Eumenides* brings an end to this period of limbo between matriarchy and patriarchy.

The absence of any governmental leader left in Orestes’ wake is representative of the old ways of rule, before the new Gods came to be. Chaos and primal fear were the chief motivators before the establishment of democratic order, and the main contributors to these emotions were the old Gods. The old Gods embody that which both Agamemnon and Clytemnestra represent: fear, blood vendettas, and a lack of remorse.

The final play of the trilogy, *The Eumenides*, centers around the trial of Orestes by a divine court. The court is judged over by the Goddess Athena, with Apollo defending Orestes from the Furies who condemn him for the murder of Clytemnestra. In this play, Orestes is forced to face his previous decision to kill his mother, and face judgement at the hands of the Gods. It is during this play that the Gods intervene in the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy. As Athena judges Orestes, she eventually decides to pardon him of his crimes, deeming his actions to be less severe than those committed by Clytemnestra, namely her killing her own husband. In acquitting Orestes, Athena introduces a new patriarchal society that, rather than revolving around primal emotions and blood vendettas, is kept in check by fear of breaking the laws that are put in place to prevent unnecessary violence and bloodshed. Rationality and reason are both things that are associated with men in ancient Greece, and are the pinnacle of this new democratic society.

Not only is there a shift in government from matriarchy to patriarchy for the mortal citizens of Greece, but also a change in structure on a divine level as well. The Furies, which came about as a direct result of Clytemnestra’s rage, are a representation of a societal structure based around the ideas of matriarchy, albeit on the extreme negative end of the spectrum. They are the embodiment of the worst fears that Greek men have regarding women, and represent on a metaphorical level the worst possible version of a matriarchal society. Athena’s suggestion to incorporate them into the new democratic society that she establishes at the end of *The Oresteia*, but in a way that removes the worst part of who they are (their relationship to primal fear and vengeance) and replaces those bad traits with traits befitting the “ideal” Greek woman, further solidifies the patriarchal nature of said new society. Additionally, the fact that Athena is the Goddess who sets up the new society is another indicator of the shift from matriarchy to patriarchy since she represents the stance of her father Zeus, as she was born from his mind

The shift from matriarchy to patriarchy in *The Oresteia* is gradual, but the result is a society that is drastically different than where it started. Primal emotions of fear and blood vengeance that have long since been the accepted way of life in ancient Greece give way to a society that revolves around reason and logic. This new society does not wholly get rid of the primal feelings that previously ruled, but rather adapts them so that they have new meaning and purpose. Thus, although by the end of *The Oresteia* the political structure has transitioned back to patriarchy, it is a new form of patriarchy created by the new Gods.