World Literature Assignment 1

How do Sophocles and Aeschylus suggest fate as the root cause of Antigone
and Clytemnestra’s actions?

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In *Agamemnon* and *Antigone*, Aeschylus and Sophocles use similar methods to suggest fate as the cause of Antigone and Clytemnestra’s actions. They both refer to the idea of evil continuously plaguing a family over time—like the House of Atreus, Agamemnon’s family. Aeschylus also employs the ‘house’ as a literal house, whereas Sophocles uses the ‘house’ to refer exclusively to ‘family’. In addition, both authors use prophecy, but with different effects due to the timing and content of the prophecies. They also suggest human will as an alternative cause for Antigone and Clytemnestra’s actions, and by doing so, make the causes of these actions ambiguous. However, Aeschylus and Sophocles differ in their portrayal of fate. Aeschylus portrays fate as an entity, the Spirit, while Sophocles portrays it as a recurring idea. I very much enjoyed reading both plays, but I enjoyed reading *Agamemnon* more, mostly because I identify with Clytemnestra more than Antigone.

Sophocles and Aeschylus both use the idea of evil plaguing a family through generations. “The ancient evils of Labdacus’ house” (Sophocles, 185) in *Antigone* parallels the evil history of the House of Atreus in *Agamemnon*. Aeschylus, however, also uses the ‘house’ to refer to the royal house of Argos—a literal house—while Sophocles uses the ‘house’ to refer exclusively to ‘family’. *Antigone*’s Chorus mentions the house here:
But for those whose house has been shaken by God
there is never a cessation of ruin;
it steals on generation after generation
within a breed.        (Sophocles, 185)

A “house that has been shaken by God” can be interpreted as a family, with evil being passed from generation to generation. By blaming this ruin on God, the Chorus asserts that a higher power controls their actions. Similarly, after the murders of Cassandra and Agamemnon, the Chorus blames the Spirit for the disaster: “The Spirit . . . has the house gripped tight” (Aeschylus, 96). If the Spirit literally resides and stays within the royal house of Argos, then the evil he inflicts is unescapable within these boundaries.

However, it can also be argued that the Spirit does not inhabit the physical house of Argos, but the psyche of its human inhabitants:

Furious Spirit, you swoop
down on the house, on the two
heirs of Tantalus, and
hold sway through women
of like mind        (Aeschylus, 96)

Here, the ‘house’ refers to Agamemnon’s family. The main difference between the Spirit controlling the House of Atreus and the royal house of Argos is who the Spirit can harm.

But in both cases the Spirit is blamed for evil just as Aphrodite is blamed for lust in other Greek stories, when it would seem that human emotions are, in fact, to blame. This removes people from control of their emotions, putting control in the hands of a higher being. We experience fear for the terrible adversity the Spirit plagues on the house, adversity that could affect anybody. We also pity the victims—Agamemnon, Cassandra, and Clytemnestra—due to the inevitability of their downfall, and because the extent of their suffering far outweighs their crimes.
Aeschylus represents fate as an entity, embodied as the Spirit, whereas Sophocles portrays fate as a recurring idea. The Spirit personifies evil and fate. Characters refer to “him” or “he”, and associate him with human traits, like hunger and thirst—“He feeds the lust / for blood deep in the belly, the thirst / to lap it up. . .” (Aeschylus, 96). The Spirit is not a god, not worshipped, but a figment of the royal house of Argos’ residents’ imagination, which makes him the representation of an element of their psyche, notably evil and fate. Moreover, as the Spirit’s dominion is limited to the royal house of Argos, and within this dominion he has complete control—the Spirit is “never to be denied its vengeance” (Aeschylus, 50)—he is fate within his boundaries. The Spirit and fate thus become synonymous. By contrast, in Antigone, though the gods are blamed repeatedly for adversity, the gods never represent fate. They are beings who administer fate, but not fate itself. Furthermore, Sophocles focuses on the theme of repeating misfortune through time within a family, illustrated by Antigone’s bold reference to Oedipus at the beginning of the play—“evils that stem from Oedipus” (Sophocles, 161)—rather than the gods’ role in bringing about evil. The representation of fate and evil through the Spirit induces significantly more fear within the reader because we cannot identify ‘him’ as human, making it mysterious. It shows no mercy and one cannot protect oneself from it. However, the gods can be identified with humans. We share similar emotions, including love, making it easier to relate to them and find security. No accommodation can be made with a mysterious, loveless curse like the House of Atreus’ Spirit.

Both Aeschylus and Sophocles use prophecy to suggest fate, but they produce different effects due to timing and content of the prophesies. Cassandra’s prophecy of events to come suggests that these events are predetermined and unchangeable. As
Aristotle writes in his *Poetics*, “Tragedy is an imitation . . . of events inspiring fear or pity. Such an event is best produced when the events come on us by surprise” (Ch. 9).

Through Cassandra’s prophecy, Aeschylus reduces the surprise—and thereby the pity and fear—felt by the audience. Sophocles, on the other hand, incorporates Teiresias’ prophecy late in the tragedy, so we still feel surprised at Antigone’s sentencing. Although Teiresias accurately predicts Creon’s fate—

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you will not outlive many cycles more
of this swift sun before you give in exchange
one of your own loins bred, a corpse for a corpse
(Sophocles, 202)
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—this comes after Antigone’s sentencing, so any information about Antigone’s death no longer shocks us. Teiresias’ prophecy nevertheless suggests that the future cannot be changed, that Antigone *must* die. The prophecy reveals to Creon his errors, causing him to reverse his decision, and briefly renews the reader’s hope of a happy ending. But the revelation of Haemon and Antigone’s deaths once again dashes the reader’s hope, which further increases the pity we feel toward Antigone.

Sophocles and Aeschylus both suggest will as an alternative cause for Antigone’s actions, though Sophocles does so to a greater extent. During her sentencing, Antigone says, “Life was your choice, and death was mine” (Sophocles, 183) to Ismene, clearly expressing that Antigone herself chose her actions. However, Antigone subsequently says, “. . . my life died / long ago, to serve the dead” (Sophocles, 183), which clearly suggests that her fate had been written. The Chorus also sends a mixed message:

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No generation frees another, some god
strikes them down; there is no deliverance.
Here was the light of hope stretched
over the last roots of Oedipus’ house,
and the bloody dust due to the gods below
has mowed it down—that and the folly of speech
and ruin’s enchantment of the mind.
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(Sophocles, 185)
The Chorus initially supports the idea of fate—through the role of the gods—but then also attributes Antigone’s misfortunes to “the folly of speech” and “ruin’s enchantment of the mind”. “Ruin’s enchantment of the mind” can be interpreted as misfortune’s ability to impair one’s reason, which alludes to Creon’s decision not to bury Polynices. If Creon had not decided to leave him unburied, Antigone could not have broken the law, implying that human will causes Antigone’s actions, not fate. Even when implying that fate caused Antigone to act, Sophocles suggests both that the gods administer fate and that the evil comes from Oedipus’ actions, further confusing us. In *Agamemnon*, Aeschylus explicitly suggests that fate is the root of Clytemnestra’s actions, such as in this choral ode:

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Woe, unassuagable woe,  
and all through the will of Zeus, 
source of all that is, 
doer of all that is done, 
for without Zeus what 
is accomplished among us? What 
of all these things is void 
of god, not god-ordained?  
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(Aeschylus, 96)

Here the Chorus asserts that Zeus is the source of everything accomplished among humans, unambiguously stressing the overwhelming influence of the gods in human events. However, there are some implications that Clytemnestra acted of her own will. She carefully plans her husband’s murder, indicating free will. Also, after killing Agamemnon and Clytemnestra she speaks to the Chorus:

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This is Agamemnon, my husband,  
now a corpse, the work of this right hand, 
a righteous workman. There’s nothing more to say.  
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(Aeschylus, 93-94)

By saying Agamemnon’s death was “the work of [her] right hand” and “there’s nothing more to say”, Clytemnestra suggests that nothing else influenced her to kill Agamemnon
but her own will. She has a logical reason for her decision (Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigeneia), which supports this argument. But later she also says:

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Masquerading in the image
of this dead man’s mate, the old and
pitiless avenger of Atreus
in a manic feast
cut him down as payment
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(Aeschylus, 97)

“The old and pitiless avenger of Atreus” clearly refers to the Spirit, and the “dead man’s mate” refers to Clytemnestra. By asserting that the Spirit somehow acted through her in the murder of Agamemnon and Cassandra, Clytemnestra reverts back to her stance that she had no control over her actions. This ambiguity between fate and will in both tragedies leaves the reader yearning for answers, a pleasurable experience because, as Aristotle wrote in his *Poetics*, “to learn gives the liveliest pleasure” (Ch. 6). Although Aeschylus suggests both will and fate as the root of Clytemnestra’s actions, the allusions to fate far outweigh the few allusions to will. The implications by Sophocles are more balanced between fate and will, making the question between fate and will significantly more ambiguous in *Antigone* than *Agamemnon*.

I deeply respect both Sophocles’ and Aeschylus’ plays, but I enjoyed reading *Agamemnon* more than *Antigone*. Both plays evoke questions that are close to my feelings: Why do we suffer? Who do we blame for our suffering? I’ve come closer to answering these questions by reading *Antigone* and *Agamemnon*. The most significant factor influencing my enjoyment is the difference between Antigone and Clytemnestra. They’re both strong women, but Antigone lacks the spark I see in Clytemnestra. Antigone gives up on life, preferring to die heroically than live with the knowledge that she could have buried Polynices. She shows that she values life by lamenting her
unmarried state—“I have known nothing of marriage songs” (Sophocles, 193)—yet her despair overwhelms her desire for marriage and life. Clytemnestra, on the other hand, would never let anybody drag her out to a cave to die; she’s a survivor. When Agamemnon kills Iphigeneia, she doesn’t think of conciliation, but prepares her revenge patiently and strategically. Although I sympathize with Antigone, I definitely identify more with Clytemnestra’s characteristics than with Antigone’s emotional lunge at death.
Bibliography


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