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Addiction and Orestes by Jackie Flanagan



In the ancient Greek story of Orestes, we find some perspective for our time. It comes at the moment when he stands and says, "I killed my mother."

We live in the age of addiction. Not only cigarette, alcohol and drug addiction, but also gambling addiction, shopping addiction, compulsive eating. There are TV addicts, online game addicts, porn addicts. Psychologists talk about women's addiction to love and men's addiction to achievement.

Addiction is usually understood as chemical dependence. An addictive substance like nicotine or cocaine becomes a requirement of the body. The user no longer has the freedom to "take it or leave it," and is unable to give up the substance without incurring intense adverse side effects and suffering agonies of withdrawal.

Now researchers tell us that certain behaviours not involving the ingestion of substances can also become addictive. Playing online games can be habit forming. Apparently a burst of the chemical dopamine is released in the brain every time the player successfully completes a task. To be addicted is to be dependent on the behaviour as a habit—and not just a bad habit, but one that can destroy a person.

Addiction is a serious public health issue. Almost one quarter of Alberta's three million people smoke cigarettes. It is estimated that 10 per cent of Albertans are addicted to drugs or alcohol. The Alberta Alcohol and Drug Addiction Commission, with an annual budget of \$66-million, handles more than 30,000 treatment admissions and 70,000 shelter admissions every year. At the province's 23 treatment centres with in-patient facilities for detoxification, hundreds of people looking for help are turned away every week.

Addiction is both a societal/cultural problem and a personal problem. Public

policies and cultural attitudes and standards profoundly affect behaviour. Compare smoking rates in Quebec and British Columbia. Where bylaws prohibit smoking, smoking decreases. Our governments, both municipal and provincial, could be more enlightened in enacting legislation to prevent those who profit from addictive products and activities from preying on the weaknesses of others. Governments might have policies to discourage self-destructive behaviour. But our government itself seems to be addicted to gambling revenue.

What has led to this epidemic of addiction? Some would say a decadent and permissive culture. Yet it might be more accurate to think of it as a culture of helplessness. Addicts are no longer responsible for their own behaviour. When we feel that our lives and happiness are determined by forces over which we have no control we become victims. The addict is the ultimate victim, driven by the uncontrollable cravings of his or her own body.

I imagine addiction to be like the howling furies that torment Orestes. His life is a nightmare of horror, trapped in circumstances beyond his control. His father, Agamemnon, at the insistence of the gods, sacrifices his sister to raise wind for the sails of the Greek ships set for Troy. After the war, his mother, Clytemnestra, takes revenge by killing his father. Then Orestes, honour bound to avenge the murder of his father, kills his mother, a crime so vile that the screaming furies descend on him. Finally the gods take pity and hold a tribunal to determine whether he deserves his punishment. They argue that external forces have impinged on him, that he can't be held responsible for his actions. Orestes slowly rises to his feet and says, "I killed my mother." At that moment the furies disappear.