Unanimous Gods, Unanimous Athens: The *Oresteia* 's Challenge to Democracy

Amit Shilo

Arethusa, Volume 56, Number 1, Winter 2023, pp. 27-75 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: *https://doi.org/10.1353/are.2023.a899548*

UNANIMOUS GODS, UNANIMOUS ATHENS: THE *ORESTEIA*'S CHALLENGE TO DEMOCRACY[1]

AMIT SHILO

INTRODUCTION

The ending of the *Oresteia* includes the mythical founding of the Athenian judicial system, speeches giving policy advice, and blessings that present an idealized version of how Athens should operate in the future. But does the *Oresteia* trilogy as a whole present a political theory and, if so, how does it relate to Athenian democracy? These vexed questions are discussed in some form in nearly every political reading of the trilogy. The stakes are high, as we have few accounts of democratic theory or structure as early as Aeschylean tragedy (ca. 499–58).[2] If, as Arlene Saxonhouse claims (2018), political theory has generally disregarded the *Oresteia*, then drawing out its political thought enriches the study of Athenian democracy and adds to debates concerning modern democracy.[3] In this article, I contend that the ending of the *Oresteia* lays out a radical political vision that comprises an overlooked and unprecedented challenge to both Athenian and more general democratic theory.

To quickly cover the well-known basic facts about politics in the trilogy: the repeated acts of vengeance that prevail in the two first plays are reversed in the multilayered harmony of the third play's ending. In the *Eumenides*, Athena's divine intervention systematically resolves the violence

1 I extend my gratitude to the many scholars whose comments have helped improve this article, especially Phillip Mitsis and David Konstan, as well as the anonymous readers at *Arethusa*.

2 For the state of the evidence, see Hansen 1991 chap. 2.

3 See the approaches to Aeschylean political thought and the insights claimed for modern political debates in Euben 1996, Markovits 2009, and Atkison and Balot 2018.

Arethusa 56 (2023) 27–75 © 2023 by Johns Hopkins University Press

of vendetta-ridden Argos by means of the first trial for homicide in Athens. She depicts this intervention as a "new law" for humanity and Athens itself. Athena connects the contending parties, the Erinyes and Orestes, to the polis, which is consequently blessed forever. Although the narrative occurs in mythic time, the trilogy more directly addresses its audience through language about the future of the city and allusions to contemporary Athenian events and institutions (Sommerstein 2010a.283–85). The *Oresteia* was staged in 458 BCE during an ongoing struggle between aristocratic and democratic elements in the city. Civic strife surrounded Ephialtes' reallocation of the powers and purview of the Areopagus Council and led to his assassination in 461/2 BCE (Cartledge 2016.85–86 and Zelnik-Abramovitz 2011). However, the lack of detail concerning most of these events and Aeschylus's relation to them means that historical interpretations of the politics in the trilogy can only go so far: the precise political position of the plays remains inaccessible on account of the *Oresteia*'s abundant ambiguities, the displacement of events into a mythical past, and the trilogy's vague statements about future Athenian policy (C. Meier 1993.87–89 and Sommerstein 2010a.285–89).

Three fundamentally different approaches prevail in current scholarship on the overarching political lesson of the trilogy. The first focuses on the language and actions surrounding the trial of Orestes, claiming that they provide a template for—and thus urge a policy of—political reconciliation.[4] Athena models the resolution of intractable conflicts by addressing both sides respectfully, founding a set of judicial procedures, stressing peaceful persuasion (*peitho*), and propitiating the losing party by means of honors and worship (e.g., *Eum.* 413–43, 794–869, and 970–75). Moreover, she shares power with a select group of Athenian citizens instead of making decisions unilaterally. Among those positing reconciliation, J. Peter Euben, utilizing Hannah Arendt's theories, focuses largely on the positive political lessons to be drawn from this ending. He depicts Athena's justice as exemplifying the unifying reconciliation of diversities, a reciprocity that precludes domination, the recognition of the legitimacy of another, judgment involving balance and proportion, and the acceptance of plurality. Euben appreciates the complexity of the tragedy (1982.28) and asserts that

4 Bowie 1993.10–11 and Sommerstein 2010a.200–09 are useful repositories. Major voices include Thomson 1946.245–97, Dodds 1960, Dover 1957, Gagarin 1976.117–18, MacLeod 1982, Euben 1982, Solmsen 1995.178–224, Griffith 1995, Chiasson 1999, and Sommerstein 2010a.199–203.

the ending does not erase the earlier suffering in the trilogy (31–33). For him, the *Oresteia* demonstrates the human "contradictions of existence" as an element of the education in judgment that the trilogy gives its citizen spectators, whose emphasis is ultimately reconciliation (33).

The second approach emphasizes the flaws of the new law. David Cohen, for example, critiques the deceptive arguments used in the trial and the ending's linguistic ties to the representation of the Trojan War. These he sees as indications that the new law is defective and based on threats of violence (1986.136–40; cf. Vellacott 1977). Cohen and others also point to the coercion wielded by the Erinyes and the Areopagus Council to pacify the polis.[5] He argues that there is no morality in either the doctrine of learning through suffering or the justice of Zeus—both of which are repeated themes throughout the trilogy. Both entail the killing of innocents. Of the ending he writes: "Thus the justice of Zeus does prevail, but it is the arbitrary justice of the right of the stronger: persuasion and compulsion, backed by fear and force" (Cohen 1986.139).

The third approach highlights the ambiguities and contradictions in the *Oresteia*, especially in its ending.[6] Notable is Simon Goldhill's systematic examination of the linguistic and thematic undermining of closure in the trilogy.[7] In terms of a political stance, Goldhill not only questions whether the trilogy represents Athenian ideology, as has been claimed, but also whether a single Athenian or democratic ideology can even be found.[8]

While using elements of each of the above approaches, I focus on how political violence in the trilogy makes *structural* use of divine justification. The connections between political structures and ideas about the divine are best investigated using the theory known as "political theology." My analysis commences with the explicit link forged between a specific type of divine justification and extreme political violence in the *Agamemnon*. I demonstrate that the Trojan War and its consequences present a wide-ranging set of problems for mythical Argos that correspond to a continuing "state of exception" in the terminology of political theology.

---

5 *Eum.* 698–99. Cf. MacLeod 1982.135, Allen 2000.21–23, Bacon 2001.58, and Sommerstein 2010a.309–16.

6 E.g., Winnington-Ingram 1948, Kitto 1961, Lebeck 1971, Zeitlin 1978, Rosenmeyer 1982, and Goldhill 1984a and 1986.

7 Goldhill 1984a.224 and 1984b.169–74, Segal 1996, Easterling 1996, and Dunn 1997.

8 Goldhill 1987 and 2000 also urges a re-examination of the very notion of ideology when discussing tragedy and its context.

Moreover, Athena's sovereign decision for a new type of justice in the *Eumenides* responds to these previous political problems by profoundly reorganizing and reorienting both the fictional Athenian state and the divine world. This revised version of Athens, I argue, illustrates an undemocratic and dangerous political theology.

A second level of analysis both clarifies and extends the argument by connecting Greek religion and democratic practice in historical Athens with analogies throughout the trilogy. I argue that the competing values of polytheism and mutually counteracting political structures contrast with the trilogy's ideal of a completely unified Athens. Finally, ~~I argue,~~ based on the trilogy and its Athenian context, I propose that the rich and generally ignored aspects of political polytheism demand a meaningful rethinking of political theology's ingrained monotheistic assumptions. My aim is to demonstrate that the *Oresteia* provides a major contribution to political thought.

THEOLOGY IN AESCHYLUS AND POLITICAL THEOLOGY

A number of caveats and definitions are in order. My readings of the *Oresteia* will necessarily be far from comprehensive due to the richness of the text and its interconnected themes. In terms of religion, we will be examining "the things of the gods," which is as close as ancient Greek ever gets to defining the concept (Parker 2005a.61–62)—a concept that encompasses both ideas about the divine (theologies) and practices related to worship.[9] I also do not intend to imply that religion and politics were distinct fields in Athenian thought or practice: the polis controlled many elements of its festivals and temples; it also published and enforced sacred laws. This common Greek constellation is often treated under the heading of "polis religion" and means that religion and politics were not separable in Athens or elsewhere.[10] Overall, the theological elements analyzed here

9 I cannot cover the full range of Greek polytheistic theologies. Ancient Greek thought and practice contained numerous disorganized groupings of ideas about the gods that are defined as theologies and analyzed, problematized, and contrasted with dogmatic theologies in several excellent studies, such as Eidinow, Kindt, and Osborne 2016. Kindt 2016.12, quoting Hinnells, preliminarily defines theology as "a systematic expression of beliefs, an account of their sources and authority, and a clarification of their relation to other areas of belief." For structuralist and anthropological views of polytheism and political thought, see Detienne 1986, 1999, and 2004, and Vernant, e.g., 1996.265–73.

10 See Sourvinou-Inwood 2000b.22 for the classic formulation of polis religion: "the Greek polis articulated religion and was itself articulated by it . . . Ritual reinforces group

are characters' statements about the gods, their ritual actions, and staged or reported divine activities. I treat these simultaneously as narrative, as literary myth in interaction with previous Greek myths, and as embedded in Athenian ideas and practices.

In terms of the trilogy's politics, I concentrate on divine elements that relate to war, on Argos and Athens within the mythical time of the play, and on the historical Athens of the audience.[11] Here, too, I cannot do more than highlight important elements of what little we have of democratic theory and practice in Athens by the time of Aeschylus and do not treat other democracies. Moreover, all applications of modern terms and theories to the ancient world are fraught with the dangers of anachronism.[12] Acknowledging the (productive) distance between ancient discourse and modern debate is crucial. This distance means that a thoughtful approach will ground any analysis in both text and context and then re-examines the theoretical apparatus itself in light of what has been uncovered.

Studies of Aeschylean theology generally read the ending of the *Oresteia* as establishing a consensus in the divine world. Scholars often frame this ending as a divine reconciliation or the "unity of opposites," and they tend to home in on chthonic and Olympian forces joining together.[13] Such discussions, therefore, elide the polytheistic aspects of the trilogy.[14] Many take for granted the victory of a single "justice of Zeus," whether benevolent,

---

solidarity and this process is of fundamental importance in establishing and perpetuating civic and cultural, as well as religious, identities." Cf. Sourvinou-Inwood 2000a, Parker 2005a, and Kindt 2009.

11 C. Meier 1990.124–25 n. 203 labels the *Oresteia* "theological politics" to distinguish it from modern political theology, since the latter relies on secularization.

12 Anachronism is an accusation that can be leveled at any application of modern political terms to ancient institutions: Saxonhouse 1996.4–7. As many studies of ancient politics do, I use polis to refer to the Greek city-state but apply insights from modern theories that discuss the nation-state. On the use of the term sovereignty for Athenian democracy, see Hansen 2010.500 n. 5.

13 For "unity," see, recently, Scapin 2020, arguing against Seaford 2003a, who posits a final "differentiation of opposites." For "joining together": Lloyd-Jones 1956, Hammond 1965, Lesky 1966, Grube 1970, Lloyd-Jones 1971, Dover 1973, Edwards 1977, Cohen 1986, Solmsen 1995, and Bees 2009. Sommerstein (2010a.274–79 and 2010c) argues for a "progressive theology" in Aeschylus in which the gods, Zeus especially, transform from capriciously violent to acquiring wisdom, justice, and restraint.

14 Goldhill 2016 describes this phenomenon as part of the continuing effects of tragedy's earlier study by almost exclusively Christian professors. Older scholarship included numerous attempts to make Aeschylus into a presager of Christianity through a "Zeus religion" that was explored and debunked in Lloyd-Jones 1956.

tyrannically violent, or incomprehensible to humans.[15] I posit, rather, that the trilogy's plurality of divinities acting in the political realm ought to be seriously scrutinized as implying a polytheistic political theology.

The modern theory of political theology is attuned to the interplay between the structures of governments and their contemporary religious values and ideas.[16] While "the political" per se is the realm of sovereignty, constitutional law, and all decisions that pertain exclusively to the state, the central trope of the theory presents the political framework of any given period as descended from, and analogous to, its conception of the divine.[17] The model from the start, however, has been almost exclusively monotheistic.[18]

This basic monotheistic assumption means that political theology defines sovereignty specifically as authority that is *undivided*.[19] Sovereignty must also not be a legal fiction, nor may it be attributed to first one and then another institution in a regression that prevents an analysis of its source. These negative definitions lead to the claim that *true* sovereignty cannot be found in the ordinary workings of the state: it must be sought in moments of crisis like war, civil strife, or revolution (Schmitt 1996.28–39 and Rasch 2019.49–61). In these situations, the distinguishing mark of true sovereigns is that they can declare the "state of exception" in which all laws and norms are suspended.[20]

---

15 Gagarin 1976.149 denounces this focus on the "justice of Zeus" as a Judeo-Christian imposition on the text.

16 For political theology as a type of "sociology of concepts" of sovereignty, see Schmitt 2005.45–46. For other definitions of political theology (a suturing of two multivalent terms), see Scott and Cavanaugh 2004 and Kessler 2013.1–38. On the difference between political theology and political philosophy, see H. Meier 1998. In discussing political theology, I present the ideas of an aggregate of its prominent thinkers. I can only delineate a few key terms and major debates relevant to my analysis.

17 It is important to differentiate "the political" from "politics," which are the contingent, ongoing affairs of the state; see Schmitt 1996.

18 Schmitt 1996.42–43 and 2005.36–52. The locus classicus is Schmitt's definition (2005.36): "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts not only because of their historical development—in which they were transferred from theology to the theory of the state, whereby for example the omnipotent God became the omnipotent lawgiver—but also because of their systematic structure." Cf. Schmitt 1996, Rasch 2004 and 2019.49–61, and Kahn 2011.1–26, 91–123.

19 Theories of sovereignty in general tend to seek the single, unified force that underlies political power. See Philpott 2021 for a recent survey, Chowdhury and Duvall 2014 for limit cases, and Rasch 2004 and 2019.1–11 for the continuing relevance of the political-theological definition of sovereignty.

20 See the much quoted apothegm of Schmitt: "Sovereign is whoever decides on the state of exception" ("Souverän ist, wer über den Ausnahmezustand entscheidet," 2005.5).

This focus on crisis is key to the analogy between politics and theology: the sovereign, in suspending the laws, becomes the absolute judge, the highest military authority, and the one responsible for life and death (Schmitt 2005.36 and Kahn 2011.32–36). In an internal crisis or existential war, the sovereign declares the exception to rescue the failing state, hoping to become its savior. In a successful revolution, the sovereign is the creator of a new law, a new state.[21] Thus the decision of the sovereign is a singular event: a "miracle" in the language of theology. As in western religious dogma, in which the universal sovereign created the world and declared the law through miraculous interventions in the ordinary workings of life, in political theology, the true sovereign of a state is only apparent in extraordinary moments of creation or lawgiving. Once the crisis is over, the true sovereign is again hidden. The exceptional, which reveals the real source of the political, is the permanent foundation for the normal (Schmitt 2005.10–14).

The grounding of the political in the state of exception transforms the justification of state violence. Individuals and groups are distinguishable in the exception by only one criterion: they are either friends or enemies of the state.[22] The category of political enemy is meant to be deliberately decoupled from other ways of defining people, such as by morality, religion, class, or group identity (Schmitt 1996.26–28). War cannot legitimately be declared on the basis of morality, religion, economics, or non-state group benefit, since political violence is not intrinsic to those other realms.[23] Only matters existential for the state are supposed to justify war (Schmitt 1996.48–50; cf. Rasch 2004.10–14). Warfare, at its core, is purely political; conversely, the political, at its core, is purely polemical.

Aside from the dangers of uncritical anachronism, other important aspects of political theology should be addressed before we engage with its useful distinctions. Many scholars nowadays are uncomfortable

---

21 Agamben 1998.42–43, however, claims that Schmitt blurs the power of the sovereign with the constituting power, the one that makes the law from outside of the law; cf. Agamben 2005, esp. 69–86.

22 The enemy is not a personal enemy, but one declared so by the state: *hostis*, not *inimicus*, πολέμιος, not ἐχθρός: Schmitt 1996.25–28, 45–47. Schmitt himself nearly exclusively discusses the enemy, as pointed out by Strauss 1996.88 and Lapidot 2020.

23 Schmitt 1996.49–50. Schmitt asserts that war must never be a matter of justice or morality. One side claiming them necessarily deprives the other side of these qualities, making the enemy inhuman and thus subject to extermination. Distinctions between types of people and groups can *become* political when they threaten large-scale violence. At that point they operate in the realm of the political as laid out in political theology and no longer in that of morality, religion, ethnicity, class, etc.

with any mention of the theory because of its historical association with twentieth-century fascist politics.[24] It is precisely with this political history in mind that many of the sharpest modern critics of political violence—from Hannah Arendt to Giorgio Agamben to Achille Mbembe—engage with political theology's definitions of sovereignty and state violence to challenge its claims. They bring forward other values that could modify the theory of the political (to which we will return in the conclusion). Each of these major critics of political theology's consequences, however, accepts its monotheistic structure.

Despite the recognition that sovereignty functions distinctively in each epoch and area, political theology debates have mostly ignored polytheism, ancient or modern.[25] This gives a deeply myopic perspective when analyzing Greece and Rome.[26] The historian Christian Meier is the most prominent scholar who discusses Greek political thought using the terminology of political theology. He claims that the very origin of the political lies in the democratization of ancient Athens. That is, whereas there was no "secularization" of Greek political thought—as Weber theorized for modernity—in Athens, it is there that the political gained "primacy" over the theological (1990.125).[27]

Further, Meier gives the *Oresteia* a central place in this process, claiming that it worked directly on the Athenians by explaining to them their own democratic revolution (1993.136). In his generalization of the

---

24 This is because the initiator of the modern theoretical debate, Carl Schmitt, justified murderous actions during the Nazi party's rise to power. His position towards, and benefits from, such horrors necessarily inflect interpretations of his political writings negatively; see Hollerich 2004.107–09 and Kahn 2011.98–99.

25 Schmitt 2005.37–42, Kantorowicz 1957, Strauss 1996.102, and Kahn 2011.120. An exception is Jan Assmann's work on ancient Egyptian polytheistic political theology: Assmann 2000 and 2009. The main line of political theology debate has, up to now, paid no serious attention to polytheism in the modern world.

26 This despite the fact that the first discussion of political theology is Augustine's disputation of Varro's polytheistic *theologia civilis* (*City of God* VI.5.12; cf. IV.27.31) and that Schmitt focused on Roman law and the concept of dictatorship: e.g., Schmitt 2014; cf. 2008.60–65 and Geréby 2008. Agamben 1998 and 2005 also traces political theology back to Roman law, but neither Schmitt nor he ever considers the effects of Roman polytheism on the concept of singular sovereignty.

27 On Weber's secularization theory and his analogy between polytheism and pluralism in modernity, as well as their lasting effects in modern political theory, see Lassman 2004. Schmitt is coy about whether political theology assumes secularization, for which Strauss 1996 critiques him. Kahn 2011 repeatedly denies full secularization in modern political theology; contra Lilla 2007.

political message of Greek tragedy as a genre, the old myths of the rule of Zeus met the new civic order (135). Festivals and the viewing of tragedy unified the citizens. They could watch a third party (a divinity, such as Athena in the *Eumenides*) intervening in arguments within a framework that reassured them that "the world is fundamentally just" (136). Yet Meier's monotheistic assumptions mean that he overvalues Zeus in both the *Oresteia* and Athens. Moreover, he is deeply dismissive of the polytheistic conflicts in the plays as nothing but symbols of historical events ("seeking to locate the old order in ancient history," 136) or irrelevant (1990.96, 100, and 1993.122–23). Last, he explicitly dismisses any notion of pluralism for Athens, insisting on a homogenous Athenian society and endorsing Carl Schmitt's completely unified notion of the political (on which more below).[28]

In interpreting notoriously ambiguous, morally challenging, and polysemic works of art such as tragedies, one ought to be open to their most provocative ideas. With these they break out of the conventions on which they otherwise rely. Defining the *Oresteia* as a socially and politically calming message to Athens, as Meier does, involves misreading the nature of its radical solution to civil strife. The first step to correcting this view is to more carefully theorize the structure of political-theological violence that dominates the *Oresteia*.

THE TROJAN WAR AND THE STATE OF EXCEPTION

The background for the Athens of the *Eumenides* is the Argos of the earlier plays of the trilogy.[29] The justifications for the Trojan War allow us to sketch out the Argive state values and political dynamics, to which there are otherwise only oblique references. The male Argive characters endorse the values of profit and glory for the state that derive from victory (profit: 567–73; glory: *Ag.* 574–81). But the predominant pretext they give for launching the expedition is theologically spurred vengeance. The Herald and the Elders of Argos repeatedly frame the war as the human enactment of divine punishment for violating the rules of hospitality: Zeus Xenios (*Ag.* 61–62) ordering retribution against Troy.

---

28 C. Meier 1990.14–15 n. 24 and 141. On Meier's use of Schmitt for the concept of the political in Athens and the *Oresteia*, see Demont 2011.

29 On other *poleis* in tragedy as "sites of displacement" for Athens, see Zeitlin 1990; cf. Seaford 2012.102–04 and Kurke 2013.

For Agamemnon, even though he wields the scepter given by Zeus (*Ag.* 42–43), the approval of the divine king is not enough. Instead, the human king pushes divine justification to its limits in a passage rarely scrutinized for its political implications (813–17):[30]

> δίκας γὰρ οὐκ ἀπὸ γλώσσης θεοὶ
> κλύοντες ἀνδροθνῆτας Ἰλιοφθόρους
> ἐς αἱματηρὸν τεῦχος οὐ διχορρόπως
> ψήφους ἔθεντο, τῷ δ᾽ ἐναντίῳ κύτει
> ἐλπὶς προσῄει χειρὸς οὐ πληρουμένῳ.
>
> For the gods, attending to no pleas (*dikas*)
> uttered by the tongue,
> without split opinion cast their votes (*psephous*)
> into the urn of blood for the massacring destruction of
> Troy;
> towards the opposite vessel only
> hope approached—it was filled by no hand.

Agamemnon bizarrely imagines the gods voting using the technical vocabulary of Athenian democratic procedures: *dikas* as political arguments or pleas in court, *psephous* as voting pebbles, and urns or vessels as repositories from which they will be tallied. The image is ambiguous as to whether this is a forensic or a political vote.[31] Many commentators have treated this passage as merely another example of the legal language that is prevalent in the trilogy and that foreshadows the trial of Orestes. The outsized political importance of this passage, however, derives from the combination of divine voting with another feature: lacking any claim to supernatural knowledge, Agamemnon nevertheless declares the *unanimity* of the gods.

Lest Agamemnon's claim seem merely a meaningless exaggeration, it is important to emphasize that both the mythic background and the play's specific context entirely belie it. In the foundational narratives of the Trojan War, the gods consistently have divergent wills and support

---

30 The Greek is from the OCT and translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

31 On the legal language in this and surrounding passages, see Daube 1939.104–25 and MacLeod 1982.133–34. The *Suppliants* uses similar terminology when describing a political vote of the demos: ψηφίσματα (601) refers to the decrees passed by a vote, and the same phrase, οὐ διχορρόπως (605), marks the lack of a split opinion.

both sides. The rare moments of divine agreement in Homer and Hesiod are built explicitly on appeals to Zeus's kingly power and coercion (Schein 1984.45–60 and Elmer 2013.146–73). The surrounding passage in the *Oresteia* resonates with the gods' conflicting values and wills: "divine resentment" (ἄγα θεόθεν, *Ag.* 131–33) against the expedition has already been invoked and Artemis is immediately named. The goddess clearly has her own competing values when it is said that "with pity" (οἴκτῳ) for the innocent victims, she "bears malice" (ἐπίφθονος) against her father's eagles and hates their feast (134–37). Apollo, too, is understood by the Greeks as hostile to them at Troy (509–11). Finally, the anger of unspecified gods (δαιμόνων κότῳ, *Ag.* 635) results in a storm being sent against the returning Greeks—a story told just before Agamemnon arrives on stage. This reference to anger may well hint at Athena, who demands the shipwrecks from Zeus in requital for Greek impiety at Troy (Apollodorus *Epitome* 6.5–6).[32] Agamemnon has himself just survived this divine storm while possibly losing his brother along with a significant portion of the fleet.

Agamemnon's image of divinities unanimously voting for his side is therefore an idiosyncratic and marked justification. It distills his political theology: Agamemnon combines the authority of his own kingship with the public approval that would be gained by the debate, broad participation, and procedures of voting in a democracy. Yet Agamemnon is unconcerned with *human* assemblies, to which he is ready to listen only after the victory.[33] He pays no attention to the citizens' dissent against the war that has already been described for the audience (*Ag.* 427–60, 799–804; see below). This disregard is reflected in his assertion that the gods did not attend to any pleas—presumably the arguments and prayers in favor of Troy.[34]

---

32 Specifically, the storm is in requital for the violation of Athena's altar by Locrian Ajax, whom she smites with lightning. The anonymity of the deity involved may be a sly suppression by Aeschylus in service of making Athena's arrival on stage all the more effective later. He may be again winking at his audience when Athena threatens the Erinyes with Zeus's thunderbolt in the persuasion scene in the *Eumenides* (827–28).

33 Agamemnon does mention a public structure of assembly and deliberation when he returns, but no voting (*Ag.* 844–46): "About the other matters concerning the city and the gods, we will hold public gatherings and deliberate in full assembly" (κοινοὺς ἀγῶνας θέντες ἐν πανηγύρει βουλευσόμεσθα).

34 Denniston and Page 1957 ad loc. and Sommerstein 2008b.94 n. 169 understand "hearing no pleas uttered by the tongue" as meaning that they heard "arguments" of martial deeds rather than arguments in words. This is a plausible reading of the lines in isolation, but only fits a context in which the emphasis is on the *military* superiority of one party, who

Insisting on an *undivided* divine justification negates any potential political or ethical check against Agamemnon's power in war. We see that Agamemnon, as sovereign, has thus declared a state of exception concerning Troy. The suspension of all norms gives him the ability to wage a total war in which all can be killed or enslaved. This allows the expedition to punish not only the wrongdoers, Helen and Paris, but the innocent in Troy as well.[35] Agamemnon does not minimize the excesses of the army that Clytemnestra warns against (excesses due to an *eros* for plunder and a conquest by profit, 338–42) and that the Herald narrates as actually happening (525–28).[36] The king has no need to. The urn of blood brimming with divine voting pebbles emblemizes his political-theological warrant for genocide.[37]

The debate over the justification for violence in the state of exception helps us understand the dynamics of this passage. Critics of the original framing of political theology find a foothold in the aforementioned detachment of the political from any other realm of value, especially in the context of war.[38] Their first major counter-argument is that diverse interests and agents consistently drive the state to conflict with a dynamic that cannot be ignored when analyzing political decisions (Rasch 2004.4–13). That is, history is filled with ostensibly religious, ethnic, economic, and other motives for war that a theory of the political must address. We will return to these points as they play out in the *Oresteia*.

The second critique concerns the violence that consistently occurs during actual states of exception. Agamben (1998) and Mbembe (2019) claim that the version of sovereignty found in the state of exception inherently

---

would then have the winning claim. Agamemnon, however, emphasizes the opposite: rather than his army earning victory through combat, the destruction of Troy was a divine decision. The point is not a minor one; as with the rest of the discourse surrounding the Trojan War in the *Agamemnon*, this passage purposefully downplays fighting to emphasize both divine justification and the suffering surrounding the war. Fraenkel 1950.2.375 focuses on the epistemological and legal aspects of the passage: "To avail himself of the evidence of human witnesses in forming his judgment would be unworthy of the Lord of all Justice, Zeus." Fraenkel's interpretation tellingly ignores the plural divinities mentioned in the passage in favor of a monotheistic, progressive view, seeing it as an example of "the urge toward the purification of the idea of god."

35 *Ag.* 62, 225–26, 355–408, 800, and 823–24; see Cohen 1986.130–34.

36 For the arguments about destroying the altars of the gods in verse 527, see Judet de La Combe 2001 ad loc. and Medda 2017 ad loc.

37 On definitions of genocide, ancient justifications, and distinctions from modern genocide, see Konstan 2021.

38 For a dissection of Schmitt's ideas on his own terms, see Strauss 1996.88, 104–07.

leads to horrors on a global scale. Since the state of exception involves the suspension of laws, anyone the sovereign declares to be an enemy is stripped of protection, especially the protection of the law against being summarily killed. Such internal or external enemies may then be slaughtered extrajudicially—and are—in combat zones, police raids, prisons, internment camps, colonies, and other spaces and times declared to be exceptions. An important structural aspect causes the political-theological justification for a state of exception to result in atrocities without end: there are no inbuilt limitations to the exception, no predetermined stopping points, and no external forces that can restrain the sovereign. Agamemnon's claim of divine unanimity is the knowing assertion of this unchecked state of exception.

The violence unleashed in this state of exception is not, however, confined to the enemy in the Trojan War. A main theme in the *Oresteia* is that gore spills over into everything surrounding violence, even when it is declared to be justified. Rather than depicting heroic battle, characters in the *Agamemnon* harp on both the human cost of the expedition and the devastation of Troy. The sacrifice of the innocent Iphigenia is the down payment in blood for divine support (*Ag.* 123–247). Thereafter, each of the Argives, except for Agamemnon, articulates some aspect of postwar suffering: the ravaged Troy (324–29), the Greek casualties (567–71), and the mourning for them at Argos (429–55). Further, vivid representations of the enslaved give voice to the loss of protection for humanity in the state of exception. Cassandra laments at great length her own fate and that of her city (e.g., 1136–39, 1167–72, 1305).[39] The enslaved chorus of the *Choephoroi* are forced to mourn for their murdered master, while simultaneously lamenting their lost relatives and themselves.[40]

Upon his return to Argos, Agamemnon attempts to close off the state of exception, but it extends out of his control. Agamemnon himself applies the friend/enemy distinction to domestic affairs (*Ag.* 830–50, cf. 1374–75). Thereafter, the victory consumes the victor. Agamemnon's own murder is prefigured in the language of divine retribution used by the Elders, who sing that the gods watch and the Erinyes punish the "killers of many" (τῶν πολυκτόνων, 461–66). When Cassandra foresees Agamemnon's slaughter, she proclaims that the conquerors of Troy are "coming off

---

39 Seaford 1987.106–07, 127–28; Wohl 1998.24 n. 41, 110–14; Foley 2001.92–94; Mitchell-Boyask 2006; Doyle 2008.58–74; Brault 2009.212–13; and Debnar 2010.

40 *Cho.* 75–83; cf. Patterson 1991.111–15. On slavery in tragedy more generally, see Hall 1997.110–18 and Hunt 2011.32–35.

thus in the judgment of the gods" (ἐν θεῶν κρίσει, 1288–89). The prophet announces a divine decision that reverses the vote claimed by the king.[41]

Clytemnestra also justifies her vengeance against Agamemnon by appeal to the divine. Earlier she had referred to the potential sacrilege of the Greek expedition as resulting in harm against it (338–42).[42] Her explicit defense after the murder recalls Agamemnon's sacrifice of their daughter for the war. Additionally, Clytemnestra partly attributes both that sacrifice and her retribution to the curse on the royal house (1372–1559).[43] She thus applies to Agamemnon the same divinely justified removal of all protection from killing that he had so widely applied to others. The Argive narrative demonstrates more than the irreconcilable conflicts of *dike* (justice) on a private level, or a family curse, or suffering for individual deeds. It also plays out the consequences of an expansive state of exception. Each further act of violence, individual and state, is connected with the human king's original claim of a full divine warrant for destruction.

THE NEW LAW AND ATHENIAN EXCEPTIONALISM

In the *Eumenides,* the entwined dilemmas of the continual state of exception and the conflict between divine forces are ostensibly resolved together. However, the scholarly discussions of the political dynamics of this solution are incomplete. A political-theological reading greatly clarifies the problems with the old law of vengeance and the power structures proposed in the new law. To begin with, scholars have never sufficiently explained the contingency of the moment: why does a series of murders in Argos lead to a new law in Athens that is also depicted as a sweeping revolution in human justice?[44] In political theology, the state of exception is triggered at an existential moment for the state. The situation is so dangerous that

41 In this case, it is unclear whether the audiences are to understand Cassandra's words as divinely inspired or her own intuition subsequent to the prophetic vision. On this issue throughout the Cassandra scene, see Shilo 2022.69–90.

42 In a passage that has led to endless arguments, acting as "the pickaxe of Zeus the avenger," the Greeks uproot the city, temples and all: *Ag.* 524–28. Cohen 1986.134 calls attention to the fact these lines contradict any notion that Zeus never punishes the innocent; contra Lloyd-Jones 1971.86–87, 90 and Sommerstein 2010c. On the question of whether to athetize these lines as somehow too sacrilegious for Aeschylus to write, see, most recently, Medda 2017 ad 527.

43 On Clytemnestra's justifications for killing Agamemnon, see Neuburg 1991 and Foley 2001.211–34.

44 For statements of the problem, see Dover 1957.236–37, Dodds 1960.19, MacLeod 1982.124, Bowie 1993.10–12, C. Meier 1990.94–96, and Sommerstein 2010a.193–200.

it *necessitates* the suspension of the law and of all norms. However, this necessity must be declared by an agent, since, by definition, it falls outside of the ability of the laws themselves to properly function. The decision to trigger the state of exception is thus the subjective decision of that agent. This freedom to decide is, in large part, the reason why decision makers are the true sovereigns: they are not subject to rules laid down by others.[45]

The progressive breakdown of the law itself is depicted in the *Oresteia*. The retributive murders in Argos destroy the ruling house; taken together with the flight of the final ruler, Orestes, they comprise an existential political crisis. Each of the trilogy's three choruses, moreover, links particular human crimes with the notion of universal retribution, thus generalizing the narrative into a playing out of law or justice (*dike*) overseen by punishing divinities.[46] This is the law operative throughout most of the *Oresteia*.[47] When the Erinyes come onstage in pursuit of Orestes in the *Eumenides*, they reify this law.[48]

What bears emphasizing for its political implications is that the Erinyes' law has a flaw at its core that manifests itself in an extraordinary (and overlooked) manner. Since the Erinyes are implacable, and even disregard all purification, they transgress Greek cultural and religious norms as much as they punish humans for such transgressions.[49] None of the Erinyes' excesses, however, is more grotesque or theoretically important than their claim to Orestes about the causation of their punishment (*Eum*. 303–05):

> ἀλλ' ἀποπτύεις λόγους,
> ἐμοὶ τραφείς τε καὶ καθιερωμένος;
> καὶ ζῶν με δαίσεις οὐδὲ πρὸς βωμῷ σφαγείς·

45 Agamben 2005.24–30 and Kahn 2011.43–63, 101–42, who sees it as akin to artistic freedom.

46 E.g., *Ag*. 461–68, *Cho.* 59–65, and *Eum.* 267–75. On the movement of *dike* throughout the trilogy, see Sommerstein 2010a.193–200.

47 The tendency in scholarship is to focus almost exclusively on punishment through the law of Zeus, framed as: "the doer suffers," παθεῖν τὸν ἔρξαντα (*Ag.* 1563–64; cf. 532–33, 1527; *Cho.* 313–14, 1009) and "learning through suffering," πάθει μάθος (*Ag.* 176–78, cf. 250, *Eum* 520). Cf. Dodds 1960.25–31, Sommerstein 2010a.254–81, Gagné 2013.394–416, and Scapin 2020.76–89.

48 The role of the Erinyes in the old law of vengeance has been well covered, even as the dynamics of their transformation remain a matter of debate: Brown 1983 and 1984, Bacon 2001, Sewell-Rutter 2007.79–109, and Schlatter 2018.160–71.

49 As implacable "hounds of vengeance": *Eum.* 129–32, cf. *Cho.* 924 and 1054. Excess and violence in their characterization: *Eum*. 186–97, 328–33 = 341–46, 782–85 = 812–15. No protection through suppliancy against their punishment: *Eum.* 176.205. Cf. Dodds 1960.24, Meinel 2015.135–39, and Nooter 2017.246–65. No purification possible: *Eum.* 41–43, 237, 280–87, 445–52; *Cho.* 66–74, 520–21.

> Do you treat my words with contempt,
> when you have been reared for me and consecrated to me?
> Even while living, you will be a feast for me, nor will you be slaughtered at an altar.

The vocabulary of this passage brings to a head the loss of all protection once someone has been "made sacred" ("consecrated," καθιερωμένος, 304).[50] Thereafter, the Erinyes repeatedly call Orestes "the sacrificed one" (τῷ τεθνυμένῳ, 328 = 341).[51] As unholy as this human sacrifice is, a further crucial element characterizes their law as "curse," the very name they have below the earth ("Curses," Ἀραί, *Eum.* 417).[52] The Erinyes allege that Orestes has proleptically—*before* his crime—been marked for punishment because he has been "reared" for them (ἐμοὶ τραφείς, 304). They thus uncouple requital from an actor's decision to commit a crime.[53] Autonomy is shattered. Together with their other extremes, this passage indicates that a pernicious paradox has been encountered within the old law. Through its reliance on violence, the law of vengeance has ceased to be about the consequences of any transgression and has taken on the pre-ordained character of a fated curse. Vendetta has a life of its own.[54]

It is important to estrange the situation one further step in order to understand the political-theological dynamics of why the law shifts at this moment in the *Eumenides* and no other. Neither divine adversary in

---

50 Agamben 1998.71–111 connects the one who can be killed without it being a crime—whom he labels the *homo sacer*—to the state of exception. In it, humans are stripped of legal protection, leaving them with nothing other than bare life, which means they may become the objects of any and all violence.

51 The Erinyes treat Orestes as a sacrificial victim who will be eaten alive, slaughtered (σφαγείς) without sacred rites. They desire Orestes as a "proper sacrifice to cleanse a mother's murder" (*Eum*. 326–27). On this act as a human sacrifice, see Zeitlin 1965.485–86 and Goldhill 1992.176–88.

52 For more on the history of the Erinyes as curses and their transformation, see Brown 1983, Sommerstein 1989.6–12, Johnston 1999.71–79 and 91–94, and Sewell-Rutter 2007.79–109.

53 Their claim touches on three of the trilogy's themes: first is the inherited curse of the royal house: Sewell-Rutter 2007.14–48 and Gantz 1982. Second is human nature itself, whether that means the violent character passed down from one's parents or the violence inherent in all mortals: Sewell-Rutter 2007.174–75. Third is fate, which the Erinyes shortly thereafter declare they themselves assign to men (*Eum.* 310–11).

54 Aeschylus has set up this conclusion long in advance by bringing the Erinyes on stage in the first place, since there are no remaining human agents to requite the murder of Clytemnestra (*Eum.* 94–139); cf. Shilo 2018.

the fight over Orestes actually indicates that the inflection point for the law itself has arrived. The Erinyes maintain throughout that this instance falls within their usual purview. Apollo at the start of the *Eumenides* (79–84) foretells that Orestes will find in Athens "charming words" (θελκτηρίους μύθους) and a release "forever" (ἐς τὸ πᾶν), but never mentions a change of the law. In the trial, Apollo is infamously only intent on rebutting the Erinyes' particular claims in defense of his favorite.[55] Athena alone declares the necessity for a political solution that can resolve the crisis, create a new institution in Athens, and change the form of justice for humanity. Athena's intervention, therefore, corresponds to the political-theological decision for the state of exception. Her transformation of *dike* is the miraculous act of the law-creating sovereign.[56]

Although Athena has thus shown herself to be the true sovereign by her declaration of the state of exception, this does not mean she rules the state in its regular workings. Athena never explicitly claims she will intervene in the course of Athenian political affairs.[57] Instead, we must extrapolate the new structures and policy of Athens from a combination of the dynamics of the trial, the advice given to the Athenians, and the blessings bestowed at the end of the *Eumenides*. Only the first two of these elements have been analyzed as part of the *Eumenides*' main political message. Athena herself provides for a preliminary hearing of the two sides, declares a better law for Athens, counsels the Athenians not to change it, selects the jury, supervises the airing of arguments and tallying of a vote, votes herself, and reconciles the indignant losing party. Throughout the trial and thereafter, both the Erinyes and Athena give policy advice to the Athenians that includes fearing the Areopagus and never changing the law. Her new law, actions, and advice are understood to be the template for Athenian political behavior henceforth and meant to help her polis surpass all others.[58]

---

55 Winnington-Ingram 1948.143–44, Zeitlin 1978.106–12, Gagarin 1976.87–88, and Sommerstein 1989 ad 657–66.

56 Athena's creation of the court is a divine transformation of the law, despite humans being its agents (*Eum.* 470–72). The hybrid trial, in which both humans and Athena vote, seems to be Aeschylus's innovation and opposed to previous versions that contained juries of either all gods or all humans: Sommerstein 1989.4.

57 This is the only extant tragedy set in an Athens without a king: Sommerstein 1989.132 n. 288. Instead, Athena is treated as the ruler of Athens from the beginning: χώρας ἄνασσαν τῆσδ' (*Eum.* 288); cf. Dodds 1960.20.

58 The Athenians will outrival the Scythians and Peloponnesians, both known for their divinely instituted law: *Eum.* 701–02. Cf. MacLeod 1982.128.

The trial, however, remains problematic as a political model. The arguments that lead to the vote are infamously off track.[59] With the trial, the trilogy recurs to the earlier issues of *peitho* as deception: Apollo's pleas are directed to the interest of the judges, and the Erinyes' threats involve coercion in this public decision making (Vellacott 1977.118–22 and Cohen 1986.136–39). Froma Zeitlin (1978.167–74) and Philip Vellacott (1984), for example, are also critical of Athena's reason for voting for Orestes on the basis that she is "always for the male" (*Eum.* 734–41); they point out the misogyny and tragic irony in the ending of the trilogy.[60] Voting in the trial lacks certainty and demonstrates that even the Athenians "without fault" (*Eum.* 482–84) and chosen by Athena are completely at odds with each other. At least an equal number—but probably a majority—of the humans take Clytemnestra's claims seriously enough to convict Orestes. The goddess appears to overrule them with her vote to tie.[61] The *Eumenides* itself thus marks as suspect both the sole representation of arguments in front of the Athenians and the divisions inherent in majority voting. In democracies, both ancient and modern, such a split opinion has often been equated with *stasis*, or civil strife (Canevaro 2018.139–43), and the anger of the Erinyes at losing illustrates this.

The subsequent reconciliation of the Erinyes involves replacing their old fearful respect with honors and giving them a role as punishing and blessing divinities in the city.[62] However, the vision of a future Athens articulated in the remainder of the play turns away from both voting and reconciliation. In fact, the blessings of Athena and the freshly transformed Erinyes sketch out a structure and orientation for Athens that differ significantly from the mythical city, the historical city, or any other polis in the Aeschylean corpus.

Several details of the new disposition of Athens are disproportionately meaningful. First, as opposed to the heroic and cursed royal family

---

59 A lengthy discussion of the voting with a summary of the different major critical strains is contained in Sommerstein 1989.221–26.

60 Cf. Rosenmeyer 1982.343–44 and C. Meier 1993.121–22. Importantly, in the *Suppliants,* the positively represented vote is emphatically "not for the male" (*Supp.* 644–45), showing that Athena's explanation for her vote is not a categorical view of justice but is reliant on her individual identity and history, to which Apollo appealed and which she confirms in this passage.

61 Lebeck 1971.134–38; cf. Sommerstein 2010b. Contrast the unanimity of voting in the *Suppliants*, discussed above n. 31.

62 *Eum.* 804–07, 854–57, 867–69, 892–97, 1026–31, and the final procession at 1033–47.

of Argos, the Athenian citizens are anonymous (e.g., *Eum.* 402; cf. Dodds 1960.20 and Euben 1986.367). A second detail, which is an overlooked vocabulary shift, marks even more strongly the model on which Athens is to operate thenceforth: in Athena's mouth, the polis becomes synonymous with the *stratos*. In all fourteen instances in the *Agamemnon*, *stratos* means "army" or "expedition." There are no uses in the *Choephoroi*. In the *Eumenides*, Apollo (668) and Orestes (762) continue to apply *stratos* to military contexts. However, Athena uses the uncompounded *stratos* exclusively to refer to the Athenians when not on campaign. In her mouth, the term becomes a synonym for the "people" (565–69, 681–84, 762, 889), unlike anywhere else in Aeschylus.[63] These two linguistic changes indicate that the goddess is representing the idealized new Athens as a specifically *military* collective, even at home.

An emotional reorientation reinforces this new vocabulary for Athens. While *philia* harmonizes the city, the divinities on stage also invoke the opposite emotion: the Erinyes counsel the Athenians to "love with a common purpose" (κοινοφιλεῖ διανοίᾳ) and "to hate with one heart" (στυγεῖν μιᾷ φρενί, *Eum*. 985–86). Both are required for what is not just unity ("a common purpose") but emphatic unanimity ("one heart"). Transforming Athens this way provides the cure (ἄκος, 987; cf. *Supp.* 366–67) for human problems—in other words, it resolves civil strife ("I pray that Stasis [Στάσιν] never roar in this city," *Eum.* 977–78).[64] Protection from such *stasis* is not contained only in *philia*, it relies equally on releasing the pent-up violence natural to humans: Athena maintains that the "terrible *eros* for glory" (δεινὸς εὐκλείας ἔρως, *Eum*. 865) within men cannot be dampened, it must be redirected towards constant martial victory (νίκης, 903; 974–75).[65] It is noteworthy that already twenty years before

63 *Stratos* before Aeschylus means an army in camp or the host away at war, as in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, with occasional extensions to refer to the common soldiers as opposed to the leaders. In Pindar and the Cretan dialect, it can mean the people in general: Chantraine 1968–1980 s.v. and cf. LSJ s.v. Sommerstein 1989 ad *Eum*. 566 claims that Athena thus treats the Athenian *stratos* as civilians; cf. Taplin 1977.392–95, 410–21. However, since the Athenians at home are not an army on campaign, this is backwards. Her mixture of *laos,* "people," and *stratos* (esp. in 681–83) for the citizens at home has the opposite valence. She is *militarizing* the people, as when she calls them to hear the law with a war trumpet (σάλπιγξ, 568).

64 Contra Griffith 1995.107–24, who claims that the *Oresteia* works towards "solidarity without consensus."

65 Athena does not pick a neutral word, since an *eros* for *kerdos* refers to the excessive desire for profit that Clytemnestra predicted would lead to divine punishment against the Trojan expedition (*Ag*. 341–42). Cf. *Eum.* 851–57 and Rynearson 2013.3–5.

the *Oresteia,* "to have the same friend and enemy" (τὸν αὐτὸν ἐχθρὸν εἶναι καὶ φίλον) was the phrasing used by the Delian league.[66] As posited by political theology, the definition of friends and enemies of the state is the political distinction par excellence (see above n. 22) and the one that allows for pure warfare. Together, these threads show that the gods are putting forward a particular theory of the state: rather than only harmony through *philia*, the second half of the cure for *stasis* is military unanimity.

The earlier parts of the *Eumenides* tend to emphasize the peaceful uses of divine power: Apollo's claim to Delphi without violence (*Eum.* 5–8), Orestes' acquittal winning his help for Athens "without the spear" (ἄνευ δορός, 289), and Athena's calm *peitho* that converts the Erinyes.[67] Yet by the end of the play, the supernatural support for Athens manifests itself consistently as the power of the spear and blessings bestowing military victory. Orestes threatens postmortem vengeance if Argos reneges on the alliance with Athens (762–77), which will help it "with the victory-bearing spear," i.e., in war, mentioning a form of δόρυ three times in eleven lines (766, 773, 777). Athena, for her part, unequivocally directs that Athenian values should imitate Homeric heroism by connecting killing in war with civic honor (913–15): "I would find it unendurable not to honor (τιμᾶν) this city among mortals as a victory-city (ἀστύνικον) in glorious war-slaying contests (ἀρειφάτων . . . πρεπτῶν ἀγώνων)."[68] The Erinyes not only name Athena and Zeus as the gods of Athens, they pick up on Athena's language ("Ares-slaying," ἀρειφάτων) by claiming that Ares dwells in the city (*Eum.* 916–18). The phrase stands out as a reference to the city's bellicose nature, for there was little actual cult dedicated to Ares in contemporary Athens.[69] Despite the earlier emphasis on persuasion and reconciliation, these phrases strongly indicate a new, divinely ordained, policy of continual warfare.

Some commentators suggest that this divine support means that Athenian motives for going to war would henceforth be purer than those

---

66 In 478 BCE: *Ath. Pol.* 23.5 and Plut. *Arist*. 25.1; see C. Meier 1990.117.

67 On Aeschylus deliberately transforming the myth of Apollo's violent acquisition of Delphi, see Sommerstein 1989 ad 4–5 and C. Meier 1993.120. On *peitho* and its problems in the *Oresteia*, see Zeitlin 1965.507, Buxton 1982.105–14, Goldhill 1984a.263–65, and Nooter 2017.281.

68 The glory of victory recrafts the whole city into the Homeric hero writ large: Euben 1982.25.30, Chiasson 1999, and Sommerstein 1989.239.

69 It was generally rare in Greece: Burkert 1985.170 and Parker 2005b.397–98. Moreover, the god's connection to the Areopagus is diminished in the *Eumenides* when compared with previous myths; cf. Sommerstein 2010a ad 685–90 and 918.

described for the Trojan War.[70] The Erinyes, after all, refer to Athens as a defender of the gods and their altars (ῥυσίβωμον, *Eum.* 919–20).[71] The implication is that the many praises of Athenian religiosity in the *Eumenides* extend in this case to cover warfare, now transformed into a sacred duty.[72] The Erinyes' reference, in fact, is not to any myth from the Athenian past but rather to Athenian contemporary self-regard for having defeated the temple-burning Persians (Sommerstein 1989 ad loc.; cf. Euben 1986). Yet nothing said about the future suggests that Athenian wars will be directed solely against enemies who transgress against the divine. Moreover, there is no mention of either defensive war or of morality as a motive. The explicit statements, instead, return to profit (992, 1008) and ever greater glory (853, 913–15, 996, 1008–09), both of which are economic and status motives.[73] Political violence is defined as a means for state flourishing.

Warfare forces political contingency to the fore. Cities are subject to changeful fortune and divine caprice leading to destruction, as was the case with Troy, formerly beloved by Zeus.[74] To ward off any possible adverse effects of the policy of continual battle, Athena instructs the Erinyes to bless Athens with "victory without evil" (νίκης μὴ κακῆς, *Eum*. 903). Further, *stasis*, coups, and changes of rulership are a feature of both the human and the divine realm, as is alluded to several times in the trilogy (*Ag.* 168–73 and *Eum.* 641–42; cf. Clay 1969.9). In reaction to the possibility of political change, Athena warns the citizens never to modify the laws (693–95). She repeatedly emphasizes eternity.[75] Athena arrests even divine contingency

---

70 Often in the context of discussing theodicy in the *Oresteia:* Kitto 1961.90–95, Gagarin 1976.66–73, Rosenmeyer 1982.259–368, Goldhill 1986.35–39, Solmsen 1995.178–224, Bees 2009.157–259, Parker 2009, and Sommerstein 2010a.193–203.

71 They thus present a clear contrast to the Greek army's destruction of the altars (βωμοί) of the gods (*Ag*. 527) and the impiety of the wealthy man who "has kicked the altar (βωμόν) of justice into oblivion" (*Ag.* 383–84).

72 Athenians as honorable and pious: *Eum.* 804–07, 854–57, 867–69, 892–97, 1026–31, and 1033–47.

73 Part of the irony of the blessings is that they reuse terms that are negative not only at the start of the trilogy but also towards its end, as the Erinyes had warned against *kerdos* leading to injustice at *Eum*. 538–41, and Athena insists that her council will be "untouched by profits" (κερδῶν) at 704. On the dynamics and negative associations of *kerdos*, see Dodds 1960.25–26, Cozzo 1988.41–82, Wohl 1998.59–117, and Seaford 2003b and 2012.168. Cf. *Cho.* 825–26; *Eum.* 539–41, 704, 990–91; *Sept*. 683–84, 697; and *PV* 747.

74 *Il.* 4.1–49 and *Ag.* 1167–69. The good life is tenuous even for heroes, as Agamemnon points out just before his ignominious murder (*Ag*. 928–29).

75 *Eum*. 484, 571–72, 681–84, 707–08, 853. Cf. Chiasson 1999, esp. 156–9l, but see J. Porter 1990.44–45, who questions this use of "forever," and Goldhill 1984b.169–76 on the problems of teleology in the trilogy.

by extending *eros* and *philia* to the gods.[76] Not only the tutelary goddess of Athens, but *every* divinity named in the blessings is said to approve this transition (Hammond 1965.42–55). An extreme version of divine support is found in the last lines of the trilogy: "Zeus, the all-seeing, and Moira have thus come to the aid of Pallas's citizens" (Ζεύς . . . Μοῖρά τε, 1045–46, cf. 960–67).[77] These blessings explicitly raise the Athenians above the rest of humanity with a permanence assured by Fate (Moira). Throughout the ending, rhetorical, religious, dramatic, and linguistic elements all create a feeling of positive closure.[78] This is not just the closure of the issues raised previously in the trilogy but of political contingency itself.

The slippage from Athena promoting a universal idea of justice to her policy of Athenocentric warfare fits a pattern evident in historical revolutions: the original goal of bettering all of humanity often distorts into bloodthirsty jingoism (Kahn 2011.22 and Mbembe 2019.15–20). Since in the *Eumenides,* this continual warfare is meant to benefit the democratic polis, scholars of politics often ignore or even endorse it, as Christian Meier does (1990.118; cf. Raaflaub 2007.116–17). Civic unity through warfare comports, on one level, with certain strands of the historical self-representation of Athens in oratory, material culture, and ritual.[79] The allusions in the *Oresteia* to contemporary Athenian military campaigns, which expanded greatly under the democracy, support this idea.[80]

Could, therefore, the collective military model of Athens in the *Eumenides* merely reflect a democratic "ideology"? After all, influential scholars have described the Athenian army as the "popular assembly under arms" and, reciprocally, the polis as "a community of warriors."[81]

---

76 *Eum*. 852, 998–99, 1001–02, and 1014–20; cf. Rynearson 2013 and Sommerstein 2010a.202–03.

77 Following Sommerstein 2008b in punctuation and translation; cf. West 1990.294–95.

78 *Eum.* 898–99; cf. 891–92. Cf. Fischer 1965, Seaford 2012.126–27 and 190–205, and Chiasson 1999.148–59.

79 On the democratic and bellicose symbolism of the Athenian collective funerals for the war dead, public eulogies, and monuments, see Thuc. 2.34; cf. Clairmont 1983, Loraux 1986.18–56, Stuppenrich 1994, and Arrington 2010.

80 E.g., *Eum*. 397–402. See Dodds 1960.20–21, Cohen 1986.140, and Sommerstein 2010a.283–85; contra Dover 1957.235–57. On the intensification of Athenian militarism under the democracy, see Pritchard 2010.5–6.

81 Vernant 1968.23: "L'homogénéité du guerrier et du politique est autrement complete . . . l'armée, c'est l'assemblée populaire sous les armes, la cité en campagne, comme inversement la cité est une communauté de guerriers." Cf. Vidal-Naquet 1968.214 and Pritchard 2010.27.

The assembly was made up of citizens who were classed by military status and repeatedly voted for the wars in which they themselves served. However, was there an overarching understanding of the assembly as the *stratos* at home? A strong refutation of this idea is found in Thucydides' version of Pericles' funeral oration, delivered in 431, at a high point of Athenian democratic militarism. A set of contrasts (2.39) between Athenian military preparations (ταῖς τῶν πολεμικῶν μελέταις) and those of Sparta turn on the Athenians living easily, not training laboriously for war from a young age, and being prepared for dangers through their own character (τρόπων) rather than by norms or ordinances (νόμων). The next two sections (2.40–41) continue the contrast by emphasizing that private citizens concern themselves with public affairs on a voluntary basis—from custom, social pressure, and disposition (esp. 2.40.2). This is very much Thucydides' version of Pericles' tendentious representation of Athens, and many of its elements are reversed during the immediately following description of the plague (2.47–54). Despite such ironies, the represented speech shows that even while urging the polis to further combat, the speaker could thoroughly deny that its citizens believed Athens was structured as an army or was generally oriented towards war.[82] We will examine below some structural aspects of the Athenian government, but for now it is sufficient to say that the *Oresteia*'s ideal of Athens as an army differs significantly from other documentary depictions of historical Athens.

Within the Aeschylean corpus, the martial structure and orientation we uncovered above are also outliers: in the *Oresteia*, Argos is not said to be organized like an army, nor defined by its orientation to warfare. Aeschylus's earlier *Persians* accentuates Athenian collectivity and democratic ideology through anonymity and by contrast with long lists of Persian nobles (Euben 1986.366 and Goldhill 1988.192–93). The Athenians are said to be helped by the gods in the war, but only for defense against an invasion (*Pers.* 243). There are no indications of divine blessings for Athenian conquests; on the contrary, the hubris of an expanding empire is a constant theme of the *Persians* (on the resonances for Athens, see Rosenbloom 2006.91–112).

---

82 In other representations of early democracy, such as in the Old Oligarch/Pseudo-Xenophon (mid to late 5th century), we also find a tendentious and complex picture of a desire for gain from warfare but not of citizens considering themselves a military collective. Cf. Mattingly 1997 and Nakategawa 1995.

The *Suppliants* provides the greatest number of confluences and contrasts in terms of sovereignty, unanimity, and blessings concerned with warfare. First, there is an extended debate over who has sovereignty: the Danaids claim it is the single ruler, who embodies the unchecked (ἄκριτος, "not liable to judgment") power of both the polis and the people (σύ τοι πόλις, σὺ δὲ τὸ δήμιον, *Supp.* 370–75). King Pelasgus, conversely, insists that he defers to the multitude of citizens, speaking of the polis as the collective "people," *laos*, and "citizens," *astoi* (πόλις, λαός, ἀστοῖς, 365–69; λεώς, πόλιν, 397–401). This dispute over sovereignty sets up the central decision, the offstage vote of the Argive citizens, which itself comprises one of the earliest references to democracy (δήμου κρατοῦσα χείρ, "the power-wielding hand of the *demos*," 604; cf. τὸ δάμιον, τὸ πτόλιν κρατύνει, "the *demos*, who rules the city," 699). The outcome of the vote is in doubt, the subject of much anticipation, and dependent on a *majority* (πληθύνεται, 604). In other words, a split decision is expected. In a surprise, the vote is unanimous (οὐ διχορρόπως, 605; δημόπρακτος ἐκ πόλεως μία ψῆφος κέκρανται, 942–43). This Danaus attributes to the persuasive power of the king (608–24; Sommerstein 1997 and Ober and Strauss 1990.241). However, Danaus immediately goes on to ascribe the entire change of affairs to the intercession of Zeus (Ζεὺς δ' ἐπέκρανεν τέλος, 624), which characterizes it as a miraculous intervention rather than the ordinary course of civic government. In their subsequent blessings, the Danaids pray for protection for the city, *demos* rule, and only the positive part of civic unity: "good common purpose" (εὐκοινόμητις, 700). No figure in the play suggests that either continuing unanimity or continuing warfare is beneficial—much less a cure for the ills of the city (Podlecki 1986.83–86 and Turner 2001.37–38). Quite the opposite, in their blessings, the Danaids explicitly and repeatedly pray that Argos *avoid* Ares, both internally and externally (625–709). The Argives are counseled to make treaties with foreigners rather than resort to war (701–03).[83]

To summarize: the blessings in the *Eumenides* present an extraordinary version of Athens that should not be regularized. They do not return to the model of persuasion and the peaceful reconciliation of differences that surrounds the trial. They do not refer to popular sovereignty with direct majority votes on policy, as the *Suppliants* so centrally does. On the other hand, their emphasis on internal harmony does not support previous readings that see the new Athens as a tyrannical power or as randomly using

83 Bowen 2013.278–79, Turner 2001.36, and Sommerstein 2008a.379 n. 140.

force for gain. Nor is this version of the future city a mere magnification of the normal Athenian self-understanding. In fact, in seeking a total cure for civil strife, the blessings go to a particular set of extremes beyond even internal harmony. The ideal Athens they depict is a military unanimity, overseen by a wise council, bolstered by the total support of every divinity mentioned, and guaranteed by the closure of contingency forever. This is the *Oresteia*'s unique political-theological theory, which produces a direct challenge to Athenian democratic thought.

POLYTHEISM AND POLITICAL PLURALITY

To better understand the form of this challenge, it is important to clarify its relation to ideas about political plurality and democracy. We thus turn to the relevant political theological thinking on unity and plurality. Then we will move on to the political and religious structures available in democratic Athens, which we will relate back to aspects of the trilogy other than the blessings. A number of political thinkers diagnose calls for strong state unity as pernicious. Arendt claims that "the first catastrophe of western philosophy is the requirement of this unity that on principle proves impossible except under tyranny" (2005.3). Arendt and other modern thinkers, including Isaiah Berlin (1958.52–53) and Agamben (2005.86), are responding in large part to political theology, whose theorists postulate a fundamental conflict between the political and pluralism.[84] The idea of a single sovereign means that the political, at its purest, operates without dissent. Sovereign decisions must be completely unchecked by other values or associations. Schmitt (1996.58–61) explicitly denies checks and balances and the separation of powers.

Recently, political theology has been applied more stringently to analyze popular sovereignty and modern democratic constitutional thought. However, this version of the theory, championed by Charles Kahn, still borrows all its structural analogies from monotheistic religions.[85] Although

84 Schmitt 1996.11–12 was the first in Germany to address, and contest, the theory of pluralism, whose topic is the multiple social associations that affect people's political actions. He insisted that treating such associations as political meant a denial of the sovereign as the true political entity (40–45) and that the only meaningful political pluralism is the pluriverse of competing sovereign nations (53–54). Cf. Schmitt 2008.53–55 and Rasch 2004.29–38.

85 Constitution is recast as covenant, revolution as revelation, sacrifice as making the state sacred through blood: Kahn 2011.1–9, 28–29, and 121–22. On Schmitt in relation to liberalism and democracy, see Rasch 2019.89–141.

dealing with American constitutional democracy, it does not account in any way for checks and balances (Kahn 2011.9, 31–47, 53–60, and 133). Instead, it focuses on revolutions enacted by "the people" (a term that makes a unity out of diverse groups) and on moments of equity decisions in a judicial context—both of which are seen as miracles of sovereign freedom.[86] Against this main line of thought, only an occasional plea has been made to scrutinize the monotheistic model of political theology. The most prominent—but quite brief and vague—is Odo Marquard's suggestion that we embrace a modern political polytheism that mimics the separation of powers of the ancient gods (2017.521–25; cf. Bettini 2016.20, 131–43). However, the theory of political theology, as it stands, is unable to integrate the splitting up of sovereignty.

But a separation of powers that could check the dominance of any one force within the polis was, in fact, a main component of Athenian civic practice and democratic theory. Three interrelated types of plurality were politically germane: 1) the polytheistic pantheon and its role in politics, 2) the political effects of the multiplicity of human values and associations (what is generally meant by pluralism), and 3) the structural restraints of democratic institutions.

Concerning the first, scholars rarely mention how greatly the *Oresteia*'s depictions of Athena's political influence diverge from Athenian practice. Whereas representing Athena and Zeus, among other divinities, as involved in political affairs is common in the mythic tradition—not only in Homer and Hesiod, but also in Aeschylus—Greek religion had no distinctly political divinity anywhere, nor an essentially political function for any god.[87]

In practice, democratic Athens stringently delimited religious influence on politics and did not turn to the divine for explicitly political advice.[88] There is no evidence outside of the *Eumenides*, for example, that the Semnai Theai (traditional Athenian divinities whom the play connects to the transformed Erinyes) were involved in Athenian politics, domestic or otherwise (Parker 2005b.406 and Brown 1984.262–63). Despite Athena's

86 Kahn 2011.32–34, 108–11, and 138–40. Note how analogous a change in law through revolution and an equity decision are to the political and judicial interventions of Athena in the *Oresteia:* creating the new law and casting the winning vote.

87 E.g., *Supp.* 624, discussed above p. 50 (this is especially true in aetiological myths); see Parker 2005b.403.

88 Delphi, for example, was not consulted for any military campaign after 479, well before the trilogy: Parker 2005b.402 and Osborne 2013.287.

tutelary connection with the city that shares her name, her status was far from hegemonic in historical Athens (Parker 2005b.396–97, 443–45). A human, Draco, was the traditional inventor of legislation against murder, even if the general ideas behind the laws could be attributed to "heroes or gods" (εἴθ' ἥρωες εἴτε θεοί, *Dem*. 23.70; MacLeod 1982.128 n. 19 and Dover 1974.255–56). Zeus was invoked most notably for turns in battle and the general safety of the polis, but a changing group of many other divinities were routinely appended to each such invocation (Parker 2005b.399). Neither Athena nor Zeus was ever understood to support the Athenians exclusively or to be concerned with political matters per se (Osborne 2013.276). Other *poleis* had a host of major and minor tutelary divinities and themselves constantly appealed to Zeus and Athena (Parker 2005b.398–99). That is, Greek theology allowed for neither a divine unanimity nor for one polis to monopolize a divine protector. These points help us delineate the valence of the fictional divine influence on Athens in the ending of the trilogy. The *Eumenides* presents an extreme theologization of Athenian law and politics by having Athena create the Areopagus and trial system, declare future policy, and promise the aid of Zeus and Fate.

Athenian festivals offer a second contrast to the trilogy's ideal of civic unanimity. The procession of the *Eumenides* evokes several festivals at once. The onstage context associates it with the Athenian procession to the Semnai Theai. About this procession and cult little is known except for their connection geographically and through oaths to the Areopagus Council (Brown 1984.262–63 and Parker 2005b.162–63). More generally, the procession at the end of the trilogy relates to the Panathenaia and the City Dionysia (during which tragedy was performed: Sourvinou-Inwood 2003.238–39). There are, of course, definite political elements in the Dionysia (and even more in the Panathenaia), giving a sense of Athenian collectivism and militarism.[89] Moreover, the very introduction of the Dionysia has been plausibly characterized as part of a wide-ranging attempt at unifying Athens and bolstering its imperialistic ambitions through religion.[90] Evidence points to the appropriation of the Dionysia, other religious festivals, and

89 Goldhill 1987 and 2000, Sommerstein 1997, Wilson 1997, Longo 1990, Griffin 1998, Sourvinou-Inwood 2003.67–140 and 231–51, Slater 2007, and Roselli 2011. Contra Griffith 1995 and Carter 2007.35–43.

90 Kurke 2013.146–49, citing the seizure of the statue of Dionysus from the annexed Boeotian Eleutherai and the subsequent connection to that city via a yearly ritual procession; cf. Goldhill 1987.59 and Sourvinou-Inwood 2000b.18–19.

even tragedy itself as part of Peisistratus's political-theological policy.[91] In other words, the civic unity such festivals offer is not inherently democratic but can be used to bolster tyranny.

On the other hand, some Athenian festivals and cult practices were not primarily meant to glorify the polis or promote civic unity. Many occurred in the demes, outside Athens entirely, or were related to family and non-civic associations. Therefore, it is important to touch on how festivals in general manifested pluralism in Athens. As in the rest of Greece, celebrants were divided into groupings that differed by festival and sacrifice: tribe, deme, family, gender, age, profession, and citizenship status (Parker 2005b.162–71). Social license was built into many of them, along with ritualistic behavior based on group identity. Some even encouraged role reversals.[92] Ritual occasions turned attention to the diverse aspects of Greek life, ideas, beliefs, and practices. Athenian religion thus centripetally encouraged political unity and centrifugally exposed participants to a multiplicity of groupings and a plurality of values.

The disparity between civic values and other common Greek values is further manifested in the conceptions of the afterlife in both Athenian religion and the *Oresteia* trilogy. Multiple Athenian festivals devoted to the dead and yearly ceremonies of mourning reinforced the centrality of the family rather than the city.[93] At their extreme, lavish funerals caused discord between aristocrats and the demos for over a century.[94] On the other hand, a central aspect of Athenian democratic ideology was the polis-sponsored collective funeral of the war dead.[95] This ritual provides a clear antithesis to the representation of the war dead in the *Oresteia*. Instead of depicting a public burial, the Herald declares it is better to forget the fallen, seeing as victory has brought profit (*kerdos*) to the city (νικᾷ τὸ κέρδος,

91 Kurke 2013.148–49; cf. Griffith 1995.116 and Sommerstein 2010a.13 n. 3. It is worth noting that the ploy Peisistratus concocted to regain political power involved a living simulacrum of Athena declaring him ruler: Herodotus 1.60 and *Ath. Pol.* 14.4.

92 It is possible that during the Kronia, enslavers waited on their enslaved, although the evidence is late. There does not seem to ever have been any formal political critique at Athenian festivals, as in Bakhtin's theory of carnival. See Parker 2005b.171–73; contra Raaflaub and Wallace 2007.44.

93 Johnston 1999.22–29, 43–46, 55, 63–66, and Burkert 1985.190–203.

94 There were multiple rounds of restrictions on aristocratic funerals and burials in the sixth and fifth centuries: Shapiro 1991.629, 643–47; Morris 1992.129–34, 138–45; Meyer 1993.106 (on Cicero *de Leg*. 2.59–66); Johnston 1999.40–41; and Mirto 2012.148–51.

95 Thuc. 2.34; Clairmont 1983, Loraux 1986 (esp. 18–56), Stuppenrich 1994, and Arrington 2010.

Ag. 567–73).[96] Afterlife cults such as the Eleusinian Mysteries (celebrated at the birthplace of Aeschylus) and Orphism promised the improvement of an individual's afterlife apart from any political factors.[97] The familial cultivation of the dead and a personal relation to the afterlife demonstrate some of the values that competed with civic ones.

Last is the issue of the separation of powers, touched on by Marquard in regards to modernity (see above p. 52), but rejected in the main lines of political theology. In historical Athens, the theory of distinct institutions constraining one another goes back to the writings of Solon and Herodotus.[98] The Assembly, the *boule*, the courts, the choosing of magistrates by lot, the Areopagus Council, and the occasional ostracism all functioned separately and resisted accumulations of power both by citizens and by other institutions.[99] The Areopagus Council served an integral role in this resistance through its historical function of "watching over the laws" or being the "guardian of the constitution."[100] One of its early functions, the *euthunia,* was a specifically Athenian institution in which officeholders were scrutinized for corruption and about the appropriateness of their actions while serving the state.[101] According to Solon and Herodotus—and the practices of early Athens—correcting harmful policy and punishing corruption only functioned properly when the sources of power were structurally separated and animated by different values.

Finally, Athenian decision-making presents two further political structures of plurality with analogies in the trilogy: open debate and voting. "Integrative rhetoric," which focuses on what is useful to the city as a whole—as opposed to what serves the interests of different groups—is

---

96 The Herald asks rhetorically: "Why should we reckon those expended in the account?" (τί τοὺς ἀναλωθέντας ἐν ψήφῳ λέγειν, *Ag.* 572). See further Shilo 2022.38–44; cf. Scodel 2006.128–30 and Grethlein 2013.90–91.

97 For attempts to find salvation themes and allusions to mystery religion in tragedy, including the *Oresteia*, see Thomson 1935.22–34, Tierney 1937.11–21, Solmsen 1947, and Bowie 1993.24–26. On the mystery and salvation cults more generally, see Linforth 1973, West 1983, Burkert 1985.276–301, Graf 1993, Graf and Johnston 2007, Bremmer 2002.15–26, Edmonds 2004 and 2011, and Bernabé and Jiménez San Cristóbal 2008.

98 Solon 4.7–14, 36.20–27; cf. Lewis 2006.108–30, Wallace 2007.57–58 and 68–71, and Ober 2015.159–60. Herodotus 3.80.6; Saxonhouse 1996.49–56 and Raaflaub 2003.75.

99 Ober 1989.71–81, Hansen 1991.123–295, O'Neil 1995.66, and Farrar 2007.181–92.

100 *Eum*. 681–706. Cf. Aristotle *Ath. Pol.* 8 and Zelnik-Abramovitz 2011.111–12.

101 The *euthunia* is referred to by Herodotus in his depiction of democratic restraints: 3.80.6; cf. *Ath. Pol*. 48.4. In historical Athens, this function moved from the Areopagus to become the purview of the citizens, who scrutinized and checked the power of individuals and groups through the assembly and courts: Raaflaub 2007.114.

understood by some to be the main mode in both actual Athenian debate and Athena's *peitho* (Canevaro 2018.131, with bibliography). We also have traces of an Athenian value of "same-mindedness," *homonoia* (Xenophon *Mem.* 4.4.16; Canevaro 2018.141–43). Intriguingly, there are indications of consensus as a value in the form of nearly unanimous votes in political assemblies throughout Greek democracies, although the evidence is later, scattered, and could well concern matters about which there was no controversy (Canevaro 2018.9–12). Therefore, the model in the *Eumenides* of civic unity through conflict resolution and same-mindedness is certainly not alien to Greece and Athens.

However, the ideal of *unanimity* in the trilogy's ending does not reflect the fact that voting in Athens was often a contentious affair that inherently emphasized divisions in perspective, values, and policy. Nearly all the evidence concerning forensic voting shows heavily split decisions (Canevaro 2018.138–40). Political voting and the debates beforehand highlighted a diversity of opinions and knowledge: the result of allowing any male citizen to speak (Ober 1989.156–63 and Canevaro 2018.140–47). There is substantial evidence for personal and political enmity and agonistic relationships among elite speakers in Athenian politics and in their assembly proposals (Mitchell and Rhodes 1996.21–29). Various realms of value and power constellations also affected both participation and voting: kinship, deme ties, financial leverage, and the threat of compulsion or retaliation (Canevaro 2018.146–47; cf. Xen. *Mem.* 1.2.43–45). Participation in the city's numerous democratic institutions meant Athenian citizens of varied backgrounds were exposed to polyphonic discourses, negotiations, and policy making on many levels (Carter 2007.70–71). They had to craft and weigh proposals in mixed social and political groups.[102] Repeated votes entailed constantly compromising through intermediate positions. Split opinions required the working out of disagreements afterwards. It is unambiguous that democratic institutions did not tend to a unity of mind, nor did they function like an army obeying commands: they continually involved citizens in structures of difference.

This survey of Athenian religious-political ideas and institutions relates to elements and themes throughout the trilogy. A plurality of values appears early in the *Agamemnon*—but as a political danger. It is widely

102 Even as they excluded most of the people in the city from political power: Katz 2004 and Osborne 2004.

recognized that silence based on the fear of violence from the regime is a primary feature of the rule of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus.[103] Yet the Elders, the advisors of the king, had also been afraid of revealing to Agamemnon their opposition to the Trojan War (*Ag.* 799–804). The trilogy demonstrates that critique under unchecked rule can only be voiced outside of the political structure. This is why the citizens are said to condemn the rulers in private for their loved ones returning from the war as ashes (427–60). Ingeniously condensed metaphors connect these casualties to financial gain.[104] The citizens do not assent to the economic motivation for war; rather, they oppose the lives of their kin to it, manifesting a non-political value of the family. The anger of the citizens is so great that the Elders fear the "curse ratified by the people" (δημοκράντου . . . ἀρᾶς, 458) and even a "night-shrouded act" (457–60) of rebellion.[105] The people in mythical Argos lack both a voice and a vote to act as checks on their rulers. Their only recourse against political violence would be *stasis*.

A similar opposition between family and political power plays out even more directly in the struggle over ritual mourning for Agamemnon. That Clytemnestra denies the king a public funeral appalls the Elders (*Ag.* 1541–50) and his children (*Cho.* 429–33). This ties into the politically subversive potential of aristocratic funerals in Athens, as mentioned above p. 54. It is, in fact, during the surreptitious *kommos* for Agamemnon that the denied ritual, civic, and familial honors create a heightened emotional state and offer the impetus for the matricide cum countercoup that begins immediately thereafter.[106] *Stasis* (*Cho.* 114, cf. 458) arises from familial mourning.

The most overt manifestation of alternate values galvanizing political acts occurs in the *Choephoroi*. Orestes reels off a series of motivations for his vengeance against the rulers. He conjoins Apollo's command to his own list of economic, familial, male chauvinist, and political reasons (*Cho.* 269–305). In the *Eumenides*, however, reacting to the same issues, Athena restores previously corrupt rituals and subversions of family relations

---

103 *Ag.* 36–39, 498–99, 548, 1344–71, and 1612–71. Cf. Rosenmeyer 1982.177–80, Thalmann 1985.228–29, Schenker 1991.69–71, McClure 1999.96, Scodel 2006.123–24, and Nooter 2017.127–34.

104 Ares is the "gold-changer of bodies" (ὁ χρυσαμοιβός . . . σωμάτων, 438).

105 Cf. *Pers*. 576–98, on which see Wohl 1998.98. Cf. Podlecki 1986.86–96.

106 For the debate on whether or how the *kommos* motivates Orestes' vengeance, see Zeitlin 1965.496, Garvie 1986 ad 306–478, Conacher 1987.113, Goldhill 1984a.137–38, McClure 1999.44–45, Bacon 2001.52–53, and Brown 2018.33–34.

under an entirely political aegis.[107] The goddess explicitly subordinates all domestic values to victory (*Eum.* 903, 913–15 quoted above pp. 46–47). The earlier threat of alternate values leading to *stasis* is defanged through the divine guarantee of eternal triumph.

Having traced out the political aspects of human appeals to alternate values in the trilogy, it is important to examine more closely instances of divine divergences in values. Artemis had been mentioned as a protector of the innocent in the context of opposition to the war and to Zeus (*Ag.* 134–37). But, much more centrally, chthonic forces in the *Oresteia* have a political aspect that is too little discussed. They play an ever-growing role as the trilogy progresses. In the *Agamemnon,* the people's curse (δημοκράντου . . . ἀρᾶς, 458) directed against the rulers of Argos already invoke the Erinyes (Ἐρινύες, 463), who are the divine embodiment of curses (Ἀραί, *Eum.* 417; discussed above p. 42). They are threatened against "those who kill many" (τῶν πολυκτόνων, *Ag.* 461) in war, and thus "prosper without justice" (τυχηρὸν ὄντ' ἄνευ δίκας, 464). Political violence is characterized as the unjust pursuit of gain. Here it is both resisted by the people and subject to divine punishment.

The Erinyes' earlier *lex talionis* and their subsequent integration into the city of Athens are a part of every discussion of justice in the *Oresteia*. However, generally missing is a key concept for understanding the Erinyes' place in the universal order and thus their political identity before they are seated in Athens: separateness. This characteristic is not apparent at first, for throughout most of the trilogy, the opposite is said of them. The Erinyes are described by humans as members of an aggregate of divine avengers, often merely referred to as θεοί (as in *Ag.* 462) and several times linked with Zeus.[108] Once they arrive onstage in the *Eumenides*, though, the Erinyes repeatedly characterize themselves as completely independent from the Olympians, a stance that Apollo's hostility and Athena's wonderment reinforce.[109] The Erinyes describe the Olympians as overly partial, hubristically violent, and subverters of the fixed laws of the universe (*Eum*. 162–63, 350–66, 385–86, 723–24, and 727–28). Crucially for the end of the trilogy, this leads the Erinyes to deny that any justification

---

107 Zeitlin 1965 and 1966, D. Porter 2005, and Bowie 1993.14–31.

108 *Ag.* 469–70, cf. 40–62, 1288–89; *Cho.* 382–85; cf. Lebeck 1971.96, Winnington-Ingram 1983.127, and Scapin 2020.84.

109 *Eum.* 350–52, 365–66, 593–97, 622–24, and 640–43; cf. Solmsen 1995.190–91; contra Schlatter 2018.158–59, 169–71.

for violence may be derived from Olympian commands (*Eum.* 299–301, 427). The partiality for Athens that Athena later so ostentatiously displays is impugned in advance.

The Erinyes' separateness enables them to defend from the outside the constantly threatened social order. They depict themselves as impartial punishers of specific human transgressions: kin murder, mistreatment of *xenoi* (guests and hosts), and violations against the gods.[110] Each of these is focused on how an individual behaves toward others, without any being framed in a political context. The Erinyes, in fact, assert that neither human justifications for crimes nor status provides a defense against their pursuit (*Eum.* 358–59, *Ag.* 462–68).[111] This means they categorically deny the validity of political motives for individual transgressions. They themselves sequester ethics, as individual actions, from politics.[112]

In a striking corollary to their separateness as check, the Erinyes undercut the assumption that human *harmony* is essentially positive. They forewarn against this obverse of separateness in a little noticed passage. When they envision themselves being obstructed by the Olympians, the Erinyes declare that their absence will "harmonize together all mortals" (πάντας . . . συναρμόσει βροτούς, *Eum.* 494–95) in total freedom from inhibition. This would lead to the universal subversion of customs (θεσμίων, 491) and justice (πίτνει δόμος Δίκας, 516). If the Erinyes are blocked from their duty to punish human transgression, they proclaim that savagery and disorder on the largest scale would inexorably occur. The Erinyes connect such social disorder with political injustice, declaring that one should not live anarchically (ἄναρκτον βίον, 526) or despotically (δεσποτούμενον, 527). The Erinyes thus put forward a political theory of moderation that is not to be transgressed for fear of their punishment (528–65). In other words, before they are integrated into the polis, they do not counsel unity

110 Stated as crimes in *Eum.* 270–71 and as positive values in *Eum.* 538–48; cf. *Supp*. 701–09.

111 As we saw above (pp. 41–42), part of what makes their justice untenable is that they consider the transgressor as so inherently evil that she or he is "reared" for them—i.e., is cursed for punishment before the crime even occurs. Also, they recognize no expiation, and they cannot, before Athena converts them, operate within a political context.

112 I use the term "ethics" here for evaluations of individual behavior towards others and the transgression of norms, although one could also use "morals." On the distinctions between the two terms, ancient and modern, see Annas 1992, Segal 1996, and Easterling 1996. On the interactions of ethics/morals and politics in the *Oresteia*, see Dodds 1960, Lloyd-Jones 1962, Hammond 1965, Lesky 1966, Dover 1973, Edwards 1977, Helm 2004, and Lawrence 2013 chaps. 4–5.

or harmony for the people in a city but rather only the importance of maintaining checks against the excesses of violence. Moreover, they have been acting as the protectors of all humanity and not for the benefit of any particular polis. The idea of one city flourishing through warfare is antithetical to the punishers of hubristic "killers of many" (*Ag.* 461–62).

Uniquely to the *Oresteia,* and a theme not discussed in political readings of the play, the Erinyes reveal their participation in a universal system of ethical punishment beyond life itself. After their pursuit of mortals in the world above, the Erinyes hand off the transgressors to Hades in the underworld (*Eum*. 267–75). This is one of the earliest examples of afterlife judgment for all humans in western literature.[113] They name Hades "the great assessor of mortals beneath the earth" (273–74). According to them, he records all mortal actions and punishes the same ethical and social violations that they pursue (270–71): "anyone . . . dishonoring either a god, or a guest-friend, or their dear parents." Further, naming Hades "the great assessor" of humankind (εὔθυνος, 273), alludes specifically to the *euthunia*, the Athenian scrutiny of individual officeholders (see p. 55 above).[114] Notably, however, Hades is never tied to any polis.[115] Athena installs the Erinyes in her city as guardians against negative forces "from below" (*Eum.* 1007–08), which implies that Hades remains a divine scrutinizer and chastiser of humans (see further Shilo 2022.176–212). Thus the separateness of the ethical law remains part of the *Oresteia*'s ending, but only as an undercurrent to the main theme of total civic unity.

The *Eumenides* unmistakably puts itself in dialogue with Athenian political thought in mythologizing the founding of the Areopagus Council and conjoining the Erinyes to it. Athena characterizes the Areopagus as a wise guide and enforcer of unity and correct action (681–708). In the process, she repeats the Erinyes' warning against anarchic or despotic rule (τὸ μήτ' ἄναρχον μήτε δεσποτούμενον, 696). Yet Athena deliberately makes

113 On the uniqueness of this passage in the context of earlier Greek afterlife ideas, see Shilo 2022.12–13; cf. Rohde 1925.238–39, North 1992, and Johnston 1999.11–12, 31–32, 98–99.

114 Bakewell 1997.298. Compare the *Persians*, where Zeus is a "harsh assessor" (εὔθυνος βαρύς, *Pers*. 827–28) and Xerxes, as king, is said to be not liable to similar scrutiny from his people (οὐχ ὑπεύθυνος, 213). The Danaids analogously call the king ἄκριτος, *Supp*. 371 (see above p. 50). Cf. Podlecki 1986.79 and 82, and Rosenbloom 2006.112.

115 Hades as a god of death and the afterlife lacks cult in Greek religion: *Il*. 9.158–59 and Aeschylus *Niobe* frag. 161. Cf. Pausanias 6.25.2; Sommerstein 2008c.168–69, Rohde 1925.183–84, and Burkert 1985.196–96, 200–01.

this new system apply only to Athens so that her polis can outrival the rest of humanity (ἔχοιτ' ἂν οἷον οὔτις ἀνθρώπων ἔχει, 702). In discussing the Areopagus in the play, scholars mostly focus on the contemporary Athenian conflict between aristocrats and the demos for political supremacy, as well as on the legitimacy of civic punishment.[116] Our analysis of the Erinyes enables a different interpretation of the institutional role of the Areopagus. The Erinyes may serve as exemplars of a separation of powers, first under the old law—by contrast to the Olympians—then under the new law—as analogues of those political institutions that act as checks and balances on each other. The Erinyes' previous and Hades' continuing separateness from the polis are hitherto unrecognized aspects of the polytheistic political thought of the *Oresteia*. Since their divine law focuses on personal transgressions without political considerations, they instantiate another idea of justice—a far more universal one. Polytheism as an irreconcilable diversity of values, along with the critique of the destructiveness of war, provides the structural framework within the trilogy for checks against political-theological state violence.

CONCLUSION

The *Oresteia*'s ending presents a comprehensive challenge to the democratic ideas and practices of Athens. Even at a high point of early democracy, the *Eumenides* prescribes loving with common purpose and hating with one heart as a panacea. This dual policy is not to be confused with a simple advocacy of the trial's voting and reconciliation procedures; it is an unanticipated turn *away* from such a model. Despite being performed in front of the citizen voters, the final scenes of the *Eumenides* do not mention the assembly nor return to voting, but rather counsel unanimity and repeatedly tie civic prosperity to military victory. This version of an ideal Athens is not merely a reflection of an Athenian self-perception, it contrasts with other *poleis* in Aeschylus, and it even reverses the peace sought in other sets of blessings. The ideal in the *Eumenides* obviates the messiness of the uncontrollable and shifting pluralities and disagreements experienced in democratic politics. It demonstrates precisely how captivating such promises of a universal solution to internal conflict can be. Assenting to the

116 For some of the discussions of Aeschylus's possible position on the Areopagus reforms, see Dover 1957.236–37, Dodds 1960.25, Bowie 1993, and Sommerstein 2010a.286–89. On the *Oresteia*'s use of the Areopagus to legitimize civic punishment, see Allen 2000.20–21.

final vision of a unanimous Athens supported by a unified divine appears indisputably preferable to worrying about the contingencies of history and about the power of other peoples—preferable for the Athenians at least. The blessings restrict true flourishing to one polis.

The problematics of the *Eumenides*' ideal are manifold. Scholars have pointed out the trilogy's earlier subversion of the terms "victory" and "profit," and have claimed that the ending is entirely violent, tyrannical, or completely undercut by the quandaries of Orestes' trial. However, these aspects of the ending only magnify its theoretical challenge, since the divine blessings for Athens are presented as completely positive. They purify words that were sullied, seemingly erase the trial's divisions, and advocate conquest despite the genocidal Trojan War and its violent aftermath.

What could responsibly replace such a vision of jingoistic unanimity? The critics of political-theological violence have proven unable to propose a structured alternative. Arendt, rejecting the homogenizing unity demanded by the political theories she analyzes, both looks back to classical thought and appeals to the plurality of individuals. She proffers natality (the ability to birth new projects, which she likens to a miracle), friendship, and free discourse as solutions, but does not indicate how these would be instituted (Arendt 2005.38–39.111–15, 123–26, and 201–04; cf. Canovan 1985). Agamben rejects any return to those classical political categories of value, such as virtue, championed openly by Leo Strauss and indirectly in Arendt's solutions (1998.187–89). According to him, political violence is now so momentous, pervasive, and permanent ("*the state of exception is the rule*," 2000.112, italics original), that he gives up on internal structural constraints and even on the state itself. His answer is to have a politics of "pure means," which does not aim at any goal.[117] He offers a "*nonstatal and nonjuridical* politics and human life" (2000.111, italics original).[118]

Mbembe, likewise, links the singular conception of sovereignty that instrumentalizes human life and death to the eradication of human plurality (2019.68–74). Critiquing the practices of violence that emerge not only from totalitarian regimes but also from normative theories of democracy, he, too, denies the possibility of a self-limiting sovereignty (67–68).

---

117 "Politics is the sphere neither of an end in itself nor of means subordinated to an end; rather, it is the sphere of a pure mediality without end intended as the field of human action and of human thought," Agamben 2000.117.

118 For a contextualization and critique of Agamben's suggestions for a future politics, see Passavant 2007.

In its place, he conceives of an "ethics of the passerby" or the politics of the stranger: an encouragement of crossing borders, of humans recognized by each other, and thus of the non-utilitarian relation of the state to individuals and groups (184–89). Mbembe proposes continual critical thinking about the colonial past, the devastating present, and the future "new community" that could overcome them (189). Each of these theorists urges a reconsideration of modern political paradigms that were inherited indirectly from the vocabulary and ideas of democratic Athens and republican Rome.[119] Yet in none of their examinations of the past is there any meaningful engagement with the political aspects of polytheism. This results in missing the potential of transforming the plural values they praise into structural checks and balances, as Marquard suggests.

We have seen that the *Oresteia*'s ending rejects many aspects of plurality: the heterogeneity of values of Greek religion, the multiplicity of human associations, and the equal humanity of non-Athenians. It does not offer a politics without ends, since the flourishing of Athens is the *telos* for which internal control and external violence are the means. Nor does its vision of the polis allow for a radical politics of the stranger, except those subordinated to Athens, as Orestes and the Erinyes are. The price of its demanded unanimity is stifled dissent in Athens and unlimited warfare.

Yet the trilogy does contain an inbuilt *structural* critique of its own vision for Athens. The *Oresteia*'s counter-positions emerge through its representation 1) of the family as a source of values alongside political ones, 2) of voting as division, and 3) of the irreconcilable multiplicity inherent in the polytheistic oversight of human actions. Only when contrasted with its final ideal Athens do these counter-positions open up a new set of questions. We can thus re-examine from unfamiliar directions Athenian society's religious and political plurality. As we have touched on here, polytheistic ideas and practices in Athens make clear the motley identities and values of its residents. Athens contained divergent and polymorphic religious associations—as did other *poleis*—along with its more particular and highly developed democratic structures that privileged public debate, voting, and mutually competing political institutions. Both the religious and the political institutions imply alternate values, any of which could become a source of checks on political overreach and violence. The

119 For some of the major differences between Athenian and modern democracy, see Hansen 1991 chap. 1 and Saxonhouse 1996.

meaning of these values, ideas, practices, and (especially) political structures is missed by a focus on the "singular sovereign" in current political theology debates. But by thinking through their analogues in the trilogy, we gain insights from a contemporary work of sophisticated, polysemic, and public art.

I thus offer the radical ideal of unanimity and the internal resistance to it as the *Oresteia*'s dual political-theological provocations to democratic thought. They demand a return to studying the interplay between the need for unity and the demands of plurality in ancient democracy. This entails continuing to distinguish more precisely the role of the multiplicity of values in early Athenian democratic thought, structures, and practices, taking into account its religious context. The difficulty of investigating such multifariousness intimates why a *polytheistic* political theology has gone nearly untheorized. As we re-examine these themes in the trilogy and in Athens, we may also reconsider their ramifications for modern ideas about democracy, which is the trilogy's third challenge—to us.

University of California, Santa Barbara

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Agamben, Giorgio. 1998. *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford.

———. 2000. *Means without End: Notes on Politics* (trans. V. Binetti and C. Casarino). Minneapolis.

———. 2005. *State of Exception*. Chicago.

Allen, Danielle S. 2000. *The World of Prometheus: The Politics of Punishing in Democratic Athens*. Princeton.

Annas, Julia. 1992. "Ancient Ethics and Modern Morality," *Philosophical Perspectives* 6.119–36.

Arendt, Hannah. 2005. *The Promise of Politics*. New York.

Arrington, N. T. 2010. "Topographic Semantics: The Location of the Athenian Public Cemetery and its Significance for the Nascent Democracy," *Hesperia* 79.499–539.

Assmann, Jan. 2000. *Herrschaft und Heil: Politische Theologie in Altägypten, Israel, und Europa*. Munich.

———. 2009. *The Price of Monotheism* (trans. R. Savage). Stanford.

Atkison, Larissa, and Ryan K. Balot. 2018. "Political Theory in Aeschylean Drama: Ancient Themes and their Contemporary Reception," in

Brill's Companion to the Reception of Aeschylus, ed. R. F. Kennedy. Leiden. 603–24.

Bacon, Helen H. 2001. "The Furies' Homecoming," *CP* 96.1.48–59.

Bakewell, Geoffrey W. 1997. "*Eumenides* 267–75: μέγας Ἅιδης εὔθυνος," *CQ* 47.1.298–99.

Bees, Robert. 2009. *Aischylos: Interpretationen zum Verständnis seiner Theologie*. Munich.

Berlin, Isaiah. 1958. *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Oxford.

Bernabé, Alberto, and Ana Isabel Jiménez San Cristóbal. 2008. *Instructions for the Netherworld: The Orphic Gold Tablets*. Leiden.

Bettini, Maurizio. 2016. *Éloge du polythéisme: ce que peuvent nous apprendre les religions antiques* (trans. V. Pirenne-Delforge). Paris.

Bowen, A. J. (ed.) 2013. *Aeschylus:* Suppliant Women. Oxford.

Bowie, A. M. 1993. "Religion and Politics in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*," *CQ* 43.1.10–31.

Brault, Pascale-Anne. 2009. "Playing the Cassandra: Prophecies of the Feminine in the *Polis* and Beyond," in *Bound by the City: Greek Tragedy, Sexual Difference, and the Formation of the Polis*, eds. D. E. McCoskey and E. Zakin. Albany. 197–220.

Bremmer, Jan N. 2002. *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife*. London.

Brown, A. L. 1983. "The Erinyes in the *Oresteia:* Real Life, the Supernatural, and the Stage," *JHS* 103.13–34.

———. 1984. "Eumenides in Greek Tragedy," *CQ* 34.2.260–81.

———. 2018. *Aeschylus:* Libation Bearers. Liverpool.

Burkert, Walter. 1985. *Greek Religion*. Cambridge, Mass.

Buxton, R. G. A. 1982. *Persuasion in Greek Tragedy: A Study of* Peitho. Cambridge.

Canevaro, Mirko. 2018. "Majority Rule vs Consensus: Democratic Deliberation in the Greek *Poleis*," in *Ancient Greek History and Contemporary Social Science*, eds. M. Canevaro, A. Erskine, B. Gray, and J. Ober. Edinburgh. 101–56.

Canovan, Margaret. 1985. "Politics as Culture: Hannah Arendt and the Public Realm," *History of Political Thought* 6.3.617–42.

Carter, D. M. 2007. *The Politics of Greek Tragedy*. Exeter.

Cartledge, Paul. 2016. *Democracy: A Life*. New York.

Chantraine, Pierre. 1968–1980. *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue Grecque*. Paris.

Chiasson, Charles C. 1999. "Σωφρονοῦντες ἐν χρόνωι: The Athenians and Time in Aeschylus's *Eumenides*," *CJ* 95.2.139–61.

Chowdhury, Arjun, and Raymond Duvall. 2014. "Sovereignty and Sovereign Power," *International Theory* 6.2.191–223.

Clairmont, Christoph W. 1983. *Patrios Nomos: Public Burial in Athens During the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC.* Oxford.

Clay, Diskin. 1969. "Aeschylus's Trigeron Mythos," *Hermes* 97.1.1–9.

Cohen, David. 1986. "The Theodicy of Aeschylus: Justice and Tyranny in the *Oresteia*," *G&R* 33.2.129–41.

Conacher, D. J. 1987. *Aeschylus's* Oresteia: *A Literary Commentary*. Toronto.

Cozzo, Andrea. 1988. *Kerdos: semantica, ideologie e società nella Grecia antica*. Rome.

Daube, Benjamin. 1939. *Zu den Rechtsproblemen in Aischylos' Agamemnon*. Zürich.

Debnar, Paula. 2010. "The Sexual Status of Aeschylus's Cassandra," *CP* 105.2.129–45.

Demont, Paul. 2011. "De Carl Schmitt à Christian Meier: *Les Euménides* d'Eschyle et le concept de 'politique' ('*das Politische*')," *Philosophie Antique* 11.151–72.

Denniston, J. D., and Denys Lionel Page (eds.) 1957. *Agamemnon*. Oxford.

Detienne, Marcel. 1986. "Du Polythéisme en Général," *CP* 81.1.47–55.

———. 1999. "Experimenting in the Field of Polytheisms," *Arion* 7.1.127–59.

———. 2004. "The Gods of Politics in Early Greek Cities," *Arion* 12.2.49–66.

Dodds, E. R. 1960. "Morals and Politics in the *Oresteia*," *PCPS* 6.19–31.

Dover, K. J. 1957. "The Political Aspect of Aeschylus's *Eumenides*," *JHS* 77.230–37.

———. 1973. "Some Neglected Aspects of Agamemnon's Dilemma," *JHS* 93.58–69.

———. 1974. *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle*. Berkeley.

Doyle, Andrea. 2008. "Cassandra—Feminine Corrective in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*," *AClass* 51.57–75.

Dunn, Francis M. 1997. "Ends and Means in Euripides' *Heracles*," in *Classical Closure: Reading the End in Greek and Latin Literature*, eds. D. H. Roberts, F. M. Dunn, and D. Fowler. Princeton. 83–111.

Easterling, P. E. 1996. "Weeping, Witnessing, and the Tragic Audience: Response to Segal," in *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*, ed. M. S. Silk. Oxford. 173–82.

Edmonds, Radcliffe G. 2004. *Myths of the Underworld Journey: Plato, Aristophanes, and the "Orphic" Gold Tablets*. New York.

———. 2011. *The "Orphic" Gold Tablets and Greek Religion: Further Along the Path*. Cambridge.

Edwards, Mark W. 1977. "Agamemnon's Decision: Freedom and Folly in Aeschylus," *CSCA* 10.17–38.

Eidinow, Esther, Julia Kindt, and Robin Osborne (eds.) 2016. *Theologies of Ancient Greek Religion*. Cambridge.

Elmer, David F. 2013. *The Poetics of Consent: Collective Decision Making and the* Iliad. Baltimore.

Euben, J. Peter. 1982. "Justice and the *Oresteia*," *The American Political Science Review* 76.1.22–33.

———. 1986a. "The Battle of Salamis and the Origins of Political Theory," *Political Theory* 14.3.359–90.

———. (ed.) 1986b. *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory*. Berkeley.

Farrar, Cynthia. 2007. "Power to the People," in Raaflaub, Ober, and Wallace 2007.170–95.

Fischer, Ulrich. 1965. *Der Telosgedanke in den Dramen des Aischylos: Ende, Ziel, Erfüllung, Machtvollkommenheit*. Hildesheim.

Foley, Helene. 2001. *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. Princeton.

Fraenkel, Eduard (ed.) 1950. *Agamemnon*, 3 vols. Oxford.

Gagarin, Michael. 1976. *Æschylean Drama*. Berkeley.

Gagné, Renaud. 2013. *Ancestral Fault in Ancient Greece*. Cambridge.

Gantz, Timothy. 1982. "Inherited Guilt in Aischylos," *CJ* 78.1–23.

Garvie, A. F. (ed.) 1986. *Aeschylus:* Choephori. Oxford.

Geréby, György. 2008. "Political Theology versus Theological Politics: Erik Peterson and Carl Schmitt," *New German Critique* 105.7–33.

Goldhill, Simon. 1984a. *Language, Sexuality, Narrative: The* Oresteia. Cambridge.

———. 1984b. "Two Notes on τέλος and Related Words in the *Oresteia*," *JHS* 104.169–76.

———. 1986. *Reading Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge.

———. 1987. "The Great Dionysia and Civic Ideology," *JHS* 107.58–76.

———. 1988. "Battle Narrative and Politics in Aeschylus's *Persae*," *JHS* 108.189–93.

———. 1992[2]. *Aeschylus: The* Oresteia. Cambridge.

———. 2000. "Civic Ideology and the Problem of Difference: The Politics of Aeschylean Tragedy, Once Again," *JHS* 120.34–56.

———. 2016. "Polytheism and Tragedy," in Eidinow, Kindt, and Osborne 2016.153–75.

Graf, Fritz. 1993. "Dionysian and Orphic Eschatology," in *Masks of Dionysus*, eds. T. Carpenter and C. Faraone. Ithaca, N.Y. 239–58.

Graf, Fritz, and Sarah Iles Johnston. 2007. *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets*. London.

Grethlein, Jonas. 2013. "Choral Intertemporality in the *Oresteia*," in *Choral Mediations in Greek Tragedy*, eds. R. Gagné and M. G. Hopman. Cambridge. 78–99.

Griffin, Jasper. 1998. "The Social Function of Attic Tragedy," *CQ* 48.1.39–61.

Griffith, Mark. 1995. "Brilliant Dynasts: Power and Politics in the *Oresteia*," *CA* 14.1.62–129.

Grube, G. M. A. 1970. "Zeus in Aeschylus," *AJP* 9.1.43–51.

Hall, Edith. 1997. "The Sociology of Athenian Tragedy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P. E. Easterling. Cambridge. 93–126.

Hammond, N. G. L. 1965. "Personal Freedom and its Limitations in the *Oresteia*," *JHS* 85.42–55.

Hansen, Mogens Herman. 1991. *The Athenian Democracy in the Age of Demosthenes: Structure, Principles, and Ideology* (trans. J. A. Crook). Oxford.

———. 2010. "The Concepts of *Demos*, *Ekklesia*, and *Dikasterion* in Classical Athens," *GRBS* 50.499–536.

Helm, James J. 2004. "Aeschylus's Genealogy of Morals," *TAPA* 134.1.23–54.

Hollerich, Michael. 2004. "Carl Schmitt," in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, eds. P. Scott and W. T. Cavanaugh. Malden. 107–22.

Hunt, Peter. 2011. "Slaves in Greek Literary Culture," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery, Vol. 1: The Ancient Mediterranean World*, eds. K. Bradley and P. Cartledge. Cambridge. 22–47.

Johnston, Sarah Iles. 1999. *Restless Dead: Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece*. Berkeley.

Judet de La Combe, Pierre. 2001. *L'Agamemnon d'Eschyle: commentaire des dialogues*, 2 vols. Paris.

Kahn, Paul W. 2011. *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. New York.

Kantorowicz, Ernst Hartwig. 1957. *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology*. Princeton.

Katz, Marilyn. 2004. "Women and Democracy in Ancient Greece," in *Ancient Greek Democracy: Readings and Sources*, ed. E. W. Robinson. Malden. 292–311.

Kessler, Michael Jon (ed.) 2013. *Polilitical Theology for a Plural Age*. New York.

Kindt, Julia. 2009. "Polis Religion: A Critical Appreciation," *Kernos* 22.9–34.

———. 2016. "The Story of Theology and the Theology of the Story," in Eidinow, Kindt, and Osborne 2016.12–34.

Kitto, H. D. F. 1961[3]. *Greek Tragedy: A Literary Study*. London.

Konstan, David. 2021. "Motivations and Justifications of Genocide," in *A Cultural History of Genocide in the Ancient World (800 BC–AD 800)*, ed. T. Taylor. London. 51–71.

Kurke, Leslie. 2013. "Pindar's *Pythian* 11 and the *Oresteia:* Contestatory Ritual Poetics in the 5th c. BCE," *CA* 32.1.101–75.

Lapidot, Elad. 2020. "Schmitt's Warring Wars: On the Political Epistemology of Political Theology," *The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence* 4.1.37–53.

Lassman, Peter. 2004. "Political Theory in an Age of Disenchantment: The Problem of Value Pluralism: Weber, Berlin, Rawls," *Max Weber Studies* 4.2.253–71.

Lawrence, Stuart. 2013. *Moral Awareness in Greek Tragedy*. Oxford.

Lebeck, Anne. 1971. *The* Oresteia: *A Study in Language and Structure*. Washington.

Lesky, Albin. 1966. "Decision and Responsibility in the Tragedy of Aeschylus," *JHS* 86.78–85.

Lewis, John. 2006. *Solon the Thinker: Political Thought in Archaic Athens*. London.

Lilla, Mark. 2007. *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*. New York.

Linforth, Ivan M. 1973. *The Arts of Orpheus*. New York.

Lloyd-Jones, Hugh. 1956. "Zeus in Aeschylus," *JHS* 76.55–67.

———. 1962. "The Guilt of Agamemnon," *CQ* 12.2.187–99.

———. 1971. *The Justice of Zeus*. Berkeley.

Longo, Oddone. 1990. "The Theater of the *Polis*," in Winkler and Zeitlin 1990.12–19.

Loraux, Nicole. 1986. *The Invention of Athens: The Funeral Oration in the Classical City*. Cambridge, Mass.

MacLeod, C. W. 1982. "Politics and the *Oresteia*," *JHS* 102.124–44.

Markovits, Elizabeth. 2009. "Birthrights: Freedom, Responsibility, and Democratic Comportment in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*," *The American Political Science Review* 103.3.427–41.

Marquard, Odo. 2017. "Éloge du polythéisme: monomythie et polymythie," *Archives de Philosophie* 80.3.505–26.

Mattingly, Harold B. 1997. "The Date and Purpose of the Pseudo-Xenophon *Constitution of Athens*," *CQ* 47.2.352–57.

Mbembe, Achille. 2019. *Necropolitics* (trans. L. Meintjes). Durham.

McClure, Laura. 1999. *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama*. Princeton.

Medda, Enrico (ed.) 2017. *Eschilo:* Agamennone, 3 vols. (Supplemento n. 31 al Bollettino dei Classici). Rome.

Meier, Christian. 1990. *The Greek Discovery of Politics*. Cambridge, Mass.

———. 1993. *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*. Baltimore.

Meier, Heinrich. 1998. *The Lesson of Carl Schmitt* (trans. M. Brainard). Chicago.

Meinel, Fabian. 2015. *Pollution and Crisis in Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge.

Meyer, Elizabeth. 1993. "Epitaphs and Citizenship in Classical Athens," *JHS* 113.99–121.

Mirto, Maria Serena. 2012. *Death in the Greek World: From Homer to the Classical Age*. Norman.

Mitchell, Lynette G., and P. J. Rhodes. 1996. "Friends and Enemies in Athenian Politics," *G&R* 43.1.11–30.

Mitchell-Boyask, Robin. 2006. "The Marriage of Cassandra and the *Oresteia:* Text, Image, Performance," *TAPA* 136.2.269–97.

Morris, Ian. 1992. *Death-Ritual and Social Structure in Classical Antiquity*. Cambridge.

Nakategawa, Yoshio. 1995. "Athenian Democracy and the Concept of Justice in Pseudo-Xenophon's 'Athenaion Politeia,'" *Hermes* 123.1.28–46.

Neuburg, Matt. 1991. "Clytemnestra and the Alastor (Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 1497ff)," *QUCC* 38.2.37–68.

Nooter, Sarah. 2017. *The Mortal Voice in the Tragedies of Aeschylus*. Cambridge.

North, Helen F. 1992. "Death and Afterlife in Greek Tragedy and Plato," in *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*, ed. H. Obayashi. New York. 49–64.

Ober, Josiah. 1989. *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens: Rhetoric, Ideology, and the Power of the People*. Princeton.

———. 2015. *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece*. Princeton.

Ober, Josiah, and Barry Strauss. 1990. "Drama, Political Rhetoric, and the Discourse of Athenian Democracy," in Winkler and Zeitlin 1990.237–70.

O'Neil, James L. 1995. *The Origins and Development of Ancient Greek Democracy*. Lanham.

Osborne, Robin. 2004. "The Economics and Politics of Slavery in Athens," in *Ancient Greek Democracy: Readings and Sources*, ed. E. W. Robinson. Malden. 265–81.

———. 2013. "Democracy and Religion in Classical Greece," in *The Greek Polis and the Invention of Democracy: A Politico-Cultural Transformation and its Interpretations*, eds. J. P. Arnason, K. A. Raaflaub, and P. Wagner. Malden. 275–97.

Parker, Robert. 2005a. "Law and Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Greek Law*, eds. M. Gagarin and D. Cohen. Cambridge. 61–81.

———. 2005b. *Polytheism and Society at Athens*. Oxford.

———. 2009. "Aeschylus's Gods: Drama, Cult, Theology," in *Eschyle à l'aube du théâtre occidental*, eds. J. Jouanna and F. Montanari. Genève. 127–55.

Passavant, Paul A. 2007. "The Contradictory State of Giorgio Agamben," *Political Theory* 35.2.147–74.

Patterson, Orlando. 1991. *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*. New York.

Pelling, Christopher (ed.) 1997. *Greek Tragedy and the Historian*. Oxford.

Philpott, Daniel. 2021. "*Sovereignty*" (Fall 2020). The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2020 [accessed 11/08 2021]. Available from https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/sovereignty/.

Podlecki, Anthony J. 1986. "Polis and Monarch in Early Attic Tragedy," in Euben 1986b.76–100.

Porter, David H. 2005. "Some Inversions not Righted: A Note on Aeschylus's *Eumenides*," *CJ* 101.1.1–10.

Porter, James. 1990. "Patterns of Perception in Aeschylus," in *The Cabinet of the Muses: Essays on Classical and Comparative Literature in Honor of Thomas G. Rosenmeyer*, eds. M. Griffith and D. J. Mastronarde. Atlanta. 31–56.

Pritchard, David M. 2010. "The Symbiosis Between Democracy and War: The Case of Ancient Athens," in *War, Democracy and Culture in Classical Athens*, ed. D. M. Pritchard. Cambridge. 1–62.

Raaflaub, Kurt. 2003. "Stick and Glue: The Function of Tyranny in Fifth-Century Athenian Democracy," in *Popular Tyranny: Sovereignty and its Discontents in Ancient Greece*, ed. K. A. Morgan. Austin. 59–93.

———. 2007. "The Breakthrough of *Demōkratia*," in Raaflaub, Ober, and Wallace 2007.105–54.

Raaflaub, Kurt A., J. Ober, and Robert W. Wallace (eds.) 2007. *Origins of Democracy in Ancient Greece*. Berkeley.

Raaflaub, Kurt A., and Robert W. Wallace. 2007. "'People's Power' and Egalitarian Trends in Archaic Greece," in Raaflaub, Ober, and Wallace 2007.22–48.

Rasch, William. 2004. *Sovereignty and its Discontents: On the Primacy of Conflict and the Structure of the Political*. London.
———. 2019. *Carl Schmitt: State and Society*. London.
Rohde, Erwin. 1925[8]. *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks* (trans. W. B. Hillis). London.
Roselli, David Kawalko. 2011. *Theater of the People: Spectators and Society in Ancient Athens*. Austin.
Rosenbloom, David. 2006. *Aeschylus:* Persians (ed. T. Harrison). London.
Rosenmeyer, Thomas G. 1982. *The Art of Aeschylus*. Berkeley.
Rynearson, Nicholas. 2013. "Courting the Erinyes: Persuasion, Sacrifice, and Seduction in Aeschylus's *Eumenides*," *TAPA* 143.1–22.
Saxonhouse, Arlene W. 1996. *Athenian Democracy: Modern Mythmakers and Ancient Theorists*. Notre Dame.
———. 2018. "'Save Our City': The Curious Absence of Aeschylus in Modern Political Thought," in *Brill's Companion to the Reception of Aeschylus*, ed. R. F. Kennedy. Leiden. 582–602.
Scapin, Nuria. 2020. *The Flower of Suffering: Theology, Justice, and the Cosmos in Aeschylus's* Oresteia *and Presocratic Thought*. Berlin.
Schein, Seth L. 1984. *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's* Iliad. Berkeley.
Schenker, David J. 1991. "A Study in Choral Character: Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 489–502," *TAPA* 121.63–73.
Schlatter, Emrys. 2018. *Der Tod auf der Bühne: Jenseitsmächte in der antiken Tragödie*. Berlin.
Schmitt, Carl. 1996. *The Concept of the Political* (trans. G. Schwab). Chicago.
———. 2005. *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*. Chicago.
———. 2008. *Political Theology II: The Myth of the Closure of Any Political Theology*. Cambridge.
———. 2014. *Dictatorship: From the Origin of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to Proletarian Class Struggle* (trans. M. Hoelzl and G. Ward). Cambridge.
Scodel, Ruth. 2006. "Social Memory in Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*," in *Orality, Literacy, Memory in the Ancient Greek and Roman World*, ed. E. A. Mackay. Leiden. 115–41.
Scott, Peter, and William T. Cavanaugh (eds.) 2004. *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*. Malden.
Seaford, Richard. 1987. "The Tragic Wedding," *JHS* 107.106–30.
———. 2003a. "Aeschylus and the Unity of Opposites," *JHS* 123.141–63.

———. 2003b. "Dionysos, Money, and Drama," *Arion* 11.2.1–19.
———. 2012. *Cosmology and the Polis*. Cambridge.
Segal, Charles. 1996. "Catharsis, Audience, and Closure in Greek Tragedy," in *Tragedy and the Tragic: Greek Theatre and Beyond*, ed. M. S. Silk. Oxford. 149–72.
Sewell-Rutter, N. J. 2007. *Guilt by Descent: Moral Inheritance and Decision Making in Greek Tragedy*. Oxford.
Shapiro, H. A. 1991. "The Iconography of Mourning in Athenian Art," *AJA* 95.4.629–56.
Shilo, Amit. 2018. "The Ghost of Clytemnestra in the *Eumenides:* Ethical Claims Beyond Human Limits," *AJP* 139.4.533–76.
———. 2022. *Beyond Death in the* Oresteia: *Poetics, Ethics, and Politics*. Cambridge.
Slater, William. 2007. "Deconstructing Festivals," in *The Greek Theatre and Festivals: Documentary Studies*. Oxford. 21–47.
Solmsen, Friedrich. 1947. "Strata of Greek Religion in Aeschylus," *HThR* 40.4.211–26.
———. 1995. *Hesiod and Aeschylus*. Ithaca, N.Y.
Sommerstein, Alan H. (ed.) 1989. *Aeschylus:* Eumenides. Cambridge.
———. 1997. "The Theatre Audience, the *Demos*, and the *Suppliants* of Aeschylus," in Pelling 1997.63–79.
———. (ed.) 2008a. *Aeschylus I:* Persians, Seven Against Thebes, The Suppliants, Prometheus Bound. Cambridge, Mass.
———. (ed.) 2008b. *Aeschylus II:* Oresteia: Agamemnon, Libation-Bearers, Eumenides. Cambridge, Mass.
———. (ed.) 2008c. *Aeschylus III: Fragments*. Cambridge, Mass.
———. 2010a[2]. *Aeschylean Tragedy*. London.
———. 2010b. "Orestes' Trial and Athenian Homicide Law," in *Law and Drama in Ancient Greece*, eds. E. M. Harris, D. F. Leão, and P. J. Rhodes. London. 25–38.
———. 2010c. "The Tangled Ways of Zeus," in *The Tangled Ways of Zeus and Other Studies in and around Greek Tragedy*, ed. A. H. Sommerstein. Oxford. 164–70.
Sourvinou-Inwood, Christiane. 2000a. "Further Aspects of *Polis* Religion," in *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, ed. R. G. A. Buxton. Oxford. 38–55.
———. 2000b. "What is *Polis* Religion?" in *Oxford Readings in Greek Religion*, ed. R. G. A. Buxton. Oxford. 13–37.
———. 2003. *Tragedy and Athenian Religion*. Lanham.

Strauss, Leo. 1996. "Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*," in *The Concept of the Political*, ed. G. Schwab. Chicago. 83–107.

Stuppenrich, Reinhard. 1994. "The Iconography of Athenian State Burials in the Classical Period," in *The Archaeology of Athens and Attica under the Democracy*, eds. W. D. E. Coulson, O. Palagia, T. L. Shear, Jr., H. A. Shapiro, and F. J. Frost. Oxford. 93–103.

Taplin, Oliver. 1977. *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy*. Oxford.

Thalmann, William G. 1985. "Speech and Silence in the *Oresteia* 2," *Phoenix* 39.3.221–37.

Thomson, George. 1935. "Mystical Allusions in the *Oresteia*," *JHS* 55.20–34.

———. 1946[2]. *Aeschylus and Athens: A Study in the Social Origins of Drama*. London.

Tierney, Michael. 1937. "The Mysteries and the *Oresteia*," *JHS* 57.11–21.

Turner, Chad. 2001. "Perverted Supplication and Other Inversions in Aeschylus's Danaid Trilogy," *CJ* 97.1.27–50.

Vellacott, Philip. 1977. "Has Good Prevailed? A Further Study of the *Oresteia*," *HSPh* 81.113–22.

———. 1984. "Aeschylus's Orestes," *CW* 77.3.145–57.

Vernant, Jean-Pierre (ed.) 1968. *Problèmes de la guerre en Grèce ancienne*. Paris.

———. 1996. *Entre mythe et politique*, 2 vols. Paris.

Vidal-Naquet, Pierre. 1968. "La tradition de l'hoplite athénien," in Vernant 1968.161–82.

Wallace, Robert W. 2007. "Revolutions and a New Order in Solonian Athens and Archaic Greece," in Raaflaub, Ober, and Wallace 2007.49–82.

West, M. L. 1983. *The Orphic Poems*. Oxford.

———. 1990. *Studies in Aeschylus*. Stuttgart.

Wilson, Peter. 1997. "Leading the Tragic *Khoros:* Tragic Prestige in the Democratic City," in Pelling 1997.81–108.

Winkler, John, and Froma Zeitlin (eds.) 1990. *Nothing to do with Dionysos? Athenian Drama in its Social Context*. Princeton.

Winnington-Ingram, R. P. 1948. "Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena," *JHS* 68.130–47.

———. 1983. *Studies in Aeschylus*. Cambridge.

Wohl, Victoria. 1998. *Intimate Commerce: Exchange, Gender, and Subjectivity in Greek Tragedy*. Austin.

Zeitlin, Froma. 1965. "The Motif of the Corrupted Sacrifice in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*," *TAPA* 96.463–508.

———. 1966. "Postscript to Sacrificial Imagery in the *Oresteia* (*Ag*. 1235–37)," *TAPA* 97.645–53.

———. 1978. "The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in the *Oresteia*," *Arethusa* 11.149–84.

———. 1990. "Thebes: Theater of Self and Society in Athenian Drama," in Winkler and Zeitlin 1990.130–67.

Zelnik-Abramovitz, Rachel. 2011. "The Guardian of the Land: The Areopagus Council as a Symbol of Stability," in *Stability and Crisis in the Athenian Democracy*, ed. G. Herman. Stuttgart. 103–26.