'The Cry II' by Wynn Jones (photograph by Kaz Takabatake).

Painting Aeschylus

Bob Doran

talks to contemporary artist Wynn Jones about his obsession with Aeschylus' Oresteia *and the joys of rendering the trilogy in visual form*

The images are compelling. Two eagles swoop on a pregnant hare, killing mother and unborn offspring and presaging the sacrifice of a king's daughter. A queen dreams she gives birth to a serpent that kills her; the serpent is her own son. Avenging Furies are transformed into guardians of justice and parade through Athens by torchlight.

The *Oresteia* of Aeschylus is full of these striking visions, some performed, some narrated. I find it surprising, then, that, with the exception of a bloodthirsty triptych by Francis Bacon, so few artists over the centuries have been inspired to portray one of the milestone works of civilization. Now, however, a British artist has explored the *Oresteia* in a series of large, striking, often unsettling works.

Wynn Jones has been painting for over 50 years. His passionate interest in the *Oresteia* has surfaced as a potential subject since his student days at Cardiff College of Art, through his years as a visiting tutor at many leading colleges, including the Royal College of Art, the Royal Academy School and Byam Shaw School of Art, and throughout his life as an artist. But it has taken him until now to deliver on his obsession. He says that the *Oresteia* is like the *Divine Comedy*, *King Lear* and the *Ring Cycle* – it's at once mythic and profoundly human. It presents a daunting challenge, one that eventually had to be faced. At last he felt ready. But he's not illustrating the trilogy like Gustave Doré and the *Ancient Mariner*. Rather, he's aiming to bring its poetry and passion into the orbit of his own journey as a painter working in the 21st century.

When I first saw the paintings in his studio in northwest London, I felt a strange mixture of delight and shock. They are narrative works, and they're figurative, not abstract, with strong colours and sharp lines. Everything in the paintings is clearly laid out, the pictorial language stark and direct, the drawing showing a minimum of detail and modelling, the overall effect situated between the dramatic theatrical impact of the mask and the expressive human gesture.

All is reduced to the barest essentials including the mostly flat areas of saturated colour that crash through tone to carry the emotional weight of the paintings. There is no sign of period dress. No *chiton* or *peplos*. Yesterday's horrors are the same as today's, and period costumes would have confined the work to that time and place, which is not what the artist is interested in.

Some of the paintings are hard and savage. In one, Agamemnon is wrapped in a red robe and bound for slaughter. In the next, Clytemnestra holds aloft the head of her murdered husband. Another painting shows two heads, one male attacking the other, female, evoking the horror of war. As Jones puts it, 'Amongst the fiery ruins of fallen cities the fate of women and children remains much the same today as centuries ago.'

There is some tenderness, too, as in the depiction of the recognition scene between Electra and her brother, Orestes, at the grave of their father, Agamemnon. Jones says his first thought was to place a sword on the grave, but he changed it to a Christian cross: 'It seemed right to me – after all, the *Oresteia* has held us within its force-field for over two thousand years and has a creative existence outside time and space.' Or as the poet Paul Roche puts it in the notes to his translation, 'Aeschylus, of course, does not speak as a Christian but he does speak as a prophet, and he does speak with the voice of humanity. He leaves a testament both deifying and humanising'.

Exploiting the spirit of transformation that weaves its stormy passage through all three plays, characters are often portrayed as hybrid creatures with marked animal or bird characteristics. The shape-shifting Furies make their first appearance, in 'Daughters of Darkness', as damaged beings, a mixture of bird, animal and human, resembling actors taking a bow downstage centre. But there is joy in the warmer colours of 'The Wise Ones', portraying the parade of the transformed Eumenides leading their torch-lit procession through Athens.

The story of Iphigenia gets a triptych to itself. The left-hand painting displays an almost animal-like Agamemnon and his doomed daughter. The middle piece relates to the eagles' attack on the pregnant hare. The Chorus in the first part of the trilogy, the *Agamemnon*, recounts how the seer, Calchas, interprets the eagles' attack as a warning of the wrath of the goddess Artemis. He tells the King he must sacrifice his daughter. Here Jones faced the challenge of combining several layers of the story in a simplified form. His response is to select two of the most important aspects – an eagle's beak and a mutilated hare – and build around them.

'The Sacrifice: Iphigenia Triptych' by Wynn Jones (photograph by Kaz Takabatake).

For the third painting, he turns to Euripides, whose *Iphigenia in Tauris* has the girl whisked away by Artemis and replaced on the sacrificial altar by a deer. In the painting she is replaced by a sacrificial effigy, giving the work a degree of compassion. Agamemnon himself is portrayed showing more human, less animal characteristics. In another painting, 'The Rescue', the artist himself intervenes, swooping down to lift Iphigenia to safety.

Jones looks back on his first encounter with the *Oresteia* as one of those important moments when you find something you will revisit as long as you live. His life-long relationship with the trilogy has been through translations by Robert Fagles, Ted Hughes, Tony Harrison, Michael Ewans and Paul Roche. He is particularly drawn to those by Hughes and Harrison, with their spare and direct descriptive power and imagery. He has never seen the plays on stage, so the imagery on canvas is drawn entirely from within himself as a painter. He says he has always been drawn to artists such as Picasso, Beckmann and Guston, painters who took on big subjects that artists today, on the whole, tend to avoid.

So why the *Oresteia*? Is it the story or the images? In fact, it's both. As Jones explains, he believes Aeschylus' work has a stature, a density, a kind of engagement with humanity, much of which is missing in the arts today:

For me it transcends time and place and never ceases to be relevant; however much we feel we've advanced in terms of compassion and civilized manners, there are plenty of examples in our own time where this is skin-deep. Scratch the surface and we soon enter the Darkness. However, despite this darkness that colours so much of the Oresteia, there is nothing nihilistic or negative there. Its ultimate transformative humanity will always ensure it a place in the canon of great and necessary cultural achievements.