Revenge and Justice

Name

Institution

Revenge and Justice

Practically following the concept of an eye for an eye will eventually leave everyone blind. Aeschylus’s trilogy Oresteia is a textbook embodiment of this saying but it also provides a perfect solution for the said problem. Indeed, the first and second plays *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroi* respectively reflect how terrible the revenge can be. Further, the two plays also show revenge as an endless cycle of suffering, since the satisfaction of one aspect of revenge only introduces a second one forming a perpetual cascade of suffering. However, Aeschylus does not just express the problem and leave his audience in limbo as he also introduces a worthy solution to it. The solution is a concept that is still in use for thousands of years after the play was written. It also entails a jury trial, presided over by a judge. This idea is conceived by goddess Athena, one of the many gods that play a crucial role throughout the play. The jury trial is carefully carried out and a vote is taken in the end. Albeit the vote ends in a stalemate, Athena moves in to use her vote as a veto, concluding the process. The end result is the transformation of the furies, who are gods of revenge into gods of kindness, thus ending the recurring pain and suffering caused by revenge.

Four crucial events dominate the theme of revenge and justice, three of which involve revenge with the final one engendering justice through a trial. The first happens way before the setting of the play and does not involve any of the play’s characters. According to a narrative given by Aegisthus, immediately after the death of Agamemnon, Atreus had tricked Thyestes to eat two of his own sons (Aeschylus, 21). This beastly act is wort the highest level of revulsion as well as a good reason for revenge. It, therefore, becomes the trigger for the cascade of revenges that dominates all three plays. It is also worth to notice that as the acts of revenge continue, the revulsion of the vengeance gets only worse. After the aforesaid act of Atreus, his son Aegisthus swears vengeance upon the family of Atreus and will not rest until the vengeance is carried out. Being unable to avenge against Atreus himself, he visits the vengeance upon the heir of Atreus.

The second act that forms the basis of the theme of revenge versus justice happens in the first play. Aegisthus takes advantage of the ten-year absence of Agamemnon, who has gone to superintend over the great Trojan War to seduce Agamemnon’s wife, Queen Clytemnestra. Through the seduction, Aegisthus seeks to ensure that Agamemnon dies in the hands of someone he loves. Agamemnon makes a triumphant return after the sacking of Troy, which makes Greece the dominant force in the Aegean Sea (Aeschylus, 11). This triumphant moment for Agamemnon became completely ruined by revenge from all of Greece and the City of Argo. Instead of Clytemnestra happily welcoming her victorious husband, bile has already been sown within them by Aegisthus. She stealthy approaches her unsuspecting husband and slays him with a knife in a bathtub (Aeschylus, 19). It is only then the triumphant Aegisthus arrives with his troops and claims the barbaric murder as a victory for his cause of vengeance: "What a glorious day of retribution!” (Aeschylus, 21)

The Third Act within the theme of revenge versus justice takes place in the second play; Choephoroiis dominant within it. The death of Agamemnon greatly grieved one close kin of the fallen king as well as one mighty god. The kin to Agamemnon is Orestes, and the offended god is Apollo. The latter instructs and empowers Orestes to avenge the death of his father, who, in essence, had died based on an accusation for the crime he did not commit. Therefore, Orestes moved in to avenge for the innocent blood of his great father and won the Trojan War. Upon arrival at Argos, Orestes enlists his sister Electra to assist him on his path of vengeance. Through deceit, Orestes gains access to the palace at Argos, and not only kills Aegisthus, but also his own mother Clytemnestra (Aeschylus,18-20).

As indicated, the acts of revenge keep getting worse than the initial cause of the cascade of death, suffering, and vengeance. The initial act was that of a man causing his own brother to eat his children. The second act was that of a man seducing the wife of his second cousin. This man then causes the said wife to kill her husband, making herself available for marriage and achieving revenge all in the same blow. The final act of revenge is, however, the worst of them all. In the making of revenge, a man kills his own mother, even after the said mother reminded him that she carried him in her womb and fed him as a child. The words “You are the snake I bore and fed*”* reflect the pain of a mother who is forced to stand in terror before her own son who is about to take her life away (Aeschylus, 20). This final act of vengeance is so barbaric and wicked that it awakens the wrath of the gods. The vengeance of men creates a crisis between the gods, with Apollo taking the side of Orestes and helping him escape from the Furies. Ghosts also join the path of vengeance with the ghost of Clytemnestra inciting the Furies to kill her own son Orestes so as to avenge her. In that time revenge has roused the earth, the heavens and even the land of the dead, and thus has reached a critical point.

The final act within the theme of revenge versus justice is an act of intervention within the critical situation, spanning different worlds and purely created through vengeance. This takes place in the third play, *The Eumenides*. Orestes has been the focus of the Furies, who are trying to destroy him, and Apollo who is seeking to save him. The entry of his mother’s ghost into the fray and against him tilts the scales against him, and he cries for help from Athena. Athena, however, does not join the play on any side but calls all the parties involved to reason together. She decides that the best course of action is to hear all the sides and make an informed decision about what is to be done to Orestes. The means of bringing all the facts together is to conduct a trial and allows each party to make their case: “So, you two parties, summon your witnesses, set out your proofs, with sworn evidence to back your claims*”* (Aeschylus,12). Twelve Athenian citizens are picked to form the jury, which hears the case against Orestes. The presiding officer for the case is Athena herself. In the trial, Orestes readily admits to killing his mother, when asked by the Chorus who act as the prosecutor: “I drew my sword and slit her throat” (Aeschylus,14). His defense, however, was that the murder was justified, since it was in vengeance of his father Agamemnon. The chorus presses Orestes hard but he is defended by Apollo, with the Furies siding with the Chorus. The twelve jurors finally vote but being an even number the vote is a tie: “The division of the votes are equal”(Aeschylus,18). It is worthy of notice that the vote was not for guilt or innocence, but rather on whether to hang or spare Orestes. Athena gives the tie-breaking vote in favor of saving Orestes, and the matter is finally resolved, ending the cascade of vengeance.

Revenge, as presented in the three plays, is an infectious disease but with a weird twist. When a normal infectious disease transmits from one individual to another, both individuals become similar as they suffer from the same disease. With revenge, however, the carrier becomes cured and shift from a perpetrator of revenge to a victim of it. Therefore, unlike the infectious disease, which even without a cure will finally run out of victims, revenge by its very nature continually creates its own victims, thus eternally perpetuating itself. At the beginning of the play the carrier of revenge is Aegisthus only, and he achieves euphemistical healing from his revenge when he gets Agamemnon murdered. Immediately after Aegisthus is cured of his vengeance, he becomes a target of revenge by Orestes. Further, Aegisthus also draws Clytemnestra, who becomes the target of revenge as well. Orestes attains healing by killing Aegisthus and Clytemnestra but immediately becomes the target of the Furies as well as the ghost of his own mother. Had Orestes being killed, the nature of the storyline left without no doubt to someone else. Perhaps, Apollo himself would have risen to avenge Orestes, with the chain of vengeance going on.

It is, therefore, clear that successfully carrying out an act of revenge does not in any way resolve the initial issue that led to the revenge in the first place. Instead, every purveyor of vengeance creates a worse situation than the one that existed before the act of revenge took place. The cascade of revenge in the three plays begins with the death of a King at the hands of his wife. The avenger faces death as a consequence of the success of vengeance, and also causes the death of his accomplice. The successful avenger in the second tier of revenge, Orestes, faces the wrath of the gods. It depicts revenge as the wrong way to solve a grudge, because it does not resolve the grudge and also creates a greater crisis. As opposed to this, however, justice through a trial brings out all the issues pertinent to a grudge, and produces a permanent resolution thereof. Therefore, justice through trial is superior to revenge and ought to be the preferred path.

Aeschylus’ trilogy is, therefore, able to resolve between revenge and justice by clearly depicting the positive attributes of justice, pitted against the negative attributes of revenge. The narrative within the three plays begins with a very barbaric act, worthy of recompense. This recompense of given in the form of revenge as opposed to justice. The continued success of revenge takes the grudge forward to the third generation from the cause of the grudge, leaving pain and suffering in its wake. Agamemnon, the hero of Troy, becomes the first victim of revenge, followed by Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Orestes then becomes haunted by a god, that creates the grudge between gods. Athena intervenes by seeking justice through a trail. The swift resolution created by the trial leaves no doubt that had Aegisthus sought a trial in the very first place, much pain and bloodshed would have been avoided. Clearly, justice through trial is superior to the one through revenge.

References

Aeschylus (n.d.). *The Oresteia. A Trilogy Consisting of the Tragedies: Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers, The Eumenides.* Retrieved from http://abs.kafkas.edu.tr/upload/225/The\_Orestia.pdf