

# Taming the Gods: the Demise of the Epic Age as Constructive Process in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*

Jingyi Liu

Wellesley College, Massachusetts, 02481, US

**Abstract.** Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, following the Trojan War's aftermath among the Atreids, chronicles the last moments of the age of heroes. In its denouement, Orestes, instead of receiving absolution from his patron-god Apollo – as he did in the mythical tradition, is tried by his fellow mortals in Athens. Throughout the trilogy, a gradual but seismic shift occurs along three related parameters: humanity's relationship to the divine, conceptions of justice (Δίκη), and the structure of the polis. The three plays, which correspond to the three libations, each represent a stage in this progression, ultimately spelling the end of the epic world. Ultimately, the justice of the Olympians, incapable of taming either divine nor mortal enmities, gives way to the institutionalised justice of the republic. The aristocratic oikos, accordingly, is supplanted by the democratic polis. Finally, divinity – embodied in the Erinyes-Eumenides – is tamed by the ascendant polis. At the end of *Eumenides*, the gods are no longer "Olympian Zeus and the Olympians", dictating human life as "unignorable potentates" on high, but pragmatic benefactors defined in relation to humanity, i.e. Zeus the Saviour, providing peace and prosperity in return for worship.

**Keywords:** polis; oikos; democracy; religion and politics in Greek tragedy.

## 1. Introduction

Aeschylus' *Oresteia* begins in the aftermath of the Trojan War, depicting the end of the heroic age celebrated in the epics. Notably, the third play *Eumenides* breaks away from the mythical tradition: instead of having Orestes absolved by his patron-god Apollo, Aeschylus brings him to Athens to be tried in court by his fellow mortals. This paper will argue that the trilogy chronicles a gradual but seismic shift along three related parameters: humanity's relationship to the divine, conceptions of justice (Δίκη), and the structure of the polis. The three plays, which correspond to the three libations, each represent a stage in this progression, which ultimately ushers in the demise of the epic world.

Ostensibly, this marks the birth of a new order, free from the recursive violence wrathful gods and heroes were wont to leave in their wake. Yet, tensions continue to strain a precarious new equilibrium. Not only do older impulses of lineage endure, the closing lines hint at conflicts to come in a "Hellenosphere" newly welded together by the traumas and triumphs of the Trojan War, instigated by Athens' imperial ambitions.

## 2. Agamemnon: Olympian Zeus and the Olympians

### 2.1 Despotic Divinity: the Inverted Rituals of Agamemnon

While Athena and Apollo figure prominently in the latter plays, in *Agamemnon* it is Artemis who looms over the action. Her demand for Iphigenia's life incites Clytemnestra's revenge, setting the entire trilogy into motion. While the former deities are associated with aspects of human civilisation such as divination, the arts and warfare, Artemis, goddess of the wilderness, represents a different conception of divinity. Identified with powerful natural forces beyond human control – "gale winds", "ferocious lions", "all beasts grazing the fields" – she harkens back to the Protean deities of archaic religion.

In *Agamemnon*, humanity is entirely at the mercy of nature and the gods that govern it. The guard's opening lines set the scene, imploring the "stars/unignorable potentates/that bring down... [summer and now the winter] ... eternal". Likewise, the chorus invokes the non-Olympian Pan as a "great god" alongside Apollo and Zeus. Finally it is revealed that even the great king Menelaus is

lost, tossed about on the high seas. It is little wonder, then, that Artemis the nature-goddess, as well as divinity in general, is looked upon with awe and terror.

Beautiful as you are, and kind to...  
all beasts grazing the fields,  
... blessed Apollo, Healer, keep her from sending  
gale winds against the ships,  
holding them fast and long at anchor, exacting  
cold, mute sacrifice

Humanity, subject to the gods' whims, can only comply and hope for the best. The capricious nature of divine grace is further revealed through two inverted rituals, in which Artemis and Apollo are shown wilfully abandoning their traditional benevolent roles. The first is Iphigenia's death, which features a complete reversal of Artemis' role as goddess of childbirth. Instead of helping a mother deliver her infant, Artemis forces a father to kill a daughter on the cusp of adulthood. This timing also subverts another of Artemis' benign aspects: her patronage over young women's coming-of age rites. According to epic tradition, Iphigenia had been lured to Aulis with the promise of marriage to Achilles. In many surviving descriptions, such as Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, she is led to the sacrificial altar dressed as a bride. (Carus) In other words, Artemis reclaims Iphigenia at the very moment when the young princess would have exited her domain, that is, virginity. Contrary to her usual role – facilitating progression into womanhood – Artemis has Iphigenia's life-cycle forcibly arrested: the *gyne*-to-be is violently frozen in time at the last moment of girlhood, as she eagerly awaits a marriage that is never to be. A reverse Hippolytus, Iphigenia is sacrificed to the virgin-goddess just as she prepares to leave her behind.

The second inverted ritual is the death of Cassandra. Here, Apollo's forsaking of his office is explicit in Cassandra's lament that "the prophet has destroyed his prophetess". The god's negligence has not merely doomed the prophetess, but distorted the art of prophecy itself. Ironically, the chorus recognises Cassandra's oracular powers when it hears her *recount the past* of the house of Atreus, the exact opposite of divination. Yet, when she abandons her seeress' riddle-speak and tells explicitly of the future, Apollo's curse falls upon her listeners. The chorus, despite its prior suspicions regarding Clytemnestra, alternates between befuddlement – "I don't see the device of the designer" – and wishful thinking – "No, if it's meant to be—but may it not", refusing to heed the prophecy until it is too late. When Cassandra adds, ominously, that "there is no healing for these words", echoing the Chorus' prior invocations of "Apollo, Healer", she casts doubt on yet another facet of the god's beneficence. This series of inversions culminates a final, bloody upending: the priestess who was wont to receive sacrifices is sacrificed herself, slaughtered like an animal at the altar, after praying "to the sun's last shining" for vengeance.

What we are left with is a despotic mode of divinity, that is, "Olympian Zeus and the Olympians": gods secure in their power on high, reigning supreme over both nature and the human life-cycle. Accordingly, justice in *Agamemnon* stems from divine mandate. The chorus calls Troy's destruction just because the gods have willed it and responds to Cassandra's dark predictions with a resigned "not if it's meant to be". That is, while the Argives wish Agamemnon well and recoil from Clytemnestra with horror, the former will not be aided if he has been marked for death by the gods. Zeus the Saviour is invoked as the ultimate guarantor who will hopefully "let the good prevail". Yet, throughout the trilogy, he is little more than a distant presence. Meanwhile, his fellow Olympians, rather than answering their followers' prayers, add fuel to the Atreids' internecine blood-feud, painting a fundamentally ambivalent picture of divine justice.

## 2.2 Cloth, Hubris and "Oriental" Despotism

And yet, this seemingly unsurpassable divide between divine and mortal is gradually subverted as the action unfolds, with broad-ranging implications for both the polis and the legitimacy of divine justice. This tension can already be seen in the description of Iphigenia's death.

with pitiful *arrows* from her eyes  
she shot each sacrificer... for often  
the girl had sung...with the pure voice of a *virgin*,

at the third libation... for *healing luck*. (italics mine)

Note the italics. In these details, which have no precedent in the epics, Iphigenia acquires Artemis' own attributes – arrows, virginity, healing powers – at the moment of her sacrifice. Divine and mortal, goddess and victim are conflated. This blurring of the lines finally culminates with Agamemnon's hubristic trampling of the purple cloth. Unsurprisingly for an Athenian playwright, Aeschylus' portrayal of this act of hubris also functions as a condemnation of 'oriental' despotism. (Mueller) While Agamemnon initially objects to Clytemnestra's staged obsequies, bidding her to "revere [him] like a man, not like a god", she finally convinces him with "And if Priam had crushed you, what would he have done?". The Greek victor is successfully goaded into mimicking the oriental despot's hypothetical behaviour, symbolically refusing to even tread the same soil as his subjects. Finally, when his lifeless body is rolled onstage in a bathtub of solid silver, strangled in sumptuous cloth, the scene seems deliberately staged to scandalise Athenian spectators. Had Agamemnon been an Athenian nobleman, looking on from the front rows at the Dionysia, this flagrant luxury would certainly have purchased for him his fellow citizens' wrath.

However, the leitmotif of cloth and hubris appears long before Agamemnon enters the scene. Further, the symbolic transgression does not merely indict the overstepping mortal – it compromises the sanctity of the gods themselves.

... at last it plunged all the way  
to Arachne's peak, the watch nearest the city.  
From there it swooped down on the royal house,  
this flame descendent of the fire of Ida.

While the rest of the relay points are merely listed, Arachne's peak receives additional emphasis. This location, named after the mortal weaver who bested Athena by composing tapestries depicting Olympian transgressions, is singled out as the ominous fire's final conduit. Although it is unclear which version of Arachne's myth Aeschylus may have known, the allusion is arguably reprised when Agamemnon realises, moments before his death, that he is ensnared in a "*spider's web*".

Indeed, Arachne's act of textile-mediated hubris sheds light on Agamemnon's. As with her accusatory tapestry, his gravest transgression is not merely overachievement, but rather *holding up a mirror* to the conduct of the gods. From the onset, Agamemnon, "lighting up the darkness", is likened to Apollo. While this was expected behaviour for a victor, even his seizing of Cassandra as his "spear-bride" parallels Apollo's own role in the prophetess' ruin. Further, Agamemnon's razing of Troy – the transgression which marked him as *dike's* next victim – is enacted with the "just spade of Zeus", that is, willed by the gods themselves. Indeed, "the seed is dying out from all [of Troy]", implies that forces greater than human are at play. This line of reasoning illuminates the common thread uniting the Atreids' transgressions throughout the trilogy, from Iphigenia's sacrifice to Orestes' matricide. While the deed itself always requires human agency, behind every step lurks a mandate from 'Olympian Zeus and the Olympians'. Agamemnon's excesses are exact replicas of the excesses of the gods themselves.

His downfall and demise thus casts both sources of justice – worldly power and divine authority – into doubt. Both human and divine are dangerously prone to excess, incapable of negotiating the fine line between justice and overstepping.

Returning to the theme of justice, Δίκη is linked via wordplay with another of the trilogy's recurring motifs – δίχτυ, the hunting-net. This is rendered most explicitly in Clytemnestra's line "now that I've caught/him here in the net that Justice spreads". The *dike* of the gods appears as a cosmic net in which mortals are inevitably caught like prey. Although the city's fall was willed by the Olympians themselves, the net of destruction cast over Troy morphs into the fatal net ensnaring Agamemnon – "his body... more net than body, pierced with so many holes". (Burian and Shapiro, 2011) In turn, Agamemnon's children return as "corks that buoy [his] net up", this time rigged to bring down Clytemnestra, as Apollo commands. And yet again, this commanded matricide incenses the Erinyes. The justice of the Olympians, then, is a recursive cycle in which mortals are inevitably trapped, with each initially justified or justifiable act of vengeance, demanded by *dike*, begetting yet more retribution.

### 3. Heroes: Remnants of the Epic Age in Libation Bearers

*Libation Bearers* opens with Orestes' invocation to "Hermes of the dark earth, go-between/overseer of my father's power". The returning prince is, in some sense, not merely an avenger but a wraith from the underworld, his dead father's phantom returned. He reveals himself to the living through mourning rites – leaving his hair at Agamemnon's altar –, spreads rumors of his own death, and takes refuge in his parent's grave before emerging to kill their enemies.

This affinity with his dead forebears highlight a key aspect of Orestes' role: he embodies the traditional aristocratic ethos of lineage and personal valor. Blood and birthright ought to be defended, and with one's own hands – as opposed to, say, legal means. If *Agamemnon*'s framework is the justice of the Olympians, *Libation Bearers* observes the justice of the heroes: that is, the traditional Greek credo of doing good to one's friends and harm to one's enemies. (Foley) Like the heroes, Orestes is set apart from common mortals by his illustrious descent and divine patronage. His motives, likewise, resemble theirs: honor, revenge and the reclamation of patrimony through murder of usurpers are common themes in heroic myth.

Under this aristocratic-heroic paradigm, which was seen as (stereo)typical of Aeschylus – he appears in Aristophanes' *Frogs* as a raging, Achillean figure, focused on the aristocracy unlike "democratic" Euripides – the polis is irrelevant. (Aristophanes) Set in ancestral mausoleums and behind palace doors, bolstered by a chorus of household slaves and unfolding around a royal vendetta, *Libation Bearers* is neatly contained within the aristocratic *oikos*. Accordingly, Orestes is neither aided by nor beholden to any mortals except for his own kin, Agamemnon and Electra. As in heroic myth, civic communities are mere backdrops for great figures' exploits.

The heroic ethos of *Libation Bears* seems to entail a slight retreat of divinity as "great men" become the primary agents of justice. Where Artemis directly imposes her will by becalming Agamemnon's fleet, Apollo remains in the background, preferring to guide Orestes through oracles. Yet, the gods are still seen as the ultimate guarantors of justice, as evidenced by Orestes' belief that Apollo's authority sanctifies the otherwise abhorrent act of matricide. The justice of the heroic age is fundamentally akin to the justice of the Olympians, and that entails the same cyclicity. While Orestes does contemplate moderation, his final decision is made between his father's furies and his mothers': the impulses of lineage and kinship still predominate. As such, justice remains a matter of blood in both senses: because it is essentially subjective, based on personal allegiance, it continues to spawn the violent, interminable vendettas that dominate Greek tragedy. Ominously, the familial legacy Orestes upholds is likened to the fatal net of justice "For children keep a man's fame living on after he dies; like corks that buoy a net up".

Moreover, under this framework, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra could both be said to have acted justly. Aeschylus allows his antagonists to make fairly compelling appeals. Clytemnestra avenges her daughter's death, "I swear by Justice, completed for my child/by Ruin, by the blood-crazed Erinyes/to whom I sacrificed this man", a scene whose pathos is echoed earlier by the chorus: "and so he steeled himself into the sacrificer of his daughter... And all her prayers, her cries of Father/Father, even her girlhood, counted for less than nothing". Further on, Aegisthus' speech characterizes Agamemnon's death as justice for *his* father, Thyestes. The fundamental similarity between Orestes and Aegisthus is even more explicit in Euripides' *Electra*, where the former's killing of the latter, his usurper uncle, at a ram-sacrifice mirrors the latter's previous killing of Atreus, *his* fratricidal uncle, on behalf of *his* father, Thyestes. As the protagonist himself laments, every possible choice is a double bind, minting fresh injustices that threaten to unleash yet another cycle of retribution.

### 4. Zeus the Saviour: Towards a New Order?

*Eumenides* begins in the aftermath of the first two libations. Within the polis, the decline of the old aristocratic order is evident in *Agamemnon*'s most memorable image: the purple cloth strewn in the victor's path. Scholars have noted the significance of textiles in the *Oresteia* as embodiments of

the aristocratic *oikos*' wealth, luxury and despotic control over its domain's resources. (Mueller) Hence, the blood-hued cloth pouring from the skene, as if flowing out from an opened vein, signals a double bloodletting: the royal house is cut down through loss of wealth as well as members. With Orestes – the house's last champion – exiled, Homeric-age heroism alone can no longer redeem the house. This demise of the old world makes way for a new schema of justice, with implications for the role of divinity, the polis, as well as the dynamics of the wider Greek world. These developments are expressed in *Eumenides*' setting, staging, and denouement.

#### 4.1 From the Pythian to Pallas: New Scripts of Divinity

First, the setting of *Eumenides* represents a break with the preceding two plays. The physical movement from the enclosed *oikos* and the Delphian temple – site of religious mystery and the cryptic prophecies that presided over *Libation Bearers* – to the law court signals an ideological transition: justice has become a matter of politics rather than piety. Indeed, in this last play the abstract sense of *dike* – a cosmic balance upheld by the gods, akin to the ancient Egyptian *ma'at* – has been replaced by the mundane definition: a civic trial. That is, a dilemma with a pragmatic, “secular” solution. While the choruses and characters of the first two plays frequently appeal to abstract, universal *dike*, such invocations are much less common in *Eumenides*, only reappearing in the Erinyes' choral lyrics.

Previously, the Olympians, notably Zeus “the third, fulfiller” and Apollo – “Healer, keep her from sending gale winds against the ships” – were often invoked as protectors and restorers of justice. The Furies, meanwhile, are seen as bringers of chaos, regarded with terror even by Clytemnestra, who seeks to placate and send away the “triple-glutted... spirits” haunting Atreus' house. The opening scene questions the Olympians' ability to restore *dike* via undermining this binary. Shortly after the Pythia's serene exposition, the Erinyes burst in, shattering the solemn order of Apollo's temple. This encroachment on the shrine's physical boundaries compromises the boundaries between the Olympians and the elder gods. Just a moment ago, the Pythia – an ironic echo for the audience, who had just ‘seen’ Cassandra slaughtered offstage – had identified Apollo as the heir of Titanesses, who like the Erinyes are daughters of Earth. Further, the Erinyes themselves refer to Apollo as Leto's child, adding another layer of tension to his dismissal of maternity throughout the play. If the Atreids cannot outrun the legacy of their cannibal ancestors, then Apollo himself, as well as the fellow Olympians he defends as bringers of order and life (“the solemn vows of Hera, the fulfiller/and of Zeus; and Aphrodite”) are also uncomfortably close to the elder gods whom he accuses of fomenting strife and death – “heads lopped off/in retribution, eyes gouged out, throats slashed”. Although they seem diametrically opposed, the boundaries between the matrilineal-chthonic Erinyes and patrilineal-celestial Olympians are not as clear-cut as the latter insists. No wonder then, that the Olympians cannot resolve the bloody conflicts of the older gods who represent visceral, prerational forces. They are akin to one another, cut from the same mould.

Indeed, as the scene proceeds, Apollo betrays his fundamental similarity to the Erinyes, namely his equal capacity for, as it were, *fury*. Besides vituperating the elder goddesses as “blood-befouled” horrors, he emphasises that they have “no rights here, no business in [his] house”. This keenness to assert control over his domain not only mirrors the goddess' defense of their ancient rights, it also recalls his twin's demand for “cold, mute sacrifice” as retribution for the slaughter of her animals. Orestes, the mortal, is caught in the crossfire between these contending gods. By displaying the gods' inability to resolve their own conflicts, this opening indicates that neither Titan or Olympian alone can restore stability to the world below.

Hence, *Agamemnon* and *Eumenides* reveal the fallibility of *dike*'s stewards, whether temporal or divine. Justice, then, can no longer be entrusted to a single entity. This necessitates a new role, ultimately fulfilled by Athena: divinity as mediator. As a female born of the male and an Olympian after the older pattern of powerful virgin goddesses, she sits astride the binaries she is to reconcile. But lastly and most importantly, the Athena of *Eumenides* is a mediator between humanity and the gods. (Burian and Shapiro, 2011) This completes the progression in conceptions of divinity seen

throughout the *Oresteia*. First comes Artemis in *Agamemnon*, goddess of primeval natural forces, indifferent towards humanity, in whose eyes a princess-sacrifice is equal to slaughtered hares. Next are the oracular Apollo and psychopomp Hermes of *Libation Bearers*, who connect mortals to the immortal realms above and below, but, as cryptic gods, remain liminal to humanity. By contrast, Athena, revered in Athens as *Promachos*, *Polias*, *Ergane* – of warfare, the state, and handicraft – presides almost exclusively over human endeavour. She is the civilised goddess par excellence, representing the age of men and rationality, rather than the preceding mythical eras. Athena's pre-eminence in *Eumenides* thus represents, ironically, a "secularisation" in worldview. *Dike* is no longer a mystical force emanating from inscrutable realms beyond the stars, but a rational principle that can be exercised through the structures of the state.

Accordingly, Aeschylus eschews mythical tradition, in which the fury-plagued prince is absolved by Apollo. Instead, Orestes, son of godlike Agamemnon, is brought to trial before his fellow mortals. That he is 'extradited' from Delphi – the Greek world's cultic centre – to Athens suggests that temporal power, not divine authority, now holds the scales. Justice has fallen into the hands of the polis.

#### 4.2 Beyond the Skene: Justice as Pragmatics, Republic as Harness-Net

Previously, the *skene* was central to the action: it served as the palace door into whose dark recess led Clytemnestra's cloth, and behind which Agamemnon, Aegisthus and Clytemnestra herself were killed. Konstan and Lowe note that, in the *Oresteia*, the *skene* embodies networks of kinship which transcend the lives of individuals (Konstan and Lowe 173). The wording is appropriate. As aforementioned, familial legacy is a snare in itself, tied to the recurring motif of transcendent principles (such as *dike*) as fatal, entrapping nets. As long as lineage-loyalty remains the guiding principle of justice, avengers like Aegisthus and Orestes will inevitably incite further vengeance, and be consumed by the *skene* in their turn.

Yet, in *Eumenides* the *skene* is completely sidelined. No important events occur behind it. In fact, living human characters almost never enter or exit it. If the movement from temple to court signals the prioritisation of pragmatic resolution over observance of divine mandate, then the *skene*'s receding indicates the evolution of justice from private to public. Fittingly, the familial vendetta is halted by Athena, who, as an immortal virgin with but one parent, is divorced from the fierce, conflicting loyalties that forced Orestes to choose between matricide and betraying his father. But now, instead of fermenting in the dark, murderous confines of the *skene*, the conflict occurs frontstage, within the public spaces of the polis.

Indeed, the trial represents a moment of spatial and functional expansion for the republican state. Not only is jurisdiction wrested away from priesthood and aristocracy, the procedures of justice are formalised and institutionalised. From the onset, Athena characterizes the court structure as a hedge against the shortcomings of individual judgement, divine or human – including, crucially, her own.

No, even I don't have the right to rule  
on a murder trial like this one, one  
that calls down such fierce anger either way.

There is recognition that both sides possessed deep, legitimate grievances, but that no single party is capable of doling out justice alone. Burian observes astutely that Athena's own verdict, made on seemingly arbitrary personal grounds (though a possible ulterior motive is discussed in the next section) does not discredit this state-building project, but rather strengthens its case. Justice cannot rely on any single human, god or goddess. As the previous plays have shown, they are all to some extent fallible and self-serving. What counts is not the outcome of the trial itself, but the effort to procedurally counterbalance conflicting interests. Apollo and the Erinyes appear as defendants, presenting their cases to a mortal jury. While Athena's verdict finally carries the day, it had only come into force as a tiebreaker, meaning her vote had the same weight as that of a mortal juror. Justice has become 'civil' and rationalised, no longer an ensnaring net of intermittent vengeance.

But that is not to say the civil institutions of the republic are not nets in themselves, that they not ensnare, nor that they are not held up by underlying violence. The naming of the play after the

*Eumenides* – instead of, say, Orestes – suggests that their conversion into a benevolent force is in some sense the crux of the Oresteia's finale. Instead of perishing in a fatal net, the fearsome goddesses are co-opted, annexed into the republican polis. This new polis appears as a harness, incorporating, channelling and redirecting pre-existing energies.

The Erinyes – violent, matrilineal avengers with no regard for human establishments – seem diametrically opposed to the republican, rationalistic, and patriarchal Athenian state. Politically, their privileging of blood ties over legal and social institutions – judging Orestes' crime as worse than Clytemnestra's because he killed a parent, while she only killed a marriage-partner – evokes the lineage-networks that predate, underlie and often threaten republicanism. Juridically, they haunt the private space of the oikos behind the *skene*, signifying a 'primitive' model of justice based on passion, personal loyalty and the blood-for-blood vendetta. Politics and polis, Athena's realm, matters little to them. Nevertheless, they cannot simply be eliminated. What they represent – the "old order" of lineage, aristocratic or otherwise, even the sanctity of motherhood, are essential to the polis. The recent Areopagus reforms, which Aeschylus and his spectators doubtlessly had in mind, (Samons 222) aimed at diminishing an institution controlled by Athens's traditional nobility. Yet, try as the reformers might, pre-democratic impulses ran deep. Indeed, these reformers themselves are latter-day Orestes, being links in a network of influential political dynasties. Pericles, heir to Epilates the Areopagus-curber, was the son of Cleisthenes' niece and later guardian to Alcibiades. (Samons 225)

However, once incorporated successfully into the net(work) of the polis, their threatening powers can become beneficial. Emphasising the pragmatic benefits of accepting her deal, Athena offers the soon-to-be Eumenides a place in the polis: "you [shall] receive the first fruits of this great land/offered up to you in hope of children/and for the fulfilment of the marriage rite". Notably, the Erinyes' potentially destructive energies are not stamped out, but harnessed and redirected. As guardians of marriage and fertility, their obsession with lineage and mother-child relationships is "put to use making children". This conclusion comes full circle, symbolically preventing the recurrence of the Atreids' adulterous, filicidal tragedy.

Even the Erinyes' primal, fearsome aspect, which Apollo abhors, does not necessarily threaten to overwhelm the rational order of the polis. Once the Eumenides relent, declaring themselves for the city, Athena lauds their terrible force as a great resource.

Any man they train their hate on doesn't know  
from where the flurry of hard blows  
crashes against his life...  
The power of the great  
Erinyes awes the gods above  
and those below, achieves their ends  
for all to see, bringing bright joyous life  
to some, life blind with tears to others.

In fact, the visceral horror, the frenzy they inspire, which had lead Orestes and Clytemnestra respectively to slaughter their kin, may paradoxically *uphold* rational order. This logic is reflected in a preceding line, where Athena exploits the religious terror surrounding the Areopagus' location to bolster the authority of the law.

Amazons... invaded, armed...  
Slit the throats of beasts in sacrifice to Ares...  
Here the people's awe and innate fear  
will hold injustice back by day, by night  
so long as the people leave the laws intact

This marks the final stage in the evolution of divinity throughout the trilogy – Zeus the Third, Saviour. The title of Saviour mirrors the new name of the Eumenides – emphasising divinity's pragmatic function *in relation to humanity*, as guarantor of earthly felicity. Accepting Athena's offered boons – honours, worship, sacrifices – they enter a relationship of mutual dependence with their worshippers. The goddesses of old that prey, are domesticated into bloodhounds that guard, the polis. As Eumenides rather than Erinyes, the goddesses become "civic" deities who serve and

express, rather than violently dictate, the order of the mortal world. Between Athens's 'national' goddess and her new converts, the Oresteia arguably concludes with a consciously Durkheimian conception of divinity, as "society stretched ideally to the stars".

However, as many have remarked, this harnessing is not quite as harmonious as Athena wishes it to appear.

"I have Zeus on my side and—  
why even bring it up?—I'm the only one  
among the gods who knows where he keeps the key  
to the chamber in which the lightning bolt is sealed.  
No, we won't have need of that"

This thinly-veiled threat echoes the tensions underlying the Pythoness' introductory monologue. Aeschylus fabricates a peaceable history for Apollo's oracle, glossing over a mythical tradition in which Apollo slaughters his predecessor, Gaia's daughter Python. For a brief moment, Aeschylus unveils the violence underpinning the republic's institutional trappings. For all her civil airs, Athena is what Gaia and Leto's children are: a goddess who will not brook disobedience. If affronted, she too will turn the forces of nature – in this case the thunderbolt, most powerful of all – against her enemies. Even the crimson *metics'* cloaks donned by the Eumenides at the end of the scene of hint at the violent scenes of preceding plays. The ancient goddesses, ensnarers of mortals, have themselves been ensnared in the structure of the state, as Agamemnon was in the sumptuous cloth. Not merely to be killed, but to be tamed and incorporated. These lines carry ambivalent implications for the republic which Athena embodies: its capacity for violence remains equal to, if not greater than, that of its predecessors. It is simply more adept at institutionalising its domination.

### 4.3 Her Subtle Net: Threads of Empire

The Eumenides were not the only forces incorporated into Athens' framework during the play. Orestes' acknowledgement of Athena's patronage, which may have played a role in her sudden verdict in favor of him, can be seen as an act of consummate realpolitik with profound implications.

I call Athena, this land's queen, to be  
my savior. Not by force of spear or sword,  
she'll claim me, my land, and all the people of Argos,  
as her true allies till the end of time.

First, this signals the disentanglement of diplomacy from aristocratic networks. By crediting Athena, the city's patron goddess, as his guardian, the foreign prince is acknowledging an alliance with Athens *as a polis*. This is atypical, differing from the traditional model of lineage-based elite guest-friendships reinforced by marriage ties, such as the one Iphigenia thought she was going to form with Achilles.

But further, Orestes' implorations suggest there is more to this alliance than meets the eye. The parallel between the Erinyes appearing in metic dress after being "persuaded" by Athena and Orestes, the sole mortal foreigner, is poignant. Clearly, Athens emerges as the dominant partner, capable of taking foreign states under its proverbial aegis. Indeed, the gratuitous emphasis on lack of compulsion implies that such relationships as Orestes is now proposing usually come about by violence. The theoretically egalitarian claim of alliance, then, should not be taken at face value. It is far more likely that Aeschylus's fictive Argos has become something akin to the *foederati* or *socii* of Rome – somewhere between a coequal entity and a client state. In this vein, Athena's decision to shield a foreign monarch from his enemies mirrors classical Athens' increasing tendency to interfere in its neighbours' internal affairs. (Kovacs) The republic profits from the crisis of its monarchical peers, emerging Venus-like from the old world's bloody fragments.

The play concludes on a yet more expansive note.

Now Greeks will say:  
"The man is Argive once again; he lives  
among his father's holdings by the grace  
of Pallas and Apollo"



This homage contextualises Athens and Argos within the broader Greek world, hinting at the former's ambitions to project its influence throughout this 'Hellenosphere'. As it were, the Dionysia at which this play was staged comprised part of this endeavor. The festival, which brought thousands of travellers to the foot of the Acropolis, was an opportunity to display Athenian power, wealth and cultural sophistication to the rest of the Greek world. (Goldhill)

## 5. Conclusion

In the first scenes of *Agamemnon*, the aristocratic oikos and despotic divinity reigned supreme. Allegiance to lineage stood unchallenged as the overarching principle of justice. By the end of *Eumenides*, however, a new paradigm had taken shape. Firstly, the divinely-ordained, lineage-based justice of the Olympians, having run itself dry with successive vendettas, is replaced by the pragmatic, institutionalised justice of the republic. While Athena tiebreaker, the majority of votes now lay in the hands of mortal men, not hero, god or priest(ess). This in turn heralded the ascendance of the democratic polis, emblematised by the shift in setting from the Atreid palace and Apollo's temple to the Athenian court. Finally, the divine-mortal relationship had in some sense *reversed*: *dike* and the gods no longer dictate human life, but are made to serve human felicity as guardians of the *polis*, their services bought by worship.

However, tensions continue to strain this precarious new equilibrium. Older forces, such as the anti-democratic impulses of lineage, are too powerful to be eliminated. Indeed, they remain a vital resource for the republic, which must balance and channel countervailing energies in order to survive. Moreover, Athens' advent as an individual democratic polis is merely the beginning of the end for the aristocratic-hieratic order of the heroic age. The *Eumenides*' closing lines hint at the city's imperial ambitions, which in Aeschylus' own time would once again unleash the dogs, or rather gods, of war.

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