More Shakespeare and Less Aeschylus in Eugene O'Neill's Mourning Becomes Electra

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THERE HAS BEEN GENERAL CRITICAL AGREEMENT that *Mourning Becomes Electra* was modeled on the *Oresteia,*[1] and the publication of O'Neill's work diary has strengthened this assumption.[2] On closer investigation, however, the similarities between the two plays are superficial, and more fundamental parallels may be found in O'Neill's trilogy and Shakespeare's *Hamlet.* The latter play shares its basic plot with *Mourning Becomes Electra,* and it can be shown that in other ways, too, O'Neill owes more to Shakespeare and less to Aeschylus and to a genuine experience of Greek drama. One may indeed speak of a direct influence of *Hamlet,* but it is quite possible that the American playwright was not aware of it. The comparison of *Hamlet* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* will not only prove that these two plays show similarities in plot wherever there are plot differences between *Hamlet* and the *Oresteia* but also help to define the fundamentally different concept of action that separates O'Neill's trilogy from the *Oresteia.*

First of all, the murder of Ezra Mannon resembles the murder of Hamlet's father more closely than that of Agamemnon. Ezra Mannon is poisoned. It is easy to see the reason for this change. Since the crime had to remain undetected for the family drama to unfold free from outside interference, open violence was irreconcilable with the setting O'Neill had chosen for his trilogy.[3] In the *Oresteia,* the

[1] E.g., Barrett H. Clark, "Aeschylus and O'Neill," *English Journal* (College Edition), XXI, 699-710 (Nov., 1932); John Corbin, "O'Neill and Aeschylus," *Saturday Review of Literature,* VIII, 693-695 (April 30, 1932); Frances W. Knickerbocker, "A New England House of Atreus," *Sewanee Review,* XL, 249-254 (1932); Friedrich Brie, "Eugene O'Neill als Nachfolger der Griechen (*Mourning Becomes Electra*)," *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift,* XXI, 46-59 (1933).

[2] In Barrett H. Clark, ed., *European Theories of the Drama, With a Supplement on the American Drama* (New York, 1947), pp. 530-536.

[3] O'Neill comments on the need for this change from the plot of the *Oresteia* but was apparently not aware of its consequences for the total action: "what an advantage it was (from a plotter's standpoint, at least) for authors in other times who wrote about kings —could commit murder without having to dodge detection, arrest, trial scenes for their

murder of Agamemnon makes Clytemnaestra and Aegisthus the absolute rulers of Argos. At the end of the *Agamemnon,* after Clytemnaestra has proudly acknowledged her deed to the helpless Chorus, tyranny is established in Argos. Clytemnaestra's shameless confession, which indicates the absence of any authority to punish her, is crucial to the trilogy, since it justifies Orestes's revenge. In the *Oresteia,* as well as in the Electra plays of Sophocles and Euripides, secrecy surrounds the return of the avenger. Intrigue is restricted to the concealment of the avenger's identity until the moment of retribution. In *Mourning Becomes Electra,* on the other hand, the crime itself is the secret, and the plot necessarily deals with the story of its discovery. That is to say, *Mourning Becomes Electra* shares its basic plot with *Hamlet.*

There are other differences between the *Oresteia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* that have been overlooked because O'Neill's identification of Lavinia with Electra has been accepted too readily. In the Greek tragedies Electra is the disinherited princess and her humiliation is the result of her father's death. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* the order is reversed. According to its position in the American trilogy, *Homecoming* should be an Agamemnon tragedy; actually, the play is dominated by the conflict between mother and daughter. The death of the father is only one episode in an Electra drama. Far from causing the humiliation of Electra-Lavinia, the death of Agamemnon-Mannon actually terminates it. In Lavinia's and Christine's struggle for power, the daughter's discovery of the poison is the decisive event. The last remnant of Christine's doubtful ascendancy over Lavinia has now disappeared: Lavinia, casting off the role of the disinherited princess, assumes that of the avenger. There is no comparable situation in the *Oresteia*; for a parallel we have to turn to *Hamlet.* It has been suggested that Hamlet is both Electra and Orestes,[4] and it may be argued that the discovery of his father's murder effects in Hamlet the change from Electra to Orestes. The frustration and the humiliation for which he lacked an "objective correlative" in the first court scene are absorbed by his new duty and his will to revenge.

characters—I have to waste a lot of ingenuity to enable my plotters to get away with it without suspicion!" (*ibid.,* p. 532).

[4] Wolfgang Schadewaldt, "Shakespeare und die griechische Tragödie. Elektra und Hamlet," *Shakespeare Jahrbuch,* XCIV, 24 (1960).

In *Hamlet* the ghost scene achieves all at once the reversal that takes up the entire first part of O'Neill's trilogy. The discovery of the murder suddenly gives direction to Hamlet's profound but aimless disgust at his mother's "adultery." In *Mourning Becomes Electra* this reversal occurs gradually. *Homecoming* shows Lavinia at various stages of knowledge; each increase in knowledge is a step toward ascendancy, which she finally achieves with the discovery of the poison. The Lavinia who squabbles with her mother about the right to show the garden to strangers and who wilfully shuts herself off in her room is as contumacious as Electra; she is stronger than her mother, but she still lacks the power to break her authority. The quarrel, however, points to a change. Lavinia knows something about Christine that will give her power. At the end of the brief conversation she throws down the gauntlet:

> LAVINIA (*harshly*): I've got to have a talk with you, Mother—before long!
> CHRISTINE (*turning defiantly*): Whenever you wish. Tonight after the Captain leaves you, if you like. But what is it you want to talk about?
> LAVINIA: You'll know soon enough!
> CHRISTINE (*staring at her with a questioning dread—forcing a scornful smile*): You always make such a mystery of things, Vinnie.
> (I, i, p. 700)[5]

The unexpected revelation of Brant's identity turns Lavinia's knowledge of her mother's adultery into an even more effective weapon than she had thought. It gives her a superiority that is only seemingly and temporarily offset by the return of Mannon, who lends fatal support to his wife's authority. Mannon's dying words and the discovery of the poison make Christine the helpless victim of Lavinia's revenge.

Ashley Dukes, one of the critics of the London premiere of *Mourning Becomes Electra,* maintains that Mannon's return from war is like the return of Hamlet's father from the realm of death.[6] But Mannon's death more closely parallels the ghost scene. Man-

[5] Passages in *Mourning Becomes Electra* will be cited from the Modern Library edition of O'Neill's *Nine Plays* (New York, 1954). References to parts and scenes in Roman numerals will be followed by page numbers.

[6] Ashley Dukes, "The English Scene. O'Neill Succeeds," *Theatre Arts Monthly,* XXII, 102 (Feb., 1938). Dukes also pointed out some archetypal resemblances between *Hamlet* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* but did not pursue them.

non's dying words: "She's guilty—not medicine" (I, iv, p. 748) are like the "Remember me" of Hamlet's father. Hamlet's reaction to his father's command is this:

> Remember thee!
> Yea, from the table of my memory
> I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
> All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
> That youth and observation copied there;
> And thy commandment all alone shall live
> Within the book and volume of my brain,
> Unmix'd with baser matter. (I, v, 97-104)

He confirms his vow by jilting Ophelia. Lavinia, too, rejects Peter's proposal from a sense of duty to her father. The parallel is valid if we consider that the sudden discovery is replaced in *Mourning Becomes Electra* by a series of partial revelations.

In the lives of Lavinia and Hamlet the call to revenge is the turning point that ends the humiliations of the past. Orestes's revenge takes a different course. His chief obstacle is the power of Clytemnaestra and Aegisthus, represented by the bodyguard at the end of the *Agamemnon,* and indirectly by the status of Electra at the opening of the *Choephoroe.* Lavinia lacks no opportunity to execute her revenge, but she wants to do it without arousing the suspicion of outsiders. Again *Hamlet* is the model, for the similar character of the crime entails a similar course of revenge. When Hamlet first hears the truth from his father he exclaims:

> Haste me to know't, that I, with wings as swift
> As meditation or the thoughts of love,
> May sweep to my revenge. (I, v, 28-30)

But as soon as he meets his friends, he realizes the difficulty of action: the need for secrecy forces Hamlet to modify his desire for instantaneous revenge.

The motif recurs in *Mourning Becomes Electra,* most explicitly when Christine initiates Brant into her plan. Brant has all sorts of ideas how he might "sweep" to his revenge: "If I could catch him alone, where no one would interfere, and let the best man come out alive—as I've often seen it done in the West!" (I, ii, p. 721). Christine replies succinctly: "This isn't the West." Indeed, it is not.

The house of the Mannons reminds one far more of the court of Denmark.

The need for secrecy and "indirections" (*Hamlet,* II, i, 66) guides Lavinia's revenge. Her first task is to convince her brother of her mother's guilt just as Hamlet has to dispel his own doubts. Both of them decide to become actors and stage situations in which the criminal will betray himself. However, some time elapses before an opportunity arises. Hamlet mystifies the court by his antic disposition. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* Lavinia "mystifies" her mother who, like Claudius, recognizes the threat in her daughter's behavior. Later, when the roles are reversed and Lavinia has identified herself with her mother, she is terrified by Orin's deliberate mystification (I, i, p. 700; II, i, p. 762; III, ii, pp. 837 f.). Hamlet's pretended madness furnishes Claudius with a pretext to remove the prince from the court; in *Mourning Becomes Electra,* Christine tries to convince Orin that Lavinia is mad (II, ii). The struggle between Christine and Lavinia corresponds to that of Claudius and Hamlet, but it takes very different forms. The two women fight for the possession of Orin, and it is during the intrigues which this struggle involves that Orin becomes a true Mannon. The spoiled child of whom we had heard in *Homecoming* and who at his first appearance in *Hunted* is still associated with Peter and Hazel undergoes a change as he is drawn into the tragic circle. He exemplifies the truth of Christine's outburst: "Why can't all of us remain innocent and loving and trusting? But God won't leave us alone. He twists and wrings and tortures our lives with others' lives until —we poison each other to death" (II, i, p. 759). The spread of poison once corrupted Christine herself, and in the final play of the trilogy its all-pervasive power is again revealed in Lavinia's frantic but hopeless attempts to rid herself of it. Even Peter and Hazel are almost infected by it. At one point Hazel implores Lavinia not to marry Peter, who is already showing signs of her baneful influence (III, iv, pp. 860 f.). The theme of poisoning thus develops a motif of the plot in a manner very similar to that of *Hamlet.* There the theme of poisoning occurs with many variations. The corruption of Laertes by Claudius is perhaps the best parallel to the corruption of Orin. Laertes runs into Claudius's trap with pathetic eagerness. His corruption, which he himself realizes only in his death, is conveyed to

the audience much earlier. To Claudius's suggestion that he should fight Hamlet with an unbuttoned rapier Laertes replies:

> I will do't:
> And, for that purpose, I'll anoint my sword.
> I bought an unction of a mountebank
> So mortal that but dip a knife in it,
> Where it draws blood no cataplasm so rare,
> Collected from all simples that have virtue
> Under the moon, can save the thing from death
> That is but scratched withal. (IV, vii, 140-147)

The Laertes who carries poison with him is very different from the young man who set out for France.

Christine fails to keep Orin on her side. She does not want Orin to be alone with Lavinia before she has spoken to him; hence, her anger at Peter: "Why didn't you call me, Peter? You shouldn't have left him alone!" (II, i, p. 762). But Lavinia literally intercepts Orin, and her few words with him are enough to undermine Orin's trust in his mother. For a moment, indeed, Christine seems to win. It is with great reluctance that Orin tears himself from his mother to follow Lavinia to see his father's corpse (II, ii, p. 777). The dialogue of Lavinia and Orin in the presence of the dead father is superficially modeled on the *kommos* of the *Choephoroe* (ll. 306-478), where the dead king is also "present." But unlike Orestes, Orin cannot be incited to action by Lavinia's words alone. Christine has too cleverly anticipated her accusations. Therefore, Lavinia suggests that they give Christine and Brant a chance to meet again at a place where Orin and Lavinia can overhear their conversation (II, iii, pp. 785-786). That meeting in the following act bears some resemblance to the scene in which Ophelia is used as a decoy. While Lavinia and Orin are plotting, Christine has followed Orin and is terrified to find the door locked. Lavinia seizes at her chance and on the spur of the moment stages a "mouse-trap." She places the medicine bottle on the dead man's chest and tells Orin to watch Christine closely. In like manner, Hamlet and Horatio resolve not to take their eyes off the king. Both times the "play" succeeds. The similarity extends even to the reactions of Hamlet and Orin. Hamlet loses his control and forfeits half his triumph. Orin, too, is tempted to forget himself and is only restrained by Lavinia's warnings. Even so, the

revelation is too much for him: he "stumbles blindly" out of the room (II, iii, p. 787). His breakdown and his savage irony may be compared to Hamlet's hysterical behavior after Claudius's exit.

Like Lavinia, Orin is a descendant of Hamlet; actually, each represents a different interpretation of Hamlet. Lavinia lacks the reflection and irresolution of the popular Hamlet; she does not hesitate to act with speed and determination. She is very much like the Hamlet of Wilson Knight's "Embassy of Death."[7] In fact, Knight's portrait really fits Lavinia better than Hamlet. Lavinia may well be called a superman even among the Mannons, who are all in their own way superhuman. Her obsession with truth and her strength of will lead her to reject escape in any disguise. Escape in *Mourning Becomes Electra* takes two forms: it is either illusion or death. Mannon's public career, Christine's affair with Brant, and Orin's dreams of a South Sea island belong to the former; the suicides of Christine and Orin, to the latter. Now Lavinia does not differ from the others in her attempt to escape into illusion; she tries harder than anyone else. She differs from the other characters in being herself the obstacle to her own happiness. Her penetrating intellect ultimately prevents any self-deception; it can bear the truth. Mannon, Orin, and Christine come to see the truth and realize the futility of illusion only to escape into death. Lavinia alone survives. She is the incarnation of the Mannon evil, "the most interesting criminal of us all," as Orin calls her (III, i, 2, p. 840), and in this respect, too, she resembles Knight's Hamlet from whom death emanates.

Orin is a much less original creation. He is the disillusioned Romantic. Like the popular Hamlet, he is weak and oversensitive. He is either bullied by his mother or by his sister. He is given to reflection and is by nature unwilling to act; when he acts he does so

[7] "Hamlet is not of flesh and blood, he is a spirit of penetrating intellect and cynicism and misery, without faith in himself or anyone else, murdering his love of Ophelia, on the brink of insanity, taking delight in cruelty, torturing Claudius, wringing his mother's heart, a poison in the midst of the healthy bustle of the court. He is a superman among men. And he is a superman because he has walked and held converse with death, and his consciousness works in terms of death and the negation of cynicism. He has seen the truth, not alone of Denmark, but of humanity, of the universe: and the truth is evil. Thus Hamlet is an element of evil in the state of Denmark. The poison of his mental existence spreads outwards among things of flesh and blood, the acid eating into metal. They are helpless before his very inactivity and fall one after the other, like victims of an infectious disease" (*The Wheel of Fire,* New York, 1957, p. 38).

in a state of blind excitement, a trait considered an essential feature of Hamlet by critics who think of him as the melancholy Dane.

Orin's share in the action is much slighter than Lavinia's; he does not come to the fore until *Haunted,* the plot of which is a pale echo of the preceding events. He is a portrait rather than a character revealed in action, except for his relation to Hazel, which may well be modeled on Hamlet's relation to Ophelia. Hamlet turns from his thoughts about suicide when he sees Ophelia:

> Soft you now!
> The fair Ophelia. Nymph, in thy orisons
> Be all my sins remember'd. (III, i, 88-90)

Likewise, Orin is attracted to Hazel—whether he has just returned from war or wishes to escape the burden of his guilt—because she is an unchanging image of peace. But Hazel's innocence also provokes Orin's cynicism. His bitter remarks about war (II, ii, p. 768) are meant to shock Hazel; in this regard they resemble Hamlet's obscenities in the play scene. In *Haunted,* Orin is led by his sense of duty to jilt Hazel just as Hamlet jilts Ophelia. Something of the intensity of Hamlet's feeling for Ophelia shows through her report of his farewell. His savage insults in the decoy scene are but the other side of these feelings. The same contrast is found in Orin:

> I have no right in the same world with her. And yet I feel so drawn to her purity! Her love for me makes me appear less vile to myself! (*Then with a harsh laugh*) And, at the same time, a million times more vile, that's the hell of it! (III, ii, p. 839)

When he finally jilts Hazel, he first asks her gently not to love him any more (III, iii, p. 848), but then changes to taunting cruelty to make the farewell final (III, iii, p. 852).

Hazel offers the key to Christine's tragedy, for in a sense Christine is never so much herself as in the two short scenes with Hazel (II, i, v), which are modeled on the relationship of Gertrude with Ophelia. To compare Christine and Gertrude may seem strange at first. Gertrude is neither guilty of murder nor is it clear whether she has committed adultery. Hatred is foreign to her nature; in all she says and does she reveals her sincere affection for Ophelia and her great love for Hamlet. But above all, there is something very

vague about her. Only once, in the closet scene, does she come to the fore, and then only to recede into a shadowy and ambiguous background. It is in this scene that Gertrude is shown lacking parental authority, just as Christine, in her various confrontations with her daughter, is handicapped by the loss of this authority.[8]

There is a deliberate contrast between Gertrude's pale portrait in the play and the violent colors in which Hamlet and his father paint her offense. Christine, on the other hand, is a Gertrude with the merciful veil of ambiguity torn from her face; in a sense she is the woman one would expect from what Hamlet and his father say about Gertrude. There is no doubt about her adultery: we see her as she abandons a respectable husband to "prey on garbage," in favor of the "son of a low Canuck nurse girl" (I, i, p. 706). We do not know whether Hamlet's imagination is accurate when he describes Gertrude's passion for Claudius, but Lavinia is an eyewitness of the clandestine rendezvous of Brant and Christine in a squalid New York hotel, and she dwells on it with the perverted pleasure Hamlet at times takes in sordid details (I, ii, pp. 712 f.).

Although the events at Elsinore are concerned with Gertrude, she hardly takes part in them. Her only active interest seems to be the match between Hamlet and Ophelia; it is typical of her remoteness that she should continue to talk about it when it has long ceased to matter. When she hears from Claudius that Polonius has found the reason of Hamlet's madness, she replies:

> I doubt it is no other but the main;
> His father's death, and our o'erhasty marriage. (II, ii, 56 f.)

Polonius's news fascinates her. It is she, not Claudius, who asks him to come to the point, and when Claudius and Polonius have only

[8] GERTRUDE: Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
HAMLET: Mother, you have my father much offended.
(III, iv, 9-10)

CHRISTINE: This report hasn't been confirmed yet, has it? I haven't heard the fort firing a salute.
LAVINIA: You will before long!
CHRISTINE: I'm sure I hope so as much as you.
LAVINIA: You can say that!
CHRISTINE (*Concealing her alarm—coldly*): What do you mean? You will kindly not take that tone with me, please!
(I, i, p. 700)

the success of their scheme in mind, Gertrude looks to the future and addresses Ophelia:

> And for your part, Ophelia, I do wish
> That your good beauties be the happy cause
> Of Hamlet's wildness: so shall I hope your virtues
> Will bring him to his wonted way again,
> To both your honours. (III, i, 38-42)

The link between Gertrude and Ophelia is maintained in the following act. It is Gertrude who first receives the mad Ophelia; she also reports her death. At Ophelia's funeral Gertrude once more returns to the match in words whose quietness contrasts with the ranting of Hamlet:

> Sweets to the sweet! Farewell.
> I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet's wife:
> I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid,
> And not have strew'd thy grave. (V, i, 266-269)

The constant association of Gertrude and Ophelia in the spectator's mind balances the slanders of Hamlet and his father; her kindness to Ophelia belies at least their more extreme accusations. Gertrude looks at Ophelia with a twofold regret. She knows that she has offended Hamlet and seizes at the prospect of the match in order to secure his happiness as well as to regain his affection. It is understandable why marriage should appeal to her as the best means to this end: she herself had once experienced happiness in marriage. Her vision of the future is nostalgic; it attempts to regain the past.

The queen is choosing a young court lady as a match for her difficult son: so far the plot fits both *Hamlet* and *Mourning Becomes Electra*. But Christine acts from fear rather than from solicitude for Orin. Also, she thinks primarily of her own interest; she uses Hazel as Claudius uses Ophelia. Whether Gertrude's plan is quite unselfish it is impossible to tell. Christine hopes that by furthering the romance between Orin and Hazel, which she had hitherto obstructed, she can isolate Lavinia and prevent her from winning Orin to her side. Thus she proposes a "conspiracy" between Hazel and herself, insinuating the danger that lies in Lavinia's jealousy. But the innocence with which Hazel at once goes into the trap and yet refuses to believe anything evil about Lavinia surprises and

touches her, and a well of affection springs up for Hazel in whom she sees her own past reflected:

> HAZEL: Poor Vinnie! She was so fond of her father. I don't wonder she—
> CHRISTINE (*staring at her—strangely*): You are genuinely good and pure of heart, aren't you?
> HAZEL (*embarrassed*): Oh, no! I'm not at all—
> CHRISTINE: I was like you once—long ago—before—(*then with bitter longing*) If I could only have stayed as I was then! (II, i, p. 759)

Just as Gertrude may see her former happiness in the mirage of a happy marriage between Hamlet and Ophelia, so the thought of Hazel makes Christine recall her time of courtship, which she describes to Lavinia: "No. I loved him once—before I married him —incredible as that seems now! He was handsome in his lieutenant's uniform! He was silent and mysterious and romantic! But marriage soon turned his romance into—disgust!" (I, ii, p. 714). Then her eyes spoke and were full of life, as Mannon says in his clumsy attempt to break the barrier between them (I, iii, p. 738). There was a time when she resembled Marie Brantôme, the nurse girl, whose memory is invoked in the scene before Mannon's entrance in order to make the contrast between past and present as poignant as possible. Christine wants nothing so much as to be young Christine again. Her affection for Hazel and her longing for innocent youth spring from her desperate fear of growing old: "I can't let myself get ugly! I can't!" (II, v, p. 805)[9]

A portrait of Gertrude would be incomplete without mention of her timidity and lack of initiative. In these respects, too, Christine resembles her; for her actions, premeditated as they may appear, are actually reactions to forces over which she has no control. And it is blind fear that makes her commit her fatal mistakes. The fearful Clytemnaestra is, of course, known to Sophocles and Euripides, but Aeschylus shows her as a woman of immense courage. O'Neill's Christine commits the crime of the Aeschylean Clytemnaestra, although by nature she is much more like Gertrude.

[9] There is a striking resemblance between Christine and Gertrude as Granville Barker sees the latter: "[Shakespeare] gives us in Gertrude the woman who does not mature, who clings to her youth and all that belongs to it, whose charm will not change, but at last fade and wither; a pretty creature as we see her, desperately refusing to grow old. And it is actually in this pathetic incongruity that the whole tragedy has struck root" (*Preface to Hamlet,* New York, 1957, p. 247).

One must keep in mind the fact that O'Neill's idea of action is quite different from that of the *Oresteia.* In Aeschylus the problem of necessity always presents itself as a fateful choice: Agamemnon makes a decision "when he put on the yoke of necessity" (*Agamemnon,* l. 218); Orestes *decides* to kill his mother. Aeschylus has no abstract concept of fate, let alone a fate that deprives action of its meaning or relieves the agent of his responsibility. He even lets his Chorus speak out against a determinism that denies responsibility and thinks of crime as something that merely happens (*Agamemnon,* ll. 750-762). The consequences of an action are determined by the original choice, and this choice may not in our sense be "free," but Aeschylus would never have denied its existence.

In *Mourning Becomes Electra,* and to a certain extent in *Hamlet,* we find a very different concept of action. It is summarized by Horatio:

> So shall you hear
> Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
> And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
> Fall'n on the inventors' heads. (V, ii, 391-396)

A contrast between deliberate actions that miscarry and rash or intuitive actions that are decisive runs through the whole tragedy of Hamlet. While Orestes asks: "What shall I do?" before proceeding to kill his mother, Hamlet comes to rely on intuition. His attitude toward action is exemplified by his account of his adventures at sea:

> Rashly
> And praised be rashness for it, let us know,
> Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
> When our deep plots do pall . . . .
> . . . . . .
> Up from my cabin,
> My sea-gown scarf'd about me, in the dark
> Groped I to find out them . . . .
> . . . . . .
> Being thus benetted round with villainies,
> Ere I could make a prologue to my brains,
> They had begun the play—I sat me down. (V, ii, 6-31)

It is a corollary of such an intuitive view of action that the agent becomes a sufferer: the events happen to him as well as to the person he acts on. Hamlet dies with Claudius; their deaths are one action, as the deaths of Agamemnon and Clytemnaestra are not. In *Mourning Becomes Electra,* such ideas are carried to an extreme. Action is no longer the result of choice and loses all significance; it becomes a stage in some pathological process that ends in death. Orin committed his "heroic" deeds in a kind of trance, in which he saw a blurred face—his own, his father's?—which he had to kill over and over again. He sees this face again when he looks at Brant whom he has just killed:

> ORIN: By God, he does look like father!
> LAVINIA: No. Come along!
> ORIN (*as if talking to himself*): This is like my dream. I've killed before—over and over.
> LAVINIA: Orin!
> ORIN: Do you remember me telling you how the faces of the men I killed came back and changed to Father's face and finally became my own? (*He smiles grimly*) He looks like me, too! Maybe I've committed suicide. . . . It's queer! It's a rotten dirty joke on someone!
> (II, iv, pp. 802-803)

Thus it is not accidental that O'Neill replaces the murder of Clytemnaestra with the suicide of Christine. The change was not merely due to the setting of the trilogy and the exigencies of the plot; it tells something about O'Neill's idea of action. In *Mourning Becomes Electra* a suicidal element is contained in all action; one might almost say that action is suicide. There is a telling ambiguity in the account of Mannon's death which will illustrate this paradoxical statement. Christine's plan is easily summarized. Shortly after she hears of Mannon's imminent return, Christine begins to plan the murder of her husband should it become necessary. She spreads a rumor of his heart disease and chooses what seems a safe way of acquiring the poison with which to do the murder. The confrontation with Lavinia convinces her that the time to act has come. She dispatches Brant to get the poison, and in the night of Mannon's return she deliberately provokes a heart attack and gives him the poison instead of his medicine. In this outline each step of the action appears to be initiated by a decision on the part of Christine, but this is not the way things happen in the play. Christine never

decides to kill Mannon; the encounter with Lavinia rather pushes her into a situation in which she suddenly realizes that her plan has started moving. At first everything works surprisingly smoothly, particularly since it emerges that Mannon's disease is more serious than he had cared to admit. But Christine had not considered the nature of the victim. The Mannon whom she planned to murder was the man of whom Orin will later say:

> Death sits so naturally on you! Death becomes the Mannons! You were always like a statue of an eminent dead man—sitting on a chair in a park or straddling a horse in a town square—looking over the head of life without a sign of recognition—cutting it dead for the impropriety of living! (II, iii, p. 780)

There is something innocent about Christine's plan, simply because it had never occurred to her that the man whom she was going to murder was not already "dead." When Mannon in his awkward fashion tries to remove the barrier between them and reveals that behind his mask he is alive and suffering, Christine realizes with growing dread what her plan really involves. For a moment Mannon has doffed his mask and beneath it she sees a man who in his way loves her deeply. In helpless terror she exclaims:

> For God's sake, stop talking. I don't know what you're saying. Leave me alone. What must be, must be! You make me weak! (*Then abruptly*) It's getting late. (I, iii, p. 740)

Mannon, "terribly wounded," dons his mask and becomes once more a pale ghost: Christine can proceed with her plan. She *decides* to bring on his heart attack. But at the beginning of the following act we see a timid Christine moving away from her husband's bed and the scene of the fateful action. Mannon calls back, turns on the light, and insists on talking to her. For the quarrel that develops between them it is important to remember what Christine had earlier said to Brant:

> I couldn't fool him long. He's a strange, hidden man. His silence always creeps into my thoughts. Even if he never spoke, I would feel what was in his mind and some night, lying beside him, it would drive me mad and I'd have to kill his silence by screaming out the truth! (I, ii, p. 723)

Something similar is happening now, only it is not Mannon's silence that drives her toward the murder. Far from pursuing her plan, Chris-

tine is persecuted by Mannon's insinuations and coarse insults until she breaks under the strain: she tells the truth. That this collapse enables her to carry out her plan no longer matters. O'Neill does not say explicitly that Mannon would have died of his heart attack, but he strongly suggests that Christine's murder is supererogatory. Christine and Mannon tear off one another's masks and the truth that appears is more deadly than any poison could be. The only certain victim of the poison is Christine herself, for it provides Lavinia with the weapon that will drive Christine into suicide. If one insists on calling Christine's death premeditated murder, one might just as well argue that Mannon commits suicide. Both arguments assume that every action requires a responsible agent, but that is precisely the assumption which is denied in O'Neill's trilogy.

Finally, in Aeschylus the form of the trilogy has a meaning: Orestes is the third man in a chain of tragic events. He belongs to the third generation after the original crime of Thyestes; his fate is the third to be decided after the deaths of Agamemnon and Clytemnaestra. As the "third savior" he is unobtrusively compared to Zeus, who is king in the third generation after Ouranos and Kronos. Will he succeed in breaking the chain of crime and retribution? That is the question the Chorus asks with great anxiety at the end of the *Choephoroe;* it is answered in the third play, the *Eumenides.* The three parts of *Mourning Becomes Electra,* on the other hand, are like the progressive stages of a disease. The form of the trilogy has lost its meaning; *Mourning Becomes Electra* is really one very long play that does not end until the pathological process has come to an end.

The traditional assumptions about the relationship of *Mourning Becomes Electra* and the *Oresteia,* then, should be revised. O'Neill misled himself and his critics by maintaining that the *Oresteia* was a blueprint for his trilogy. *Mourning Becomes Electra* significantly departs from the *Oresteia,* and wherever it does so it goes parallel with *Hamlet.* The murder of Ezra Mannon follows the poisoning of Hamlet's father, and the revenge plot based on the secrecy of crime and revenge rather than on the concealment of the avenger's identity also has *Hamlet* as its model. Lavinia and Orin are both descended from Hamlet rather than from Electra and Orestes, respectively. The relationship of Hamlet and Ophelia is the pattern for the relations of Peter and Hazel to Lavinia and

Orin, and the relationship of Hazel and Christine is strikingly similar to that of Ophelia and Gertrude.

The comparison between *Hamlet* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* throws a new light on the "Greekness" of O'Neill's trilogy. Critics commonly contrast the "happy end" of the *Oresteia* with the grim pessimism of *Mourning* and then either condemn O'Neill for his extreme pessimism or—as Roger Asselineau has done recently[10]—praise him for the deeper insight and greater daring with which he carried the story to its bitter end. But the difference is not one of degree or of mood. We have seen that the *Oresteia* and *Mourning Becomes Electra* employ entirely different concepts of action. It is simply not true that O'Neill, as he said himself, psychologized Greek fate. For the "fate" that O'Neill considers so typical of Greek tragedy does not exist. There is no evidence that O'Neill's approach to Greek drama ever freed itself from the critical prejudices that persist even to this day; he saw Greek tragedy through the spectacles of a popular determinism. There is nothing in *Mourning Becomes Electra* which would suggest that O'Neill ever had an original experience of Greek drama in general, or of the *Oresteia* in particular. No doubt, he knew Aeschylus's trilogy well, but he must have read it with a notion, at once very strong and rather vague, of what a Greek tragedy ought to be like. He never penetrated to the Greekness of it; nor was he inspired by it. O'Neill's trilogy is no more Greek than the house of the Mannons: it only has a Greek façade.

[10] "*Mourning Becomes Electra* as a Tragedy," *Modern Drama*, I, 143-150 (Dec., 1958).