

CHAPTER 22

Ghosts, Demons and Gods: Supernatural Challenges

Amit Shilo

Introduction

Aeschylus lived in a world shimmering with divinities. Temples and shrines dotted the ancient Greek landscape, religious ceremonies (both private and public) marked time, myths told in song and depicted in art swarmed with supernatural forces. Everything, both good and bad, was somehow connected with the will of powers that ranged from the ghosts of the dead, to minor spirits of nature, to dark forces from below, to the highest Olympians. Thus it is no surprise that in Aeschylus's tragedies human beings must constantly wrestle with a hazardous array of supernatural influences. At dramatically potent moments the wills of these diverse, generally anthropomorphic forces break into the human world through indirect means: oracles, prophecies, dreams and other signs foretell of destruction or urge violent action. Characters interpret, dispute and sometimes defy these signs – at great peril. Most spectacularly, and oftentimes with elaborate buildup, ghosts, demons and gods themselves manifest as characters on stage. As we will see, each superhuman encounter, either terrifying or sublime, offers rich counterpoints to the usual understanding of human life.

This chapter will investigate a few paradigmatic instances and point to others within Aeschylus's relentlessly complex tragic compositions. Some background concerning Greek polytheism is necessary for modern readers to unpack the web of cultural associations and relevant myths concerning these superhuman figures. The first section thus briefly introduces religious ideas and practices that shaped individual and civic life. It then touches on some influential earlier examples of literary approaches to the divine world. Thereafter, the interpretive sections of this chapter follow a progressive schema from humanity to the highest gods of the Greek pantheon. We begin with the perspectives of human characters on the gods, especially focusing on whether they have any knowledge of divine will. The next section turns to human characters who themselves cross the threshold into the supernatural, as ancestor figures, ghosts and undead heroes. The following sections cover divinities, moving from the chorus of ancient demons, the Erinyes, to ever more powerful Olympians. Throughout, we will see how supernatural speculations and interventions significantly reshape the mythic world constructed within their play, and beyond. At key points divine forces upend societal

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values in general; at other times they raise issues that were current in classical Athens. Overall, the following discussion will focus on Aeschylean techniques for upsetting his audiences' conceptions.

Divinities in Greek Religion and Earlier Literature

The supernatural figures of ancient Greek myth were generally understood as congruent with the figures of religious cult who shared their names, although with some important differences. Literature and religion attributed to a wide range of divinities control over natural events, such as storms and plagues, and ones that we attribute to political or psychological forces, such as warfare and dreams. Divine beings in this system could be simply personifications of abstract ideas, for example Justice and the Curses. Humans named them in prayers and ascribed potent effects to them, but there are few narratives in literature concerning their personal history. The Olympians and a variety of other divine beings, on the other hand, are the subject of complex mythological narratives in which they experience desires, engage in conflicts and even undergo fundamental transformations.

In religion divine beings were treated almost exclusively as abstract and unknowable, superior beings with particular domains of influence. The practices of worship and prayer were embedded in all aspects of life, from the everyday to special events, from domestic dedications to massive yearly festivals. Worship of one divinity was not exclusive of others nor was it territorially delimited outside of the sacred precinct around a shrine: travellers worshipped local divinities and new divinities could be introduced to a community. There were often several temples, both grand and small, to an Olympian divinity within larger communities, each dedicated to a different aspect of that divinity. For instance, throughout the Greek world Athena was worshipped as a virgin warrior (*Parthenos*, as in the Parthenon sanctuary in Athens) and, relatedly, as the civic guardian (*Polias*) of Athens, from which city she probably takes her name. But Athena is also a goddess of crafting (*Eragne*), represented in cult, art and literature with the wool-working spindle (on Athena and Athens, see Loraux 1993). On a smaller scale than temples to Olympians, shrines to minor divinities and local heroes were everywhere. Individuals and groups continually prayed to divinities to avoid evils and obtain blessings for every facet of life. Aeschylus dramatises these types of human–divine relationships often: the Herald of the *Agamemnon* prays to Hermes as the tutelary divinity of heralds, Cassandra is the prophetess of Apollo, whereas Orestes in the *Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides* trusts Apollo as a personal saviour.

Politically speaking, the ancient Greeks routinely prayed to divinities for the protection of the state. External oracles were consulted concerning warfare, plagues and the founding of new cities. Yet when Greeks wrote history or recorded their political deliberations they generally avoided claiming direct divine interference in contemporary affairs. Even if specific gods in literature are said to be for or against a particular city (especially in epics about the Trojan War), there is no concrete evidence of war between followers of one cult against those of another. Moreover, in historical Athens there were few theocratic elements. For example, the gods were not said to have established the Athenian laws (unlike the Cretan and Spartan claims to divine law codes, see Plato, *Laws* 624a–25a). Although the Athenian state financed a number of cults, priests had no say in politics. City-wide festivals dedicated to particular gods included the Athenian Greater Dionysia, to Dionysus, in which tragedy and comedy were first staged. The interplay of this politico-religious context, especially the festival, with the content of tragedies has become ever more prominent in scholarship (e.g. Goldhill 1987; Winkler and Zeitlin 1990).

Literature demonstrated a different but overlapping concern with the supernatural. In ancient Greece there were neither dogmatic religious texts nor emphasis on belief in a way that is common today. Instead, the stories of the gods in poetry sung both on religious occasions and as entertainment were linked. The works of Homer and Hesiod, though not written as sacred texts, became some of the most important influences on how Greeks saw their supernatural world. Yet they circulated alongside religious hymns and archaic poetry from a variety of authors that all meaningfully diverge from them and each other in their divine stories and perspectives. These works often describe in detail the gods' actions and intimate motivations, with the claim that these have been revealed by the Muses. Whether one considers this claim to refer to divine inspiration or the passing along of traditional stories (or both), it means that knowledge concerning the divine is available to audiences, if not to the human characters.

Resolution of conflict, social reintegration and the maintenance of hierarchies account for much of the treatment of the divine world in archaic literature. Such stability is the overarching idea despite sophisticated literary techniques that complicate every theme and its interpretation. In Homer's epics, although deeply ironic and violent interactions occur among gods and between gods and humans, the destructive aspects of the gods are often balanced by scenes of immortal feasting, laughter and lovemaking. In the *Theogony*, Hesiod presents a knowable theological framework of the universe. The work delineates a divine progression from the chaos of creation, through the conflicts among the older generation of divinities, to Zeus's ordered, eternal sovereignty. In Hesiod's *Works and Days*, the harshness of life and tremendous destructive potential of the gods is ever-present, but humans can flourish if they properly follow the divinely guaranteed balance of the world. Hesiod forefronts human labour, the cycles of nature and the hierarchy of relations, especially the subjugation of chaotic female forces, both divine and human. In lyric poetry roughly contemporary with Aeschylus, Pindar balances even the most tragic stories of divine destruction with benefits to deserving humans, understood as aristocrats and victors of prestigious athletic contests. Pindar warns against competing with the gods, but his poems are programmatically structured as eternal praise for human achievement.

Aeschylus himself has often been depicted as more "religious" than other dramatists. Even the first mention of him in the historical record has to do with divinities. His younger contemporary Herodotus critiques Aeschylus as having promulgated a story not in any poet before him, but rather taken from Egypt, that Artemis was the daughter of Demeter (Hdt. 2.156.4–6). In early classical scholarship there was an attempt to foist on Aeschylus a "Zeus religion" that prefigured Christianity, a theory that the plays do not at all support (see the critique in Lloyd-Jones 1956). As we will see, the ghosts, demons and gods who appear on the Aeschylean stage are not flat, symbolic figures acting out religious allegory. Aeschylus's divinities make known their individual perspectives, needs and experienced feelings, all of which are sometimes central to the action. Against this background of religion and archaic literature shines more clearly (and darkly) the emphasis in Aeschylean tragedy on humanity's uncertainty concerning the gods and on the destabilising aspects of encounters with the divine.

Knowledge of the Divine in Aeschylean Tragedy

By contrast to archaic Greek literature, in tragedy the lack of a narrator means that all statements about the divine world come from characters' embedded perspectives. Therefore one must keep in mind that human characters generally lack even *indirect* knowledge of divine will. The *Oresteia* contains numerous exclamations of uncertainty about which divinities

affect particular deeds, the proper phrasing of prayers, the justness of destructive prayers and the expected responses of the gods (Goldhill 2004, 53–54). The exceptions come as powerful – often destructive – incursions into human existence: at some points characters become privy to oracles, at others prophets dramatically divulge the future. Yet these glimpses of divine will are never presented as full revelation; they occur in language and thus must be interpreted.

Choral songs, which serve as structuring interludes in tragedy, include numerous mythological stories, praise to the god and oftentimes theologically framed reports of human actions. Concerning the question of whether tragic choruses have privileged access to the divine in their songs, there is a long academic debate (Fletcher 1999; Rosenmeyer 1982, 145–87). A crucial insight is that choral songs never demonstrate any precise knowledge of divinity or the future when compared with the oracles quoted by characters or with the language of staged gods (Parker 2009, 128–32). Aeschylus’s foreign characters, despite sometimes manifesting magical abilities (such as raising the dead in the *Persians*, 619–842), nevertheless do not seem to understand the gods any better (see later in this chapter). Egyptian and Persian characters rarely name gods but, when they do, use Greek names such as Poseidon and Zeus. Thus the obscurity of divine purpose is cross-cultural and thoroughgoing.

The inability of human characters to access the divine schema has wide-ranging consequences for their interpretations of events and human motivations. In the *Persians*, the Messenger ascribes the defeat of the expedition to conquer Greece to “some avenger or evil spirit, appearing from somewhere” (354). A later passage takes this uncertainty to an extreme: “whoever had before considered the gods as nothing, implored them then with prayers” (497–99). Although scholars tend to deny the possibility that this passage indicates “atheism” (Garvie 2009, 223–24), it is patently a reference to disbelief in, indifference to, or active disrespect of the gods among the Persian soldiers. As such, it seems like an early (perhaps the earliest) analogue of the modern saying “there are no atheists in foxholes”, implying, of course, that there are atheists elsewhere and at other times. Needless to say, those who show contempt for the divine end badly; many of these soldiers drown immediately thereafter, as the sun melts the frozen stream they are crossing.

Another paradigm by which human characters attempt to interpret action is that *both* divine and human reasons compel an action. This “double-motivation” occurs a number of times in Homer, in passages that depict a god motivating an action and subsequently a human acting as though it were their idea (e.g. *Odyssey* 18.158–65; Pelliccia 2011). Aeschylus uses this technique at key points in a number of his plays, for example in each of the kin-murders in the *Oresteia*. The most famous passage is found in the choral song depicting Agamemnon’s sacrifice of his daughter. Calchas represents the sacrifice as the demand of Artemis to allow the Greek army to sail to Troy (*Agamemnon* 198–202). The Chorus sing that Agamemnon shed tears and was internally torn, but finally that “he put on the yoke of necessity” (218). The condensed image captures Agamemnon simultaneously making an active decision and being forced by fate (Lesky 1966). This does not absolve him from responsibility, as they add that Agamemnon’s mind “blew in an impious direction” (219) and Clytemnestra murders him in part for this very act.

Examples of this double motivation occur with other interfamilial murderers: Clytemnestra herself claims both that she is responsible for killing Agamemnon (*Agamemnon* 1404–06) as well as that she is not responsible, but only incarnates the curse of the house (1497–512; Foley 2001, 211–34). Orestes refers to Apollo’s prophecy that urges him to kill his mother (*Libation Bearers* 269–97) but also claims that even if he *disbelieves* it (298) he has a host of compelling human reasons (299–304). Eteocles in the *Seven against Thebes* decides to enter combat against his brother, in a scene filled with invocations of the family curse and gods that drive him to it (653–719). Eteocles, however, conjointly cites personal knowledge of his

brother's character and actions since childhood, as well as his right as "ruler against ruler, brother against brother, enemy against enemy" (664–71; Torrance 2007, 38–63). In each of these scenes Aeschylus eschews the direct voice of a divinity. Instead he focuses attention on the extreme difficulties humans face in comprehending divine effects on the world.

The examples above concern mythic characters and mythic wars, but the *Persians* includes speculations about divine will that would have doubtless been far more poignant for the Athenian audience. Aeschylus dramatises the fallout from the sea battle at Salamis (480 BCE) from the enemy perspective: after the Persian Messenger blames the loss on unknown gods who kept Athens safe (quoted earlier in this section), he immediately turns to depict specific Greek deceptions and tactics (*Persians* 355–432). Since the playwright and many of the audience members fought in this existential war against the Persians, it is as though Aeschylus is winking to his audience, hinting that they were actuating divine plans.

Yet even here Aeschylus does not let speculation about divine will stand as simple truth. He jars the audience with continual, disconcerting references to double-motivation. An example is the explanation by the Ghost of Darius of why his son's decision to attack Greece was doomed from the start (*Persians* 742, 749–50):

Nevertheless, when man hastens to his own undoing, the god too participates with him... Mortal though he was, he thought in his folly that he would gain the mastery of all the gods, yes, even over Poseidon.

According to Darius, Xerxes' hubris consisted of building a bridge across the Hellespont to Europe (the reference behind "mastery...even over Poseidon") and his subsequent downfall was due to the sea god's anger at this attempted yoking. In fact, Darius was himself known to have bridged the sea and he, too, lost disastrously to the Greeks (Rosenbloom 2006, 101–03). What kind of responses might audiences have had to this ascribing of the Persian loss to an architectural affront against Poseidon, rather than emphasising the misjudgement of the second attempt by Persians to conquer a well-organised, highly independent Greece?

This is not to say that Aeschylus entirely subverts a moral message: an oracle predicts further Persian routs by the Greeks as punishment for their impieties in war (such as burning temples, 800–28). Audience members, who well know the historical outcome, can feel that divine justice has been fulfilled. Nevertheless, such moments are rarities in the Aeschylean corpus. The plays are mostly brimming with human declarations of ignorance and divergent understandings of superhuman influence. This is the fundamental predicament of Aeschylus's human characters and he implies that the audience shares their illiteracy of divine plans.

Undead Humans

A number of Aeschylus's plays dramatise extensions of human existence beyond death. As in Greek culture more generally, a variety of possible continuations is evident: either as souls in Hades, spirits to whom prayer is made, ghosts, or even heroic figures. In the rare cases when the undead appear on stage, they simultaneously alter the dramatic action and give radically different perspectives on human life. In the *Persians*, the Queen and the Chorus of Persian Elders raise the former king from the dead in order to somehow alleviate the disastrous defeat by the Greeks (*Persians* 607–842; Muntz 2011, 257–71). Yet, although the Ghost of Darius claims much influence in the underworld (686–92), he asserts no power to intervene in the living world. The Ghost character has also clearly gained no knowledge after death: he has to be informed of the Persian losses and, when he does speak of the future, it is only to reveal the oracle he heard while alive (739–41).

Darius's final lines cause much consternation among commentators, for he sententiously advises the Persian Elders (and thus, in some way, the audience) to "give pleasure to your soul" because wealth is of no use to the dead (841–42). Whereas the Greeks thought of Persians as overly concerned with material goods, and the living characters in the play also emphasise fine clothing and the benefits of wealth, Darius's supernatural prescription that "you can't take it with you" seems wildly inappropriate in the context of national calamity (Rosenbloom 2006, 114–15). His reappearance nevertheless puts different frames of reference together for the internal and external audiences: he expands on the Persian catastrophe with the prediction of even greater losses, but also gives a more general perspective on life from the vantage point of the dead (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 223–27). Audiences are left to their own devices to understand what such wisdom from the afterlife might mean for the Persians – and for humanity.

Similarly, the Ghost of Clytemnestra in the *Eumenides* continues the discord that the living queen sowed in the first two plays, but also transfigures it. When alive, Clytemnestra deceives Agamemnon with her words; murders him in revenge for his killing their daughter; and takes over the state with her lover. In these acts she subverts Greek ideas about gender, family and a well-ordered state. The Ghost of Clytemnestra returns for vengeance against her own murderer, Orestes, who is both her son and the heir to the throne. Being powerless herself, she must urge the Erinyes (aka the Furies) to act for her. In the *Libation Bearers*, Orestes presents his murder of Clytemnestra as just vengeance (973–1006), yet in the *Eumenides* her Ghost character rejects his notion of justice (94–139). The challenge she presents is not restricted to her individual need for vengeance, but shakes the entire patriarchal system. The whole play, in fact, is structured around her ongoing claims, which lead to the confrontation between the Erinyes and Apollo and to the trial of Orestes (Shilo 2018). Through ghost figures and other allusions to the undead Aeschylus questions the evaluation of justice and, by extension, all living decisions: how can one appraise action if its consequences continue to change after death?

At the other pole of human afterlife transformations are semi-divine heroes. After Homeric times, shrines to local supernatural beings became associated with dead humans, especially transgressive mythological figures. These were understood to be heroes, who might be more concerned with their locale and its community than the Panhellenic Olympian divinities. In the *Oresteia*, playing off of the historical worship of Agamemnon as a hero around Sparta, Aeschylus moves Agamemnon's palace to Argos. Aeschylus thus more easily creates an origin story (etiology) for the contemporary alliance between Argos and Athens and simultaneously reduces Spartan claims to Agamemnon's supernatural support.

However, in the *Eumenides* Agamemnon is not the focus of heroic power, but rather it is Orestes who rewards his acquittal in Athens with vows for an eternal military alliance (754–77). Orestes' transformation into a martial hero, however, presents a twofold challenge to audience members: First, they have already witnessed Orestes' actions on stage, as a young man who never went to war but, instead, murdered his mother. Although heroes were oftentimes those who have done terrible deeds, still Orestes' military language contrasts greatly with his depiction until that moment. Second, the Athenian alliance with Argos was a historical reality for the audience, but not Orestes' association with Argos. Aeschylus's etiology is thus novel and we have no evidence that it was ever taken up thereafter. Overall, Aeschylean plays frame their afterlife scenes in ways that begin with the specific dilemmas of the plot and then expand to themes of societal and political import. We should nevertheless recognise that each encounter with the undead includes deeply subversive elements that prevent us from taking their ostensible message as definitive.

A Chorus of Curses, the Erinyes

The darkest forces of the universe terrifyingly appear in the *Eumenides* in the form of the Chorus of Erinyes. These ancient divinities, known from Mycenaean times, had only a minor cultic presence in classical Greek religion, but are widespread in the visual arts and archaic literature. They are said to be daughters of the primordial earth goddess, Gaia, and, as far back as the figurines at Mycenae, are generally depicted as snakes. Both these features locate them within the category of the “chthonic”: dark, bloody and deadly forces related to the earth and underworld. In previous literature their functions fall into two loosely related categories: balancing the universe and carrying out familial curses among humans (on their role in art and literature see Sewell-Rutter 2007, 78–109.) Besides the *Eumenides*, in which they appear as characters, Aeschylean plays only invoke them in speech, but do so often.

Each of those other plays also refers exclusively to either one or the other of their previous functions. In the *Prometheus Bound*, which may not have been written by Aeschylus (see Chapter 12 in this volume), the Erinyes, along with the Moirai (Fates), represent divine necessity, to which even Zeus must bend (515–18). That is, they are impersonal forces of divine balance. On the other hand, in the *Seven against Thebes* their sole function is enacting familial curses (e.g. 70). This is also the case in the first two plays of the *Oresteia*: in the *Agamemnon* they are referred to as part of the family curse (e.g. 1117–20). In the *Libation Bearers*, once Orestes commits familial murder, the Erinyes appear only to him, driving him mad. The Erinyes in this scene externalise Orestes’ internal guilt and thus ambiguously represent external punishment for blood crime.

With theatrical inventiveness, Aeschylus shifts the Erinyes from abstract beings in the *Agamemnon* to invisible forces at the end of the *Libation Bearers*, to highly physical ones at the start of the *Eumenides*. In that final play of the trilogy they appear on stage as horrifying, anthropomorphic beings with gorgon heads: snoring at first, they are roused by the Ghost of Clytemnestra to hunt Orestes like hell-hounds. They claim they will slurp his blood and send him to eternal punishment in Hades (*Eumenides* 264–75). They enact their duty through obsessively repetitive songs and dances meant to magically bind Orestes. With this multi-layered spectacle Aeschylus activates for the audience the Erinyes’ eerie emotional effects.

Yet as the *Eumenides* progresses, the Erinyes transform from one-dimensional, monstrous avengers into layered characters. Like other staged divinities, the Erinyes have their own motivations: they declare that it is their divinely given eternal duty to punish mortals for murder (312–20), a task paradoxically both honourable and polluting (385). This differentiates them from the Olympians, who want nothing to do with blood and punishment (360–66). The Erinyes go further, declaring that their venerable justice cannot be overruled by the newer Olympians (e.g. 155–63). In this case, they deny that Orestes can ever be purified of his mother’s murder except by succumbing to them and even accuse Apollo of defiling sacred Delphi by sheltering a polluted human (165–72). The Erinyes thus weaponise the notion that the spilling of blood causes pollution (Meinel 2015, 119–27). They personify the extreme point of vendetta, continuing it beyond the death of the last human avenger for Iphigeneia and Clytemnestra. One may also read them as championing the claims of blood kinship and femininity against male-dominated politics (Zeitlin 1996, 101–19).

A complex interplay emerges between the Erinyes’ universal view of justice and their particularised staging. As characters they are relentless, violent in their language and portrayed as ancient, feminine, monstrous beings. This provides Apollo one angle of attack that he could not use against the abstract notion of retributive justice: in his verbal (and nearly physical) battle with the Erinyes he presents purely negative versions of their justice based on their appearance (192–93). Their very notion of justice, unquestionable as long as the Erinyes

were distant or invisible, fissures under the stress of cross-examination. Apollo questions their application of law, pointing to their failure to pursue Clytemnestra, the killer of Agamemnon, when she was alive (211–24). The Erinyes – as other tragic characters do when cornered – prevaricate: they claim that their mandate applies exclusively to kindred blood, whereas Agamemnon was only *married* to his killer (212). Thus the embodiment of these divine forces opens them up to a fierce inquisition, creating the necessary conditions for a revolution of justice in the divine and human realms.

Even though the arguments are unsatisfactory on both sides, the Erinyes refuse to abandon their duty (*timē*, a word that means “honour” as well, 227) and fight back when they feel dishonoured (*atimos* and related terms, e.g. 780). Their refusal to be bullied by the male god and their protection of Clytemnestra’s rights as a mother cause a conflict too great for Apollo alone to resolve. The resultant trial leads to the culminating reason for staging the Erinyes: after they lose, their transformation in character corresponds to a transformation in justice. Athena’s offer to them of real honour instead of dishonour is contingent on their adding blessing to their punishing aspects. Henceforth, instead of roaming the earth to punish all humankind for transgressions, they settle in one city, Athens, for its sole benefit. They add blessings for milk and dew – liquids of fertility – to their previous singular focus on blood. They become associated with the beneficial goddesses known as *Eumenides* (literally “Kindly Ones”, the meaning of the play’s title), or *Semnai Theai* (“Sacred Goddesses”, 1041), an Athenian cult with which the audience would have been familiar. A torchlight procession ends the trilogy, reminiscent of both the festival of Dionysus and the yearly ritual for the *Semnai Theai* (Sourvinou-Inwood 2003, 238–39). The Erinyes’ unexpected *evolution* in the *Eumenides* is just as striking intellectually as their terrifying costume and binding magic is dramatically.

There is a dilemma in this alteration that the blessings and ritual ending obscure: the Erinyes, who had an eternal, free-roaming, apolitical mandate of blood vengeance given by Fate (391–93) actually *choose* to abandon these duties in favour of staying in one city and operating for its political interests against all others. Supernatural change is thus central to the *Eumenides*. This shift is ostensibly positive. It occurs under the protection of Athena and for the sake of Athens, the city of the audience. Nevertheless, such divine mutability entails the possibility of further reversals in the future. As we will see in the section “Athena for the City; Athena for War”, Aeschylus’s Athena addresses this theological issue with a disturbing, political solution.

Apollo: Violence, Prophecy and Rhetoric

Before turning to Athena’s role, however, we must more closely examine the adversary of the Erinyes in the *Oresteia*, Apollo. The modern, abridged Apollo is the youthful god of light and wisdom. A casual or generalising reading of the *Oresteia* might see in Apollo only the all-good protector of Orestes and the antagonist of blood-sucking demons. Yet, like other Olympians, he has a long, varied religious and mythic tradition. Some of the important positive attributes of Apollo are healing, prophecy (at Delphi especially), purification and ritual initiation of youths into manhood. His function as the god of disease, however, is the well-established counterpart to his function as the healing god. He also has a dual aspect as the prophetic god par excellence, since prophecy must tell of the future, whether favourable or ruinous (Roberts 1984, 60–72). Yet one should not end the analysis of tragic representations of the gods at the notion of ambiguity. Instead, this elementary Greek religious and dramatic dynamic ought to be the starting point of a deeper interpretation.

In the *Oresteia* the baneful aspects of Apollo precede his healing functions, thus deeply problematising his later characterisation as both saviour of Orestes and mouthpiece of Zeus. Apollo's possible role in the vengeance against Troy (*Agamemnon* 55–59) and his arrows of plague shot at the Greek army (509–13) are some of the first mentions of the god. It is his prophet, Calchas, who demands the sacrifice of Iphigeneia to Artemis, despite calling on Apollo as healer (146). In the Cassandra scene, too, the main emphasis is on Apollo's violence. From the start, Cassandra, the Trojan priestess of Apollo, blames him for bringing her to her doom and laments her fate by assimilating his name (*Apollōn*) to a Greek verb for destruction (*apollōn* 1080–81). In a confession whose savage aspects still receive too little emphasis, Cassandra tells of the god sexually assaulting her: “he came to me as a wrestler” (1206), a simile used elsewhere by Aeschylus of warfare and rarely used in Greek for love (Denniston and Page 1957, ad loc.). She continues that after “assenting” to his advances she somehow “cheated him” (1208), although the exact meaning of each of these terms is never made clear. Oftentimes in myth – and in previous Aeschylean plays – the sexual aggression of a divinity against a human results in a divinely blessed child (e.g. Zeus and Io in the *Suppliants*), which seems to bring some resolution within each story (although it is imperative for modern readers to question precisely such resolutions). This is not the case here. Instead, Cassandra's sexual encounter with Apollo leads to him *cursing* her, which is why her prophecies are always disbelieved (1212). Corresponding to Cassandra's prophetic-destructive connection to Apollo is Orestes' own (Morgan 1994). In the *Libation Bearers*, Apollo's prophecies drive Orestes to murder his mother on threat of terrible punishments brought on by the Erinyes (283). The act itself nevertheless leads to pursuit by the Erinyes. We see that in the first two plays it is (often gendered) violence and prophetic destructiveness that characterise Apollo's interventions in the human world.

In the *Eumenides* Apollo appears on stage – perhaps in a dazzling costume – as the champion of Orestes. Yet alternating with characterisations of him as a non-violent saviour connected to Zeus are his sometimes brutal, sometimes deceptive speeches and the accusations brought against him. The play begins at his temple in Delphi, where his priestess gives a new, pointedly non-violent aetiology for Apollo's takeover of the sanctuary: instead of having slain the monstrous Python, as in previous myth, in this version Apollo receives Delphi as a birthday gift from a succession of female goddesses tracing back to Mother Earth (1–8). The disparity between Apollo's behaviour and this description is evident once he confronts the Erinyes on stage in an extraordinarily aggressive manner, insulting and threatening them with his arrows all the way to the end of the trial. They, in turn, accuse him of overturning divine justice, of polluting his sanctuary with blood and even of getting the Fates drunk so he can subvert the natural order (723–28), a further aggression against female divinities. These dissonances in the divine and human realm banish any easy reconciliation of the positive and negative aspects of the divinity.

Apollo's rhetoric within the trial of Orestes further undermines the idea that the god acts in line with an absolute justice, as he claims. Apollo declares that his prophecy is directly from Zeus (614–20), yet his arguments during the trial have long drawn suspicion: First, he offers blessings and an alliance to Athens if the jurors acquit Orestes, unrelated to the issue of his guilt (665–73). Second, he states that the jurors should ignore their oaths (621), which Athena's instructions later explicitly contradict (709–10). Third, Apollo infamously claims that a mother is not biologically necessary for reproduction: he declares that while the father plants his seed, a mother is merely a *stranger* to her son (657–61). This startling declaration is used to support Apollo's arguments that killing a mother is less problematic than killing a father and king. The passage has generated much debate, but there is no evidence that such a biological theory was generally accepted by the audience. It is not even the position of Clytemnestra's children *within* the play. Their repeated references to her as mother force

them to confront the difficulty of killing her, by contrast to their ease at dispatching her co-conspirator, Aegisthus. Some scholars have therefore identified Apollo as the preeminent proponent of a larger pattern of misogyny within the *Oresteia* (Zeitlin 1996, 107–12). The god buttresses his assertion with an example, but, crucially, his choice is neither human nor a precise fit: he refers to Athena herself, who sprang from Zeus's head after he swallowed her mother (662–66). The appeal to the goddess is pointed, for she not only presides over the case, but casts what is likely the decisive vote. This draws attention to Apollo's devious forensic techniques (such as those with which the audience would have been familiar from human trials and public deliberation): he offers political gifts to the jurors, attacks his opponents, appeals to the voting judge and uses suspect arguments. In sum, Apollo's depiction in the *Oresteia* blends claims for his non-violence, Zeus-supported truthfulness and calm deliverance of Orestes with his numerous prophecies of bloodshed, personally violent acts (especially against females) and manipulative justifications.

Athena for the City; Athena for War

Athena in the *Eumenides* acts on the grand canvas of politics, warfare and universal human-divine relations. Through her, Aeschylus cultivates every device at his disposal to give the trilogy a sense of satisfying closure after the uncertainty and violence that haunted all previous scenes of the *Oresteia*. She is central to the dramatic reversals, patriotic promises and religious rituals of the ending. Athena's divine intervention also correlates with a spatial shift to the city of the audience: after the first two plays occur in Argos, the *Eumenides* opens in Delphi, then unexpectedly relocates to Athens. Further Aeschylus links the mythic time of the play to contemporary Athens by dramatising Athena "founding" the Areopagus, which was a living institution for the audience. With Athena at the helm of the city, victory, profit and persuasion seem to become all-positive terms, the earlier rhetoric of darkness turns into that of light, and the gods are said to bless Athens forever. For these reasons the end of the trilogy continues to be understood by many readers and scholars as Athenian propaganda (Kennedy 2009, 32–35). Yet whereas this is the dominant strain of Athena's language and the dramatic structure of the ending, it also invites a series of subversive questions: how, precisely, does Athena achieve closure in a violent, uncertain world? On what political model is her favoured city-state to operate? If Athens is the eternal victor, what happens to the rest of humanity?

The particulars of Athena's actions and rhetoric lead to unexpected and little-discussed answers. Her approach to resolving conflict is unique in the trilogy and some have labelled it entirely positive. First, she reverses Apollo's strategy: whereas he attacks the Erinyes, Athena treats them respectfully, allowing them to entrust her with judging their case against Orestes. Second, she listens to both sides in what amounts to a "pre-trial hearing" and grants each a turn in the trial. Athena asserts that neither a divinity nor humans can judge the case of continuing vengeance alone, without instigating further violence. Consequently, she chooses the wisest Athenians to be jurors alongside her as vote-casting judge. Her court seems to be a model of humans and divinities working together. Because it involves human voting, it has often also been understood as a template for democracy (Meier 1993, 112–13).

Violence is brought near in Athena's scenes, yet always seems to retreat. One must keep in mind that the "first trial for bloodshed" (*Eumenides* 682) is a matter of life and death for Orestes. Once the case is decided, Athena focuses on alleviating the resultant conflict by placating the losing party. Yet an attentive audience might notice her rhetorical legerdemain: Athena declares that "the defendant wins (*nikā*) even if the vote is equal (*isopsēthos*)" (741). After the Erinyes become incensed, however, she uses the same Greek terms for

winning (*nikaō*) and an equal vote (*isopsēthos*) to try to convince them that they have not actually lost: “you have not been defeated (*nenikēsth*)”, but the case truly resulted in an equal vote (*isopsēthos*)” (795–96). Similarly, once the Erinyes threaten Athens for contravening their allotted function, Athena alludes to her capacity for violence even against divinities, through Zeus’s thunderbolt (827–29). She raises this option only to dismiss it, in favour of repeatedly offering the Erinyes honoured places in Athens. When she succeeds, Athena declares that this was a victory of the goddess *Peithō* (“Persuasion”) and Zeus of the Assemblies (970–75). Athena compiles an array of divine allies for Athens: the heroised Orestes, the reformed Erinyes, herself and even the highest powers, Zeus and Fate (1045–46). She consistently declares that her promises are eternal (e.g. 898–99). Athena’s orchestration of the resolution thus gives the impression that the *Oresteia* is intended to teach humanity a lesson: building relationships and influencing through rhetoric is more positive and effective than violence.

However, to better understand Athena’s “founding of the new law” in context, it is important to know that Aeschylus is innovating, and with politically torrid material. Concerning the trial of Orestes, our evidence suggests that previous myths depicted the jury as composed exclusively either of gods or of humans, not the hybrid model in the *Oresteia* (Sommerstein 1989, 4–5). Additionally, the ancient institution of the Areopagus was probably inherited from pre-democratic times as either a governmental council or a homicide court; we have no other legends of its divine establishment. As far as we can tell, over time the Areopagus became an aristocratic bastion that had its power reduced by a democratic reformer, Ephialtes, in order to increase the power of the people, only a few years before the *Oresteia* was staged (Zelnik-Abramovitz 2011, 104–11). The evidence implies that aristocratic reactionaries subsequently killed Ephialtes as part of widespread civil strife between the two factions (Cartledge 2016, 85–86). In this context, Athena’s divine warning against ever altering the laws (681–95) is ambiguously related to the contemporary turmoil: is Aeschylus speaking through her against Ephialtes’ changes or against reversing those changes? Scholars have argued both sides (see further, Chapter 1 in this volume). Rather than promoting a specific political agenda, such phrasing merely indicates that the goddess is concerned with protecting institutions and preserving the city from internal violence (Sommerstein 2010b).

Yet such warding off of civil strife is not, in the divine ending of the *Oresteia*, at all a peaceful process. Athena’s emphasis on persuasion glosses over the details of a new world order in large part predicated on violence. First, Athena’s focus is solely on Athenian flourishing, not that of any other city or state; the point of the Areopagus is that it will give her favoured city an advantage over all others (700–04) and the heroic power of Orestes explicitly serves to guarantee Athenian military invincibility (776–77). Second, the “cure” for the disease of civic violence is “plenty of foreign war” (864). Last, Athena and the Erinyes bless Athens with “victory without evil” (903).

Athena’s character on stage is a confluence of systems of closure: she resolves the human plot, gains divine allies, brings blessings to her city and arranges the religious procession at the end. She insists that convincing and consensus-building are her favoured tools. Yet the corollary of internal peace is the encouragement and justification of constant external bloodshed. Athena claims that the approval of Athenian hegemony is universal, supported by a network of divinities all the way up to Zeus and the Fates. Her emphasis on eternity allows no future divine transformations. Could Athenian audience members accept this divinely condoned jingoism unquestioningly? We cannot tell their range of reactions. Modern readers may compare both the *Oresteia*’s own depictions of the horrors of warfare and the fate of Athens itself after its period of successful conquests in order to reflect on the pernicious aspects of such an emphasis.

The Absent Zeus

Zeus is the central node of both Greek religion and myth. Despite being neither the first god nor the creator god he is understood as the father and the dominant figure of the Greek pantheon. Thus in the *Eumenides*, Apollo's many claims that his prophecy is dependent on Zeus rely on treating Zeus as the unquestionable epitome of divine power, truth and fulfillment. Zeus is also the source of truth when Athena explains the verdict (797–99). It seems from these claims that a foundation for eternal good can be built on “Zeus the Saviour”, the cult title by which he is referred to several times in Aeschylus (*Libation Bearers* 244–45, *Eumenides* 759–60; Burian 1986). Yet Aeschylean tragedy never takes such a one-sided approach even to this god.

Simultaneous with praise of Zeus we find repeated insistence on his inscrutability. The Daughters of Danaus, for example, sing an ode to Zeus's sovereignty and righteousness and claim his will is always effortlessly and completely fulfilled (*Suppliants* 91–103). Yet even they emphasise that mortals cannot perceive the tangled paths of his shadowy mind (86–90). In the *Agamemnon* the Chorus sings that Zeus is the source of all events, but that his intentions remain, nevertheless, mysterious to men (*Agamemnon* 160–83 is known as the hymn to Zeus; Lebeck 1971, 35–36). A further telling clue to the treatment of Zeus is how rarely, if ever, he appears as a character: the lost plays *Prometheus Unbound* and *Weighing of Souls* could conceivably have been exceptions, but as it stands, nowhere in the Aeschylean corpus do we find lines attributed to a staged Zeus (Sommerstein 2010a, 226). This absence at the heart of the divine structure implicitly haunts all references to Zeus's will.

Beyond the theme of human ignorance and divine absence, the numerous references to negative aspects of Zeus undercut his unquestioned authority (Goldhill 2000, 53–54). These critiques are most striking from the mouth of divinities. The *Prometheus Bound* from first to last characterises Zeus as an autocrat: not only Prometheus, whom Zeus is punishing, but Hephaistos, who is Zeus's son, and other divine characters critique his coercion and abuses of power (e.g. 14–35). Zeus's sexual violence plays a significant role in a number of tragedies: in the *Prometheus Bound* his rape of Io is the back story for her crazed arrival on stage, fleeing the requitals of Hera. The same act against Io is normalised as the background of the *Suppliants*, in which nevertheless the Daughters of Danaus beg throughout the play to be spared from analogous sexual violence by their human pursuers. Last, the Erinyes in the *Eumenides* refer to the well-known myth of Zeus gaining the throne by violently deposing his own father (640–42).

Characterisations of Zeus have cosmic repercussions. As mentioned, the *Eumenides* ends with a procession that appeals to Zeus and the Fates. The implication is that in tandem they will prevent further divine changes. Yet in the *Prometheus Bound* the Fates are more powerful than Zeus, according to Prometheus (515–18) and have a plan about which he knows nothing. Zeus's sexual pursuit of Thetis is fated to lead to his overthrow if he consummates it (908–15). Even if *Prometheus Bound* was not by Aeschylus, both it and the negative stories in the *Eumenides* demonstrate that tragic representations of Zeus at some points emphasise his violence and potential error. He is sometimes characterised with similar hubris and appetites to human autocrats. Zeus is also subject to forces beyond his control; he is susceptible to a tragic fall, like human characters. Although the dethroning of Zeus is incommensurate with the audience's religious system, making that possibility a focal point of the *Prometheus Bound* exemplifies tragedy's unrestricted provocations. Aeschylean tragedies conjoin the theme of Zeus as the source of blessings and good rule with his absence, autocracy, violence and potential fallibility. They thus destabilise human and even divine justifications that are based on Zeus's will.

Conclusions

Throughout Aeschylean tragedy interactions with the supernatural warp individual lives and ideas about life in general. They sometimes upend the most significant systems of human society: kinship, justice and political structures. Aeschylus does, at times, represent divine care for humanity and punishment of transgressions; conversely, he often emphasises the negative aspects of each divinity. These contradictions play out on stage and characters must deal with their consequences. We began by examining some of the numerous expressions of ignorance concerning divine will, which characterise humanity as trapped in a world of unknowable polytheistic conflicts. The anxiety such uncertainties cause may even extend to the world of the original audience, as when Aeschylus dramatises events or social structures connected to Athens. His representations of the will of the gods in history swerve unexpectedly from others we know about, as in the Persian speculations about divine causation or Athena's creation of the Areopagus. In those instances it appears Aeschylus is inviting his audience to reconsider their own history and political structures.

Aeschylean narratives of existence after death and returns from the dead twist human life in another, more individual manner: the continuation of Darius, Agamemnon, Clytemnestra and Orestes as powerful beings after their death demonstrates that humans can be “rewritten”, but not necessarily in a way commensurate with their lives. Darius the conqueror becomes a sage figure chastising his son for the hubris of invading Greece, which he himself had once attempted. Agamemnon, the bellicose king and child murderer, is reduced from his political past to, ironically, become merely a protector of his family. Orestes, who has never been to war, becomes an afterlife hero-figure overseeing military expeditions. Clytemnestra, however, remains unredeemed. Aeschylus thus reopens questions about values: if the final accounting is beyond one's control, what does that say about one's living goals and actions?

Aeschylus dramatises divinities as individuals, not easily unified. The very nature of Greek polytheism means that divine will is split and is not to be understood as supporting only one set of people, cities or values. Each divinity staged in Aeschylean tragedy both represents a node in a network of supernatural forces and also speaks from an individual perspective. They have their own characteristics, needs, honours and motivations, which often cause friction with other divinities. Aeschylus thematises such conflicts, especially in the *Oresteia*, as a collision of values.

The anthropomorphic staging of divinities also draws attention to sometimes negative aspects of their corporality. In the *Eumenides* Apollo is physically and verbally aggressive towards the Erinyes, echoing his earlier violence against Cassandra. Apollo's attacks on females and his collusion with Athena to unconditionally privilege the male, father and king raise society-shaking questions: can such gendered violence truly be justified? What does it mean for human families and society if the intimate connection between children and mothers is permanently severed? Conversely, Athena's divine super-body (unbeatable in war, immortal, born of no mother, refusing intimate contact) is implicitly linked with her focus on the civic super-body: she transforms the emphasis from individual human beings (where it was for the majority of the trilogy) to the collectivity of Athens in the ending. However, her promises of civic harmony are predicated on encouraging eternal warfare rather than the pacific means that Athena represents herself as employing.

Divinities, through their eternal embodiment, also alter the human perspective on time: Prometheus in the *Prometheus Bound* might suffer for untold ages – until at some future point he simply ceases to. There is no mention of continuing trauma or disability; except for the rarest of circumstances, divinities are permanently able-bodied. Analogously, Apollo and Athena in the *Oresteia* can speak in terms of eternity, making the death of individuals – so prominent from a human perspective – become infinitesimally small. These are just a selection

of the vast shifts in the conception of individual life and society that Aeschylean encounters with the divine may prompt.

Finally, with the direct interventions of divinities Aeschylus radically transforms political notions. The participation of the gods in the Trojan War stories is one background element for understanding warfare in the *Oresteia*. Athena and the Erinyes' emphasis on total war as a unifying path towards eternal blessings must be understood with this destruction in mind and – by modern readers – with the destruction that Athens suffered in the wars that followed the staging of the trilogy. Here one should sound a last interpretive warning: whatever one thinks about the perspective of the *Persians* on divine interventions or the political, theological resolutions that the *Oresteia* offers, these plays were artistic, bounded encroachments into the world of the Athenian audience. They occurred in the context of a civic religious festival, were funded by the city and spoke to the masses of the voting population, to influential aristocrats and possibly to their allies. Yet the plays take place in a parallel, mostly mythic-literary world. Aeschylean representations of divinities, innovative foundation myths and fictional civic structures were neither congruent with Athenian experience nor picked up thereafter. Instead, to audience members and modern readers, Aeschylus's representations of the supernatural world present diverse intellectual incitements to rethink fundamental issues.

FURTHER READING

For a classic overview of Greek religion, see Burkert 1985. More Athens-focused is Parker 2005. A cognitive approach to Greek religious belief and practice is found in Larson 2016. An important and incisive perspective on the role of religion for tragedy is Sourvinou-Inwood 2003. Giving the background necessary for interpreting Aeschylus is the accessible and wide-ranging Sommerstein 2010a. A contrasting set of more theoretical approaches is offered by Goldhill 2004, a sophisticated student edition of the *Oresteia*.

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