Classically Insane

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> Revenge is a kind of wild justice, which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed out; for the first wrong, it doth offend the law, but the revenge of that wrong, putteth the law out of office.—Francis Bacon

The charge is first-degree murder. On his 18th birthday, a young man named Stephen slashed his mother's throat while she slept. Then, he called the police. His attorney wants to understand his client and to defend him. I enter Stephen's life as the defense expert and step into a Greek tragedy.

For ages, the working relationship between psychiatry and the judicial system has been problematic, politicized, confused, and confusing to professionals and public alike. I needed to understand that relationship. My search for understanding turned into a journey with surprising twists and turns, landing me in an unanticipated place. I traveled to the birth of Western civilization and met an ancient Greek playwright who served as midwife to the emergence of scientific thinking and democratic justice. There were lessons in Aeschylus for the modern medical expert.

At Stephen's trial, my name is called. I walk in front of the jury to the witness stand, nod to the judge, and repeat an oath that witnesses have declared since Solon's time, 2,500 years ago. I am here in the 21st century, but I feel I'm back in Athens in 458 BCE at a similar trial. Orestes is on trial for killing his mother, Queen Clytemnestra—a courtroom drama immortalized in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*.

The structure of the two trials, millennia apart, is strikingly similar. On the Athens stage there is a courtroom and presiding judge, the goddess Athena, with a prosecution by the Furies representing a mother's revenge. The defense counsel is Apollo, representing Orestes, and a father's vengeance. There is a jury of Athenian citizens.

Apollo asks for a dismissal because Orestes was merely fulfilling a duty to his father, Agamemnon, who was murdered by Clytemnestra. The Furies object: Orestes has admitted his guilt, and matricide is so abominable that a trial is not necessary. Clytemnestra must be avenged. Kill him!

The Furies call on their goddess, Athena, to decide Orestes' fate. She refuses. Homicide is too important for gods to decide. There must be a trial before a jury of Athenian citizens; law must prevail. Athena agrees to act as secular judge, and warns that the substance of law is more important than its letter. Yes, she adds, to kill one's mother is an abomination, but because it is so terrible, it demands explanation. Why? How could he? What would drive him to it? With the introduction of the question, "Why?," Aeschylus brings psychology into the courtroom. The *Oresteia* is the first psychological case study of the insanity defense.

Aeschylus based his play on a subplot of *The Iliad*. Agamemnon had sacrificed his daughter, Iphigenia, to the gods to initiate his war against Troy. But Aeschylus added his own twist to Agamemnon's family tragedy. Clytemnestra avenges her daughter's sacrifice by murdering the king on his return from war. Orestes, their son, then avenges his father's murder by killing Clytemnestra. When the Furies descend on Orestes to avenge Clytemnestra, Aeschylus steps in. Enough already! Vengeance only breeds more violence in this endless cycle.

The *Oresteia* is more than a play. It is social commentary. Aeschylus dramatized his vision of war's depravity. Youthful life is drained away to satisfy old men's honor. Collateral human suffering tears the social fabric. Violent conflict resolution is destruc-

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tive, whether by the state or an individual. Revenge is not Justice. The *Oresteia* is an assertion of the rule of law, of democratic justice, and the crucial importance of psychological understanding.

Aeschylus' overlooked message is that of unspoken, "frozen" grief that can explode into murderous violence. Clytemnestra does not grieve openly; under an icy surface, she smolders. Orestes' sister, Electra, also agonizes over losing her father. It is a pain that does not rise to the surface, but also smolders. The siblings are robbed of their identities by their father's murder, a topical theme of the age. Electra's grief fuses with Orestes' sorrow. She supports, encourages, his—their—matricide.

Aeschylus drew from personal experience, saying in *Prometheus Bound*, that words are physician to the mind gone mad. The *Oresteia* was written after Aeschylus watched his brother bleed to death beside him at the battle of Marathon. Aeschylus' drama is a definitive example of constructive grief. In turning frozen grief from murder into justice, Aeschylus stood the *Iliad*'s glorification of war on its head.

The first two plays of the Oresteian trilogy describe the gruesome history of the family, it's entanglement in the Trojan War, and the origins of Orestes' matricidal blood-lust. That is the background for the third play, the courtroom drama. That classic ended in a hung jury. But, as was the custom, Athena, as presiding judge held the deciding vote. On psychological grounds, the goddess found Orestes not guilty.

Back in the modern day, I explain Stephen's mental illness to his public defender. He is sure his client must be crazy, he says, but there are problems. Even though Stephen meets technical criteria for legal insanity, mental illness as a defense is almost impossible for juries to accept. The mind is hard to understand. A diseased mind is harder still. But even more important, the lawyer says, the bloody killing of a mother will inflame the jury. Where crimes are gruesome, emotions rule. The jury will look for any justification to find guilt and exact the ultimate penalty for such a monstrous act. Mental illness be damned. Hang the bastard.

There is a twist Aeschylus would have appreciated. As I look at the jury, I see in the first row a young woman, nine months pregnant—about to burst. This jury will decide the fate of a man charged with killing his mother? As the trial proceeds, whenever a chilling scene is described, all jurors fix their eyes on the mother-to-be.

I spell out how Stephen's mental illness, a form of schizophrenia, is connected to the killing. His cutting her throat was driven by psychosis. He could not stop himself, despite the abstract knowledge that killing is illegal. He hallucinated, heard voices; God and Satan argued about him. God screamed, "No!" Satan bellowed, "She deserves to die." The two voices roared at each other, blended, became one horrible overwhelming command, "Do it!"

But there is more. Stephen was the middle child of Max and Enid. His sister Isabel was three years older. On Isabel's 10th birthday, Max drove her to her birthday pony ride. He lost control of the car. Isabel died. Enid's life, too, drained from her. Her heart ached, her insides empty. Agony turned into simmering hatred of Max; he killed her daughter.

Max sank into Dionysian stupor. Alcohol numbed his guilt, his self-hatred, Enid's hatred, and the cancerous emptiness of losing his daughter. He stopped bathing, eating; he drank himself into oblivion. One February night, Enid's frozen rage erupted. She dragged the dirty, disgusting, passed-out drunk outside, and watched his vomit turn to ice. The next morning nine-year-old Stephen found his dad in the front yard, cold and stiff. He screamed, "How could you?' Enid smiled, "He deserved it, and if you tell anyone—say one word—I'll slit your throat." The boy never uttered a word.

They called him hyperactive, ADHD. Constant motion, unable or unwilling to concentrate, always daydreaming. Impulsive, irritable, inflammable; he'd strike out, hit other kids, even teachers. Repeatedly sent home from school, suspended, and truant to the extent that he was finally referred to juvenile court—a bad kid. A psychiatric examination concluded he had a conduct disorder, another term for "bad kid." Dosed with Ritalin and purged with tranquilizers, he slowed. Numb, dumb, quiet, so quiet there was no more trouble. He was lethargic, fell behind—a slow learner, learning disabled, labeled.

Some time later, Stephen was crossing a busy street. "Jump in front" popped into his mind. Someone sneaked that into his brain. Others, even strangers, knew what he was thinking. His thoughts were broadcast like radio waves. More and more, his mind was robbed, deliberately mystified. Perhaps he was being poisoned. He dare not tell mother. She might be the one poisoning him. If he said anything she would become a Fury.

He noticed things about her. She looked the same, and yet . . . Then he knew. She was not his real mother. She was an imitation, not even human, a perfect replica constructed by the same people who were stealing his thoughts. They must have kidnapped her and put the replica in her place. That's when the voices started. First, it was God telling him to love his mother, to go find her. Then a booming Satan, "She's not real; she's going to kill you like she killed your dad." God and Satan fought, but Satan won. The order was "kill!"

He knew it was wrong to kill. In general. But he was ordered, compelled. And besides, it was not his mother, not even a real person. Where was she? Why wasn't anyone looking for her?

The Furies began deliberations on Friday afternoon. The pregnant juror's baby was due the next day. Time was short. It was no surprise that the verdict came in at 5:00 p.m. on the nose.

Stephen sits on death row. He doesn't care, any more than the jury did. He is waiting for his mom.

The Furies are alive and well in our century.