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Spectres of the Stage: Ancient, Dramatic Apparitions Across Time and Culture

Ghosts appear in plays and stories from all over the world and through time serving similar purposes within their performance. These ghosts rouse the actions of characters, instill fear, and teach lessons. Each ghost has a role to play in their story which may seem unique to the situation but upon closer inspection appear eerily similar to each other. Most of these dramatic apparitions appear out of regret, guilt, and a sense of injustice.

One of the most widely known Greek mythologies, House of Atreus, features plenty of death and violence that typically results in *biaiothanatoi*, a type of ghost that according to Greek beliefs formed from being killed by acts of violence (*biaiothanatoi*). Many plays from Greek and Roman classical theatre adapt the story of the House of Atreus; therefore one must somewhat acquaint themselves with the story before proceeding. To make quite a long story much shorter: Tantalus, a son of the king of gods Zeus, offended the gods by sacrificing his son Pelops as an offering. The gods cursed Tantalus for this horrific deed and his descendants to suffer in constant turmoil. Family feuds, blood killing blood, wife killing husband, and other such horrors haunted this family for three generations after Pelops until Orestes, son of Agamemnon, finally releases the curse through a trial with Athena and Apollo (Struck, "House of Atreus").

The Oresteia tells the story of the last two generations under this curse. Written by Aeschylus, the earliest Greek tragedian largely attributed in adding a second character/actor to scenes creating dialogue form, *The Oresteia* focuses largely on Orestes and his parents, Agamemnon and Clytemnestra (Struck, "Aeschylus"). Clytemnestra, originally the protagonist of the first play *Agamemnon* in which she kills her husband from whom the play takes its name,

dies at the hands of her child Orestes eight years after the events of the *Agamemnon*. In her final moments she attempts to persuade Orestes not to kill her with many different techniques. In one line, she warns him, “Take care: beware the hounds of wrath that avenge a mother” (*Libation Bearers* 924). This sets her up as a vengeful spirit even before her death. Unfortunately for her, her words do nothing to stop Orestes who believes himself doomed whether or not he kills her and fears the gods more than his mother’s wrath. In an act of violence off stage, not seen by the audiences of Greek theatre, Orestes kills Clytemnestra. She returns as a ghost in the final play of Aeschylus’ series. The “hounds” which she invoked in *Libation Bearers* turn out to be the Furies, Greek goddesses of vengeance, and take up the mantle to pursue Orestes and punish him for the blood he spilt.

At the beginning of *The Eumenides*, the last play of *The Oresteia*, Orestes hides in the Oracle’s temple at Delphi where Apollo puts the Furies to sleep allowing Orestes a quick escape. At this time, Clytemnestra mystically appears on stage. She has become a ghost. She screams and yells at the sleeping Furies to avenge her. Among her wails to rouse the claws of her vengeance, Clytemnestra laments the unfair treatment,

I’m *speaking* to you now!

I’m telling you how deeply I am blamed:

despite the things they did to me—my kin—

though I was slaughtered by a matricide—

no high-up deity contends for *me* (*Eumenides* 97-101).

In just these lines, one can hear the anguish and regret Clytemnestra feels. She avidly points out how the story has been set up by the gods from the beginning and this became her chance to exact revenge for her earthly body to reach peace in the afterlife.

This is the first appearance of a ghost in *the Oresteia*. Mysticism itself exists as a common trope as the ancient Greeks believe it to be as to how the world worked. Cassandra from *Agamemnon* was a prophetess; Apollo and Athena, gods of mythology, appear in *The Eumenides*. There are three reasons for which Clytemnestra fascinates the audience: she was the protagonist of the first Oresteian play, she is the victim of the second play, and she is the only character in the plays the audience sees in two different states of *animated* being. The states being either alive or dead. There are plenty of deaths in this trilogy alone that could have resulted in a ghost: Iphigenia, the guiltless sacrifice; Agamemnon, the adulterous war-hero; Cassandra, the innocent prisoner; Aegisthus, the arrogant lover; Clytemnestra, the lonely queen, reanimates her soul to seek her revenge, unlike the others..

In the broader story, Clytemnestra lost the most of all the people who were wronged, or at least she felt the most hurt from the losses. Therefore, her ascension from the dead symbolizes the greater regret and guilt that she experienced more than other characters who had been killed in *The Oresteia*. Not only does her ghost appear as a physical manifestation of her own guilt, she also became the manifestation of Orestes' guilt over having killed her at his own hands. At the end of *Libation Bearers* and the beginning of *The Eumenides* he runs away from his own manifestations of guilt, the Furies, which no other character can see. However, he never sees the ghost of Clytemnestra and never gets to have that confrontation after he kills her. It is difficult to then categorize Clytemnestra as purely a manifestation of Orestes guilt as she acts outside of his perception and of her own will.

Clytemnestra anticipates her own guilt before she dies. "We are to perish by treachery, just as we committed murder" (*Libation Bearers* 888). This quote implies that Clytemnestra knew of her imminent and inevitable death and that, on some level, she deserved it. This shows

that she does hold guilt and regret for the deaths she caused although she still feels justified in her execution. That justification causes her to come back from the dead to continue to seek vengeance for her own life.

Another play featuring ghosts finds itself far removed from Aeschylus' ancient Greece. *Snow in Midsummer* by playwright Guan Hanqing written in Yuan Dynasty China features a ghost who, like Clytemnestra, the audience gets to view from the two states of animated being, alive and dead. However, instead of being separated between three plays it is encapsulated into one play. Dou-E dies after sacrificing herself in filial duty in place of her mother-in-law for a murder neither of them committed. Dou-E's role within the play contradicts itself as other characters treat her loosely and berate her yet she maintains the utmost virtuosity and piety. In her youth her father married her off to the Tsai family. After her marriage, her husband died 2 years later, leaving her widowed and without children.

A debtor tries to kill off Mistress Tsai, her mother-in-law, but a man and his son save her. The two men demand marriage to Mistress Tsai and Dou-E as payment for saving her life. Mistress Tsai could only agree to protect her life but Dou-E followed her virtue and remained loyal to her late husband. This causes some conflict between the characters and the man's son tries to poison Mistress Tsai secretly but ends up poisoning his own father for which Mistress Tsai and Dou-E get blamed. Dou-E takes the fall as she fears for Mistress Tsai's health and quietly goes to execution. At the time of her execution she made three vows: that if she were innocent, her blood would not fall to the ground, but rise up a white ribbon, that heaven would send down three feet of snow to cover her body although the midsummer sun burns hot, and that the district of her execution would suffer three years of drought (Guan Act IV). She promised these three affirmations and died. What she promised came to pass yet she was still unsatisfied.

Dou-E had still died unjustly. Thus when the opportunity arose that a minister came to check the cases of the district, Dou-E could finally clear her name. The minister, also her father, finding her case and how she had died began to scold her, as if being executed wasn't enough. She recaps the entire story, which has been somewhat paraphrased in the above two paragraphs, to her father (and the audience) before finally urging him to expose the truth and clear her name.

Dou-E demonstrates some of the most important core values of Chinese life that essentially boil down to filial piety and loyalty. It is curious to think about how the play portrays Dou-E as a filial daughter and loyal widow which are highly valued traits of women at the time only for her to be constantly oppressed and slandered to the point where she has to give up her own life. The only redemption she gets manifests through the heavens which grant her wishes and the one she forges for herself by appearing in her father's study and directly telling him the truth from beyond the grave. Like Clytemnestra, Dou-E has to appear on the earth herself to even attempt to get justice for her life. Audiences may debate and doubt Clytemnestra's death and justifications but may not question that of Dou-E. The title of the play more closely translates into English as "*The Injustice Done to Dou E.*" Even the playwright tells the audience from even before the start of the play that what Dou-E goes through is unjust.

Dou-E comes back from the dead to assign guilt and to fix the regret she has that she could never clear her name properly during such an improper investigation. Her own regret over having died drives her to clear her name and maintain a clean reputation for herself and her family. Like Clytemnestra, the original force of her death and reanimation is her family. Dou-E knows herself to be guiltless, verified by the heavens, and vindicated by her father. Of the three ghosts in this paper, Dou-E is the only one that receives a "happy ending," if one can call being dead a happy ending.

The next play features a ghost somewhat different from the past two but still shares the underlying themes. *Thyestes* by Seneca, was written in the 1st century AD in Rome, about 500 years after *The Oresteia*. *Thyestes* also features a story from the House of Atreus. This story takes place with Orestes' grandfather (also Agamemnon's father) Atreus and the feud with his brother Thyestes, Agamemnon's uncle. In the beginning, Thyestes lives peacefully in exile while Atreus stewes in anger over Thyestes allegedly sleeping with Atreus' wife as well as trying to take the throne. Atreus decides to plan his revenge and take action before Thyestes has the chance to kill him. His plan involves luring Thyestes back to Mycenae for a truce but then he kills Thyestes' sons and cooks them into food to make Thyestes eat them (Seneca). However, the ghost of this play is a bit surprising.

At the very beginning of *Thyestes*, the ghost appears. It is Tantalus, the very founder of the curse. In the family tree, he is the grandfather of Atreus and Thyestes and has long since passed away, tortured forever in the underworld for his misdeeds to the gods. He has a lengthy dialogue where he laments his position and woefully asks the ones who bring his punishment, the Furies, what new punishment the gods assign him to do in the world of the living. Compared to the other ghosts, Tantalus is rather unique in that he opens the play as the prologue and assigned the role of driving the plot for his punishment. The Furies tell Tantalus his punishment, "Fill them with evil lust for battle, shake their raving souls with storms of insane strife" (Seneca 88-89). Another moment that makes him unique is that the gods forced him to return to Earth not for the sake of his own vengeance or unjust death as Clytemnestra or Dou-E, but against his very will to invoke unjust deeds as punishment for his offense to the gods.

A core reason for Tantalus' differences stems from the playwright Seneca's values as a stoic. The stoic ideas of the soul and behavior were rather contrary to those that followed

Platonic or Aristotelian schools of thought. Whereas Aristotle and Plato argued for the permanence or near permanence of the soul (insolubility), Stoics believed the soul was made of matter and thus would dissipate upon being released from the body (Lorenz). This also changes Tantalus' role in the play. Two of the core foundations of stoicism are avoidance of overwhelming passion and *memento mori*. Tantalus punishment as ordained by the gods fulfills both of these. For one, death already remains his state of being and he currently must pay his comeuppance showing the enforcing of *memento mori* ("remember death" in English). As for the former, Tantalus must stand chin deep in clean rushing water unable to drink, with fruit from a tree hanging above his hand just out of reach. This punishment of control and restraint greatly suits the tastes of a stoic.

Tantalus himself begs to go back to that punishment instead of encouraging the licentious and violent behavior of his descendants, "It is my place to suffer, not be myself a punishment to others" (Seneca 90-91). Tantalus clearly has enough guilt and regret that he openly admits to the Furies and audience. Even his name expresses this, as it means "the sufferer" or "the bearer" (*Tantalus*). Most importantly, in true stoic fashion, Tantalus takes responsibility for his past actions although he still has no choice but to relieve his guilt and regrets on his descendants, thus perpetuating the cycle of death and despair in his household.

The three ghosts, Clytemnestra, Dou-E, and Tantalus, share the themes of regret and guilt despite being separated by place and time. From 5th century BC Greece up to Yuan Dynasty China, these ghosts all give us a glimpse into the innate nature and beliefs of humanity. Although the minutia of those beliefs may differ, the core underlying emotions remain the same. Ghosts come back with regrets to fulfill what they were unable to in their lives. In literature they are tools to present a physical manifestation of the energies a character may experience such as guilt

and grief. No matter what era or what place, ghosts exist within the stories the people tell. The names may change and so may the setting, but the ghosts represent a fear that humanity has of leaving behind unfinished business and a fantasy of being able to fix mistakes for oneself. In drama, these ghosts will continue to haunt the stage.

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