

Aeschylus' Forgotten Pistolero

This paper shows how Ferdinando Baldi's 1969 western, *Il pistolero dell'Ave Maria*, not only adapts the mythological structure of the Orestes legend but presents the Aeschylean theme of the destruction of the house visually. Baldi turns the Orestes legend into a western by transporting the story to late nineteenth century Mexico. The primary narrative, however, does not follow the *Oresteia*, preferring to focus on the return of the Orestes figure, Sebastian Carrasco, and his revenge on his mother and her lover. The material from the *Agamemnon* is retold in an extended flashback. In this secondary narrative, the general Juan Carrasco (Agamemnon) returns home from war where his wife Anna (Clytemnestra) and her lover, Thomas (Aegisthus), kill him. In one of many divergences, not all of which are effective, Thomas stabs Juan and Anna chases him down to finish the job with a gun. This act is witnessed by Isabella (Electra). Sebastian escapes with the help of the maid.

Some of the plot changes obscure the characters' motivations. In the primary narrative, Sebastian has apparently forgotten his past and believes that the maid, who has died, was his mother. His old friend, Raphael (Pylades), who is being chased by bandits sent by Anna, finds Sebastian in order to bring him back home to take revenge. We learn from Raphael that his love for Isabella caused her to be married away to a simple shopkeeper. It is implied that Raphael was castrated in punishment. Thus Raphael has a strong motive for revenge, as does Isabella who witnessed Anna kill her father and suffers from the conspirators, but it is unclear why Raphael seeks out Sebastian for revenge. Anna's motivations for killing Juan are likewise obscure. We are left to assume

it was the charms of Thomas alone that led her to kill her husband. In the primary narrative, she clearly has tired of Thomas and regrets her actions.

Both the plot and the requirements of the genre make it is unclear what drives Sebastian to revenge. According to the plot, he is apparently an amnesiac, a fact suggested by his belief that the maid who saved him was his mother and by close-ups on his eyes whenever a bell tolls. True to the unflappable western hero, Leonard Mann plays Sebastian as reserved and emotionless. Sebastian reacts to events rather than setting them in motion. Even his climatic murder of Thomas comes only as a response to Thomas' aggressive actions.

If Sebastian is angry that his father was killed, he does not show it. If he feels any conflict between his duty to his father and his mother, Baldi removes it. First, it is Thomas who kills Anna. Second, the dying Anna reveals that she was not the natural mother of the children. The avoidance of matricide is thus over-determined. Although this knowledge drives Isabella mad, the reason for Baldi so altering the family dynamics is unclear.

Although the plot changes and genre requirements cause the movie to lose much of the thematic and emotional power of Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, Baldi uses pacing and visual effects to enact a powerful realization of the destruction of the house of Carrasco. The inevitable final confrontation between Sebastian, Isabella, Thomas and Anna takes place very late in the movie, creating a sense of anticipation and tension. Then Baldi sets that dramatic final scene at night with the Carrasco house burning down around the characters. It is the most visually striking scene in a visually powerful movie. Even the brief epilogue, where Sebastian, Raphael and Isabella ride off into the sunrise cannot

fully mitigate the feeling of utter destruction shown in the scene of conflagration. It is this visual power where Baldi best reflects the Aeschylean theme of the destruction of the house of Atreus.