

ROUGH DRAFT
9.16.2009

Nice!
Vae Victis ✓

"Oh my human brothers, let me tell you how it happened." Thus begins The Kindly Ones, the monstrous and monstrously complex masterwork of Jonathan Littell. The story is narrated in the fashion of a memoir by Dr Maximilian Aue, now hiding as a factory owner in France due to the fact that during the Second World War he had been a Lieutenant Colonel (SS-Obersturmbannfuhrer) in the Third Reich. As a work of historical fiction, The Kindly Ones is nearly unmatched in the world of literature. It is instantly apparent that Mr Littell spent copious amounts of time tracing down endless facts and figures about the trajectory of this conflict, as there are pages and pages of statistics pertaining to the most tedious of details. In addition to this, he seems to strive to explain how seemingly normal men could have been driven to commit some of the worst atrocities in recent memory, by including penetrating descriptions of the mindsets of some of the major figures in Nazi Germany. Littell's warscapes - particularly the chilling section devoted to the fall of Stalingrad - are so realistic as to be tangible. Beyond the psychopathic philosophical justifications for die Endlosung der Judenfrage, however, lies another set of interesting facts about this novel, facts buried so deep that it is likely that the majority of readers waded through one thousand pages of very dense text without once realizing their presence. For underlying this tale of modern warfare is actually a far, far older story, one with its origins in ancient Greece. For The Kindly Ones is actually a modern re-imagining of Aeschylus' Oresteia trilogy of plays, with Dr Max Aue playing the role of none other than Orestes himself.

expand

excellent

There are few obvious hints to the parallels that Mr Littell strives to build between the Oresteia and his novel, but they

can be made by the attentive reader familiar with some aspects of Greek mythology. By far the lowest hanging fruit in this regard is the title of the book itself. No explanation is provided by the author for this choice, save perhaps obliquely in the very last line of the entire book: "The Kindly Ones were on to me." This is a reference to the Eumenides, the name given to the Erinyes (Furies) after Orestes' acquittal by the court of the Areopagus. Most modern Americans have never read any of the plays of Aeschylus (let alone the competing versions of these events written by Sophocles or Euripides), so some explanation of the history of these plays will prove useful at this point.

good point

The central events of the Oresteia trilogy revolve around an ancient curse. The roots and nature of this curse are attributed to somewhat varying accounts, but they generally begin with the Olympian gods honoring the mortal Tantalus by inviting him to dine with them on Mount Olympus. The historian Pindar writes that Tantalus butchered his son Pelops and served the gods his body as the main course, saying: "...that they cut your [Pelop's] limbs up with a knife and [put them] into the water boiling over the fire, and at the second course of the meat at the tables they divided you and ate."

As a result, Tantalus is condemned to suffer everlasting hunger and thirst in the Underworld, and Pelops is brought back to life. (Odyssey 11. 582-592) Pelops goes on to become a hero with a cult at Olympia, and eventually is blessed by his lover, Poseidon. He is thus able to challenge Oenomaus in a chariot race for the hand of his daughter, Hippodamia. In this quest, Pelops was aided by Myrtilus, by having him remove the lynchpins of Oenomaus' chariot, killing him. Myrtilus, who was the son of the god Hermes, believed that this assistance gave him permission to enjoy Hippodamia

on the first night. When he attempted to violate her, Pelops cast him off of a cliff into the sea. As he fell, Myrtilus cursed Pelops and his descendents. The only surviving account to connect this murder with the acts of Tantalus is Seneca's Thyestes. ✓

This curse continued with Pelop's children, Atreus and Thyestes, and eventually on to their children, who are featured in the Oresteia trilogy. The main actors in the first of these plays are Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, and Aegisthus. Agamemnon, of course, was the King of Mycenae and leader of the Argive army which sacked Troy. At the outset of this expedition, Agamemnon sacrifices his own daughter Iphigenia to appease Artemis and gain favorable winds for the voyage. For this act, upon his return, the King is promptly butchered by Clytemnestra as he is undressing in the bathtub. Involved in the plot was Aegisthus, son of Thyestes. ✓

In the Odyssey, Agamemnon's ghost states that "it was not brigands who murdered me on land, but Aegisthus, with my cursed wife, arranging my death and fate, having called me into the house and given me a feast - killing me like an ox at the manger. Thus I died a most pitiable death..." *good*

Orestes is the son of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, away from Mycenae during his father's murder. He was raised in the court of Strophius, King of Phocis. He eventually returns to Argos and avenges his father's death by murdering Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. He did this at the behest of Apollo, who deploras the fate of Agamemnon. But this act puts Orestes smack in the middle of conflicting sanctions, as matricide is the most heinous of crimes to the chthonian gods, represented by the Furies. They thus pursue Orestes, seeking vengeance. *good*

This is the root of the reference that Littell is making in the final line of his work, as well as the title. It is a seemingly

bizarre way of terminating this tale for anyone uneducated in the works of Aeschylus. It makes even more sense, when seen through the lens of several other easily overlooked comments and acts sprinkled throughout the story. ✓

Dr Aue is multilingual, being fluent in French as well as German, thanks to the fact that he spent part of his youth living in the home of his step-father, Aristide Moreau. This is in no way unusual for a European man, neither in the days of WWII or today. What is somewhat atypical is Dr Aue's fluency in ancient Greek. This quality is made even stranger by the fact that many of Aue's friends also happen to have this skill. This is perhaps the first textual hint offered to the reader that there are elusive and allusive undercurrents at work here. *good*

It is in Paris that we are given another, stronger signal. In one of the many ^ecameos by famous individuals in Littell's book, the French collaborationist writer Robert Brasillach shares drinks with Aue and his best friend and benefactor Thomas. Thomas HAUSER and Brasillach are immediately at odds:

"'Is he your Pylades, then?' Brasillach acerbically snarled at me in Greek.

'Exactly,' Thomas retorted in the same language, modulated by his soft Viennese accent. 'And he is my Orestes. Beware the power of armed friendship.'"

Pylades, of course, was the best friend and advisor to Orestes in Aeschylus' second play of the trilogy, Choephoroe (Libation Bearers). In this play, Orestes regains contact with his sister, Elektra. Their reunion is joyous, and he quickly tells her of his intention to avenge Agamemnon, as well as the details of Apollo's oracle: if he does not kill his mother, his life will become a horror. Orestes is soon welcomed into the palace by Clytemnestra, where she accepts the report of her son's death

cameos
cameos

(I'll get it right!)

with intense and mixed emotions. Aegisthus is summoned to the palace to confirm the news, and is slaughtered by Orestes. Clytemnestra is awoken by the cry of a servant:

"'I tell you that the dead one is alive and come to strike the living dead!'

'Ah! I understand the meaning of your riddle. We die by treachery, just as we killed by treachery. Someone, quickly, give me an axe to kill a man. Let us see whether we win or lose...'"

After some hesitation, Orestes slays her with an axe, perhaps the same one she had raised to kill him. In this event we find the most remarkable connection between the works of Littell and Aeschylus, and the reason for the title of the former's work. Throughout The Kindly Ones, we are given brief snippets of Aue's childhood, mostly to give us a framework for constructing the edifice of Aue's psychosis. We are informed that his father was largely absent from home, as he was a fanatical nationalist officer fighting with a Freikorps militia against the Versailles settlement. In these brief descriptions, we are given a portrait of a man very much in line with Agamemnon: gruff, warlike, a leader of men. We are also informed that Maximilien and his twin sister, Una, were both highly devoted to him, in spite of their mother's attempts to banish his memory. The father soon disappears, and the mother eventually remarries a frenchman and moves the family to Antibes. From the time the father left to the point that the mother remarried, Aue was mostly away at boarding school. The span of time was ten years - precisely the time period that Agamemnon was away from home while attacking Troy.

Aue is soon shot in the head by a sniper's bullet, while caught with the 6th Army in the "Kessel" of Stalingrad. He is sent to convalesce in Berlin, and is visited by his sister. After he has reconnected with Una, he has the desire to see his home again,

establish "Bildungsroman" connection →

good
excellent links

good

and so takes the train to France. As in Choephoroe, his mother Heloise does not recognize him at first. The feeling is mutual: "...then an old woman appeared behind Moreau and contemplated me in silence. So this was my mother?"

Aue is welcomed into the house, although there is some tension. He relieves this by chopping some wood in the backyard, after which he takes a nap. When he awakens, both Moreau and his mother have been murdered - with the same axe that he had used to cut the wood. Aue claims to have no recollection of the murders, but it is clear to the reader that his psychosis has merely blocked out the horrid event. There are obvious similarities here between the murders of Heloise and Clytemnestra, both in the choice of an axe as the weapon and in the location of the murder of Heloise: the bathroom. One is instantly reminded that Agamemnon was killed in the bathroom of the palace.

*True
fascinating!*

For this act, Aue is pursued relentlessly by two German detectives. These men will play the role of the Furies for the remainder of Littell's book. In the third of Aeschylus' plays, Orestes has fled to Delphi, seeking the help of Apollo against the Erinyes. Aue, too, immediately flees to Berlin and seeks protection in his position, now quite important, in the elite Hauptamt Sicherheitsdienst ("Main Office of the Security Service"). At Delphi, Apollo orders Orestes to flee to Athens, and plead his case before Athena and the Areopagus. In this trial, we have the conflict of two forces: the old doctrine of blood-for-blood-style vengeance as opposed to the rational, case by case judgement promulgated by the Greeks. It is a clash of the old ways vs the new, with Orestes smashed right in the middle. He is eventually acquitted and the Furies are renamed "The Eumenides" (The Kindly Ones) and given new and far more beneficent functions.

Littell has no desire to end his novel in such a fashion. A happy ending would have seemed totally out of place, given the preceding thousand pages. For Aue, the protections of the Reich break down as the Russians near Berlin, and the two detectives eventually find him and attempt to execute him for the Antibes murders. The Russians kill one of them in an exchange of machine gun fire, and Thomas arrives - in typical fashion - to kill the other. Aue then crushes his Pylades' head with an iron bar and escapes to France with his papers.

exactly!

This ending makes a rather dark statement about justice. Whereas in the Oresteia plays, justice is shown to evolve into a more rational state, it totally breaks down into irrelevancy in Littell's book. There is no real justice, especially in times of war, and only the clever survive the real world; woe to the vanquished. This fits Aue in a certain way, for despite the similarities between these two works, he is no Orestes. There is no tragedy here, only a rather vicious psychopath doing what all moral nihilists do: kill, destroy, ruin. In the final lines of the introduction, Aue states: "These words are of no use either, they disappear like water in the sand, this wet sand that fills my mouth. I live, I do what can be done, it's the same for everyone, I am a man like other men, I am a man like you. I tell you I am just like you!" One is left hoping that he is very much mistaken.

true

true

good point!

100/
100

!!

Wow! you have made me
curious and eager to read this book!
Excellent essay.