Agonistic Politics, Contest, and the *Oresteia*

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Dedication

For Aeschylus, from whom I learned. Pathei Mathos
Abstract

Contemporary political theorists, such as William Connolly, Bonnie Honig, and Chantal Mouffe, have adopted the *agon* from ancient political thought as a critique against liberal theories of pluralism and tolerance. These thinkers view the *agon* broadly as the institution of contestation and emphasize the beneficial aspects of conflict, strife, and discord for democracy. Despite the adoption of the ancient Greek *agon*, contemporary agonistic theory exhibits a strange silence towards the ancient roots, experiences, and meanings of the *agon*. This curious inattention to the ancient understandings and historical contexts of the *agon* have resulted in a “de-Hellenization” of agonism; contemporary agonistic political theory has stripped the *agon* of its uniquely Greek-heroic historical characteristics and experiences resulting in an anemic understanding of the place of violence, strife, and contestation in democratic politics. In an effort to re-Hellenize contemporary understandings of agonism I turn to the heroic-epic of Homer’s *Iliad* and the tragic world of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*. In the *Iliad*, “The Shield of Achilles” serves as a microcosm of multiple sites of contestation that touch upon all aspects of human life. The shield depicts a world that accepts conflict and discord. Reading the *Oresteia* as a series of agonistic contests questions the assumptions of agonistic theory that contest leads to a mutual recognition of identities and differences. The *Oresteia* demonstrates that the challenge of agonistic theory is not to affirm the perpetuity of contests as Honig posits, but to question whether these aggressive tendencies can be controlled and channeled without eradicating differences or limiting the political. By returning to classical conceptions of the *agon*, this dissertation seeks to demonstrate that contemporary agonistic theory displaces the bloody roots of contest and diminishes the propensity for contests to spiral into violence.
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Introduction:

Re-Hellenizing the Agon

“If there is any bliss among men, it does not appear without toil.”
Pindar, “Pythian 12,” l. 28-29

To embrace the agon is to affirm a life of ceaseless and insatiable striving. Nearly all aspects of ancient Greek life were saturated by expressions of agonism. Contemporary political theorists such as William Connolly, Bonnie Honig, and Chantal Mouffe have adopted the agon from ancient political thought as a powerful vehicle of critique against liberal theories of pluralism and tolerance. For these thinkers, the agon is viewed broadly as the political institution of contestation and conflict. Agonistic politics, as represented by these post-Nietzschean thinkers, broadly emphasizes the beneficial aspects of political conflict and strife through contests which simultaneously affirm “the indispensability of identity to life,” and disturb “the dogmatization of identity.”¹ And yet, despite the adoption of the ancient Greek agon, contemporary agonistic theory exhibits a strange silence towards the ancient roots, contexts, experiences, and meanings of the agon. In its attempt to re-imagine contemporary practices of democracy, agonistic politics makes almost “no reference to how older layers of language, meanings and practices might still inform or could have survived residually in its recent revival.”² This

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² Andreas Kalyvas, “Democratic Narcissus: The Agonism of the Ancients Compared to That of the (Post)Moderns,” in Law and Agonistic Politics, ed. Andrew Schaap (Surrey, England: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2009). p. 16. A possible exception to this is Bonnie Honig’s recent work on Sophocles’ Antigone. However, even though Honig returns to ancient sources on Greek tragedy, nowhere in this work does she attempt an exposition of
curious inattention to the historical contexts and ancient understandings of the \textit{agon} have resulted in what Kalyvas has termed, a “de-Hellenization” of the \textit{agon} and the practice of agonism.\textsuperscript{3} As a result, contemporary agonistic political theory has stripped the \textit{agon} of its uniquely Greek and heroic historical characteristics and experiences resulting in an anemic and bloodless understanding of the place of violence, strife, and contestation in democratic politics. They have created a “Greek-less” \textit{agon} of docile competition.

What then would be the consequences of re-Hellenizing the \textit{agon}? What does the Greek experience and its expressions of agonism bring to contemporary understandings of democratic politics and strife that are presently lacking in agonistic political thought? Such a project of re-imbuing the \textit{agon} with a quintessentially Greek character is not without its own perils. Nowhere in the ancient record is there an extant philosophical work that offers a coherent and sustained discussion of the \textit{agon} and its politics. Neither Plato nor Aristotle ever wrote a philosophical treatise on agonism. Instead, to capture the centrality of agonism to Greek social and political life requires one “to sift through fragmented and dispersed textual and material sources in mythology, poetry, theatre, rhetoric, historiography, philosophy, visual representations, architecture and archaeology and try to combine and interpret the findings into an eclectic, tentative and uncertain framework that cannot but accept its own unavoidable arbitrariness.”\textsuperscript{4} This type of theorizing thus becomes like an archaeological excavation that reveals more about the

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\textsuperscript{3} Ibid. p. 17, 31.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid. p. 18.
archaeologist than it does the society being exhumed. It is not so much the historical reality of the *agon* that is attempting to be disinterred, but rather the rich array of possibilities that ancient conceptions of the *agon* could reveal for contemporary democratic politics. As such, re-Hellenizing the *agon* is not about fully recovering the ancient *agon*, but rather about re-imagining and complicating contemporary expressions of the *agon* through its ancient significations. If this can be seen as a return to the *agon*, it is only in the sense of a *palinagon*: a looking backwards in order to move forwards.

This project of re-Hellenizing contemporary understandings of the *agon* illuminates both the contributions and failings of agonistic political theory. On the one hand, the Greek *agon* underscores the importance of *dissoi logoi*, the productive force of arguing from opposite positions that encourages the proliferation of arenas of conflict and debate. But on the other hand, the Greek *agon* is attentive to the risks and dangers of politics as dissentful strife in a way which contemporary agonistic theory obscures. Agonistic political theorists are correct to argue against the tendency of democratic theories of deliberation to create and promote closure, but they underestimate the dangers and risks of proliferating the sites of agonistic contestation. Agonistic theory expects that embracing the politics of the *agon* will result in the creation of contemporary Pericleses. But, given the violence of competition between actors and identities that the Greek *agon* highlights, shouldn’t we see the emergence of a new Clytemnestra or Cleon as being

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5 this word is my own invention. It is a combination of *palin+agon* (πάλιν+ἀγών). *palin* meaning to go backwards, (as in palindrome) and *agon* as in contest. In this sense it is a different understanding of the agon that looks both backwards and forwards. It is an attempt to escape the accusation of desiring to nostalgically return to the golden age of the Greeks.
equally as likely as the respectful agonistic citizens that Connolly, Honig, and Mouffe desire? Agonistic political theory, despite its emphasis on the productive aspects of dissent, prioritizes the creation of “civil” forms of contestation that deny the propensity for agonism to descend into violence. These “civil” forms of contestation retain the capacity to create their own remainders who are excluded from the realm of “respectful” agonistic contestation. A project of re-Hellenization shows that the value of the agon is not in these drives to create civility, respect, and magnanimous competitive spirits, but rather in the eruptions of expressions of dissent which themselves bring to light the remainders, disadvantages, social grievances, inequalities, and alternative perspectives, directing our attention to contests between irreconcilable positions and their potential for violence.

By examining the agon in its ancient Greek social and political contexts, it is revealed that contemporary theories of agonism contain a sanitized vision of contestation. Contemporary agonistic political theory argues that contestation ought to be both civil and non-violent. However, agonistic contestation amongst the Greeks, whether it be in the realm of politics, warfare, theatre, or athletics, was often bloody and even sometimes deadly. In the Greek full-contact sports of boxing, wrestling and the pankration, “death lurked,” and athletes who accidentally killed their opponents enjoyed legal immunity. Furthermore, bloody eruptions of contestation show that violence itself was often used as

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a way of expressing profound dissent. For Clytemnestra to triumph, Agamemnon must die. This too is a form of agonism and to see violence as always already a failure of politics unnecessarily and naïvely limits the political while creating remainders of those left outside the “civil” or normal practice of politics. For those left outside of or dissatisfied with the realm of politics, sometimes violence becomes the only practical option of expressing dissent and enacting change. Furthermore, the ancient Greek *agon* does not begin from an assumption that debate leads to a solution. Rather, lack of resolution is a frequent outcome of agonistic action and dissent. Ancient conceptions of the *Agon* do not seek consensus but rather strive to attain the right to struggle and express dissent. Even the Ancient Greek practice of ostracism is consistent with a democratic desire to preserve the *agon* as an arena of perpetual competition and struggle. Aristotle argues that ostracism as a practice had above all democratic equality as its aim.\(^7\) As a result any individual who dominated the political *agon* of the city through any means such as wealth, number of supporters, or influence, was ostracized to preserve the equality and right of all to compete in politics.\(^8\) The competition and struggle of the *agon* was therefore preserved by “disabling and banishing the most prominent citizens.”\(^9\) Like Greek tragedy, the *agon* does not offer simple solutions but rather poses more questions and dilemmas for politics. The very indeterminacy of tragedy as a genre allows for open-readings and for probing the depths of political dilemmas and problems without resorting

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\(^8\) Aristotle, "The Politics." 1284a, p. 82.

\(^9\) Ibid.
to facile prescriptions. As an institution, the *agon* provides a space for exploring and questioning claims to authority where disagreement, whether peaceful, threatening, or violent, is given legitimacy and a political voice.

**Nietzsche, Agonism, and Tragedy**

The beginnings of Nietzsche’s philosophy can be seen in his work as a highly controversial classical scholar. In much of his early writings, Nietzsche was doing the work of a classicist, commenting on the tragic playwrights, engaging with Simonides and Hesiod, and having a deep affection for pre-Socratic philosophy. In many ways, Nietzsche’s broad conceptualization of politics can be seen to have its roots in the Athenians’ definition of politics as the business of the *polis*. As such, politics is constituted not just by the affairs of the state, but also by the entire social fabric of Athens including the theatre. The social and political world of ancient Greece was extremely vital in the development of Nietzsche’s philosophy.

For Nietzsche, one of the most notable achievements of the ancient Greeks was that they produced a culture which placed tragic drama at the heart of public political life. Nietzsche inextricably links agonistic contestation with tragedy as a civic institution. As Gambino argues, “Nietzsche presents tragedy as a form of political education meant to help the Athenians internalize the agonistic principle by compelling them to confront the

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problematic and ambiguous natures of their own identities.” Nietzsche embraced tragedy’s artistic and civic functions. Nietzsche’s conceptualization of the Greeks is one in which a recognition of the suffering and temporality inherent in life and in identities was confronted and made meaningful through agonistic action generally, and through the agonal spirit embraced in tragic drama. For Nietzsche, the Greeks “knew and felt the terror and horror of existence,” and channeled these experiences through agonistic action. It is only through the public competition of the agon that the heights and depths of human existence can be realized. Because the Festival of Dionysia is itself a competition, tragedy thus takes “the form of a colossal wrestling among the great musical and dramatic artists,” which therefore serves to educate the citizenry in agonistic action by its example. In The Birth of Tragedy Nietzsche understands agonal strife as the fusing of opposing elements, the Apollonian and the Dionysian to create the highest form of art, tragedy, in which the agonistic destruction that accompanies the meeting of differences and identities is itself necessary to a process of transcendence and understanding. It is perhaps important to note that Nietzsche himself saw the Birth of Tragedy as his first attempt at an ongoing transvaluation of values.

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12 Ibid. p. 416.
Agonistic contests for Nietzsche are the key to appreciating and embracing the sweetness and the sorrow of both victory and defeat. In the “struggle and joy of victory,” 16 Nietzsche argues that the Greeks found a balm for the wound opened by the meaninglessness of existence and the temporality of human achievement. His agonism is rooted in a world of spectacle, contestation, struggle, and cruelty, through which individuals strive to define and set themselves apart through their accomplishments over others. 17 Agonistic contestation thus invigorates through its violent lust for victory and domination. Nietzsche sees the Greeks as possessing a “tiger-like pleasure in destruction,” 18 that is also a creative embrace of the negative drives of envy, competition, ambition, and jealously. In this way, Nietzsche perceives that the agon contains within it a violent and aggressive will; however, such wanton ambition, desire, and violence is not always and necessarily unrestrained.

Drawing heavily from Hesiod, 19 Nietzsche speaks of the two goddesses of Eris. The first Eris is destructive of human communities, as she is concerned with war, fatal encounters, and mutual destruction. The second Eris, however, is good for human communities and allows for human beings to become great. It is this beneficent Eris who channels aggression, ambition, envy, and jealously into a creative rather than destructive force through competition and mutual rivalry. He argues that it is the two goddesses of Eris “who as jealousy, resentment, and envy stirs men to actions… to the action of

16 Nietzsche, "Homer's Contest." p. 37.
17 Ibid.
18 Ibid.p. 35.
The productive capacities of the second *Eris*, who both Hesiod and Nietzsche praise, always runs the risk of being overrun by the negative forms of strife that bring destruction rather than creation. Agonism is enshrined within the social and political order of the Greeks in civic institutions such as the Olympic games, the Assembly, the courts, and poetic competitions which seek to restrain the first *Eris*, while creating the space and opportunity through which the struggle of the second *Eris* can be promoted. Agonistic action is thus an imperfect attempt at the transformation of aggression and ambition into a form and order which is creative and constitutive of culture, community, and achievement. Agonistic action is itself a struggle between the positive and negative forms of strife.

For Nietzsche, agonistic contest is motivated by honor-seeking individuals whose talents reveal themselves in a struggle for glory and distinction that stems from envy for the laurels of others. As a form of education, agonistic contestation’s goal is the welfare and glory of the civic community; agonistic action is thus seen as a precondition for a healthy and vital *polis*. As Nietzsche argues, every Athenian citizen “had to develop himself in contest, so much so as to be of the highest benefit to Athens and to bring it the least harm.”

The *agon*, as the arena of agonistic contest thus embraces the second *Eris* of mutual competition and serves to restrict and restrain human ambition and violence. Though agonistic contestation has its roots in violence, the goal is not to fatally destroy

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20 Nietzsche, "Homer's Contest." p. 38.
21 Ibid. p. 40.
22 Ibid. p. 39.
23 Ibid. p. 40.
24 Ibid.
one’s opponent; it is rather to defeat one’s opponent through public competition in which both combatants survive. For the good of the city, agonistic contestation is directed away from blood filled acts of violence, and towards arenas of speech, rhetorical prowess, persuasion, and athletic competition, through which increases in one’s own glory also increase the glory of the polis. For Nietzsche, without this kind of positive and controlled agonistic contest, both the Hellenic state and the Hellenic man degenerates. For agonistic contestation and the state to flourish, it must remain life-affirming even as it destroys in order to create. In other words, agonistic action must succeed in channeling and restraining the violence of the first Eris at the same time as it embraces the strife and wrestling of the second Eris. Nietzsche’s respect for the agon and for agonistic contestation flows not merely from how the exercise of power is legitimized, but more importantly from how agonistic action allows for the realization of a human community which interactively and continuously strives for achievement and distinction. However, it must not be forgotten that agonistic action always contains the threat of controlled and public manifestations of strife descending into destruction. Theorists of agonism often neglect that agonistic action can be motivated as much by the first Eris as by the second.

**Contemporary Agonistic Theory**

What unites contemporary agonistic political theorists, in the most general terms, is the attempt to answer the question: how are we to build and inhabit a community together where our many differences unite rather than divide us? Agonistic theory

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25 Ibid. p. 42.
contains two fundamental assumptions regarding the nature of political life: interdependence and strife. For theorists such as William Connolly, Bonnie Honig, and Chantal Mouffe, all identities are intrinsically social and relational; no identity is an island. Once the relational and interdependent aspect of identity is acknowledged, the recognition of struggle as playing a creative and productive role becomes clearer. Competition and contestation become vital aspects of the process of making the self. In Connolly’s words, “each identity is fated to contend to various degrees and in multifarious ways with others it depends upon to enunciate itself. That’s politics, the issue is not if but how.”

Furthermore, agonistic political theorists see themselves as embracing a form of radical democracy that meaningfully recovers the political through recognizing the co-constitutive and negotiated nature of identity, the productive role of contestation and strife, and by relinquishing the dream of a harmonious society founded on an universalizing conception of “the good.” This self consciously places agonistic theory’s version of the political in opposition to communitarian and liberal theories, especially those of Sandel and Rawls, which they charge with “losing” or “displacing” the political. Agonistic political theory alerts us to problems with the way in which politics, identity, and community are understood in much of democratic theory. However, while agonistic theory increases our awareness of tensions and fissures, it ultimately does not solve these problems. The failure to fully come to grips with the aggression and violence of the *agon* shared by Connolly, Honig, and Mouffe demonstrates a fundamental error in their understandings of political contestation and strife. As Kristen Deede

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Johnson argues, in emphasizing the power, chaos, and conflict of the *agon* these theorists relinquish all hope for harmony and unity within political societies.\(^{27}\) While contemporary agonistic theory attempts to theorize a place for aggression, conflict, and desire in political life, it ironically does not fully come to terms with the *agon*'s potential for violence. Agonistic politics does not take to heart Nietzsche’s understanding that violence is the deep ontological root underlying all forms of contestation.\(^{28}\) Furthermore, agonistic theorists are reluctant to associate the *agon* with ideas of justice, thereby negating the *Oresteia*’s caution that the *agon* cannot be separated from justice, (δίκη).

William Connolly’s *Identity\Difference* argues that the *agon* is an expression of freedom and diversity through which the competitive play of differences can ensure plurality and protect against closure. For Connolly identity is always already connected to a series of differences on which it depends for meaning and significance.\(^{29}\) He argues that identity is not given, but is instead formed through co-constitutive processes and relationships with others. Furthermore, “the definition of difference is a requirement built into the logic of identity, and the construction of otherness is a temptation that readily insinuates itself into that logic.”\(^{30}\) Identity is formed against what it is not, in a meeting of differences. As a result self-identity is always formed in relationship to collective identities and encounters with the other. Johnson argues that “because of the relational and collective nature of identity, the identity/difference relation necessarily involves

\(^{27}\) Kristen Deede Johnson, *Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). p. 3
\(^{28}\) Nietzsche, "Homer’s Contest."
\(^{30}\) Ibid. p. 9.
social and public forms through which identity is acquired at the same time as some
difference is excluded.”31 The practice of identity proves itself to be a paradox that must
be negotiated. Connolly formulates this paradox as being the “pressure to make space for
the fullness of self-identity for one constituency by marginalizing, demeaning, or
excluding the differences on which it depends to specify itself.”32 Negotiating this
paradox has vast implications for how democratic politics plays out. Connolly hopes that
the paradox will be negotiated through a deep pluralism which protects, fosters, and
encourages differences. However, this hope is tempered by an acknowledgment that more
often than not, democratic societies translate the paradox “into an aggressive politics of
exclusive universality.”33 This second lamentable response to the paradox creates a rigid
and dogmatic Us v. Them sense of identity and a tendency towards exclusion and
persecution rather than inclusion and belonging. In other words, the problem is not the
acknowledgement of an other different than ourselves, but the tendency to cast that other
as an heretical, disturbed, or degenerate deviation from the “truth” of one’s own identity.

In focusing on the dynamic relationship of identity\difference, Connolly draws
attention to the costs, dangers, and necessity of identity to communal life. Adopting a
Nietzschean sensibility, Connolly highlights our general unwillingness to recognize and
affirm the contingency and lack of eternal, or stable foundations to identity. Ressentiment
becomes key to Connolly’s understanding of how identities are negatively formulated
against a construction of a hostile external other against which one’s own identity is

33 Ibid. p. xv.
assessed. The practice of *ressentiment* thus becomes the way in which societies erroneously attempt to justify practices of exclusion, scapegoating, persecution, and the fixity of identity.\(^{34}\) *Ressentiment* contributes to a stigmatization and, to use Connolly’s phrase, “dogmatization of identity.”\(^{35}\) In this way, *ressentiment* leads to a pathological disposition towards difference which poisons and sickens the potential, politics, and practice of democratic life.

Related to the problem of *ressentiment* is Connolly’s critique of liberal tolerance as an ethic of political and communal life. He argues that the idea of tolerance is premised on a mere forbearance of cultural practices which are “thought to be intrinsically wrong or inferior, but also thought to contain a glimmer of truth that might evolve.”\(^{36}\) In this way, tolerance is dependent on a negative judgment of difference which does not critique or disturb the fixity of one’s own identity. Against the ethic of tolerance Connolly forwards an understanding of “agonistic respect.” From a recognition of the centrality of strife and interdependence to political and collective life flows “an ethic in which alter-identities foster agonistic respect for the differences that constitute them, an ethic of care for life.”\(^{37}\) Agonistic respect involves the willingness on the part of different identities to see differences not as threats that require oppression or denial, but rather a recognition based on a respect that sees differences as speaking to the co-constitutive nature of identities and an acknowledgment of the interdependence of all identity. A politics informed by the ethic of agonistic respect enables already established

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\(^{34}\) Ibid. p. 192.

\(^{35}\) Ibid. p. x.

\(^{36}\) Ibid. p. 43.

\(^{37}\) Ibid. p. 166.
constituencies within a political community to be open to new identities and movements. Furthermore, this enables already established identities to strive to create political spaces which are conducive to the emergence of new identities. As such, Connolly argues that the ethic of agonistic respect “flows into agonistic appreciation of difference.” In other words, the driving idea behind the ethic of agonistic respect is that when differences meet they attempt to move past tolerance and oppression, and evolve towards respect and affirmation.

In Nietzschean form, Connolly both acknowledges and affirms the instability and uncertainty of the agon. Furthermore, he sees in the agon and its ethic of agonistic respect a way out of the dichotomies of Us v. Them, Inclusion v. Exclusion. For Connolly, “the terms of contestation enlarge opportunities for participants to engage the relational and contingent character of the identities that constitute them, and this effect in turn establishes one of the preconditions for respectful strife between parties who reciprocally acknowledge the contestable character of the faiths that orient them and give them definition in relation to one another.” In other words, all political life is essentially contested, and ambiguity becomes not something to be cleared up, but embraced in a colossal wrestling between identities. When seen in terms of a collective struggle, ambiguity becomes for Connolly a liberatory practice which enables one to escape from thinking about politics and democracy in a way which seeks to establish closure and fixity at the expense of difference. As a practice “agonal democracy

38 Ibid. p. 167.
39 Ibid. p. 211.
40 Ibid. p. 72-73.
enables (but does not require) anyone to come to terms with strife and interdependence of identity\difference.”\footnote{Ibid. p. 192.}

Connolly’s agonistic politics alerts us to many problems relating to the practice of liberal democracy, especially concerning the strong emphasis on the manufacturing of tolerance and consensus. Connolly’s theory of agonistic engagement is a significant step in creating and fostering new techniques of deliberation that have the potential to not only enable a diversity of identities to participate in civic life, but also to mitigate the forces of \textit{ressentiment} that underlie interaction. However, Connolly dangerously underestimates the strength and omnipresence of aggressive forces which also underlie agonistic politics. These aggressive drives find expression through contestation and pose a much greater threat of violently bursting forth and disrupting pluralist democracy than Connolly acknowledges. Connolly is strangely silent about how pluralist democracy ought to react when the invitation to engage in contests founded on agonistic respect is rejected. Furthermore, by Connolly’s own admission, his theory of politics casts aside a commitment to establishing a harmonious community. He argues that agonistic politics “combats at their highest levels of articulation regulative principles that govern the idealism of the normal individual and the harmonious community.”\footnote{Ibid. p. 166.} In this way Connolly links the desire for a harmonious community with the drives of \textit{ressentiment} towards homogeneity and exclusion. As Johnson argues, “Connolly’s liberalism leaves us without hope for harmony or unity, without a picture of anything beyond the attainment of an ironic consensus. Such consensus is ‘ironic’ because it is based in
recognition of the contestability of the contending presumptions we each bring with us. Thus, Connolly’s theory demonstrates two fundamental failings in vision. Firstly, Connolly fails to fully come to terms with the dangers of violence and aggression that undergird all agonistic action. Secondly, Connolly’s theory casts aside too readily the dream of a united community of differences, demonstrating a failure to imagine the conditions under which both contestation and a redefined notion of a harmony of dissonances could coexist.

For Bonnie Honig, politics is understood as the contestation and friction between different identities, beliefs, and perspectives. It is the fractious and fissionary nature of politics which she sees as having been displaced from political theory’s understandings of contemporary life. As Johnson argues, “Honig is seeking a way to recognize and be more open to the excesses that will always exist within a given society.” For Honig, it is dangerous to assume that the goal of politics is to erase or render obsolete conflict, contestation, and strife. Honig argues that virtue theories, political theories which attempt to use administrative tactics and juridical settlements as methods for settling or eliminating disputes, attempt to establish stability and closure by ignoring the productive capacities of dissonance. She opposes virtue theories to virtu theories which instead assume that politics can’t be administratively maintained and order defies preservation. Virtu theories assume that contest and conflict are the very stuff of politics and are deeply opposed to attempts at closure and muffling dissonance. Honig’s agonistic politics as a

44 Ibid. p. 88.
manifestation of virtue theory is a move away from identifying politics with the smooth administration of society that strives to render the political safe from disruption and strife.\footnote{Ibid.}

Central to Honig’s understanding of agonistic politics is the idea of “remainders.” She argues that there will always be individuals or groups who do not fit with the given political order, and are thus rendered outsiders or remainders to the order and community at large. The very existence of remainders speaks to the reality that any political arrangement or system will never achieve perfection. Remainders also for Honig serve to justify her claim that there will always be contests that seek to achieve inclusion, carve out niches for particular identities, gain political power, or strive to remake political consensus. Furthermore, the friction created by the contestation of these remainders enables the creation of new spaces which are receptive to dissonance and difference. In this way, affirming the inevitability and persistence of contestation “is to see that attempts to shut down the agon perpetually fail, that the best (or worst) they do is to displace politics onto other sites and topics, where the struggle of identity and difference, resistance and closure, is then repeated.”\footnote{Ibid. p. 15-16.} It should also be noted that Honig’s embrace of remainders is not indicative of a belief that politically more active lives are somehow more meaningful, fulfilling, or worthwhile. Rather, she argues that her conception of politics as inherently agonistic speaks to the strong belief that the remainders generated by non-agonistic political theories, (virtue theories) not only displace politics but also
have the potential to disempower and undermine democratic institutions and their principles.\textsuperscript{48}

While Honig is the first to note that “the perpetuity of contest is not easy to celebrate,”\textsuperscript{49} her theory of agonistic action appears to commit some of the same mistakes as the virtue theories she criticizes. It is not necessarily the case that agonistic action will or can promote versions of freedom, acceptance of differences, plurality, and community that do not attempt to close political space. Indeed, Honig’s embrace of the contest seems to be highly selective. Like the virtue political theories which she charges with attempting to smooth away disagreements and strife, her agonistic politics appears to displace the violent and aggressive roots of the \textit{agon}. Even if contestation can be directed away from violence and aggression, her politics only permits certain manifestations of the \textit{agon}, which agree to play by the rules of a peaceable engagement. Honig seems to display a general unwillingness to acknowledge that the losers of agonistic contestation must accept the terms of their defeat and that coercion and the threat of violence are always present. Violence and aggression thus become like the remainders created by attempts to close down avenues of political expression, and always exist in a way which threatens to erupt unexpectedly and undermine her project of agonistic action. Furthermore, given the volatile, unpredictable, and ever-present reality of contestation, along with the way in which the violence and aggression of the \textit{agon} exists as a looming shadow in Honig’s theory, it is difficult to accept her maintenance that order and stability are possible. Like Connolly, Honig rejects harmony as fatally complicit with liberal theories that seek to

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid. p. 14.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
close down or repress the *agon*. However, it is unclear how a pluralist agonistic political community can persist in peaceful strife if the violent and aggressive roots of the *agon* are hidden from view.

Chantal Mouffe, similarly to Honig, sees the political as an irreducible antagonism that underlies all human relations. She also shares the deep opposition to liberal democracy which she terms “Western universalism.” Moreover, she argues that much of contemporary political theory fails to recognize the contestatory nature of politics and dangerously strives towards an impossible elimination of strife and disorder. Mouffe closely links her agonism to an idea of antagonism which draws heavily from Carl Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political*. In this way, Mouffe attempts to bring back into our understanding of the political, “the ever present possibility of combat,” which is constantly at work in Schmitt’s friend-enemy distinction. Mouffe even goes so far as to say that the types of positive and productive agonistic relationships of Connolly are impossible when seen from a Schmittian perspective. Schmitt’s idea of the need for an existential enemy to exist for any community is also maintained by Mouffe. She emphasizes how all identities are constituted by the differences that they encounter in the “other” and that it is through this contrast that alternative identities and antagonisms of Us v. Them are born. This complex action between the meeting of differences forms the “constitutive role of antagonism,” or “agonistic pluralism.” For her, democracy

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contains within it those who are friends, the *demos*, and those who are enemies. The enemy does not vanish but is instead transformed into those “who do not accept the democratic ‘rules of the game’ and who thereby exclude themselves from the political community.”

In an attempt to acknowledge Schmitt yet simultaneously sanitize his emphasis on overt physical violence, Mouffe argues that agonistic citizens ought to view themselves as “friendly enemies.” Agonistic citizens are thus friends because they inhabit the same symbolic spaces, yet enemies because they are both desiring and willing to organize these spaces differently from others. In this way, Mouffe acknowledges the need for an external other to identity, and attempts to channel antagonism in a constructive and inclusive manner. This permits Mouffe to hold onto the ideas that all identities are relational and that antagonism is irreducible. However, Mouffe backs quickly away from the radical consequences of seeing antagonism as a legitimate form of contestation when she argues that the purpose of democratic politics is “to keep the emergence of antagonism at bay.” In this way Mouffe also attempts to cleanse politics of violent eruptions between irreconcilable positions and identities, and institutes a hierarchy of value in which peaceful contestation is seen as more legitimate than threatening or violent dissent. Mouffe argues that “legitimate” conflict requires a “common bond,” between contesting parties. This task of democracy, “to transform antagonism into

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54 Ibid. p. 4.
55 Ibid.
58 Ibid. p. 20.
agonism,”⁵⁹ and to have adversaries recognize “the legitimacy of their opponent,”⁶⁰ is one that brings Mouffe’s theory very close to the positions of deliberative democrats that she criticizes. What is really needed is not a prescriptive statement that relations of antagonism need to be transformed to relations of agonism, but rather a descriptive ethics that seeks to understand antagonism’s place as a form of agonism itself. This would grapple with antagonism in a real sense instead of dismissing or obscuring its presence as a form of political conflict inherent in democratic relations of power.

The question for Mouffe becomes, what types of institutions ought democracy foster in order to affirm the “ineluctability of antagonism,”⁶¹ without fostering undue exclusion and repression. She is at great pains to illustrate that democracy is a form of rule and is not monopolized by any one perspective or theory. Athens was not liberal, but it was a democracy.⁶² There is a danger in assuming that the way power relations are configured is the way they must be configured. If the arrangement of power is taken as a given, then the ability to critique and question is lost. Through the acknowledgment of conflict, disruption of hegemonic narratives and the perception of more opportunities to question and change are enabled. For Mouffe exclusion is a constant due to the nature of the friend-enemy distinction, but it is ameliorated by the fact that the terms of exclusion are constantly renegotiated. The role of power in a political action thus becomes crucial, as all consensus rests on a contingent and temporary stabilization of power. Johnson argues that for Mouffe, “to forget this, is to overlook the conflictual nature of the political

⁵⁹ Ibid.
⁶⁰ Ibid.
⁶² Mouffe, The Democratic Paradox. p. 81.
that inhabits every consensus, is to open the way to overlooking and disguising the exclusions that necessarily exist under any consensus, and therefore to close the door to the multiplicity of voices that comprise contemporary pluralism.” This however, stands in contrast to Mouffe’s claim that conflict must not “destroy the political association,” which implies that not all relations of power are open to renegotiation.

Mouffe’s theory is about dynamic conversions. She attempts to shift away from antagonism and towards agonism, from enemies to adversaries. As such, she is centrally concerned with finding methods that will recognize agonism and still permit the preservation of democratic values of liberty and equality. In her notion of friendly enemies is a commitment to viewing adversaries agonistically, rather than antagonistically. This necessitates seeing those that we disagree with as legitimate opponents who have a right to disagree. She also attempts to hold onto a reformed liberal-pluralist notion of consensus and tries to achieve this through a reconceptualization of exclusion grounded in a reformed Schmitt. This move seems to be difficult and fraught at best, and a compromise of the principles of her radical understanding of democratic life at worst. As Dietz argues, “the desire for reconciliation in the face of flux might explain the tendency at the level of Mouffe's theorizing to oscillate between a (radical) account of democracy grounded in the rough process of struggle and antagonism and a (reformist) account of democracy attuned to the reassuring constant liberalism:communitarianism.”

It seems that exclusion will play a very large role in manufacturing political consensus as

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64 Mouffe, *On the Political.* p. 20.
there will be a great many constituencies and identities which are deeply at odds with a liberal inspired, pluralist conception of democracy. Mouffe’s claim that exclusion will never be stable and will be constantly renegotiated seems to do little to address the significant problems with power, violence, and contestation that she raises. “Mouffe's reconciliatory impulses,” as Dietz argues, “are in struggle with her agonistic impulses; they constantly dilute her politics of antagonism (a volatile brew of Machiavelli and Carl Schmitt) with the pacifying additives of (an equally diluted) Rawlsian liberalism and Aristotelian republicanism.” Indeed, Mouffe attempts to pacify the violence and aggression of Schmitt’s politics, but the success of this reinterpretation is doubtful.

Ultimately, the theories of Connolly, Honig, and Mouffe serve to raise many problems regarding contemporary democratic life, but do not succeed in solving them. I am sympathetic to and agree with the claim that all of politics includes contestation and that our theories of politics ignore the *agon* at our peril. However, these agonistic theorists do not take their own claims regarding the indispensability of contestation to life seriously enough. Just as agonistic theorists accuse liberal and communitarian approaches of displacing the political, they too displace a politics of aggression and violence from the *agon*. In assuming the passivity of the *agon*, agonistic theory forgets the violent and aggressive drives and desires on which the *agon*’s various versions of contestation are founded. They fail to seriously grapple with the question of what role ought aggression and violence play in contemporary political life and under what conditions the *agon* can either justifiably make use of violent action or is likely to unleash violence in order to

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66 Ibid.
satisfy the demands of actors. The mere acknowledgement of the lurking presence of these forces is not enough to equip our theory and praxis to grapple successfully with the aggression and violence that permeates all of political life.

When push comes to shove, agonistic political theory is only playing at contestation, and fails to fully wrestle with the presence and dangers of violence that lurk at the core of the *agon*. Conflict is not something which politics seeks to eliminate but rather the ordering principle of political action. In de-Hellenizing the *agon*, contemporary theories of agonism have removed the *agon’s* emphasis on the joy of gathering and winning, and the agony of defeat and pain. These theories, in embracing a weak and anemic form of agonism, assume that contestation is a net good for democratic politics where dissent can be reconciled or incorporated into a given order and where identities are affirmed rather than cast aside as remainders. This assumes that the *agon*, an arena for separating the best from the rest, can be transformed into a space where there are no losers and where everyone can negotiate a satisfying victory. That the conflict of contestation is mostly good and conducive to relations of respect is an assumption that not only, “remains to be proven,” but also one that is not upheld by ancient Greek conceptions of the *agon*.

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67 on this point see also: Kalyvas, "Democratic Narcissus: The Agonism of the Ancients Compared to That of the (Post)Moderns." p. 34.

68 Ibid.
Agonism in Classical Athens and the Oresteia

The *epinikia*, (ἐπινίκια) victory odes, of Pindar are perhaps one of the clearest expressions of the centrality and multiplicity of agonistic contestation to the Greek experience. For Burckhardt, Pindar is the herald of the Greek *agon*. Nearly all of the surviving victory odes were written to honor individual victories won at one of the four great athletic competitions, (the Olympic, Pythian, Nemean, and Isthmian Games) that were tied to Panhellenic religious festivals. Goldhill argues that Pindar’s victory odes were “a performance hired to mark the place of an individual within his city.” Only through the act of constantly striving and struggling against one’s peers can an individual attain honor, prestige, respect, and glory. For Pindar, “trial is truly the test of mortals.” It is in the competitive arenas of the *agon*, that individuals not only test themselves against each other, but prove who they are and where they stand within a human community. The word “agony” speaks to prevalence of pain in agonistic competitions and the ever present risk that even peaceful manifestations of the *agon* could become

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violent and painful. For victory to mean something, it needed to involve risk, as “achievements without risk win no honor among men.”

While Pindar’s victory odes do praise individual acts of triumph and victory, winning is not the most important aspect of agonism; what matters is not the victory alone, but rather the act of striving. “Olympian 2,” for example, makes use of the adjective *agroteros*, which conveys the senses of striving, struggling, and being fond of the chase, to describe the *agon*. What matters most is not the sweetness of victory, but the act of pursuing and struggling always after victory. Conflict, and the celebration of the act of competing, is first and foremost the subject of Pindar’s panegyrics. The picture of agonism that Pindar presents is one that sees the *agon* as “an articulation, rather than a resolution, of conflict.” Tied up with this is the importance placed on “gathering” and “assembling,” which returns to the original sense of an *agon* as an assembly. For an individual victory to have meaning, it needs to be witnessed. In this way, the *agon* carries a heavy social dimension; to lose sight of this social aspect of agonism is fail to understand what the contest means for Pindar. While the *agon* is both a *peira*, (test or trial, πεῖρα) and a *krisis*, (separating, judgment, κρίσις) this is only made possible by the gathering of competitors, communities, spectators, and judges. As Fitzgerald argues, “this

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is a reflection of the *agon* itself, which is both a gathering and a separating, a conflict and a celebration, and finally, an articulation of these opposites.™

Speech and contestation are central to the many manifestations of the *agon* in the context of 5th Century Athens. As Laura McClure argues, “to be a citizen was an act of speech, since to be a citizen meant to participate actively in the speech of the city, whether in the courts, the Council, the Assembly, or the agora.”™ It is important to note that all of these agonistic arenas had their own rules and customs for how contests would proceed and be assessed. One way to interpret agonistic speaking and acting in the context of the Athenian *polis*, is as a contest between participants in which each strives through creative rhetoric and inspired oratory towards victory over the other. The very act of speaking publicly is a struggle for victory and supremacy. This lends to agonistic contestation a character in which words and violence merge in politicized speech; the words themselves and not direct physical actions are deployed to wound one’s opponent. As such, the successful agonistic actor in the Assembly is one who inextricably combines combat, argumentation, and speech, and who deploys language to the end of victory. Words and clever rhetoric become weapons that can harm one’s opponent.

Many scholars have assumed that “the agonal arena of the Greeks was in its entirety a uniquely male phenomenon.”™ While agonistic action for the Greeks is

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typically seen as an androcentric phenomenon, women were also seen as capable of participating in certain types of agonistic action. There were documented female agones in the ancient Greek world. Pausanias reports that women competed in poetry competitions and that Corinna of Tanagra had the distinction of beating Pindar in his own birthplace, of Thebes. Cynisca of Sparta has the distinction of being “the first woman to breed horses and the first to win an Olympic victory,” in chariot racing. Cynisca had her victory immortalized in a bronze statue of herself with the winning chariot, and also had the honor of a hero cult established in her name. For women such as Corinna and Cynisca, even earning the right to compete against their male peers in male-dominated arenas would have been an agon in itself.

Athenaeus claims that both men and women competed in beauty contests, and that “the women who enter are called ‘gold-bearers’ (Chrysophoroe, χρυσοφόροι).” These beauty contests were seen as entitling the competitors and victors to honor and distinction; however, these beauty contests were less significant than other types of

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81 Ibid. 3.8.1. The passage also notes that “After Cynisca other women, especially women of Lacedaemon, have won Olympic victories, but none of them was more distinguished for their victories than she.”
82 Ibid. 5.12.5, 6.1.
83 Ibid. 3.15.1.
84 Athenaeus, The Deipnosophists, trans. Charles Burton Gulick, vol. VI, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1937). 13.609f. Interestingly, there were both male and female beauty agones. On male beauty contests: “Theophrastus, too, says that there is a beauty contest of men in Elis, that the trial is held with all solemnity, and that the winners receive weapons as prizes; these, says Dionysus of Leuctra, are dedicated to Athena and the winner, beribboned by his friends, leads the procession which marches to her temple.” 13. 609f.
contestation because victory hinged upon “a gift of chance.”

More importantly, women competed in specifically feminine contests assessing their moral virtues and skills in household management. Quoting Theophrastus, Athenaeus reports that "there are contests between the women in respect to moral virtue, (sophrosune) and good household management." Such contests were seen as more important because “the honor paid to moral virtue ought to be of a greater degree. Only because of moral virtue is beauty an honorable thing; for without moral virtue there is a danger of leading to licentiousness.”

As this shows, the domestic lives of women were seen as a venue for agonistic action. Women competed not only through physical beauty, but also in the domestic arts of household management such as weaving and child rearing, and in moral arenas of modesty, good-sense, and decorum. This casts new light on Pericles’ claim that female excellence entails being least spoken about among men. Exhorting women who have newly become war-widows, he says “great will be your glory in not falling short of your natural character, and greatest will be hers who is least talked of among the men whether for good or bad.”

Women are to compete against other women in modesty and humility, and to avoid becoming the topics of male conversation. Those who are spoken of in male gossip are also those who have lost the contest.

Despite the agonistic action of women, ancient conceptions of the agon do have a strongly masculine character. The emphasis on the violence of speech and contestation

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85 Ibid. 13.610a Gulick translates this as “this honor is a matter of chance.”
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid. 13. 610a-b.
grants to agonism a distinctly masculine character not merely because overtly agonistic actors are most frequently male, but more importantly because agonism is consciously linked to a heroic masculine ethos rooted in combat, contestation, courage, glory, and the desire for public political power. It should not be forgotten that agonistic action was not limited to the peaceful internal affairs of the city. War, informed by a Homeric understanding of the warrior, can be seen as constituting another agon in which violence and bloodshed are governed by rules of engagement that channel aggression and hostility. Peter Krentz argues that the unwritten rules of Greek warfare contributed to the development of the Hoplite agon, in which mass hand to hand combat was idealized and glorified. Homeric heroes are often described using the verb, emmemaos, (ἐµµεµαως) the sense of which is to rush forth eagerly, usually in the context of slaying ones enemies. Furthermore, the battles in Homer are often depicted as one on one contests between heroes on opposing sides. Within Aeschylus’ corpus, the word agon is used in the sense also common in the 5th century of “battle-fighting” five times. The agon of war is one which seeks to direct and unleash the violence of contestation in life and death struggles for victory which realize the existential identity of the heroic warrior.

91 Ibid. for example, “Book 7” Hector and Ajax, “Book 18” Hector and Patroclus “Book 22” Hector and Achilles.
Aeschylus’ trilogy the *Oresteia* chronicles the cycle of agonistic contestation and bloodshed that lays waste to the house of Atreus, and the repeated violence of justice as vendetta which can be stopped only by redefining the political, social, and judicial order. If one approaches the *agon* through the lens of Greek tragedy, one discovers that conceiving of the *agon* as a single definable term is itself an act of violence that obscures the complexity of the concept in ancient political thought and drama. The etymology of *agon* is related to “meeting,” “gathering,” “debate,” and the more common “contest.”

To grasp the plurality of the ancient *agon* it is helpful to think not of a single unified *agon*, but of multiple and diverse *agones*. *Agones* were found throughout ancient Greek social and political life, from the contests of the Olympic games, to the formalized legal arguments of the courts, to the political debates of the assembly, to the private teachings of the Sophists, and to the theatre of Dionysus. Within Greek drama, tragedy displays one kind of ritualized *agon*, the *agon* of expulsion or death, and comedy another, the *agon* of victory over evil. While both of these dramatic *agones* share an emphasis on the salvation and harmony of the community, tragedy does not offer easy solutions to the violence of contestation. Rather, the tragic *agon* probes the depths of problems, insists on ambiguity and complexity, resists simple solutions and denies closure. In this way, tragedy, unlike contemporary agonistic political theory, simultaneously grapples with and problematizes both the violence and desires for harmony and justice inherent in the *agon*.

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95 Ibid.
Tragedy does not shy away from or attempt to distort the violence that often accompanies agonistic contestation. Agonistic politics has not come to grips with the ambiguity and diversity of the *agon*, a significant problem given that agonistic theorists are committed to embracing agonism as a constitutive element of all democratic politics.

Approaching Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* as a series of violent physical and verbal contests questions the way in which contemporary agonistic theory has appropriated the *agon*. These contests fit within a history of violent revenge and contestation that has repercussions for the House of Atreus both before and after the action of the trilogy; all of the contests, whether they be the Feast of Thyestes long before Agamemnon’s return and the sacrifice of Iphigenia, Clytemnestra’s violent act of revenge, or Orestes’ acquittal at the trial, form a long chain of related agonistic contestations. In other words, the consequences of agonistic action in the *Oresteia* disturb notions of the purity of a single “independent” act by demonstrating how disparate contests separated by time, agents, and location, continue to influence and feed one upon the other by demanding further action and blood. Furthermore, the *Oresteia* shows that the *agon* and its politics not only provide an arena for the reconciliation of differences, but can also displace differences and justify exclusion instead of inclusion by permitting only certain kinds of contests, and in insisting through the threat of coercion or the realization of violence that the losers of agonistic contests must accept the terms of their defeat. Attempts to channel the aggression and desires that often fuel agonistic contests *can* and *do* fail in the face of agonistic contests between incommensurable identities. I argue that aggression forms the substratum of the human condition. As such, these aggressive drives can be sublimated
and channeled, or violently break out; both of which find expression in different forms of the *agon*. The *Oresteia* demonstrates that contests which mark the meeting of identities and differences more often than not struggle to secure the supremacy of one identity over its competitors through the domination of difference. Clytemnestra can only be satisfied by the total defeat of Agamemnon; Orestes requires that his opponents lie dead at his feet; for Athena and Apollo to win, the Furies must lose their case and become subsumed into the androcentric order of Athens. Agonistic action does not necessarily result in an embrace that enshrines differences as equal. That blood can flow as the result of agonistic contests is not something that contemporary agonistic theory can afford to forget.

In placing at centre stage a series of gendered and unequal agonistic contests of subjection and domination, my reading of the *Oresteia* and my broader engagement with Greek tragedy in its social and political context will call into question the assumption in agonistic theory that contest leads to a recognition and valuation of identity and difference. The *Oresteia* rather leads one to argue that the challenge of agonistic theory is not to embrace and affirm the perpetuity of contests as Honig posits, but to question whether these aggressive tendencies can be effectively controlled and channelled *without* resulting in the eradication of differences, strict censorship of public expression, domination of dissident identities, or the limiting of the political realm. These contests frame the terms of a critical engagement where tragedy serves as a catharsis of violence, and reflects on the political and social implications at the core of agonistic struggles for political inclusion and power. A driving force of my argument is a disarticulation of the

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way in which the *agon* has been adopted by contemporary political theory and a creative reclamation of the *agon* that is attentive to the ambiguity, complexity, and diversity of the *agon* in classical Greek political life and tragedy between agonistic actors. It is unclear how contemporary agonistic theories can ensure that conflict would disturb fixed identities instead of making relations of enmity more rigid, or why contestation would lead to inclusion rather than stigmatization. Why wouldn’t contestation make us even more aware of the differences that separate us? Why wouldn’t the results of high-stakes contestation lead to ever more polarization and seemingly irreconcilable factions? To phrase it differently, could the *agon* be transformed into a tool of reconciliation that could save the House of Atreus from the violent struggles and contests that shape its ruin? The *agon’s* potential for blood and violence is prominently displayed in the three plays of the *Oresteia*, so much so that the very act of “reading the *Oresteia* makes one afraid for one’s life.”\(^97\) What tragedy’s contesting voices upon the stage show us is that the *agon* is a savage beast which defies efforts to tame and domesticate it.

Chapter 1:
The Agony of Homer:
What is the Shield of Achilles to Us?

"if all men, by the act of being born, are destined to suffer violence, that is a truth to which the empire of circumstances closes their minds."
Simone Weil, “The Iliad, Poem of Might”

“the toil was endless, the victory unaccomplished, the contest unjudged;”
Hesiod, “Shield,” l. 310

The Iliad, called the poem of force by Simone Weil, glorifies the contestations and deeds of heroes caught up in the ever-tightening net of the Trojan War. Book 18 marks a significant turning point in the action of the Iliad. It is here that Achilles ends his withdrawal from battle, and it is the shield and armor forged for him by the smith-god Hephaestus that enables him to seek revenge against Hector for the slaying of his dearest friend and comrade Patroclus. Awash in the agony of his grief, Achilles determines to ignore the warnings of his goddess mother Thetis that his own death will follow quickly on the heels of his revenge. Once the mortal Achilles is newly armed in the armor fashioned for him by the immortal Hephaestus, the events that will ultimately lead to the destruction of Troy and the defeat of her protector Hector are set in motion.

Since Hephaestus cannot “hide him away from death and its sorrow,”1 he agrees to make Achilles a set of armor so fine “that any man in the world of men will marvel at through all the years to come – whoever sees its splendor.”2 However, the imagery that

1 Homer, Iliad. Book 18, l. 464.
2 Homer, Iliad, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin 1990 ). Book 18. l. 545-6. (Lattimore: “such as another man out of many men shall wonder at, when he looks on
Hephaestus selects to place on Achilles’ shield is not that which the audience would have expected to adorn the shield carried by the most fearsome and awe-inspiring warrior in the *Iliad*. In Greek epic and poetry the description of the shields of warriors typically pivot around sites of dread and horror. The splendid shield carried by King Agamemnon into the fray of battle is inscribed with Fear and Terror, with the severed head of a Gorgon and “her stare of horror.” The aegis of Athena is described as being composed of fearsome and horrifying images designed to stop the heart of the most courageous warrior:

“all about which Terror hangs like a garland, and Hatred is there, and Battle Strength, and heart-freezing Onslaught and thereon is set the head of the grim gigantic Gorgon, a thing of fear and horror.”

Hesiod, who clearly had the Shield of Achilles in mind, describes the Shield of Herakles as containing both scenes of idyllic beauty and bowel-loosening horror. While also containing a few scenes that depict a pastoral idyll and domestic life similar to those on the Shield of Achilles, the Shield of Herakles primarily contains scenes of death and destruction with Strife, Deathcloud, Death Demons, Manslaughter, and Confusion.

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3 Homer, *Iliad* Book 11, l. 36-7.
5 “Beside them stood Deathcloud, gloomy and eerie, pale and shriveled up; subdued by hunger, she was swollen at the knees, and her fingers were tipped with long nails. Snot streamed down from her nostrils, and from her cheeks blood dripped on the ground. There she stood with a famished grin, wearing upon her shoulders a coat of dust turned to mud by tears.” Hesiod, *Shield* l. 264-270.
6 “And among all these warriors black Death Demons clattered teeth that glistened white; yes, Death Demons war-grim and fierce, glutlusty and dripping, crimson with blood, fought over the fallen corpses, driven by thirst for dark blood. And they would dig their great claws into the flesh of the first warrior they snatched, either as he lay dead, or as he
literally rending the limbs of the fallen and dripping in their blood. As Athanassakis argues, “Through the shield of Herakles, the poet hammers at the listener with terrifying images of repulsive and violent monsters, and despite the presence of the city of peace, whose presence only enhances through contrast the horrors of strife and conflict, the poem is permeated by a nightmarish vision of the powers that man has to battle in order to secure peace.”

Indeed, the poet’s choice of decorative motif is remarkable for his decision *not* to depict mainly monsters and dread-goddesses designed to terrify one’s opponents. The shield does contain images of the extraordinary lives of the gods and monsters typical of the shields of heroes, but these images make up only a tiny fraction of the imagery on the shield. As Edwards writes, the Shield of Achilles is extraordinary for its composition of “scenes familiar to the poet’s audience from their everyday life. He has other designs than to frighten us.”

The Shield of Achilles contains many scenes which on the surface appear to depict a peaceful and well ordered human world. One is confronted with scenes of harvesting, winemaking, marriage, dancing, music, and singing. There has been a move by scholars of Homer to interpret the closing books of the Iliad, and the Shield of Achilles in

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particular, as indicative of a shift from epic’s age of heroes to the ethos of the *polis.*

Richard Seaford argues that there is a direct link between Homer and “the historical development of the *polis.*” However, while the Shield of Achilles does contain many scenes of city, domestic, and pastoral life of a highly unusual nature for the shield of a fearsome warrior set on revenge, the shield cannot be understood as exuding the “peace, serenity, order” which some scholars see. Nor can such scenes be seen as a metaphor for Achilles’ rehumanization and reintegration back into Greek society, which he makes a reality once he agrees to accept compensation from Priam for the death of Patroclus and decides to return Hector’s body. Achilles’ refusal to share food with the Greeks before battle speaks strongly to his lack of reintegration into human society. Indeed, his words that “food and drink mean nothing to my heart but blood does, and slaughter, and the groaning of men in the hard work,” powerfully evokes Achilles’ anger and continuing alienation. But if the Shield of Achilles as I argue does more than merely depict the peaceful and well-ordered life that Achilles has forsaken, then one must ask, “why is the

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9 See Gregory Nagy, *Homeric Responses* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003). p. 75. referring to the legal case in the city at peace: “the juridical scene…lays the conceptual foundations for the beginnings of the *polis*, even though the telling of the scene itself is framed by an epic medium that pretends, as it were, that there is as yet no *polis*."


11 Athanassakis. p. 117.


13 Homer, *Iliad.* Book 19, l. 199-214

14 Ibid. l. 213-4
Shield of Achilles, instrument of war in a poem of war, covered with scenes of delightful peace, of agriculture, festival, song, and dance?¹⁵

These scenes of peaceful rural and city life do not stand in judgment of the violence and brutality of the Trojan war and the Iliad as a whole; rather, they serve to remind one of the broader context in which such aggressive and violent agonism resides as an essential and constant component of the human condition. Instead of standing in judgment of the Trojan war, the idyllic scenes on the shield enable one to see the agonistic contestation between heroic warriors, armies, and cities as a continuation of the agonism found throughout all of Greek social and political life. Indeed, even in the depiction of the city at peace and the pastoral idyll of shepherding are agones which speak to both a real and threatened violence at the heart of contestation. Furthermore, the shield depicts such strife-filled agones not as dangerous threats which must be eliminated in order for a harmonious society to be realized, but rather as perfectly natural and essential components of what it means to be human. Taplin argues that, “the shield is a microcosm, not a utopia, and death and destruction are also there, though in inverse proportion to the rest of the Iliad. Rural life is invaded by the Lions, and one of the two cities is surrounded by armies and carnage.”¹⁶ As such, the Shield of Achilles is a microcosm depicting in miniature a variety of agones which touch upon all of human social and political life.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 357.
The shield can be read as an attempt to depict much of that which occurs in the world, and to place the Trojan war in a much broader context as one event that occurs in an entire world of possible actions. It “does not intend to present a particular occurrence, but paradigms of ever-continuing human social activities.”\textsuperscript{17} Importantly, the shield emphasizes some of the competitive elements of human existence, and omits others. As Taplin argues, “the Shield is a microcosm; but that does not mean it includes in miniature every single thing to be found in the world – that would be impossible, and is not in any case the way that poetry and art work. They select and emphasize in order to impart meaning. The shield omits, for instance, poverty and misery; it omits trade and seafaring; it does not figure of religion or cult, and it does not figure mythology or named hero’s and places.”\textsuperscript{18} When its entirety is glimpsed, the shield serves to illuminate the stakes in the Trojan War, and to comment on the limits that Achilles in his grief and anger is about to transgress. It is only through the joint depiction of the joy and sorrow of agonism as being the very stuff of the human condition that the shield can be seen as truly depicting the everyday life of humanity, and as being a brief moment of calm before the strife and storm of the \textit{Iliad’s} agonistic battles continue in the form of Achilles’ wrath and revenge.

\textbf{Ekphrasis: to Tell in Full}

In crafting a new set of armor for Achilles, Hephaestus first sets all twenty bellows to blowing on the crucibles, making the flames leap high and hot in his

\textsuperscript{17} Edwards, \textit{Books 17-20}. p. 208.
\textsuperscript{18} Taplin, ”The Shield of Achilles within the Iliad.” p. 356-7.
workshop, and sets to forging “a shield that was huge and heavy.” The vividness of the forging scene is dependent on the motion of the forges and the crippled smith setting about his work with complete control and poise. The narrative frame through which we encounter the shield is through the actions of Hephaestus as he moves about his workshop, engrossed in his craft. After the forging of the shield Hephaestus sets to making the rest of Achilles’ armor including a corselet, helmet, and greaves, which Homer describes in a mere five lines; it is the shield itself which is of the utmost importance. There is an irony in that the divine craftsmanship of the shield and armor cannot protect Achilles from a mortal death, despite their immortal maker. The shield and armor of Achilles serve to chain the deaths of first Patroclus, then Hector, and finally Achilles together, and serve “as an ironic gulf between the immortal gods, who fashion the armor and present it to their favorites, and the mortal heroes whom it cannot save from death.” This is a significant parallel to Troy, whose walls were crafted by Poseidon to make the city invulnerable and which also fail to protect either the city or its doomed inhabitants. As Scully notes, “both Achilles and Troy are ‘clothed’ in the divine and doomed.” Once Achilles takes up his arms and assumes a battle stance, stunning in his shining armor, he is warned for the last time that his own death is imminent. Astride his chariot he sings out to his team of horses that Patroclus will soon be revenged. He is answered by Xanthos, his horse, who replies that they will keep him safe for the time but

20 Ibid. l. 608-612.
that “still for you there is destiny to be killed in force by a god and a mortal.”

Immediately after speaking, the furies, ancient goddesses of vengeance, silence the horse’s voice. Achilles is deeply disturbed by this last prophecy of his death, and once more “the craftsmanship of an immortal and the short lifespan of the mortal are violently contrasted.”

Hephaestus begins the forging and decoration of the shield by making the earth, sky, sea, sun, full moon, and constellations at the heart of the shield. This series of images is the first to move us beyond the workshop of Hephaestus, and directly into the world depicted on the shield itself. It may initially appear as odd that Homer elects to place these elements at the centre of the shield, with the other designs revolving around them, instead of on the rim of the shield encircling all within. However, “their placement at the center suggests that Homer, foreshadowing pre-Socratic cosmology, conceived the four elements as internal to everything in the world.”

Taken together, these images of the sea, earth, and stars serve to order and set the bounds of human activity. As Becker argues, the effect of the ekphrasis in this section is that “the world represented and the visual image are conflated in the language of description.” The constellations were key in ordering the agricultural year, and the Bear in particular was an invaluable guide to sea-farers as its position in the night sky did not shift and was thus key to successful navigation. There is a clear link to the later cosmology of Hesiod in his Works and Days.

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26 Hubbard, "Nature and Art in the Shield of Achilles." p. 29.
which reflects a longstanding and antecedent history of poetry centering on nature, agriculture, and the cosmos. As Hubbard notes, “the world of the shield is therefore not only the world of Homer’s time, but the world as seen and represented through the various poetic arts as well as the visual arts.”

The next scene that Hephaestus fashions “in all their beauty” is that of the two cities “of mortal men:” the city at peace, and the city at war. The first city is filled with scenes of peacetime pursuits such as marriage festivals where the brides are led by torch light to their new husbands and the streets are filled with dancing, music, and singing. At first blush, the wedding scene seems to be a truly joyous occasion. However, when seen in the broader context of the *Iliad*, even these seemingly happy marriages can be seen as doomed unions. Weddings and their ill-fated couples are significant as it is the marriage feast of the newly and unhappily married Thetis and Peleus which is the starting point of the Trojan war, and it is from their union that Achilles, the destroyer of Troy is born. In the entirety of the *Iliad* there are no happy marriages. As Hubbard argues, “no marriage connected with the *Iliad* is innocent or free from a tragic outcome: not Peleus and Thetis, not Menelaus and Helen, not Hector and Andromache, not Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, not Odysseus and Penelope.”

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29 Homer, *Iliad*. Book 18, l. 490.
30 Ibid. l. 491-496.
31 At this feast the goddesses Athena, Aphrodite, and Hera establish a contest to determine who is the most beautiful. Paris is chosen to be the judge, and each goddess promises him certain things if he chooses her. Aphrodite promises Paris Helen.
While the marriage scene carries with it the implication of doom and violence, not all is entirely peaceful in the overt description of the scenes which comprise the city. In the marketplace before a crowd of onlookers a quarrel breaks out between two men over the ransom, or blood price, for a slain man. One man offers restitution, but the other refuses “and would accept nothing.”\(^{33}\) In a conflict which has already claimed one life the peaceful city is faced with the possibility of violence becoming once more realized. But instead of continuing the blood feud, the two men call for an arbitrator, “to have a decision,”\(^{34}\) and rush to where the judges of the city are in session, seated “on benches of polished stone.”\(^{35}\) The judges, arranged in a circle, debate the right and wrong of both men’s claims, and two talents of gold are offered to the “judge who in this case spoke the straightest opinion.”\(^{36}\) Surrounding the judges is a ring of onlookers who “were speaking up on either side, to help both men,”\(^{37}\) and the heralds who strive to keep “the people in hand.”\(^{38}\) As such, the trial scene is ordered in a series of circles, with the two litigants at the centre and surrounded by the judges who are then in turn surrounded by the onlookers. Furthermore, in the trial scene it is not just the litigants, judges, and onlookers who debate what would constitute justice in the case, but also the audience of the *Iliad* who are equally invited to take sides. Indeed, debates surrounding the legal significance,

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\(^{33}\) Homer, *Iliad*. Book 18, l. 500.

\(^{34}\) Ibid. l. 501.

\(^{35}\) Ibid. l. 504.

\(^{36}\) Ibid. l. 508.

\(^{37}\) Ibid. l. 502.

\(^{38}\) Ibid. l. 503.
meaning, and translation of the trial scene makes it one of the most disputed scenes in the entire *Iliad*.  

The line, “one man promised full restitution in a public statement, but the other refused and would accept nothing,” is highly ambiguous. It could also be translated as stating that one man was claiming to have paid in full, and the other was denying that he had received anything. As such, the dispute could be about if the paying of ransom constitutes a more just penalty than blood vengeance, or about if the ransom had already been paid and that justice had been done. The quarrel begins with a death, and threatens to conclude with at least one more as the plaintiff does not want to settle for restitution or a public statement; he wants the defendant dead. In this way, the dispute is about the justness of poine, (ποινή, blood price) and whether or not it applies to this case.

Following Nagy, I see the defendant in the trial scene as arguing for the right to pay ransom, compensation designed to serve as reparations for the death, and that the defendant is therefore also arguing that the slain man’s death is not a case of aggravated

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41 For parallels within the *Iliad* regarding poine see also Book 9, in which Ajax pleads with Achilles to accept treasure and the return of Briseis from Agamemnon, thus putting aside their feud. When Achilles refuses to relent, Ajax, despairingly says, “he is hard, and does not remember that friends’ affection wherein we honored him by the ships, far beyond all others. Pitiless. And yet a man takes from his brother’s slayer the blood price, or the price for a child who was killed, and the guilty one, when he has largely repaid, stays still in the country, and the injured man’s heart is curbed, and his pride, and his anger when he has taken the price; but the gods put in your breast a spirit not to be placated, bad, for the sake of one single girl.” l. 630-638. It is certainly no stretch to see some of Achilles’ behavior in the plaintiff’s favoring of revenge and refusal to accept ransom.
murder but one in which there are significant extenuating circumstance.\textsuperscript{42} Furthermore, if the issue is simply whether or not a debt has been paid in full, the issue would constitute a simple disagreement over facts, and as such it would not be a case that contains “an issue of principle that taxes the court.”\textsuperscript{43} In short, it would simply be unnecessary for the judges to meet, and compete in judgment and wisdom, over the matter of a mere debt.

Drawing upon the legal traditions of the ancient Near East, Westbrook argues that in cases of homicide and other serious crimes it was left to the court to determine whether or not the plaintiff had the right to seek revenge or ransom and what that ransom would be.\textsuperscript{44} Furthermore, that “the reason why the killer and not the other party is said to be arguing before the court is that the burden of proof is upon him to establish the existence of mitigating circumstances… The other party, the avenger, has the dual right to ransom or revenge. By refusing to take ransom, he asserts that the case is one of aggravated homicide and he therefore has a free choice between ransom and revenge, and he chooses the latter.”\textsuperscript{45} Nagy sums up the litigation scene as follows: “the defendant wishes the limit to be ransom, not revenge, while the plaintiff wishes the limit to be revenge, not ransom.”\textsuperscript{46} It is left up to the discretion of the court to establish whether revenge or ransom is most appropriate, and thus to determine which course of action the plaintiff has a moral duty to accept.

\textsuperscript{42} Nagy, \textit{Homeric Responses}. p. 77.
\textsuperscript{43} Westbrook, "The Trial Scene in the Iliad." p. 54.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. p. 58.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid. p. 75.
\textsuperscript{46} Nagy, \textit{Homeric Responses}. p. 78.
The litigation scene also raises the role of coercion in an interesting way. Ancient courts in the Near East did have it within their powers to hand down harsh punishments for serious crimes. However, we have no known records that these courts had their own mechanisms for bringing individuals before the court or for enforcing decisions. As Westbrook notes, “the problem of coercion arises at two stages: bringing one’s opponent to court, and enforcement of the court’s judgment.” While in the trial scene it appears that both litigants consent to come before the court, it is not clear if they both do so completely freely. It is possible that with the escalation of the quarrel and the gathering of the crowd in the marketplace, one or both of the litigants feels compelled to bring the matter before the court and furthermore to appear. Frequently plaintiffs would have to rely on friends, family, and neighbors to aid in bringing the defendant before the court, and it is certainly plausible that the crowd of onlookers could be fulfilling this role. Furthermore, the court lacks the power in and of itself to enforce and impose its decisions. As Gagarin notes, “neither an individual nor the state, in Homeric society at least, could compel anyone to submit to δίκη, [dike].” While the judges themselves lack the coercive might to impose their decision on the litigants should one or both disagree, the crowd, representing the broader human community, most certainly does not.

Just as the litigants are engaged in contestation with each other, so too are the judges. At the center of the competition amongst the judges lies the two talents of gold

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47 Westbrook, "The Trial Scene in the Iliad." p. 56.
48 Ibid. p. 56.
which are “to be given to that judge who in this case spoke the straightest opinion.”\textsuperscript{50} In the trial scene “the ultimate winner is the one who takes all, and this winner is neither of the two litigants.”\textsuperscript{51} Only one of the judges will be found to speak the most justly, and it will be this individual who receives the two talents of gold. Though it is not explicitly stated, it seems safe to assume that each litigant puts forth one talent. And while there are “no clear parallels for such a prize” from what is known about the procedures of Athenian courts, “it is plausible that when the settlement of disputes becomes a time-consuming occupation…litigants should be required to give a gift, in effect a fee, to the judge for settling their dispute.”\textsuperscript{52} That said, two talents of gold is quite a fee! In ancient Greece the talent was a unit of mass with a corresponding monetary value in different precious metals. One talent was the equivalent of sixty minas, six thousand drachmas, or thirty-six thousand obols. Ridgeway suggests that in Homer’s time the two talents of gold would be equivalent in value to two oxen.\textsuperscript{53} It is also possible that the case was only heard by the judges because of the hefty “prize” put forward by the two litigants. The quarrel begins in the marketplace and it will conclude not only with judgment but also with the exchange of money. Given the sums that are involved, one must wonder, how impartial are the judges?

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{50} Homer, \textit{Iliad}. Book 18, l. 507-8.
\textsuperscript{51} Nagy, \textit{Homeric Responses}. p. 85.
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However, thinking of the judges as attempting to put forward an impartial decision which considers only the legal facts of the case might be anachronistic. As Gagarin argues:

The important point to bear in mind is that one elder will speak the straightest δίκη, [dike] not by agreeing with one litigant or the other, but by finding the most acceptable settlement (δίκη) somewhere between the two opposing claims (δικαιο) [dikai]. This may be difficult for us to understand since our judges usually decide either for the plaintiff or for the defendant, but Homeric judges normally declared compromise settlements (as they had to in noncompulsory litigation). The purpose of the trial here is to find the best compromise, and thus the one who speaks the straightest δικε receives two gold talents as a fee.

As such, one can expect that the decision of each judge will attempt to mediate the dispute between the two litigants so that both parties will be forced to compromise. Since both defendants put forward the money together, this would seem to be a check on the partiality of the judges, as there would be no risk that deciding more in the interests of one than the other would result in either gaining or losing the two talent fee.

That said, one must consider the question of who decides which judge speaks the straightest. Clearly it is not left up to the litigants to decide which judge is the victor as each consented to the arbitration of the court, and as this would likely result only in more quarrelling and each man restating the justice of his own narrow point of view. One could also assume that it is not left to the judges to decide amongst themselves who has reached the best decision as this too could result in argument and each judge asserting the justness of his proposed outcome. There is, after all, both a large sum and public honor at stake. It would seem most likely then that it is the crowd of onlookers who, after listening to the

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54 Gagarin, "Dike in the Works and Days." p. 85.
decision of each judge, decide who will win the prize and whose words will carry the
day.\textsuperscript{55} Further support for this interpretation can be found in the line, “one man promised
full restitution in a public statement,”\textsuperscript{56} which suggests that the litigants are individually
appealing to the crowd’s judgment to determine who has the most just claim. In
Macdowell’s assessment the crowd of onlookers watching the trial cheers and applauds the judgments they find good, and the heralds are left to determine which judge received the greatest support from the crowd, meaning that “the decision is, effectively, the people’s.”\textsuperscript{57}

Importantly, however, we never see the moment of judgment, nor do we know if
the trial is resolved peacefully. We are instead left with the moment of contestation as an ongoing action, and not the narrative certainty of resolution. The litigants are forever engaged in bitter dispute. The judges are ever deliberating and competing with each other to be the one to speak the straightest $dikē$. The heralds are always striving to keep the crowd in check and prevent strong emotions from bubbling into violence. As Nagy notes:

“In the inner world of the Shield of Achilles, this group of arbitrators must compete with each other in rendering justice, until one winning solution can at last be found. Such a winning solution is also needed for the Iliad as a whole, which does not formally take a position on the question ‘Who is $aιτιος$ ‘guilty, responsible’ in the narrative?’ The response to this question is left up to someone beyond the Iliad.”\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{55} See also Gagarin, “Dike in the Works and Days,” who states: “It seems likely, though it is by no means certain, that the awarding of the prize was decided by the crowd of onlookers” p. 85.

\textsuperscript{56} Homer, Iliad. Book 18, l. 499-500.


\textsuperscript{58} Nagy, Homeric Responses. p. 85.
Indeed, the moment of narrative resolution is denied, and the story of the trial left open to many possible outcomes. The *Iliad* itself does not stand in judgment, nor does it seek to establish closure. It instead asks one to contemplate the many possible outcomes and to ponder their significance. It is not left to the bard to stand in judgment regarding right and wrong. Furthermore, if the legal system and the rule of law are viewed as forming the heart of the *polis* then the city at peace has competition at its heart. As Taplin notes, “Here is no vendetta or the perilous exile which Homer and his audience associated with the murderer in the age of heroes. We have, rather, arbitrators, speeches on both sides, and considered judgments.”59 The peaceful city, governed by the rule of law, and here characterized by the attempt to settle disputes through the law rather than customs of vendetta, is dependent on contestation.

In the city at war we are confronted with two armies, “shining in their war gear,”60 with one defending and the other besieging. In this city *agon* is nested within *agon*. While there is firstly the *agon* between the defenders and the besiegers there is also within the besieging army an internal *agon* in which the army itself is “divided whether to storm and sack, or share between both sides the property and all the possessions the lovely citadel held hard within it.”61 In other words, the besieging army is not only at war with the city it is attacking, but also with itself. The people within the city, refusing to give way, see this division and infighting as an opportunity, and attempt to turn the dissension to their own advantage. They begin to arm for an ambush with the goal of

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59 Taplin, "The Shield of Achilles within the Iliad." p. 349.
60 Homer, *Iliad*. Book 18, l. 509.
61 ibid. l. 510-12.
raiding the cattle and supplies of their besiegers. From the city’s ramparts the women, children, and “the men with age upon them,” look out upon the battlefield and watch as the ambushers leave the city. The ambushers are led by Ares and Athena to the site of the ambush. The ambushers lie in wait, and spring their trap once the two herdsmen with their cattle and sheep approach. The ambushers slay the herdsmen amidst a great cacophony from the battle and the terrified animals. The besieging army, hearing the uproar from the animals while they are debating in counsel, rushes after the ambushers “and soon overtook them.” The two groups engage in a bitter battle on the banks of the river. In the thick of the battle the goddesses of Confusion, Strife, and Din of Battle are present, drenched in the blood of the dead and dying, and grabbing hold of the dead, living, and wounded.

Athena and Ares are clearly recognizable in their splendid golden raiment and armor and are further set apart from the people they lead by their size: the gods are huge while the people are smaller. This marks the only time on the shield when the Olympian gods are depicted, a significant move that speaks to the bard’s motivations in depicting the world of humanity instead of the divine. The gods here appear to take sides in the conflict, as they also do in the Trojan war, by leading the people to the site of the ambush. In the broader context of the Iliad, the gods take a direct hand in the conflict by intervening in the fighting and encouraging their favorites. Much of the divine

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62 Ibid. l. 513.
63 Ibid. l. 514-515.
64 Ibid. l. 532.
65 Lattimore incorrectly translates Strife as Hate and Din of Battle as Death
intervention in the contests of men is also about settling scores for perceived past wrongs. For instance, both Hera and Athena despise Paris for deciding in favor of Aphrodite in the beauty contest. Poseidon too has a score to settle with the royal family of Troy from when he was compelled by Laomedon to build the very walls that protect Troy. Athena also frequently engages in deceitful conduct during the fighting, most famously by encouraging Hector to fight Achilles and then abandoning him right when he needs divine aid the most. In the city at war, however, the gods only lead and watch; they do not take a direct hand in the fighting.

That said, it is significant that in describing the gods upon the shield, Homer stops describing the action of the shield and returns to describing the shield as a work of art. In this way, the description of the gods draws attention once more to the distance between the immortal and mortal. In a sense, the description of the gods as leading the ambushers speaks to how the violence of fighting is itself a sending up of control; once the fighting starts, it is beyond human control. As Simone Weil argues, there is something unique about might and violence which constitutes a sending up of human control and has the power to render individuals into things. She writes that when might is “exercised to the full, it makes a thing of man in the most literal sense, for it makes him a corpse. There

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67 Homer. *Iliad*, Book 24, l. 22-30. “So Achilleus in his standing fury outraged great Hektor. The blessed gods as they looked upon him were filled with compassion and kept urging clear-sighted Argeiphontes to steal the body. There this was pleasing to all the others, but never to Hera nor Poseidon, nor the girl of the grey eyes, who kept still their hatred for sacred Ilion as in the beginning, and for Priam and his people, because of the delusion of Paris who insulted the goddesses when they came to him in his courtyard and favoured her who supplied the lust that led to disaster.”

68 Homer. *Iliad*, Book 21, l. 441-460.

69 Homer. Book 22, l. 270-271, 297-301, 446.
where someone stood a moment ago, stands no one. This is the spectacle which the *Iliad* never tires of presenting." In the description of the city at peace, it is clear that whatever the outcome of the trial scene, it will be a very human form of justice. With the ambushers in the city at war, however, the presence of the gods suggests that events are far beyond human control. Within the *Iliad*, “no single man is to be found in it who is not, at some time, forced to bow beneath might.”

The city at war contains many parallels to the broader narrative of the *Iliad*, and can be seen as prophesizing the fall of Troy. The “beloved wives and their little children,” recalls Hector’s wife and child, Andromache and Astynax, watching the fighting from the battlements of Troy. When Andromache hears that “the Trojans were losing, and great grew the strength of the Achaians,” she goes with the speed of “a woman gone mad,” to the wall with a nurse to care for the baby Astynax. From this vantage point, she could fearfully watch should Hector fall. At the wall also are “all the wives of the Trojans and their daughters” who run up to Hector when he returns to the city “to ask after their sons, after their brothers and neighbors, their husbands.” Knowing that “there were sorrows in store for many,” Hector replies to them that they must pray to the immortal gods. The gods will indeed be cruel to Andromache and Astynax. Widowed, she will be taken into slavery as war booty, and forced to watch

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71 Ibid. p. 161.
72 Homer. Book 18, l. 514.
73 Homer. Book 6, l. 387.
74 Ibid. l. 388.
75 Ibid. l. 238.
76 Ibid. l. 239-40.
77 Ibid. l. 240-41.
helplessly as her infant son is hurled from the very battlements from which they both stood watching and waiting for their doom. In Troy the women, children, and the elderly are compelled to watch powerlessly as the men on both sides fight and die. They are unable to either intervene in the fight, nor stop it; they can only watch, filled with trepidation and foreboding.

However, the same group depicted on the shield of Achilles seems to have more options for action and resistance available to them. These women, children, and the elderly do not stand on the wall merely to watch; they “stood on the ramparts to hold it.”\(^{78}\) As they watch the ambushers leave the city, one can only assume that they stand at the ready to defend their city and homes by hurling stones and other objects down upon their attackers should the city be attacked before the ambushers return.\(^{79}\) They do not stand idly by in fearful watchfulness, but rather watch with a war-like intensity and fierce commitment of their own. One suspects that the very fact that the ambushers are willing to chance a risky cattle raid, and must leave their women, children and elderly to defend the city in their absence, speaks to how incredibly dire the city’s situation has become.

In both the *Iliad* and the shield of Achilles there is an army divided in itself, lacking a unity of purpose. In the city at war, the besieging army is divided into two sides whose relationship to each other is ambiguous. Like the Greeks before Troy the two sides of the army do not agree amongst themselves and are split as to what action to take; they are engaged in active contestation over what to do. Should they sack and burn the city to

\(^{78}\) Ibid. Book 18, l. 514-15.

\(^{79}\) The verb is *ruomai* (ῥύομαι) meaning to shield, guard, protect, defend. Can also mean to rescue, to free, redeem, or deliver.
the ground, or should they rather pillage the city and divide the spoils between both sides of the army? This closely mirrors the Greek army besieging Troy. Agamemnon desires to destroy Troy utterly, down to the last male child still in his mother’s womb. He says to his brother Menelaus who is inclined to ransom the supplicating Trojan Adrestos, “let not one of them go free of sudden death and our hands; not the young man child that the mother carries still in her body, not even he, but let all of Ilion’s people perish, utterly blotted out and unmourned for.”

Thinking this to be right, Menelaus bodily shoves the boy towards Agamemnon who slays him. In the same scene Nestor, one of the most persuasive speakers in the *Iliad*, councils the army, “henchmen of Ares, let no man any more hang back with his eye on the plunder designing to take all the spoil he can gather back to the vessels; let us kill the men now, and afterwards at your leisure all along the plain you can plunder the perished corpses.”

As in the broader narrative of the Trojan war, it is only the besieged who possess a unity of action and purpose.

The very fact that the men of the besieged city decide to embark on a dangerous and risky cattle raid speaks to their unity of purpose, and grim determination to turn the tables on their attackers and break the siege. As such, the willingness of the ambushers to risk all speaks to their courage, heroism, and most importantly defiance. In the context of the *Iliad*, cattle raiding is associated with martial skill, agonistic competition, danger, plunder and provisioning, and bravery. Nestor refers to his cattle raiding in his younger

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80 Homer, *Iliad*. Book 6, l. 57-60.
81 *Dikē* does not appear, but *aisimos* (αἰσιμός, suitable, right) and *phren* (φρήν, reason) do. Book 6, l. 61, 62.
82 Ibid. Book 1, l. 67-71.
days as a way of speaking to the prowess he once possessed as a warrior. 83 Camped outside the walls of Troy, the Greek army used cattle raids to re-provision itself to such an extent that Thucydides argued that had the Greeks brought more supplies and opted not to engage in “plundering expeditions… they would have won easily.” 84 When Aineias is urged on to face Achilles and his wrath in battle, he states that this would not be the first time he has faced Achilles; Aineias was driven out of Ida when Achilles raided his cattle. 85 The competitive agonistic character of animal theft is apparent in Achilles’ statement that he has no personal quarrel with the Trojans since “never yet have they driven away my cattle or my horses,” 86 implying that if they had, Achilles would feel obligated to compete with the Trojans and win back more than what he personally lost. Cattle raiding is itself a mode of agonistic contestation that is not unique to wartime, and constitutes a type of small scale proto-war during periods of peace; indeed, it is even regarded as a respectable profession. As such, the Greeks saw conflict as always being a part of life even in times of peace. Writing of a Cretan mountain village which still practices cattle raiding today and lays claim to a Homeric tradition of animal theft, Herzfeld argues that cattle raiding as a mode of agonism “embodies a local conflict; it claims a higher order of wit and courage.” 87

83 Ibid. Book 6, l. 669-683.
86 Ibid. Book 1, l. 154.
At the site of the ambush, the ambushers lay in wait for the herdsmen. For their part, the herdsmen “playing happily on pipes… took no thought of the treachery.” The ambushers quickly slay the herdsmen, whose unlucky deaths are portrayed “with the same small touch of pathos that marks the death of so many inconsequential warriors in the poem.” The last thing that the herdsmen do is to delight their ears with carefree music, completely unaware of the danger and their imminent doom. The deaths of the herdsmen alarm the animals who begin to create a terrified uproar, alerting the besiegers. It is only when the besieged become the aggressors that “the divided besiegers are thus compelled to abandon their idleness and their division to defend their flocks.” They race from their councils, putting aside their disagreements to defend their holdings.

Homer describes the ensuing battle in rapid fire prose that serves as a hyperlink, placing the audience directly in the middle of the action. The raid itself quickly becomes a war within a war, with the goddesses of Confusion, Strife, (Eris) and Din of Battle playing an active role in the butchery. This is the only place on the shield where we see the Strife of hatred who spurs men to war, as opposed to the positive face of Strife that can be seen in the city at peace leading the judges to compete in rendering justice. As the men of the armies fight on the banks of the river, and over the corpses of the fallen, the goddesses constitute a dreadful presence that serves as a reminder of how quickly agonism can descend into violent bloodshed. The description of Din of Battle marks the most terrifying image upon the shield. The clothing she wears “showed strong red with

88 Homer. *Iliad*. Book. 18, l. 526.
the men’s blood,” and “she was holding a live man with a new wound, and another one unhurt, and dragged a dead man by the feet through the carnage.” The live man can easily be seen as Achilles, and the dead man dragged by the feet seems to clearly foreshadow the death of Hector, and his corpse being dragged behind Achilles’ chariot. As such the relatively small battle between the besieging army and the ambushers foreshadows the fall of Troy. The ancient Greeks regarded war as “a traditional and all-absorbing form of sport,” and as “the great and only game.” The vivid telling of a battlefield soaked in the blood of the dead, dying, and wounded serves to remind one of the terrible stakes involved when one plays at the game of war.

Significantly, Homer here does not depict the end of the battle. We never know who triumphs, and the two sides hammered onto the shield are perpetually engaged in violent conflict, surrounded by dread goddesses delighting in the destruction. Furthermore, while the motive of acquiring much needed provisions can easily be supplied for why the ambushers leave their city, one can also wonder if the ambushers had the added motivation of deliberately luring the besiegers into a battle away from the city. If read in this way then the ambush can be seen as a set-up intentionally designed to lure and engage their attackers. Do the ambushers anticipate that the scent of blood will alarm the animals and draw out the enemy, or does the terror of the beasts and its consequences take them completely by surprise? In other words, is the ambush indicative of good military strategy laid low by bad luck, or is the botched cattle raid and the arrival

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91 Homer. *Iliad*. Book 18, l. 538.
92 Ibid. l. 536-7.
of the besieging army an unexpected stroke of misfortune? Certainly, ill fortune plays a considerable role in this *agon*, and is reminiscent of Achilles’ tragic worldview that people receive at best mixed gifts from the gods, and some are only given evils which ultimately destroy them.\(^94\) Without doubt, the naïve slaughtered herdsmen seem to have been given disproportionately evil gifts, much like Andromache’s seven brothers who were all slain tending their cattle and sheep.\(^95\)

The depiction of the city at peace and the city at war as being side by side with each other serves to put war and peace into perspective both in the Trojan war and beyond. As Becker notes, these scenes show that “though it dominates this epic, war is only one part of life in the world.”\(^96\) Alden argues that “the ideal world of the first city, where disputes go to arbitration and festivities are the order of the day is very different from the nightmare vision of the second city.”\(^97\) However, this interpretation sees the shield as depicting both a utopia and a distopia, and implies that the shield offers a choice between war and peace. Instead, I argue that the depiction of the two cities shows that both war and peace are an ever-present part of human existence. It is also quite possible that the two cities are not two different cities, but are rather the same city depicted at two different moments in time. Furthermore, historically in the ancient world peace and neutrality were not options that could be chosen. To refer back to Thucydides, the Melians desired to remain neutral and avoid war, but the stronger Athenians denied them the choice. Permanent peace was not an option, as it was a hard fact that all cities would

\(^{94}\) Homer. *Iliad*. Book 24, l. 525-533.
\(^{95}\) Ibid. Book 6, l. 421-424.
attack and be attacked by their neighbors, and many cities were constantly engaged in warfare. The actions of the men in the city at peace to seek out arbitrators clearly speaks to a desire to contain violence and preserve peace. However, the city at peace is implicitly threatened by war through its placement on the shield directly next to the city at war. In this way, the city at peace is threatened by an internal *agon* whose violence it attempts to control, and also by an external *agon* consisting of the threat of war.

The two cities can neither be seen as condemning war and the misery it sows, nor as promoting peace as an alternative free from the passions of hatred and anger that often lead to violence and war. Instead, the two cities place human existence on a continuum between two extremes, both of which have their merits and disadvantages. As Taplin argues, the shield of Achilles “makes us think about war and see it in relation to peace,”\(^\text{98}\) without being either pacifist or antiwar. For Homer, “it is just as sentimental to pretend that war does not have its monstrous ugliness as it is to deny that it has its own strange and fatal beauty, a power, which can call out in men resources of endurance, courage and self-sacrifice that peacetime, to our sorrow and loss, can rarely command.”\(^\text{99}\) The city at peace can be seen as lauding the very human efforts to control violence through justice and the institutions of the *polis*. The city at war, however, can be seen as highlighting the heights of courage and bravery that war brings out in individuals, as well as drawing attention to the cruelties and sorrows that the violence of war sows.

For the remaining scenes on the shield, Hephaestus fashions images from daily life. He makes “a soft field, the pride of the tilled land… with many ploughmen upon

\(^{98}\) Taplin, "The Shield of Achilles within the Iliad." p. 361.
it.\textsuperscript{100} After the ploughmen reach the end of a strip of land, a man races up to them to refresh them with “a flagon of honey-sweet wine,” and the ploughmen once again turn to the furrows and make haste to complete another full turn of the field.\textsuperscript{101} This scene speaks to Hesiod’s idea of the positive competition engendered by the first face of \textit{Eris}, the goddess of strife, whereby “a man will long for work when he sees a man of wealth who rushes with zeal to plow and plant,”\textsuperscript{102} and not to the second face of violent rivalry that \textit{Eris} also inspires. Following immediately after the city at war, this scene seems to implore individuals to turn away from the negative \textit{Eris} who spurs men towards violent conflict, and towards the good \textit{Eris} through competitive devotion to their work and the quest for prosperity.

Next are scenes of harvest and kingship, and winemaking. The laborers reap the harvest as their King happily looks on, herals slaughter an ox for a feast, and the women set out barley for the laborers to eat.\textsuperscript{103} In the vineyard young boys and girls, “in all their light-hearted innocence,”\textsuperscript{104} pick the grapes to the accompaniment of a singer with his lyre. The grape pickers rush off with their baskets brimming full, keeping time with the music “with singing and whistling and light dance-steps.”\textsuperscript{105} These scenes show people playing and delighting in their work. The scene of kingship depicts the ties of duty and obligation between a king and his subjects. It is deeply economic in that the subjects bring the wealth of the harvest to their king who then determines how the bounty will be

\textsuperscript{100} Homer, \textit{Iliad}. Book 18, l. 541-2.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid. l. 544-7.
\textsuperscript{102} Hesiod, \textit{Works and Days}. l. 21-2.
\textsuperscript{103} Homer, \textit{Iliad}. Book 18, l. 550-60.
\textsuperscript{104} Ibid. l. 567.
\textsuperscript{105} Ibid. l. 571-2.
distributed. As Taplin notes, this scene represents a king and his *temenos*, “an especially desirable estate granted to [the king], the kind of privilege which any great *basileus* might hope to return to after the war, the kind which Achilles might have had if he had chosen long life instead of glorious death.”\(^{106}\) The vineyard scene shows the joy and delights of peacetime typified by song and dance which the warriors in Troy have forsaken.

As if to remind his audience that all of human existence constitutes a life lived on the edge, Homer next depicts two lions savaging a bull while the shepherds and their dogs attempt to drive them off. The scene begins idyllically, with the herdsmen leading their herd of oxen to pasture and water. However, the “two formidable lions,”\(^{107}\) shatter the peace and serenity of this pastoral scene by seizing upon and dragging away a bull. The herdsmen with their dogs pursue, “but the two lions, breaking open the hide of the great ox, gulped the black blood and the inwards guts.”\(^{108}\) The herdsmen attempt to set their pack of dogs on the lions, but the frightened dogs are turned back, and keeping clear they bay and take up a stance near the lions. As Taplin argues, the lions break in upon this pastoral idyll “as though to prevent the world of the shield from being too perfect.”\(^{109}\) Once again Homer does not give any narrative closure to the scene, and the audience is left to wonder if the herdsmen will succeed in driving off the lions, or if the lions will lay waste to the herd and its protectors. The savagery of the lions and the inability of the herdsmen and their dogs to save the doomed bull serves as a reminder that human beings

\(^{106}\) Taplin, "The Shield of Achilles within the Iliad." p. 352.
\(^{107}\) Homer, *Iliad*. Book 18, l. 579.
\(^{108}\) Ibid. l. 582-3.
\(^{109}\) Taplin, "The Shield of Achilles within the Iliad." p. 353.
are also engaged in a cruel and violent contest with nature. Following immediately after the scenes of harvest and harmony, the brutality of the lions demonstrates that “in the peacetime agricultural world man’s worst enemy is the lion, not other men.” Once again, Homer underscores that even in times of peace human beings engage in dangerous forms of contestation. Furthermore, the lions also recall the savagery with which the Achaean warriors fell upon Troy and her people.

The final scenes of the shield return to imaginings of leisure, nature, and peace. Hephaestus crafts a serene shaded meadow populated by flocks of sheep and dotted with shepherds’ steadings; the bucolic vision of the meadow which the herdsmen from the previous scene had hoped to find for their cattle. Next, the smith-god fashions a scene of dancing, rejoicing, and singing. This scene contains a kind of frenetic and euphoric energy as the finely dressed young men and women dance in circles as if on a potters wheel. The dancing and singing is led by two acrobats while “revolving among them.” Surrounding the revelers is a contented multitude, recalling the onlookers from the litigation scene in the city at peace, just as the young men and women recall the festivities of the marriages from the same scene. Even though this scene contains in itself only joy and delight, it too has a place in the broader context of the Trojan war. Singing, dancing, and young love, as Taplin notes, epitomize pleasurable peacetime pursuits which are “useless and even despised in time of war.” Furthermore, it is exactly these

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110 Ibid.
111 Homer, *Iliad*. Book 18, l. 600-1.
112 Ibid. l. 604-5.
pursuits which the warriors have forsaken for themselves in favor of darker deeds. Should war ever encroach on the world of the dancers, these same youths would be forced to trade their fine clothing for helmets and spears, and the women would be left to fearfully watch the battle.

The final image of the shield is that of “the great strength of the Ocean River,” flowing around the entire outer rim of the shield, and encompassing all depicted upon it. In this way, the Ocean River serves as a reminder that all of the scenes that make up the shield of Achilles are integral parts of what it means to be human, and that none of the scenes, whether of war or peace, can stand alone or be removed. By physically joining all of the scenes together, the River Ocean demonstrates that “on the shield the actions of peace complement those of war.” In this way, the River Ocean is a vivid reminder that contestation, both during peace and war, is the very stuff of politics and humanity.

**Achilles’ Choice and the Fear and Trembling of the Myrmidons**

When Achilles first set sail for Troy, he made the choice that would define him for all time. He chooses not to live a long and prosperous obscure life, but rather a short life filled with glory and everlasting fame. He chose brevity and glory. When Agamemnon robs Achilles of Briseis he also robs him of the honor and glory which is due Achilles as a warrior. As such, Agamemnon’s actions lower Achilles’ status and compel him to reflect on his reasons for fighting. In choosing to withdraw from the field

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of battle Achilles not only turns his back on the currency of glory and honor which had previously defined him as a warrior above all others, but also on suffering. Achilles chooses to no longer suffer the physical and mental wounds of war. It is only with the death of Patroclus, and the well of suffering that Achilles’ grief plunges him into that Achilles sees a reason to return to the fight. He chooses differently. He does not return to seek the glory and honor which is his due and which he will receive, but to wreak revenge on all of Troy for the death of his dearest and most irreplaceable friend. The moment when Achilles receives his new armor is also the moment in which his own fate and that of Troy is sealed. By accepting the armor Achilles chooses to end his isolation and to turn unflinchingly down the path of violence, vengeance, and suffering. What is Achilles’ anger and grief if not suffering? What are his deeds as a warrior if not the willful infliction of suffering on others?

As Taplin states, when Achilles takes the armor and his shield from his mother’s hands, “we are made to contemplate the life that Achilles has renounced and the civilization that Troy will never regain. The two finest things in the Iliad – Achilles and Troy – will never again enjoy the existence portrayed on the Shield: that is the price of war and of heroic glory. The Shield of Achilles brings home the loss, the cost of the events of the Iliad.”\(^{116}\) Newly armed with his shield on his arm, Achilles himself is consumed by a unique and terrifying glory. As Schein argues, “Achilles embodies in purest form the characteristically Homeric conception of the tragic contradictions of warfare and heroic life, of the potential greatness and potential horror, the inextricably

\(^{116}\) Taplin, "The Shield of Achilles within the Iliad." p. 361.
linked beauty and sorrow of human existence."\textsuperscript{117} And though Achilles is the greatest among the Greek heroes, the glory that he achieves through the massacres of the final books of the \textit{Iliad} is fearsome, awe-inspiring, and terrible. In Simone Weil’s words, "Achilles beheads twelve Trojan adolescents on Patroclus’ funeral pyre as naturally as we cut flowers for tomb."\textsuperscript{118} Indeed, Achilles’ actions in the final books of the \textit{Iliad}, the ease with which he maims, massacres, and destroys, sheds light on why his shield is almost entirely free of monsters. In his suffering, agony, and revenge, Achilles in and of himself has become all the monster needed to terrify his opponents. Coupled with the images of peace that he bears upon his shield, Achilles has become more terrifying than any gorgon, medusa, or dread goddess that Hephaestus could have devised. Achilles has become the monster as hero by going beyond the limits, and it is his shield that reminds us all of what is at stake, and what is irretrievably lost.

As soon as Thetis presents the shield and armor to Achilles, a great “trembling took hold of all the Myrmidions.”\textsuperscript{119} Whereas Achilles’ “eyes glittered terribly under his lids, like sunflare”\textsuperscript{120} at the sight of the shield, the Myrmidons can only avert their eyes. Of the men who compose the fiercest and most esteemed fighting force in the \textit{Iliad}, “none had the courage to look straight at it. They were afraid of it.”\textsuperscript{121} Men who would not hesitate to face the spears of their opponents and whose camp is placed on one of the most vulnerable positions occupied by the Acheans, are suddenly filled with dread at the

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\textsuperscript{117} Seth L. Schein, \textit{The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984). p.163.  \\
\textsuperscript{118} Weil, "The Iliad, Poem of Might." p. 163.  \\
\textsuperscript{119} Homer, \textit{Iliad}. Book 19, l. 14.  \\
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid. l. 17.  \\
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid. l. 14-15.
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sight of their leader’s armor. As Scully argues, “the shield depicts a vision which unnerves even the most resolute of human heroes.”\textsuperscript{122} It is only Achilles who dares to drink deep of the images on the shield. His delight coupled with the hardening of his anger is a stark contrast to the fear and trembling that grips the Myrmidons.

Some scholars have suggested that the reaction of the Myrmidons stems from being overcome by the blinding light of the divinely crafted shield. Edwards states that the Myrmidons are “overawed by the glare of the armor alone,”\textsuperscript{123} while Becker writes that the shield is “too bright for others to look at.”\textsuperscript{124} As such, the trembling of the Myrmidons is seen simply as the unremarkable reaction of mere mortals to having gazed directly upon the work of divine hands. I argue, however, that the fear and trembling that overcomes the Myrmidons has a much deeper and more profound source. The shield in and of itself is terrifying precisely because it shows in one glance all of the joy, sorrow, and uncertainty of human existence. In depicting war and peace, violence and harmony, as being inextricably bound up with one another, the shield does not hide the suffering that violence and hatred inflict. The constant “undercurrent of discord and violence,”\textsuperscript{125} and the ease with which the limits of peace are transgressed in the pursuit of glory and honor are intimately woven together in the images of the shield. In showing joy and suffering as two sides of the same coin, the shield disturbs the narrative of glory that accompanies war, and illuminates the consequences of its violent pursuit.

\textsuperscript{122} Scully, ”Reading the Shield of Achilles: Terror, Anger, Delight.” p. 45.
\textsuperscript{123} Edwards, \textit{Books 17-20}, p. 236.
\textsuperscript{124} Becker, \textit{The Shield of Achilles and the Poetics of Ekphrasis}. p. 149.
\textsuperscript{125} Hubbard, ”Nature and Art in the Shield of Achilles.” p. 29.
When seen in this context of contestation and violence the shield examines the tensions involved in going past the limits of its more prosaic qualities. The images of peace and harmony become fragile, tenuous, and above all temporary when viewed next to hatred, strife, and violence. As Schein argues, “much of the tragic power of the *Iliad* derives from a paradox: the activity that has the highest value, the individual and collective attainment of honor and glory by both Trojans and Greeks, involves destroying a city that represents all that is domestically and socially most humane and civilized – a city much like the home cities of the Greek warriors left behind.”

The shield compels those who look upon it to see that Troy is not so different from the cities that many of the Greek warriors will never see again, and how easily the situation could be reversed. It shows the joys of harvest and leisure, while at the same time bearing witness to the destruction and grief that warfare inflicts on women, children, and those who can no longer fight. It highlights the role of justice and the rule of law in attempting to bring peace to the internal affairs of the city and depicts the will and determination on the part of one city to destroy and another to defend. On issues of right and wrong the shield remains ambiguous and allusive, never once presenting any side as more just than the other. The shield never allows for its population to be seen simply as victims and killers; there are victims who are killers and killers who are victims.

The shield both admits and depicts a world that accepts conflict and discord. What is so terrifying about the shield is the god’s eye view of all that goes on in the world, and the knowledge of what it means to transgress those limits. The individuals depicted on

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the shield are ever-embroiled in the ambiguity of their scenes. When viewed by outside observers the artistry of the scenes upon the shield take on an enlivening stasis that allow for one to draw back from one’s own particular position in the world and to contemplate not a single individual scene, but all of humanity’s world at once. When looking down on the shield one can see its unity, which escapes if viewed from the position of any one particular person in the shield. As the Myrmidons show, the shield of Achilles invites us to look on it, and the act of seeing it all at once is terrifying. Even the audience of the Iliad does not see the shield in its entirety. We are only allowed to see it piece by piece as it is being fashioned. We never see it as a completed whole. If we did, we would more than likely shrink away from it in fear just as the Myrmidons do. Only the gods and Achilles with his god-like wrath can withstand it in its entirety. In showing the terrible beauty of violence and contestation alongside fleeting images of harmony and what might have been, the shield of Achilles expresses the stakes in the picture of internecine conflict that is the Trojan War. On it, “the gain and the loss are put side by side without prejudice,”¹²⁷ and are seen as always accompanying the greatest of human achievements. In short, the shield of Achilles depicts a world of agonism which can only be seen as tragic.

Chapter 2:

Clytemnestra’s Contest: Women and the Violence of the Agon

“No mortal is prosperous or happy to the last, for no one was ever born to a painless life”

Agamemnon in Euripides’ Iphigenia in Aulis, l. 161

Victorious in battle and held in the highest esteem for his exploits, a king and husband returns home after a ten year absence. His homecoming will not be the one he expects. He will be met not with adulation and joy, but rather by a woman who is more like “an accursed bitch,”1 “a viper double-fanged,”2 or “a Scylla witch”3 than a loving wife. She has become his most daring and deadly adversary. In his absence she has not only ruled, but has meticulously planned to avenge the murder of their daughter, killed with the king’s own hands. The queen will engage her husband in a deadly contest of words. She will beckon him to tread upon a path of crimson into the palace, foreshadowing his true welcome. For this woman a victory in words will not suffice. She “lust[s] for conflict:”4 the king must die by her hand. The contest, known as the Greek agon, has turned bloody. Soon the palace will reek like a battlefield, its halls filled with the stench of violence; its baths filled with the blood of the fallen king. And yet, more

2 Ibid. l. 1233.
3 Ibid. l. 1233.
4 Ibid. l. 940.
slaughter will come to these halls and the contest will be reawakened by the old song of sin, hatred, and revenge.

The story is that of Aeschylus’ *Agamemnon* in which the king’s triumphant return becomes the opportunity for his murder at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra. Through a close reading of the carpet scene, I argue that Aeschylus presents a series of highly gendered and unequal contests of subjection and domination. As an agonistic actor Clytemnestra calls into doubt the claims by agonistic theory that the *agon* fosters mutual recognition and accommodation. The carpet scene instead highlights the aggressive tendencies of the *agon* and questions if the violence of the *agon* can be controlled and channeled without relying on the maintenance of inequality and limiting access to the political. As Clytemnestra’s agonistic action demonstrates, the tragic *agon* intimately links persuasion and violence in struggles to gain political inclusion and power. In contests where women seek to enjoy the benefits of masculine inclusion such as citizenship, rights, political speech, honor, and glory, the *agon* demonstrates a much greater propensity to spiral into violence. A re-imagining of tragic heroines like Clytemnestra sees their challenges as indicative of a tension and failing in which the

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5 Although the scene is typically known as “the carpet scene,” in scholarship, it is a misnomer. As Hugh Llyod-Jones states, “I wish people would not talk about ‘the carpet scene’; a carpet is meant to be trodden on, and the most important thing about Clytemnestra's priceless tapestries is that they were not.” For the sake of convenience and continuity with the existing literature, I have chosen to refer to the scene as the carpet scene, as referring to it more accurately as “the tapestry scene,” would create unnecessary confusion despite my agreement with Jones. Clytemnestra does not roll out the red carpet for Agamemnon; instead she bids him to trample and destroy the rich tapestries and garments that comprise the material wealth of his household. see Hugh Lloyd-Jones, "Review: Lebeck (A.) the Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 92 (1972). p. 194.
masculine public *agon* of political speech is constructed and maintained by an exclusion of the feminine.

**Women’s Speech and the Agon**

In terms of the different types and varieties of *agones*, it is key to note that agonistic speech in the context of Athens is directly and inextricably linked to the masculine public life of the *eklesia* (ἐκκλησία, assembly) and not to the feminine private life of the *oikos* (οἶκος, household). Agonistic speech is thus always a striving that plays out in a rivalry between honor-seeking individuals. In the context of Athens, agonistic contestation was a defining characteristic of public speech between male citizens capable of participating in the political workings of the *eklesia*. As Arendt argues, the agonistic character of political speech and action serves “as a way of distinguishing or disclosing oneself,”\(^6\) and as the opportunity for citizens “to win ‘immortal fame,’” in the public political life of the *polis*.\(^7\) Agonistic speech contests permeated all expressions of the Athenian *agon* as, “all Athenian citizens engaged in the contest of words either as actors or as spectators not only in the Assembly and the courts, but also in the dramatic and poetic competitions of the city Dionysia.”\(^8\)

Athenian women, however, were deliberately excluded from participating in most venues for public agonistic speech and contestation. Since to partake in agonistic contestation requires that one also be able to participate in the speech at the heart of the

\(^{8}\) McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama*. p. 15.
political and public governing of the Athenian *polis*, women as non-citizens are by definition excluded. The lives of most Athenian women centered around the *oikos* and not the *polis*. Many women dedicated their lives to household management, family, and the cultivation of feminine virtues. For those women who did hold careers, these occupations were typically related to traditional feminine roles and saw women working as priestesses, midwives, and wet nurses.\(^9\) Women who enjoyed lives outside of marriage or who had careers as poets and painters were the exceptions and not the rules. It must be noted that this does not mean that women were incapable of competing. Women did compete in areas within the household such as the bearing and raising of children, skills in the domestic arts, and played a significant role in furthering the ambitions of husbands and sons. Women even were known to participate in athletic and poetry competitions. The story is not simply one of exclusion even in public life, as women did enjoy prominent roles in Greek religion and funerary rites, and even competed in terms of the beauty and power of the laments that they could sing for the dead. However, the competitive avenues that were open to women did not enable them to participate as full members in the public and political life of the *polis*. As such, women are barred from meaningful participation in the *agon* as a civic and political institution. Complicating this lived reality of real Athenian women, is the role of women in Greek tragedy. As Cecilia Sjöholm argues, “the strength of the heroine in Attic tragedy contradicts the oppression of real, historic women. If women were invisible in ancient Athens, and if democracy and

tragedy were an affair for free men, why were so many tragedies about women? The question is not why female characters are flawed or even evil, but why they appear at all, given the male dominance in Athenian society.\textsuperscript{10} Whereas the majority of extant Greek prose explicitly links women to the private and speechless life of the \textit{oikos}, tragedy flaunts its bold and outspoken women on the public stage in a way which highlights the gendered conflict between \textit{oikos} and \textit{polis}.

While women were prevented from engaging in the honor-seeking of agonistic contestation enjoyed by male citizens, this is not to say that women’s speech was regarded as ineffective. Quite to the contrary, “women’s verbal expressions [were] viewed as potentially dangerous.”\textsuperscript{11} The speech of rhetorically strong and verbally agile women in tragedy is thus both a surprise and a discursive element in Athenian society. The transgressive speech of women in tragedy is marked by a “pervasive association between women and deception.”\textsuperscript{12} Women’s speech in tragedy is more often than not represented as deceitful, manipulative, linked to adultery and promiscuity, and at odds with the dominant modes of speech practiced by husbands and other masculine authorities.\textsuperscript{13} Furthermore, the agonistic speech of women characterized by a deliberate verbal transgression of masculine authority is arguably made possible by the freedom that


\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. p. 5.

\textsuperscript{13} McClure, \textit{Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama}. p. 20, and McClure, "Introduction." p. 6.
women gain from the absence of men.\textsuperscript{14} Clytemnestra’s speech, for example, is first enabled by the prolonged absence of Agamemnon during the Trojan war. In the \textit{Oresteia}, Orestes thinks that it is best for him to talk to a man\textsuperscript{15} demonstrating that “in the trilogy even talking to women is viewed as fundamentally different than talking to men.”\textsuperscript{16} Even more importantly, the speech of women through the figure of Clytemnestra is shown to be capable not only of triumph, but also of subverting masculine order and authority, and as leading to the downfall of men. In the agonistic contests that occur in the \textit{Oresteia} between the masculine and the feminine, women are shown to not only be capable of agonistic speech, but to be formidable and treacherous opponents, whose actions challenge the very order of Greek society, and the exclusion of women from the \textit{agon}.

\textbf{The Carpet Scene}

Clytemnestra has been declared by Helene Foley to be the most infamous of all stage wives in tragedy.\textsuperscript{17} The meaning of her name, like so many in tragedy, is indicative of her identity. Depending on the spelling, as her name is frequently spelled in different ways, Clytemnestra’s name can mean “famous cunning” (Klytemestra), or “praiseworthy, famous wooing, or renowned for suitors” (Kltemnestra).\textsuperscript{18} Her name therefore draws attention to her famous marriage to Agamemnon as well as her fierce intelligence and

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\item \textsuperscript{14} McClure, \textit{Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama}. p. 7.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid. p. 201.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Kathleen L. Komar, \textit{Reclaiming Klytemnestra: Revenge or Reconciliation} (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003). p. 28.
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linguistic skills of manipulation. Clytemnestra’s cunning speech and dexterous use of language are deployed to serve her ambitions and desires for power, autonomy, sexual freedom, and revenge. Clytemnestra skillfully manipulates language in her engagement with Agamemnon in the carpet scene in the service of “maternal vengeance.” Her linguistic dexterity and skill in the Agamemnon is noted by nearly all commentators. Clytemnestra’s command and control of language and speech towers above all others whom she engages in verbal contestation. The chorus, for example, praise her for speaking persuasively like a wise and self-controlled man. They clearly recognize her authority to rule in Agamemnon’s absence, and even her right to speak publicly and politically as a man would. As Goldhill notes, “her power is because of the lack not just of the ruler but of the ‘male.’” The rulership that Clytemnestra has enjoyed in Argos essentially as an uncontested king is enabled by Agamemnon’s lengthy absence and secured by Clytemnestra’s skill and cunning as a political actor. The fact that Agamemnon has a kingdom to return to at all after a ten year absence is a testament to Clytemnestra’s ability and deftness as a ruler. However, despite strong evidence to the contrary, the Chorus still choose to see her as a stereotypical woman, governed more by feminine emotional flights of fancy than by the masculine rationality she clearly

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19 Ibid. p. 28.
20 Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 351. Edward Wright Haile translates the line as “My lady, this is heartening and full of manly sense,” and Hugh Lloyd-Jones renders the line as ‘Lady, you speak wisely, like a prudent man.”
21 Ibid. l. 258-260. All translations are from Lattimore unless otherwise cited.
Despite Clytemnestra’s ability to exercise male authority and to excel in the male-dominated competitive arena of speech, the chorus fail to see her as anything other than a woman. As will be shown, the recognition of Clytemnestra as surprisingly skilled in masculine endeavors, but as still merely a woman, constitutes a failure to fully recognize Clytemnestra’s prowess in male-dominated arenas of contest that she willfully and consciously exploits to her advantage in the agonistic contests that she engages in with men. The most important and devastating of these contests is with her husband Agamemnon.

The identity of Clytemnestra is consistent with Nietzsche’s picture of agonistic contest in the Greek world, if one broadens agonistic actors to include women. She is a figure who is driven forward by the two goddesses of Eris, the first which governs positive forms of competition, and the second who drives individuals towards violence and strife. From the very beginning, Clytemnestra’s deployment of rhetorical force “aims at victory.” Komar argues that Clytemnestra’s identity and actions are marked by “an irrepressible will to act, steeped in extreme violence,” all key motivations for agonistic contestation. Throughout the trilogy, Clytemnestra serves as “a focal point of violence,” in terms not only of the violence that she personally enacts, but also in terms of the violence that ensues in subsequent agonistic conflicts as a result of her murder of Agamemnon. However, the string of agonistic contests that Clytemnestra initiates and provokes set the stakes much higher than is usual in agonistic contests between free and

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23 See for one example Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 274.  
26 Ibid. p. 48.
equal male citizens. Clytemnestra’s agonism is one that refuses to be restrained, and is therefore one in which the violent and destructive *Eris* dominates. Partially because she is a woman, and partially because she strives to be recognized as not merely equal to but as superior to the males whom she engages in agonistic competition, Clytemnestra’s challenge threatens to undermine the social order and hierarchy of her society. Though Foley is correct in arguing that Clytemnestra “embodies the greatest threats to the cultural system of which a wife is capable,”\(^{27}\) her challenge to male-order goes still farther. As Komar notes, Clytemnestra is the last challenge to the reaffirmation of male dominance that characterizes Aeschylus’ time.\(^{28}\)

The carpet scene begins with the return of Agamemnon from Troy and sets up the violent homecoming that Clytemnestra has fashioned for him. My analysis focuses on two key elements of the carpet scene: Clytemnestra’s speech of greeting, (lines 855-913) and the agonistic jousting in speech between husband and wife which precedes Agamemnon’s entrance to the palace and his murder, (lines 914-974). Much of the scholarship on the carpet scene tends to focus on Agamemnon’s motivations, and specifically on why he yields to persuasion. This scholarship assumes as does Easterling that “there has never been serious critical controversy about Clytemnestra because she is so elaborately realized by Aeschylus;”\(^{29}\) her motivations are too clear and obvious for there to be any doubt as to why she acts. Furthermore, Easterling notes that the carpet scene “cannot be thought of as having any practical effect on the action: however

\(^{27}\) Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*. p. 201.
Agamemnon walks into the house, Clytemnestra can still attack him in the bath.\(^{30}\) Easterling reads the carpet scene from the perspective of Agamemnon and does not focus on Clytemnestra or her perspective. However, the significance of Clytemnestra’s actions, and motivations are much broader than these readings would suggest. Instead of focusing on Agamemnon’s motivations and fate, this reading instead centres on Clytemnestra as the central tragic figure and views the play as being her tragedy. By choosing to read the carpet scene as an agonistic contest many new revelations can be made regarding why Clytemnestra acts as she does, and the significance of the results of her contest with Agamemnon in terms of the dramatic arc of the trilogy. One must remember that the tragedy of the *Agamemnon* is not only the death of a king and a husband at the hands of his wife and queen. It is also the tragedy of the entire household, and even more broadly it is the beginning of a series of agonistic contests that will eventually result in the closure of a female *agon* and with the subordination of the feminine to the masculine. Furthermore, if the sacrifice of Iphigenia marks the point where Agamemnon’s murder becomes unavoidable, then it must not be forgotten that Clytemnestra’s victory in the carpet scene also marks the point where Clytemnestra’s ignominious fate is sealed. For masculinity to be firmly reestablished at the closing of the trilogy, Clytemnestra must die, and the power of maternal blood rights that she exercises and as embodied by the Furies must be controlled by masculine authority.

As an agonistic contest, the carpet scene displays the disruptive features of agonism which make it attractive as a vehicle of liberation. Clytemnestra clearly

\(^{30}\) Ibid. p. 17.
understands that acting agonistically gives her a powerful means for combating hegemonic expressions of male power. The carpet scene is a no-holds barred contest between two incommensurable identities, those held respectively by Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, and in which, to borrow Nietzsche’s phrase on agonism, we “peer into the abyss of hatred.”

By styling herself as an agonistic actor, an identity reserved exclusively for male citizens, Clytemnestra challenges and calls into question male patriarchal dominance at the same time as she attempts to bring into being a politically emancipated identity as an honor-seeking woman who acts as a man would, protects those dear to her, (φίλοι, φίλοι) and harms her enemies (ἐχθροί, ἐχθροί). As Foley notes, the moral dilemma that Clytemnestra’s actions pose to male order and authority is significantly different and dangerous “because she is a woman.”

Thus, the initially linguistic contest between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon is significant for its display of the tension between the sexes as being a power struggle between incommensurable identities, domination, and violence, which is consistent with agonistic action.

The Love of an Honest Woman: Clytemnestra’s Speech of Greeting and the Agon with Agamemnon

When Clytemnestra learns of Agamemnon’s return, she rejoices “not as a wife at the safe return of her husband, but as a soldier victorious in battle.” Winnington-Ingram notes that the carpet scene “is a contest between two wills, in which the woman plays

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31 Nietzsche, "Homer's Contest." p. 36.
32 Foley, Female Acts in Greek Tragedy. p. 203.
33 McClure, Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama. p. 80.
upon the weakness of the man, putting forward argument after argument which he ought to reject in terms but does not.”

For Clytemnestra the significance of the carpet scene is far greater than merely setting the terms under which her husband will be permitted to once again enter his house; the carpet scene more importantly serves to demonstrate Clytemnestra’s powers of persuasive speech at the expense of Agamemnon and thus deliberately undermines Agamemnon’s fitness to rule as king to her queen. Clytemnestra not only controls the terms in which Agamemnon returns to his home, she also subtly shifts and destabilizes his identity as a powerful and potent male ruler, while publicly identifying herself with male authority and its exercise. The homecoming that Clytemnestra orchestrates and meticulously plans is not only the one that Agamemnon “well deserves,”

but is also one which she warns the chorus who witness its fruition not to “bear malice” towards her for acting as she will, and reminds them of the gravity of the harms and pains that she suffered because of Agamemnon.

On Agamemnon’s part, he recognizes that he is engaged in a battle of words with his wife, but he fails to fully recognize the stakes in their competition. For him, the contest is one of wills between a husband and his wife. He sees Clytemnestra as at most challenging his masculine rule over her as a husband; he does not perceive that Clytemnestra is challenging his very life. Agamemnon only briefly glimpses that the contest is also about authority, legitimacy, and the right to rule, when he questions if he

35 Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 903.
36 Ibid. l. 904.
ought to trample the tapestries unfurled at his feet.\textsuperscript{37} His problem is that he consistently underestimates his wife as an adversary, and fails to see her as a worthy competitor. He fails to see in Clytemnestra’s female form, a male agonistic competitor. Instead, from Agamemnon’s perspective, Clytemnestra is a vain woman in need of being humored in their sparring match. She is merely a wife that he must indulge. Despite Agamemnon’s lack of vision, he is still engaged in an agonistic battle. He does recognize that Clytemnestra’s challenge questions his authority as a husband over his wife, and he only grants Clytemnestra a victory after she assures him that doing so only attests to his power over her, and says nothing about her power over him.\textsuperscript{38} It is not that Agamemnon does not see himself as competing with Clytemnestra, but rather that he fails to apprehend exactly what it is that they are competing over. In this way, they are engaged in an unequal agonistic contest where only one party fully understands the stakes. Like so many political actors engaged in contestation, they fail to see eye to eye over the very thing that they are competing over. Agamemnon has grossly misjudged the content and stakes of his contest with his wife, and it is an error which will cost him his life.

The carpet scene opens with Queen Clytemnestra making a public speech of greeting to the returning King Agamemnon. The vast majority of scholarship on this passage has concluded that throughout Clytemnestra is being deliberately deceitful in her use of language; her words form the content of an entirely cunning and manipulative speech. The Queen is merely performing the role of the joyous wife upon the return of her husband. In other words, the audience is not meant to believe the content of

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. l. 946-49.  
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. l. 941, 943.
Clytemnestra’s speech. Her words then, do not reflect truthfully or without guile her own experiences and emotions both prior to and at the return of Agamemnon. I argue, however, that we have been too quick to read only coyness and cunning into this speech. Instead, I argue that the first part of the speech of greeting, (lines 855-886) truly does reflect Clytemnestra’s experiences, and that it is only in the second half of the speech, (lines 887-913) that she deliberately twists her words to shape hidden meanings. Furthermore, in the second part of the speech Clytemnestra succeeds in illustrating all of the things that Agamemnon as head of the household should have been and failed to be. Clytemnestra also slyly inserts a single hailing reference to her lover Aegisthus while she is talking to and about Agamemnon that invites a comparison between the two men. In so doing, Clytemnestra not only begins to demonstrate Agamemnon’s failures as a father and husband, but also demonstrates the ways in which Agamemnon has gone about destroying their household and family. The reference to Aegisthus then, can be read as Clytemnestra’s justification for completing the destruction of her household with Agamemnon and her decision to found a new tyrannical household with her lover Aegisthus.

Instead of viewing the first half of Clytemnestra’s speech as a deliberate act of performative subterfuge, it is possible to see this section as offering Clytemnestra’s own explanation for her transition from love to hatred and her murderous intentions. Indeed, at the close of the first section of the speech, Aeschylus has Clytemnestra state: “such my
excuse to you, and without subterfuge.” How would interpretations of this speech change if one took this sentence literally? If one chooses to believe these words, to see Clytemnestra here as honestly presenting her experiences and thoughts to the audience, chorus, and Agamemnon, then the entire content of the speech needs to be re-evaluated. If taken literally, this line prevents interpreters of Clytemnestra’s words from asserting that she speaks falsely throughout this speech. We then need to pause and ask: what if she speaks the truth openly and honestly? If so, then Clytemnestra is truthfully presenting her experiences, motivations, and even justifications for her actions to come. This interpretation is further supported by how Clytemnestra begins her speech. She greets Agamemnon by first declaring that she takes “no shame to speak aloud before you all the love I bear my husband.” With these words she draws attention to the fact that she is about to do something uncharacteristic for the Greek wife; she is about to speak publicly, openly, and honestly about her own emotions, inner state, and experiences. Without shame, she is about to speak not only in public, but also about her own emotional transformation; both of which would have been considered highly shameful for a woman to do under almost any circumstances. What will follow in the first section of the speech is not the deceit and manipulation that we have become accustomed to from Clytemnestra. Rather, she speaks boldly and without embarrassment that “what I tell you now I learned not from another; this is my own sad life all the long years this man was

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39 l. 886. The Greek word here is σκῆψις meaning a pretext, plea or excuse. The entire line reads: τοιάδε μέντοι σκῆψις οὐ δόλον φέρει.
40 Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 856-7.
And she is not ashamed to tell all what she has suffered and how this suffering has transformed her love for her husband into hatred.

The first section of Clytemnestra’s speech of greeting has a second parallel function. In addition to offering her own motivations, Clytemnestra’s words also illuminate the perilous position that many women found themselves in with the start of the Trojan war. The beginning of the war marked the mass exodus of men from their homelands and households. With many men of fighting age leaving their hearths to seek glory in the agon of war, the women of the houses were left without male protectors. Their sons, husbands, brothers, and sometimes even fathers away to seek their fortunes in war, the women were left without male kin to defend and console them. Clytemnestra does not separate herself from this experience. Instead, she numbers herself among these women who were left without male protection. By speaking the truth that “it is evil and a thing of terror when a wife sits in the house forlorn with no man.” Clytemnestra claims solidarity with the multitude of women who like her found themselves alone in a house without the man of the house. Women who suddenly found themselves in positions of male authority, responsible not just for the affairs of the household, but also for protecting their own persons and their children.

Clytemnestra speaks without censoring her emotions about the feverish fear of constantly hearing news from the field of battle. She remembers the panic and terror whenever a messenger would come through Argos bearing news. Is he dead? Is he injured? How badly has he been wounded? She viscerally recreates the heartbreak and

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41 Ibid. l. 858-60.
42 Ibid. l. 861-2.
the fear of having only rumors for information. So many tales of injury and suffering, that “if he had died each time that rumor told his death, he must have been some triple-bodied Geryon43 back from the dead with threefold cloak of earth upon his body, and killed once for every shape assumed.”44 With these words she expresses a double meaning. She draws attention to the fact that if all the rumors had been true, her husband would have been killed many times over. But beyond this she also passes judgment on Agamemnon and by extension all other husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers who left their women behind, all for the sake of reclaiming a single adulterous woman for her cuckolded husband. Agamemnon, and the men like him are Geryons; they are both giants and monsters. They are giants for their military prowess and skill, monsters for abandoning their women for ten long years.

This interpretation then stresses not the hate that Clytemnestra presently feels for her husband, but instead the transition from love to hate that she underwent in those ten long years. She is genuinely speaking “of the love I bear my husband,”45 but in so doing she is also explaining how the circumstances in which she found herself in conspired to poison that love. The constant barrage of rumors, with so many tales of wounds that no

43 Geryon: the name of a terrifying giant. In Hesiod he is described as a monster with three separate human faces, but Aeschylus in a different tradition gives the giant three separate bodies, which Clytemnestra then embellishes with the logical conclusion of three separate burials. Geryon plays an important role in the 10th labor of Herakles, when Herakles is required to gain possession of the giant’s cattle. In the battle with Herakles, Geryon carries three shields, three helmets, and three spears. Herakles kills him with a poisoned arrow that pierces his forehead. Here then Clytemnestra depicts Agamemnon as both man and monster, capable of sustaining a vast number of wounds and multiple deaths.

44 Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 869-72.

45 Ibid. l. 857.
body, man-monster or not, could possibly sustain and survive, took their toll. Many women like Clytemnestra would have been uncertain if any of their male relatives would ever return from Troy and were confronted with the possibility that they would not have a man of their own to protect them against unwanted advances and even violence. Possibly, Clytemnestra and the women she identifies with would have found themselves in a situation similar to Penelope where without a male protector they would have been beset by men set on claiming them, their husband’s assets and titles, and even prospectively doing harm to their offspring. In this situation many women, Clytemnestra included, could not find within themselves the strength of Penelope to endure that barrage of suitors, and threats of violence towards them and their children made by men who coveted what others had left behind upon sailing to Troy. Like many other Greek women without male kin to support them, her will and spirit broke. She relates that “because such tales broke out forever on my rest, many a time they cut me down and freed my throat from the noose overslung where I had caught it fast,”46 (emphasis added). Like many women without any men in their lives to help shoulder their burdens, Clytemnestra tells us that she too gave into despair. She lost the will to continue, and tried many times without success to end her misery. Furthermore, within the play no one casts doubt on the veracity of Clytemnestra’s claim that she did indeed attempt on multiple occasions to take her own life. At no point in the play does anyone highlight this claim as being a deliberate act of deception. The fact of her suicide attempts goes unchallenged within the drama. Like many tragic heroines in Greek tragedy, she chose to take her own life by

46 Ibid. l. 874-6 emphasis added.
hanging herself. But unlike heroines such as Jocasta and Antigone, she failed to die. Clytemnestra’s sufferings continued.

This decision to commit suicide and thus end the constant torrent of terrible rumors from Troy also played a significant role in her decision to send her son Orestes away. Because of such rumors, Clytemnestra not only decided to take her own life, but also exile her son. She says, “therefore is your son, in whom my love and yours are sealed and pledged, not here to stand with us today, Orestes.” When she as mother could no longer go on, she chose to send her son away to be reared by another. Her words here then have a significant temporal element. Her suicide attempts came immediately after the decision to send Orestes from Argos. What she thought would be her final act as a mother, was to send her son away from Argos to be raised by another, just before her failed suicide attempts. Her explanation goes further still. She argues that she also sent Orestes away because she feared for his safety. Without a man, how could Clytemnestra be expected to protect her young son from those who would callously kill a child to seize the father’s place? It was not just Agamemnon who faced danger. Phocis, to whom she sent Orestes, “spoke to me of peril on two counts; of your danger under Ilium, and here, of revolution and the clamorous people who might cast down the council – since it lies in men’s nature to trample on the fighter already down.” In other words, a significant

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49 Ibid. l. 881-5.
reason for sending Orestes away is because he was in danger and it was the best way for her to protect his young and fragile life.\textsuperscript{50}

Just as with Clytemnestra’s suicide attempts, this interpretation is strengthened by the fact that no one in the play criticizes Clytemnestra or takes issue with her act of sending Orestes away. Clytemnestra states, “It were right; yet do not be amazed,”\textsuperscript{51} and no one seems to be amazed. All who hear her words seem to accept them. Neither the chorus, nor Agamemnon finds fault with her explanation for Orestes’ absence. Nor does anyone even comment on it. It is unremarkable. It is significant that in speaking publicly about both her suicide attempts and the absence of Orestes that Clytemnestra is confident that no one will contradict or question her actions. However, this alone is not enough to definitively prove the veracity of her claims. Instead, another possibility for the silence of the chorus is that rather than silently supporting the truth of her words, they are too frightened of Clytemnestra and her wrath to speak out against her.\textsuperscript{52} That said, it is still

\textsuperscript{50} Later in the trilogy doubt is cast on this interpretation of her actions. In the \textit{Choephoroi} the nurse Cilissa claims that it was she who raised Orestes and not Clytemnestra, thus undermining Clytemnestra’s claims of strong maternal attachment to Orestes, (l. 749-765). However, no other evidence is given to support the nurse’s account, and it would have been common for the nobility to use a wet nurse to aid in the rearing of children. What the nurse’s words do is cast into doubt Clytemnestra’s implied statements that she herself exclusively raised and nurtured Orestes, (l. 896-8, 908) but they do not render it impossible for Clytemnestra to have ever nursed the infant Orestes. Furthermore, in the confrontation with Orestes, Clytemnestra directly attests to the love she bore for her infant child, and states boldly to Orestes that when she sent him away, “I sent you to a friend’s house. This was no throwing away,” l. 914. Aeschylus, \textit{Choephoroi}.

\textsuperscript{51} Aeschylus, \textit{Agamemnon}. l. 879.

\textsuperscript{52} For example, later in the play the chorus fails to rush to Agamemnon’s defense when the murders are taking place, and they express a clear fear of tyranny along with their indecision. After the murders they clearly fear Clytemnestra’s wrath and tyranny, and despite their threats to take up arms, they fail to act against the rule of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Ibid. l. 1348-65, 1530-36.
significant that Agamemnon does not seem to doubt the truth of Clytemnestra’s suicide
ttempts or criticize her decision to send Orestes away. Certainly the King has not yet
realized what he has to fear from his wife, and his silence can therefore be interpreted as
agreement with her words and actions.

This analysis is not to suggest that all of Clytemnestra’s words in the first half of
her speech have only a singular literal meaning to them. Clytemnestra delights too much
in her own linguistic cunning to resist double meanings. Her love for the *agon* of speech
prevents her from speaking in an entirely straightforward manner. In relating her fears
about the injuries that Agamemnon was potentially suffering, she says, “had Agamemnon
taken all the wounds the tale whereof was carried home to me, he had been cut full of
gashes like a fishing net.” With these words she foreshadows Agamemnon’s murder at
her hands. The previous image lacks a fish caught in the net, a fish that Clytemnestra
will soon entrap. The murder in which she will soon entrap Agamemnon in a robe woven
by her own hands, a robe not dissimilar to those she previously used in her attempts to
end her life. Like a great fish, Agamemnon will be caught and butchered either in Troy or
at home. The robe that she will use in the murder will literally be cut full of gashes with
her blade as Agamemnon struggles for life like a flopping fish. In so doing, Clytemnestra
draws attention to both the devastating psychological effect of rumor on those left at
home, and uses the same image to foreshadow the demise that will soon be upon her
husband. As if to remind herself of her intentions, Clytemnestra foreshadows the means

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53 Ibid. l. 867-8.
54 After Clytemnestra has murdered Agamemnon she publicly and defiantly declares:
“That he might not escape nor beat aside his death, as fishermen cast their huge circling
nets, I spread deadly abundance of rich robes, and caught him fast.” Ibid. l. 1381-3.
of Agamemnon’s death. Although he has survived the ever-tightening net of Troy, he will not escape her net.

In the second half of her speech of greeting Clytemnestra begins to speak through cunningly constructed sentences that are laden with duplicity. She signals to her listeners that the words she just spoke were without subterfuge, but offers no similar assurance for what she will say next. Until this point, Clytemnestra has used her speech of greeting to present her experiences during Agamemnon’s absence, and to offer her own explanation and justification for her conduct in the past, present, and future. Now, however, Clytemnestra uses her linguistic skills to begin setting a trap for Agamemnon. She cleverly plays to Agamemnon’s expectations on how he ought to be greeted as the conqueror returned home, and breathes a double meaning into her words. Initially her words appear to praise Agamemnon as lord and husband, but on a deeper level her words actually illuminate Agamemnon’s failings. Clytemnestra uses her speech of greeting not to heap honor on Agamemnon as he expects, but rather to begin setting the stage for his downfall at her hands.

With Agamemnon’s return, Clytemnestra states that “the rippling springs that were my tears have dried utterly up, nor left one drop within.” This line can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, it can be read as stating that Clytemnestra has wept for so long that she can no longer weep. Alternatively, the lines can be read as stating that Clytemnestra can no longer weep because the love she once felt for her husband has now

55 Ibid. l. 887-8.
turned to hate. Initially, these words appear to speak to the sorrow that Clytemnestra felt because of the absence of her husband, and the dreadful rumors of his fate in Troy. Certainly, when Agamemnon hears these words he is meant to think that his absence was the cause of her tears. However, Clytemnestra’s tears can be seen as having another source. Clytemnestra’s bitter tears could be referring to her heartache and pain over the death of her daughter Iphigenia, killed by the king’s own hands. The love that Clytemnestra felt for her husband when he sailed to Troy gradually turned to hate after the sacrifice of Iphigenia. That said, the first section of her speech indicates that it was not the sacrifice of Iphigenia alone that transformed her love to hate. The circumstances she found herself in with the absence of her husband, coupled with the murder of Iphigenia aided in the transformation of her love to hatred. Importantly, Iphigenia is not directly mentioned in this passage, but she does seem to have a spectral presence. For Clytemnestra, it is a terrible injustice that her daughter was murdered so that one adulterous woman could be returned to her husband. It was the sacrifice of Iphigenia,

56 Loraux explicitly states that the tears of mourning mothers are like the tears of the emblematic Nightingale, at once a symbol of endless lament and murderous revenge. The tears of grieving mothers are therefore “at the same time maternal and desperately deadly” Nicole Loraux, Mothers in Mourning, trans. Corinne Pache (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1998). p. 23. Speaking to Cassandra, the chorus in the Agamemnon also draws attention to the wailing grief of the Nightingale, “the wild lyric as in clamor for Itys, Itys over and over again her long life of tears weeping forever grieves the brown nightingale.” Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 1142-45.

57 The only child who Clytemnestra explicitly mentions in the carpet scene is Orestes, and she refers to Orestes in terms which could also be taken as applying to Iphigenia. see Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 877 for the most prominent example, as well as, Winnington-Ingram, "Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena." p. 132.

58 When Clytemnestra is publicly claiming the righteousness of the murder of Agamemnon she claims that the chorus was honor bound to bring Agamemnon to justice for the murder of Iphigenia. “he slaughtered like a victim his own child, my pain grown

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and Clytemnestra’s own inability to protect her daughter, that proved to be the tipping point in the transformation of her love to hate. Without a male relative to avenge Iphigenia’s death, it falls to Clytemnestra to seek justice in the form of blood vengeance. Agamemnon’s return signals the end of Clytemnestra’s tears, but not because the king has returned safely and triumphantly home. Her crying is at an end either because her tears had already dried up, or because the return of the king signals that the time of her revenge has come. When she speaks of the beacon fires,\(^59\) and the wounds that she thought she saw Agamemnon suffer in her sleep\(^60\) she calls attention to the careful preparations that she has made for her revenge. In her sleep she has seen the wounds that she will inflict on Agamemnon, and the flames of the beacons have alerted her that the long period of waiting is at an end. She declares, “now all my suffering is past.”\(^61\) The time for her vengeance is at hand.

At this point in the speech, Clytemnestra begins to formally hail Agamemnon as triumphant King returned home after sacking Troy. She says:

> Now all my suffering is past, with grieless heart I hail this man, the watchdog of the fold and hall; the stay that keeps the ship alive; the post to grip groundward the towering roof; a father’s single child; land seen by sailors after all their hope was gone; splendor of daybreak shining from the night storm; the running spring a parched wayfarer strays upon. Oh it is sweet to escape from all necessity!\(^62\)

\(^59\) Ibid. I.890.
\(^60\) Ibid. I. 893-4.
\(^61\) Ibid. I. 895.
\(^62\) Ibid. I. 895-902.
She seemingly pays extravagant tribute to Agamemnon for his exploits as a King and military leader. However, so great is the praise that she heaps upon Agamemnon that her words can be seen as having a double purpose. In purposefully overdoing her language of esteem, her words not only massage Agamemnon’s ego, but could also have the effect of calling down the wrath of the gods upon Agamemnon for his arrogance, and boasting. Just as lightning strikes the tallest tree, so the gods’ anger lashes out at the most prideful and successful individuals.

Upon close examination, the content of her words here cannot be seen as heaping only praise on Agamemnon. Clytemnestra only says, “I hail this man,” but does not specify precisely who she is referring to. Context suggests that she is speaking to Agamemnon who shares the stage with her, but it is possible that she is hailing another man located off-stage. While many of her lines here can be seen as plausibly referring to Agamemnon as a King returned home, one line in particular strongly suggests that Clytemnestra is not truly speaking only of her husband. The line, “a father’s single child,” cannot be seen as applying to Agamemnon. The King is not in any sense an only

63 Ibid. l. 896. τόνδε (τόνδε) is the Greek used here. As such it implies “this” in terms of proximity, (ie this one here). To be off stage, she probably would have used ἐκεῖνον (ἐκεῖνον) meaning, that one, over there. However, it is still possible that Clytemnestra has a double meaning in leaving ambiguous exactly which man she is referring to by not naming Agamemnon directly.

64 Ibid. l. 898. The Greek is: μονογενὲς (monogenes) τέκνον (téknon) πατρί. (patri). Compare this also to Aegisthus’ recounting of the Feast of Thystes: “out of such acts you see this dead man stricken here, and it was I, in my right, who wrought this murder, I third born to my unhappy father, and with him driven, a helpless baby in arms, to banishment. Yet I grew up, and justice brought me home again, till from afar I laid my hands upon this man, since it was I who pieced together the fell plot.” l. 1603-9. Monogenes does not here appear, but he does draw attention to the fact that he is his father’s only surviving child.
child, as he has a brother, Menelaus, who still lives. Most likely Agamemnon in hearing this line would think that Clytemnestra was saying that he was his father’s singular child meaning his most exceptional or most prized child. Alternatively, the line could be read figuratively, as expressing the sentiment that Agamemnon is as welcome in Argos as an only son returned home as the salvation of his household’s bloodline. However, the sentence can be seen as having a much plainer meaning that tips the audience off to the subtle duplicity that Clytemnestra is using. If read literally, there is only one character in the *Agamemnon* who fits the criteria of being an only child: Aegisthus. This line in particular then can be seen as referring to another: Aegisthus, the King’s cousin and the Queen’s lover. In this way, Clytemnestra uses her hailing of Agamemnon to invite a direct comparison between her legitimate husband and her illegitimate lover. Clytemnestra not only begins to demonstrate Agamemnon’s failings, but also seeks to justify her decision to create a new tyrannical household with Aegisthus.

Clytemnestra’s hailing speech is filled with irony and deception. The irony stems largely from the fact that Agamemnon believes himself to be all of the things that Clytemnestra is saying, but in reality, to her, he is none of these things. Clearly, Agamemnon believes himself to be “the watchdog of the fold and hall,” but in his long absence at Troy, he has not been the one protecting and guarding his kingdom. That task has fallen primarily to Clytemnestra who has ruled in Agamemnon’s absence. Furthermore, in Clytemnestra’s view, Agamemnon has failed as a watchdog in the most

65 Ibid. l. 896.
66 Agamemnon himself seems to unwittingly acknowledge that it has been Clytemnestra who has served as watchdog to his kingdom when he answers her greeting by saying, “Daughter of Leda, you who kept my house for me” Ibid. l. 914.
unforgivable of ways. As husband and father it is his duty to protect his family from harm. However, he chose his duty as king and military leader over his obligations as a father to his family when he decided to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to secure fair winds for the fleet to sail to Troy. For Clytemnestra, Agamemnon willfully and unforgivably chose to murder their daughter instead of protecting her from harm. He is like a watchdog become wolf; he turned on the very flock he was meant to keep safe.

Agamemnon would also assume that Clytemnestra as his wife would see him as “the stay that keeps the ship alive.”67 In other words, he would most likely hear these lines as stating that Clytemnestra draws strength and inspiration from her husband, that in some way, he provides her with a reason to live. However, the only way in which Clytemnestra draws a sense of purpose from her relationship to Agamemnon would be her belief that it is her duty as a mother to avenge the death of her daughter. If I am correct in taking Clytemnestra’s account of her attempts at suicide literally, then this line can be seen as having an additional meaning. Clytemnestra’s words here can be seen as containing a temporal element. It is quite possible, though the text is mute, that when Clytemnestra was gripped by her own despair and after she had decided to send Orestes away and take her own life that she instead began her affair with Aegisthus. In other words, here she could be referring to Aegisthus and their relationship as being the ship that kept her alive. That without her adulterous relationship with Aegisthus, she would have drowned at sea. In this way, Clytemnestra asserts that it is through her relationship

67 Ibid. l. 897.
with Aegisthus that she finds her own salvation and support, and not through her relationship to her husband.

To Clytemnestra, Aegisthus has been a means of securing her own peace and happiness. However, in no way can Aegisthus be seen as the salvation of the House of Atreus. Like Agamemnon, Aegisthus cannot be seen as acting as a protector and defender of the household. Indeed, Aegisthus as an adulterer is actually destroying rather than preserving the family. His relationship to Clytemnestra, while providing her with companionship, also completes the destruction of her family with Agamemnon. Clytemnestra does not appear to be troubled by the effect of adultery upon her household. In her view, she most likely sees her family as having been destroyed by Agamemnon’s act of perverted sacrifice and his long absence well before her relationship began with Aegisthus. In this way, she would see her relationship to Aegisthus as a way of escaping from a corrupted household that she no longer wishes to be a part of. What this highlights is that Clytemnestra as a wife is loyal up to a point. Euripides’ telling of the sacrifice of Iphigenia in his play *Iphigenia at Aulis* draws attention to the extent of Clytemnestra’s loyalty. In this play Clytemnestra recounts how she went unwillingly into a marriage with Agamemnon and stresses that as a wife she has been “blameless, modest in passion, and in honor seeking to increase your house so that your coming-in had gladness and your going-out joy.”68 She beseeches Agamemnon to save their daughter rather than slay her by saying, “by the gods, do not force me to become a woman of evil! Or to betray you!

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And you, against me do not commit this sin!" What this demonstrates is that as a wife Clytemnestra has limits to her loyalty and obedience. With the death of her daughter, she is no longer able to love her husband, and this irreversibly poisons their marriage with hatred. Aegisthus might very well be what Clytemnestra needs, but he cannot be seen as the mainstay or salvation of the house. As an adulterer, he completes the destruction of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra’s household for the further reason that Aegisthus and Clytemnestra would likely have children and that these children would disenfranchise her children with Agamemnon.

Following from this, the next line in Clytemnestra’s hailing speech can be seen as comparing Clytemnestra’s relationship to Aegisthus with her relationship to Agamemnon himself. It was Aegisthus who became to Clytemnestra a “post to grip groundward the towering roof.” In the storm that became her life after Agamemnon’s departure and the sacrifice of Iphigenia, it was in Aegisthus that she sought comfort and support. In this way, Aegisthus to her was also like “land seen by sailors after all their hope was gone.”

It was in his arms that she found some solace when she thought that all was lost. When she could no longer bear the rumors and pressures of being a woman without a man, she fell into Aegisthus’ bed. And in his bed, she also discovered a “running spring” that quenched her thirst after being alone and lost. With sexually charged language, Clytemnestra tells us that it is Aegisthus after all who “makes the fire shine on my

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69 Ibid. l. 1181-4.
70 Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 897-8.
71 Ibid. l. 899.
72 Ibid. l. 901.
hearth,” and not Agamemnon. Again, these are all things that Agamemnon as her husband should be to her but is not.

In this way, Clytemnestra’s hail plays upon Agamemnon’s expectations as to how he ought to be greeted and who he believes himself to be, while at the same time slyly inviting comparison with another who has illegitimately supplanted Agamemnon’s position and status. However, Clytemnestra’s speech here does not seem to view her relationship to Aegisthus in an entirely positive light. Instead, her words suggest that she is trying to justify her relationship to Aegisthus as a necessity given the circumstances she found herself in. Indirectly she reveals one lie that she has told to Agamemnon: the lie that she was home alone in Argos. In reality she had taken up with Aegisthus, and she seems to suggest that in a storm, any phallus will do. Her line “oh, it is sweet to escape from all necessity,” has a double meaning. If it was a necessity for her to begin a relationship with Aegisthus during Agamemnon’s absence, then the return of her husband can be seen as freeing Clytemnestra from this necessity. She no longer requires Aegisthus as a protector now that Agamemnon has returned and she is free to take her revenge. Aegisthus, then, is no longer a necessary means to an end, and the manly woman no longer needs a womanly man by her side.

Clytemnestra’s choice of words here is most unusual, as necessity is considered to be a tremendously powerful and inescapable force. For a Greek audience, it would be shocking to hear a character declare herself to be freed from all necessity as Clytemnestra does. Necessity is not something that one can escape, and to claim that one is not bound

73 Ibid. l. 1435.
74 Ibid. l. 902.
by necessity is to risk *hubris*. The word that Clytemnestra uses is *anagkaios* (ἀναγκαῖος) which has the sense of urgent necessity, constraint, applied force, life of slavery, necessary for life, or doom imposed by fate or stress of circumstances. Clytemnestra can never be fully freed from necessity; like all mere mortals she can never be rid of the things necessary for life. However, in a significant way she is ridding herself of a particular perceived necessity: Agamemnon’s rule over her. Perhaps Clytemnestra sees herself as a shipwrecked sailor and Agamemnon’s return is like spotting land after all “hope was gone.” His return marks the time of her revenge, and it is only through killing him that she can free herself from the necessity of Agamemnon’s rule and household. Deeper still, Agamemnon’s return and murder frees Clytemnestra from the crushing necessity of constantly plotting and seeking revenge. When she kills Agamemnon and displays his body she states, “much have I said before to serve necessity,” implying once more that her act has freed her from the necessity that once bound her. In her grief for the loss of Iphigenia she became a slave to her mourning, and in her hate-in-love for her husband she became doomed by the stress of circumstances. It is by bowing to the urgent necessity of revenge that she is able to free herself from these constraints. She sets herself free by cutting down the man who caused her such grief and by setting herself above him as ruler of her own tyrannical household.

The household that Clytemnestra establishes with Aegisthus can only be seen as the establishment of a tyranny. After she kills her husband she boldly declares, “speak of

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75 Ibid. l. 899.
76 Ibid. l. 1372.
me never more as the wife of Agamemnon,” removing herself completely from his household and destroying the rule of Agamemnon. In setting up the tyrannical household she creates a perversion of the family. She and her consort Aegisthus rule outside of the legitimate order of succession, making them tyrants. Further, the family itself, including any children she might have with Aegisthus, is tyrannical in that it is a corruption founded on adultery, murder, and a perversion of gender roles. Through the murder of Agamemnon she establishes the very tyranny that the chorus fears, and is powerless to prevent. Aeschylus uses the language of yoking, whipping, along with threats of violence to characterize the rule of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus as a tyranny. The violent founding of their house and rule brings with it the pollution of kin-killing which taints all of Argos. The chorus question why Aegisthus does not himself wield the knife against Agamemnon. As a cousin, it would still be kin-killing, but not as great as that of a wife murdering a husband and would spare the city spiritual pollution. Further, Aegisthus has a legitimate claim to blood revenge against Agamemnon because of the

77 Ibid. l. 1498-9.
78 During the murder of Agamemnon, when the chorus hears the cries of the king as he is being murdered they speak individually, agonizing over what action to take. One of them says, “anyone can see it, by these first steps they have taken, they purpose to be tyrants here upon our city.” Another chorus member states, “No, we can never endure that; better to be killed. Death is a softer thing by far than tyranny.” Despite their strong words, the chorus takes no action to defend Agamemnon and their defiant words only lead to the submission they despise. Ibid. 1354-5 and 1364-5.
79 For example, Aegisthus threatens to chain the chorus like slaves to rowing: “but there are chains, there is starvation with its pain, excellent teachers of good manners to old men,” and further threatens them by saying, “you shall be dragged, for baby whimperings sobbed out in rage. Once broken, you will be easier to deal with.” For those who attempt revolt, they are assured that “The mutinous man shall feel the yoke drag at his neck, no cornfed racing colt that runs free traced; but hunger, grim companion of the dark dungeon shall see him broken to the hand at last.” Ibid. l. 1621-2, 1631-2, and 1639-42.
80 Ibid. l. 1633-5.
Feast of Thyestes and Agamemnon’s familial guilt in the slaughter of Aegisthus’ siblings. And yet, Aegisthus does not act. He chooses not to engage Agamemnon in a contest for his life. He instead chooses to have a woman do the killing for him and to submit to her rule as a tyrant over him.81

As the reality of Agamemnon’s murder sinks in, the chorus ask, “where shall I turn the brain’s activity in speed when the house is falling?”82 But as one house lies in ruins, the tyrannical house rises up. The key elements of tyranny are all found in the household established by Clytemnestra: a lack of trust in close associates, greed, killing family, and impiety.83 Her rule embodies one of the worst traits of tyranny, in that “the tyrant uses illegitimately acquired power to alienate from the politai (citizens) that which is ‘ theirs,’ especially citizen dignity, that is freedom, equality, and security of the citizen.”84 Like the parable of the lion cub,85 Clytemnestra the “woman-lioness”86 has grown from feminine weakness to the mature tyrannical domination of others.

81 The chorus condemn Aegisthus’ refusal to wield the knife against Agamemnon himself as weak and womanly. They say: “But why, why then, you coward, could you not have slain the man yourself? Why must it be his wife who killed, to curse the country and the gods within the ground?” Ibid. l. 1643-5.
82 Ibid. l. 1531-2.
85 In this story a lion cub is fostered within a man’s house from infancy until the day that the fully grown lion slaughters all within, repaying their kindness with blood and death. Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 717-36.
86 Ibid. l. 1258.
Agamemnon hears Clytemnestra’s speech of greeting, but does not truly listen to her words or grasp their meaning. Instead of perceiving the obvious threat in her words, he dismisses her greeting as womanish and overly long. He reacts by cracking an uncivil joke at her expense, by saying “Daughter of Leda, you who kept my house for me, there is one way your welcome matched my absence well. You strained it to great length.”

Agamemnon’s response is incredibly caustic as by calling Clytemnestra “Daughter of Leda” he draws attention to her status as the sister of Helen of Troy, and in so doing undermines the valuable work she has done ruling in his absence by drawing attention to her familial relationship to a lustful and unfaithful woman. He does not respond to Clytemnestra’s declarations of love as one would expect a loving husband happily reunited with his wife after a long absence to do. He is unable to see past what he expects to hear, and therefore cannot see the double meanings that Clytemnestra uses throughout her speech. In no way, does he even begin to grasp that he is in immediate danger. In this way, Agamemnon seems to ignore the surface level meaning of Clytemnestra’s words and is blind to the deeper treachery that her words reveal. The irony of Clytemnestra’s words is completely lost on him, and he remains oblivious to the threat that she poses to him. Her victory in speech over him is assured.

Once the tapestries are unfurled upon the ground to be trampled beneath Agamemnon’s feet, Clytemnestra issues a declaration that summarizes her intentions towards Agamemnon and the ends that she wishes to achieve through victory over him: “let there spring up into the house he never hoped to see, where Justice leads him in, a

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87 Ibid. l. 914-16. Kept my house, in the sense of guarded my house, the Greek is: Λήδας γένεθλον, δωµάτων ἐµῆι, literally “offspring of Leda, guardian of my house.”
crimson path.”

From this dramatic statement it is clear that Clytemnestra is only ironically referring to the purple dyes of the tapestries strewn along the ground; her real meaning draws attention to the similarity in colour between the tapestries and Agamemnon’s blood that she will soon spill. Furthermore, it must be noted that Clytemnestra’s “crimson path” also references the dried blood of the Feast of Thyestes and therefore the cycle of revenge and contestation, that has permanently stained the halls of the House of Atreus for generations past, present, and future. In this way, Clytemnestra’s actions are inextricably tied in with the agonistic cycle of revenge and bloodshed that savages the House of Atreus. There is no sense in this statement that the cycle of contestation and violence will end with the slaying of Agamemnon. In a significant way the crimson path is also followed by Clytemnestra and can be seen as foreshadowing her death at the hands of her son. Metaphorically, she follows Agamemnon down the crimson path to her doom as surely as she shepherds his destruction.

Clytemnestra attempts to persuade a reluctant Agamemnon that it is indeed appropriate for him to walk upon the tapestries. Agamemnon initially resists Clytemnestra’s attempts at persuasion. He tells her: “do not try in woman’s ways to make me delicate, nor, as if I were some Asiatic bow down to the earth and with wide mouth cry out to me, nor cross my path with jealousy by strewing the ground with robes.”

Agamemnon perceives that what his wife asks of him is dangerous, but he does not fully realize the danger of the contest that she entraps him in. He understands the danger of

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88 Ibid. l. 910-911.
89 Ibid. l. 918-922.
angering the gods by acting impiously through arrogant conduct that presents him as being above mere mortals, but he does not realize the threat to his masculine and Greek identity that Clytemnestra’s request poses. He does not recognize the danger that Clytemnestra herself poses to him. As Easterling argues, “the important point Clytemnestra is implicitly making is that the conquest of Troy is so special that Agamemnon deserves special treatment, and the distinction between Greek and barbarian can be blurred.”90 Clytemnestra asks Agamemnon what Priam would have done if he had won a victory as great as Agamemnon’s, to which her husband replies “I well believe he might have walked on tapestries.”91 In so doing Clytemnestra attempts to demonstrate under which conditions trampling the purple would be appropriate: if it was done to fulfill a vow or if it was someone else who was similar to Priam. All of this has the effect of appealing to Agamemnon’s vanity and of persuading him that “under certain circumstances walking on the tapestries would be the right thing to do.”92

With his reluctance eroding, Clytemnestra appeals to Agamemnon as an honor-seeking male by reminding him that “he who goes unenvied shall not be admired.”93 In terms of the motivations of agonistic contestation, this remark is crucial. Clytemnestra here appeals to Agamemnon’s desire for glory, and his envy; key motivators of agonistic action. His envy is appealed to in two ways: his envy of those he sees as possessing greatness, and crucially the envy he wishes others to hold for him as being esteemed above all others. Furthermore, Clytemnestra herself is partially motivated by envy for

90 Easterling, "Presentation of Character in Aeschylus." p. 12.
91 Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 935-936.
93 Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 939.

Agamemnon’s position as ruler, and his male authority.\textsuperscript{94} She wants for herself the honor that he enjoys as a male ruler. Agamemnon responds to Clytemnestra by saying, “surely this lust for conflict is not womanlike,”\textsuperscript{95} and underlines the degree to which gender roles have been reversed.\textsuperscript{96} In so doing, Agamemnon acknowledges that it is a contest that he is engaged in with his wife, but does not recognize how truly dangerous the contest is for him. He uses this remark to chide Clytemnestra for her masculine lust for battle and victory, and to remind her of her position as a woman and his wife. Clytemnestra then changes the rhetorical direction of her argument, and replies “yet for the mighty even to give way is grace.”\textsuperscript{97} In so doing Clytemnestra appeals to Agamemnon’s masculine identity and to his kindness as a ruler over both Argos and his wife. Agamemnon’s masculine pride is flattered when Clytemnestra reminds him that his might permits him to yield by drawing attention to her own lack of power as a woman.

Agamemnon clearly perceives how great Clytemnestra’s desire for victory is, even though he does not recognize fully what her victory entails. As Goetsch argues, “Aeschylus' text is full of double entendres, as if Klytaimnestra were challenging her husband, and he would escape his fate if only he had wit to understand what she said.”\textsuperscript{98} For Clytemnestra the contest between her and Agamemnon is much more than merely a domestic dispute between husband and wife, as Agamemnon foolishly believes it to be.

\textsuperscript{94} Winnington-Ingram, "Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena." p. 132.
\textsuperscript{95} Aeschylus, \textit{Agamemnon}. l. 940.
\textsuperscript{96} Winnington-Ingram, "Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena." p.133.
\textsuperscript{97} Aeschylus, \textit{Agamemnon}. l. 941.
When he asks Clytemnestra, “do you too desire a victory in strife?” he speaks with a tone of masculine condescension in which the victorious male warrior asks his wife of warrior spirit if she too craves a battle victory. Agamemnon knows that he will bend his will and yield, but he does not know entirely what it is that he concedes. As McClure argues, “Agamemnon, like so many other tragic heroes, plays the part of the gull, deceived by his wife’s irresistible verbal cunning.” In no way does Agamemnon fully realize either the stakes in the contest, or the terms of his defeat when he chooses to be persuaded and concedes to Clytemnestra’s desire. Indeed, one can even argue that Clytemnestra taunts her husband. When he does yield, he claims to fear the consequences and feel a sense of shame for trampling the splendors of his house which he ought to preserve, but he does it nonetheless. Clytemnestra’s words appeal to “the key-notes of his character… vanity and ambition. Ambition led him to sacrifice Iphigeneia at Aulis… Now vanity tells him what is the fitting reward for the conqueror.” Clearly, Agamemnon does not realize how much he demonstrates by action the truth of the alternative and twisted identity that Clytemnestra has spun for him.

Significantly, spectators to the contest are aware of the trap that Clytemnestra sets, and recognize that Agamemnon does not perceive his own imminent danger. As

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99 Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*. l. 942. I have chosen to use the translation employed by Winnington-Ingram, "Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena." p. 133, as I find that it more accurately captures the tone of condescension in Agamemnon’s words as well as the battle sense of the Greek. The Greek is: ἦ καὶ σὺ νίκην τὴν δήριος τίεις; As such, the Greek directly refers to a victory in battle, (dērios) which is obscured in Lattimore’s translation as: “does such a victory as this mean so much to you?”

100 McClure, *Spoken Like a Woman: Speech and Gender in Athenian Drama.* p. 80.


102 Winnington-Ingram, "Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena." p. 133.
soon as Agamemnon enters, the chorus seek to warn him. They urge him to “ask all men: you will learn in time which of your citizens have been just in the city’s sway, which were reckless.” With these words, one can only assume that they seek to warn him that treachery is afoot. This is a warning that Agamemnon not only does not heed, but one which he does not even understand. Clytemnestra strives to not only persuade Agamemnon to abide by her conditions, but also attempts to persuade the chorus composed of the male elders of Argos that it is she who is worthy of ruling them, and that her murderous actions towards Agamemnon are just. Later, Cassandra says to the chorus what should by now be obvious to all, that “the admiral of the fleets… does not suspect the rabid bitch’s tongue that licks his hand and pricks her ears, in stealth his downfall, and will work his doom.”

When Agamemnon does walk upon the tapestries, his actions equate him with the fallen foreign ruler Priam, corrupting his identity as a Greek ruler and transforming him before the elders of Argos. Agamemnon yields not only because Clytemnestra intensely desires it, but also because her persuasion and flattery speaks to him of a desire that he harbors but that he dare not express himself. Thus, Clytemnestra succeeds in making “a public demonstration of Agamemnon’s unfitness to rule, and his corruption by the Trojan experience.” For Clytemnestra, the only acceptable outcome to their agonistic contest is Agamemnon’s death. For her, justice for Iphigenia’s sacrifice and her own gambit for power and liberty can only be achieved if the trickster himself dies by a trick orchestrated

103 Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 808- 810.
by her. As MacLeod argues, in the carpet scene “we have the ironic spectacle of the conqueror conquered.” Agamemnon’s last words before entering the house speak directly to the power of Clytemnestra’s words to dominate him. The king states that “my will was bent to listen to you in this,” and acknowledges his own subjection and defeat without fully grasping its extent.

When Agamemnon walks the tapestries, trampling their wealth into the dirt, he symbolically recreates his own role in the sacrifice of Iphigenia, by once again destroying that which is most valuable to his house. Unlike in Homer, Aeschylus has Agamemnon take complete responsibility for the decision to kill Iphigenia; the king does not blame the prophet Calchas for ordering the sacrifice as he does in the Iliad. Both the carpet scene and the sacrifice of his daughter are instances of the pyrrhic sacrifice of useful things. His trampling of the tapestries is the senseless destruction of the treasures of his household, just as the sacrifice of Iphigenia destroyed that which was most treasured by his house.

As Scodel argues, “the Carpet Scene develops the association of the sacrificed virgin with valuable, and wasted, property; in walking on the tapestries Agamemnon could almost be

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106 “No shame, I think, in the death given this man. And did he not first of all in this house wreak death by treachery?” Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 1521-1526. The treachery that is referred to here is the sacrifice of Iphigenia. In some versions of the myth Iphigenia is lured to Aulis by the promise of a marriage to Achilles. see Euripides’ Iphigenia in Aulis.


108 Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 956.


110 “Great the extravagance, and great the shame I feel to spoil such treasure and such silver’s worth of webs.” Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 948-49.

111 “The beauty of my house.” Ibid. l. 208.
said to repeat the sacrifice itself.”

Clytemnestra’s persuasion suggests that the bounty of the house is so great that Agamemnon can afford to trample into destruction the valuable tapestries as their wealth will be replenished. Similarly, Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia suggests that she could be replaced by another daughter. This is a line of reasoning that Clytemnestra in Euripides’ *Iphigenia in Aulis* refuses to accept. She instead claims that by murdering Iphigenia, Agamemnon has exchanged that which is most precious for that which is most detested: the return of Helen. For the corrupted sacrifice of her daughter, Clytemnestra stages the equally corrupt sacrifice of her husband in retribution.

For the chorus, the fact that the king has been killed is made worse by the reality that his ignominious death came at the hands of his wife, entangled in a fine robe in his bath, and that the kin-killing brings pollution to all of Argos. The chorus even goes so far as to question how this slaying at the hands of a woman could be Zeus’ justice. Furthermore, Agamemnon’s death is all the more shocking not only because he was killed by his wife, a mere woman, but because he died through treachery and guile and not on the open battlefield of male contest. Especially troubling is that Agamemnon is entrapped in a robe woven by female hands before he is struck down by a male martial

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112 Scodel, "Δόμων Ἀγαλμα: Virgin Sacrifice and Aesthetic Object." p. 117.
113 Euripides, *Iphigenia in Aulis*. l. 1166-1171. “If any man should ask you why, why do you kill your daughter? What answer will you make? Or must your words come from my mouth? I kill her, you must answer, that Menelaus may win Helen back. And so our child, in her beauty, you pay as price for a woman of evil. So you buy with our best beloved a creature most loathed and hated.”
weapon wielded by those same female hands that ought to be ignorant of how to perform such an act.

At this point it is illuminating to consider Nietzsche’s understanding of the Greek practice of ostracism. Nietzsche argues that ostracism was practiced in order to preserve the *agon* as a sphere for the promotion of excellence through contestation. Ostracism was thus a punishment for those individuals who so completely dominated the *agon* that no one could compete against them, thus eliminating the possibility for true contestation. Ostracism thus “does away with an outstanding individual, so that once again the competing game may awaken.”\(^{116}\) When one individual towers so far above all the rest, true rivalry and contest are no longer possible. One must not forget that the chorus in reaction to Clytemnestra’s murderous victory over Agamemnon declare that her punishment is to be banishment from Argos: “you shall go homeless now, crushed with men’s bitterness.”\(^{117}\) The word here used for banishment, *apopolis*, (ἀπόπολις) translates literally as away from the *polis*, meaning that Clytemnestra’s banishment is meant to deprive her of being a part of a *polis*. Ostracism was a punishment meant to protect the *polis* from those who would use politics for personal aggrandizement and thus was seen as a safeguard against tyrannies and those who wished to style themselves as tyrants.\(^{118}\) Komar is correct in stating that the fact “that men feel compelled to fear and condemn

\(^{116}\) Nietzsche, "Homer's Contest." p. 40.

\(^{117}\) Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*. l. 1410-1411. The Greek is: ἀπέιδιχες ἀπέταμες, ἀ(πὸ)πολις δ᾿ἔσηι, μῖσος ὁβριμον ἀστοῖς.

[Clytemnestra] only adds to her significance.” It is certainly possible to see the pronouncement of Clytemnestra’s banishment as an attempt to preserve the male *agon* as a realm of contestation. The chorus thus threaten to drive Clytemnestra out precisely because she has decisively demonstrated that she is capable of completely, utterly, and even fatally dominating and defeating any of those who dare to engage her in an agonistic contest. The threat of banishment here, as Fraenkel notes, also “corresponds to the stoning in the clash of the chorus with Aegisthus,” where Aegisthus is threatened with stoning as a means of either driving him out of the city or killing him.

The entirety of the action in the *Oresteia*, from the carpet scene of the *Agamemnon* to Athena’s coercive persuasion of the furies in the *Eumenides*, “is a series of battles lost and won.” By the end of the first play, Clytemnestra has “successfully rebelled against man,” and is confronted by a chorus whose fear outweighs their anger. In an extraordinarily rare occurrence, the chorus leave the stage in silence, dejected and resigned to live under the tyranny of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. While Clytemnestra is motivated to revenge by grief for her daughter’s unnecessary sacrifice and the betrayals of Agamemnon, by the end of the play, secure in her victory, the queen speaks “not as mother, but as competitor for power who has gained one victory of force and is prepared

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121 Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*. l. 1615-16.
123 Ibid. p. 113-14.
to gain another."\(^{125}\) In her triumph, Clytemnestra expresses a fragile and ambivalent hope, that now that she holds power, good order can be brought to her house.\(^{126}\) And yet, her agonistic acts of violence will not succeed in bringing peace to her household. Instead, Clytemnestra’s speech and contestation has resulted in victory for a “wretched persuasion”\(^{127}\) which claims its place in the long line of reciprocal revenge of kin killing kin.

\(^{125}\) Winnington-Ingram, "Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena." p. 135.

\(^{126}\) Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 1673.

\(^{127}\) Ibid. l. 385. τάλαινα πειθώ.
Chapter 3:

Bloody like the Wolf: The Savagery of the Agon of the Grave

Shortly after the Ionian Revolts, the Greek Tragedian Phrynichus staged his play *The Capture of Miletus* at the Great Dionysia. The tragedy was composed shortly after the sack and destruction of the city of Miletus at the hands of the Persians in 494 BCE. As such, the play was a rare example of a tragedian writing not from myth, but from recent events and a history shared by the audience. So compelling was the playwright’s depiction of the grief and sorrow of the defeated Milesians that “the audience in the theatre burst into tears.”\(^1\) However, “the dramatic representation of this holocaust, which marked the bitter end of the Ionian revolt, struck too close to home,” as “the Athenians’ political self-identification as Ionians made them feel that the misfortunes of their fellow Ionians, their ‘kinsfolk,’ were really their own.”\(^2\) As Herodotus reports, Phrynichus “was fined a thousand drachmas for reminding them of their own evils and they forbade anybody ever to put the play on the stage again.”\(^3\) Something extraordinary happened in the theatre when the audience was collectively overcome by a torrent of tears both for the Milesians in the play and for their own sufferings during the Ionian revolts. But something even more extraordinary occurred when the Athenian Assembly reacted to this

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cathartic public outpouring of grief by not only fining Phyrnichus for the quality of his work but also by outright banning the play from ever being produced again. From this point on, tragedy depicted almost exclusively mythical subjects. For Nicole Loraux, the ban of *the Capture of Miletus* results in “a ban on memory,” whereby it is not merely the play which is banned, but any act of remembrance that recalls the grief and sorrow of real defeats.

What is so dangerous about mourning and the public expression of grief that it requires laws to prevent and regulate its occurrence? The laws passed by Solon in response to the Cylonian Conspiracy imply “that funerals could arouse dangerous sentiments among the people,” and that female lamenters could use their funeral songs to call for retribution and blood. By singing menacingly of the ties of honor, shame, and duty, female lamenters could invoke the *agon* of the grave to demand for male relatives to avenge the deceased. The legislation passed against *the Capture of Miletus* suggests that even staged depictions of mourning were seen as having the potential to solicit real desires for blood to pay for blood. Despite the attitude that mourning was a dangerous activity which required regulation and containment, the tragic stage remained as a venue for depicting very public acts of lamentation in a pleasure of tears. The prominent lamentation in Aeschylus’ *the Choephori* is permeated with a mood of “hope and

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4 The one known exception to this is Aeschylus’ *the Persians* produced in 474 BCE. However, the depiction of the historical subject, a dramatization of the Persian reaction to news of their defeat at the Battle of Salamis, centres on the grief of a defeated enemy, and as such can be interpreted as a victory ode of sorts for the Greeks.

5 Loraux, *Mothers in Mourning*. p. 43.

foreboding,” and the “fear that the darkness may not so easily be turned to light.” The first 651 lines of the play consist of a prolonged sung lament for Agamemnon at his graveside. Orestes and Electra use their lament for their father to promote and stir violent passions for revenge and murder. The chorus of foreign slave women sing a passionate song of retribution that urges the children to take up the mantle of agonism and avenge their father. Like real Athenian lamenters, who could use their song to stir men to violent revenge, the chorus “do so as artists in full consciousness of their powers.” According to the harsh logic of the Choephori, blood calls to blood, and blood once spilled demands a return to violent agonism and a downward spiral of retribution that calls into question appeals to justice and punishment.

**Greek Customs of Mourning**

Prior to the passing of restrictive laws directed at funeral practices in the 5th and 6th centuries, Greek burials were elaborate public spectacles, which took place primarily outdoors, crossing the space between oikos and polis. Funeral customs began by preparing the body of the deceased to journey outside of the household and through the city to a final resting place. In the funerary scenes depicted on Geometric and classical vases we see that “women predominate and are shown engaged in the rituals carried out both before and after the internment of the body.” The kinswomen of the deceased were responsible for preparing the body first by closing the eyes and mouth, and then

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proceeding to ritually wash, dress, and anoint the body.\textsuperscript{10} Typically the body was clothed in white, but if the deceased was either unmarried or newly married the body would be dressed in wedding attire.\textsuperscript{11} The choice of bridal clothing for both unmarried or newly married men and women was chosen likely to symbolize a marriage in Hades which removed the deceased from their household amongst the living.\textsuperscript{12} Before the body of the deceased began its journey outside of the household, the body was displayed and adorned with garlands of laurel, celery, and herbs, and individuals could come to view the body.\textsuperscript{13} Beside the doorway to the house was placed a bowl of water that came from outside the home for the living to use to purify themselves after coming into contact with the pollution of the corpse.\textsuperscript{14} After the passage of Solon’s laws restricting mourning, many funerary practices such as the ritual washing, dressing and anointing of the corpse, and the singing of laments by kinswomen, were performed indoors.

Next the deceased began its procession through the city from household to resting place. The mourners were composed largely of women, with one woman, usually either the mother or wife designated as the main mourner of honor who clasped the head of the dead.\textsuperscript{15} The rest of the female mourners would be other kinswomen and in some cases paid professional mourners.\textsuperscript{16} As Blundell notes, “In the Archaic period, many female

\textsuperscript{10} Alexiou, \textit{The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition}. p. 5.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{12} The equation of death with marriage is a common element in tragedy. For example, Antigone twice likens her death to a marriage. see l. 816, and l. 891.
\textsuperscript{13} Alexiou, \textit{The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition}.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. p. 5.
\textsuperscript{15} Blundell, \textit{Women in Ancient Greece}. p. 162.
\textsuperscript{16} see the laying out of Hector’s body, in \textit{the Iliad}, where professional mourners are brought in. Homer, \textit{Iliad}. Book 24 l. 704-804. see also Plato, \textit{The Laws of Plato}, trans.
mourners would have had no blood relationship with the dead person.”17 Aside from very close male relatives such as a father, husband, or brothers, the mourners were almost exclusively female. The male mourners would proceed in the procession in a highly ritualized and solemn silence, with their right arms raised uniformly, striking a stark contrast to the “wild ecstasy of the women.”18 As Alexiou notes, “the archaeological and literary evidence, taken together, makes it clear that lamentation involved movement as well as wailing and singing. Since each movement was determined by a pattern of ritual, frequently accompanied by the shrill music of the aulós (a reed-pipe similar to a double flute), the scene must have resembled a dance, sometimes slow and solemn, sometimes wild and ecstatic.”19 However, while the women accompanying the corpse on its last journey through the city likely wailed and danced, the procession was not the place for the singing of dirges. The formalized content of sung laments was reserved for the graveside.20 Once the women arrived at the site of the deceased’s tomb, they were anything but silent.

The female mourners not only wailed and sang their laments for the dead, but also wore the physical representations of their grief. The chorus in the Choephoroi, lamenting for the dead Agamemnon sing:

my cheek shows bright, ripped in the bloody furrows of nails gashing the skin.

Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). (800e). “choruses of singers who come, hired from abroad, of the sort that are paid to walk before funeral processions, inspired by some Carian Muse.”
17 Blundell, Women in Ancient Greece. p. 73.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid. p. 7.
This is my life: to feed the heart on hard-drawn breath.
And in my grief, with splitting weft
of ragtorn linen across my heart’s
brave show of robes
came sound of my hands’ strokes
in sorrows whence smiles are fled.  

With these lines we know that the women of the chorus are dressed in mourning garments that have been ritualistically torn with their bare hands, and that they have used those same hands to drag bloody channels through their cheeks. Such acts as “the violent tearing of the hair, face and clothes were not acts of uncontrolled grief, but part of the ritual indispensable to lamentation throughout antiquity.” The rending of skin, the tearing of flesh, the ripping of hair, and the shredding of garments were all ways in which the living could create on their own bodies the injuries done to the deceased and share in the burden and dishonor of the injuries suffered by the dead.

Once the mourners arrived at the graveside, the singing of ritual laments could begin. For the ancient Greeks, the rituals of mourning often took the form of threnody. The word *threnoidia* is a compound which derives its meaning from *threnos*, (wailing) and *oide*, (ode). As such, the threnody, through which we come to know many of the laments preserved in epic and tragedy, is a mournful and highly emotional song dedicated to the deceased and typically sung at the graveside. The practice of lamentation in the ancient world is incredibly diverse, but “what is common to laments for the dead in most ‘traditional’ cultures is that they are part of more elaborate rituals for the dead, and that

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22 Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*. p. 6
they are usually performed by women." In the world of the ancient Greeks women played the dominant roles in funeral rituals and were the main composers and singers of laments. While women were largely excluded from the public and political life of the polis their roles as mothers, midwives, and mourners did give them a particular authority in religious matters of life and death. As Blundell notes, “religion was the one area of activity where a section of the population that had been ideologically confined to the private sphere was allowed to emerge into public prominence.” The role of women in Greek funerary rites and religion therefore created a space within the male-dominated polis where women exercised power and authority through controlling the rituals of birth and death. As Holst-Warhaft argues, “in a patriarchal society where women are consistently undervalued, it leaves in the hands of women, who, both as child-bearers and midwives already have a certain control over birth, potential authority over the rites of death.” Prior to Solon’s legislation that restricted mourning women controlled not only the rites of birth as mothers and midwives, but also the rites of death in their roles of preparing the dead and singing and composing laments.

One of the worst things that could befall an individual was to go unwept and unburied, (aklauton athapton). In the Odyssey Elpenor reminds Odysseus of the terrible fate that befalls anyone who goes without burial and lament. He beseeches Odysseus to “remember me, and do not go and leave me behind unwept, unburied, when you leave,

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24 Blundell, Women in Ancient Greece. p. 163.
26 see the burial of Hector in which the mourning is led by Hector’s kinswomen: his wife Andromache, his mother Hecuba, his sister Cassandra, and sister-in-law Helen. Homer, Iliad. Book 24, 1. 704-804.
for fear I might become the god’s curse upon you; but burn me there with all my armor that belongs to me, and heap up a grave mound beside the beach of the gray sea, for an unhappy man, so that those to come will know of me.”

The rights of the dead to the funeral rites owed to them were protected not only by the ties of duty and honor to their kinsmen and kinswomen, but also by the threat of the dead person’s curse if these rites were not observed. As religious agents and authorities over the passages of birth and death, it fell largely upon women to protect and carry out the rites of burial. When Electra recoils at her mother’s audacity, it is to cry out “in horror at her mother’s crime: she dared to bury Agamemnon without the ceremony due to a king, and without mourning.”

For Electra, the murder of her father is equally as abhorrent as mutilating his corpse and denying him a proper and honorable burial.

Through funeral customs and the voices of women raised in the wailing song of lament a bridge of duty and responsibility understood through loss could be formed between the living and the dead. However, creating and crossing this bridge between the living and the dead is not without its perils. Women’s laments formed a powerful mode of communication with the dead that could be used to either relieve the suffering and grief of the living, or to call upon the living to avenge the dead through calls of blood for blood. This type of communication “with the dead places a certain power in the hands of

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28 Alexiou p. 4. Similarly, in Sophocles, Antigone is motivated in part by a need to remedy the dishonor done to her brother’s corpse by Creon’s edict denying burial. She insists not only on burying her kinsman, but also making the burial public, to declare the *kleos*, (glory, κλέος) of her deed. For Antigone, “if I dared to leave the dead man, my mother’s son, dead and unburied, that would have been real pain.” Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. David Grene, *Sophocles I* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991), l. 466-8.
women,”29 who are then able to use their privileged position of lament to fuel blood feuds through the violent and bloodthirsty rhetoric of lamentation. As Richard Seaford argues “women were associated with a loyalty to the household unmitigated by any public role, and with a greater intensity of lamentation than men, an intensity which, in the event of murder, would issue in unrestrained demands for revenge.”30 Songs of lament for the dead could turn from grief and loss towards deadly calls for vengeance.

It is exactly this kind of dangerous and incendiary mourning that directly led to the passage of restrictive laws against female lamentation. When Solon enacted the laws restricting lamentation and mourning, he was reacting to the violent and bloody consequences of a past attempted coup and a failure of the justice system that continued to threaten the stability of Athens generations after the fact. As Holst-Warhaft argues, “Solon’s laws were passed at a time when blood feuds were still common, and Plutarch regards the legislation as being directly linked to the feud that lasted for at least thirty years following Megakles’ murder of Kylon and his fellow conspirators.”31 In order to understand the reasoning, justification, and intent of Solon’s restrictions on feminine practices of mourning and lamentation, one must first grasp the implications and consequences of the masculine agonistic conflict for control of Athens involving the supporters of Megakles and Cylon.

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29 Holst-Warhaft, Dangerous Voices: Women’s Laments and Greek Literature. p. 3.
30 Seaford, Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State. p. 84.
The Cylonian Conspiracy and Solon’s Laws Restricting Mourning

In 630 BCE\textsuperscript{32} Athens survived a violent and bloody attempted coup led by one of its own citizens. The driving force behind the coup was a very prominent and much lauded Athenian aristocrat named Cylon who was also a former victor of the Olympic games, and the son-in-law to Theagenes, tyrant of Megara. The Cylonian Conspiracy took place during a tumultuous time in Athens’ political history when rival groups of aristocrats vacillated between supporting tyranny and quasi-democratic rule by fragile coalitions of aristocrats. Cylon and his Athenian followers, supported by foreign troops supplied by Theagenes, attempted to seize the Acropolis during the Olympic games and install Cylon as ruler of the city. Cylon had sought advice from an oracle at Delphi, where he was advised to attempt to claim Athens during a festival to Zeus. Cylon took this to mean that his victory would be assured if he acted during the Olympic games. However, the people of Athens were not willing to accept another tyrant and they rushed in from the surrounding countryside\textsuperscript{33} and Cylon soon finds himself under siege by the

\textsuperscript{32} There is considerable debate as to the exact date of the events of the Cylonian Conspiracy. It is generally accepted to have occurred no earlier than 636 BCE, because this is the first Olympic games held after Cylon won his victory, and no later than 594 BCE, as the event occurs definitively before Solon was named Archon. John Henry Wright argues that the Cylonian Conspiracy should be dated precisely to 630 BCE, and his argument was confirmed by evidence from Aristotle’s treatise \textit{the Athenian Constitution}. Aristotle’s work was discovered in 1879 as part of the Egyptian Oxyrhynchus Papyrus and published for study in 1880. An examination of it confirms a pre-Draconian date for the Cylonian Conspiracy, consistent with Wright’s argument. For more information on the dating of the Cylonian Conspiracy see: John Henry Wright, "The Date of Cylon," \textit{Harvard Studies in Classical Philology} 3 (1892). p. 1-74. in particular see pages 12-13

\textsuperscript{33} Thucydides, \textit{The Peloponnesian War}. I 126. p. 71.
very people he is purporting to rule. Cylon and his supporters fall victim to a long and
drawn out siege during which many of the besiegers leave and turn the affair over to the
hands of the Archons.\textsuperscript{34} At some point Cylon and his brother most likely escaped,\textsuperscript{35}
leaving the remainder of their supporters to face the grim prospects of starvation and
Athenian justice. The remaining conspirators took up refuge at the altar of Athena Polias
as suppliants. Megakles, who is the archon eponymous at the time, manages to convince
the conspirators that they will be guaranteed a fair trial and their lives if they will leave
the altar.\textsuperscript{36} The suppliants tie a string to the statue of the goddess, to preserve a physical
claim to the protection granted them by the altar, and agree to be led out.\textsuperscript{37} However, “as
soon as they came over-against the temple of the Furies… the thread broke itself; upon
which, Megacles and his colleagues rushed upon them and seized them, as if they had
lost their privilege.”\textsuperscript{38} Eventually, nearly all of the conspirators are slaughtered, either in
front of the Temple of the Furies or in front of the Areopagus where they had fled.\textsuperscript{39}

The breaking of the thread was surely used by Megakles and his supporters as an
attempt to justify their breaking of the promise of safe-conduct and the ensuing sacrilege
of slaughtering the suppliants. If the thread broke, they could interpret this as Athena
repudiating her protection and therefore the conspirators would lose their protected

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{35} The ancient sources are conflicted on this point. Early sources such as Thucydides I
126 explicitly state that Cylon and his brother escaped. But Herodotus is silent on the
matter and says nothing as to the fates of the two brothers.
\textsuperscript{36} Plutarch, "Life of Solon," in \textit{Plutarch's Lives} (London: Thomas Davison, Whitefriars,
1809)., p. 255.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.p. 255-6. see also Thucydides, \textit{The Peloponnesian War}. 1.126. p. 72
\textsuperscript{39} Thucydides, \textit{The Peloponnesian War}. 1.126. p. 72
position as suppliants. They could cast their actions as the patriotic actions of individuals defending Athens from her enemies. However, the Athenians did not believe this narrative of events and instead viewed the slaying as a heinous crime against religion. This was greatly shocking, and Megakles and his entire family were seen as having violated the law against killing suppliants and to have incurred a miasma of pollution on the city. Megakles and his entire family, the Alcmaeonidae, were exiled from Athens, and later generations were seen as inheriting the pollution. As Thucydides writes, “Accordingly these cursed ones were driven out by the Athenians, driven out again by Cleomenes of Lacedaemon and an Athenian faction; the living were driven out, and the bones of the dead were taken up; thus they were cast out. For all that, they came back afterwards, and their descendants are still in the city.”

However, the conflict between Megakles and Cylon does not end there; as Plutarch reports, “the remains of Cylon’s faction afterward recovered strength, and kept the quarrel with the descendants of Megacles.” The surviving members of the families, as well as supporters for each faction, continued to perpetuate the blood feud for at least 30 years, undeterred by the punishments meted out. As Richard Seaford argues, “the aftermath of the Kylonian conspiracy represents, in Plutarch’s narrative, the failure of the judicial process. A trial is promised, but is replaced by violence which turns into an enduring civic crisis of reciprocal violence and pollution, namely into the worst of what

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40 Ibid. see also Plutarch, "Life of Solon." p. 256.
41 Plutarch, "Life of Solon." p. 256.
the judicial process is designed to avoid.” The exile of all those involved in the Cylonian conspiracy does not result in a quieting of violent agonism. Instead, the two sides for at least three generations engage in violent agonistic contests that disturb the peace and threaten the security of the entire Athenian polis. As Alexiou argues, “in the inflammable atmosphere of the blood feud between the families of Megakles and Kylon that was still raging in Solon’s time, what more effective way could there be to stir up feelings of revenge than the incessant lamentation at the tomb by large numbers of women for ‘those long dead?’” Furthermore, the rest of Athens, “relapsed into their old disputes concerning government; for there were as many parties among them, as there were different tracts of land in their country.” Even those not directly involved in the Cylonian dispute by blood, continued to engage in forms of agonism that had the potential to turn violent. The agon of Athenian political life, though quieted, continued with a more restrained competitive agonistic politics that contained a threatening possibility. By relapsing into their old disputes, the Athenians embraced agonistic contests that augured a further deterioration of class relations between the poor demos and the rich oligarchs. When this is added to the already existing culture of blood feuds perpetuated by the continuation of the violence of the Cylonian conspiracy, Athens found itself in an extremely volatile political climate that threatened to rend the civic fabric of the polis irreversibly.

42 Seaford, Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State. p. 95.
43 Alexiou, The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition. p. 21-2
It is around this time, when the violent calls for vengeance for the dead are continuously reissued and the city is rocked by the cycle of violent responses, that Solon enacts his laws to moderate and limit the practices of mourning and lamentation.\footnote{Ibid. p. 257.} What is remarkable, is that in attempting to halt the violent agonism committed by men against men in revenge for past wrongs, Solon did not target the male bodies responsible for blood feud killings. Instead, he targeted the female voices calling for vengeance. Solon was reported to have designed and instituted his laws against mourning and lamentation with the advice of Epimenides of Crete, who had experienced similar difficulties with blood feuds and mourning in Phaistos and who had personally traveled to Athens to assist Solon.\footnote{Alexiou, \textit{The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition}. p. 14-15. Athens and Crete were also not the only places in the Ancient Greek world to pass legislation limiting the role of women in mourning and funeral rites. Legislation was also passed on the island of Keos at Ioulis and at Delphi in the 5\textsuperscript{th} century, as well “at Gambreion in Asia Minor in the third century and at a number of other places in the Greek world….In all cases, women are especially singled out by the restrictions,” Holst-Warhaft p. 114. At the city of Keos, the dead even had to be carried in silence, no more than five women could be present, and the women were only permitted to wear unsullied, pristine grey clothing. see Loraux, \textit{Mothers in Mourning}. p. 21-2.} In each city, the excesses of mourning and grief expressed by women were seen as being primarily responsible for the continuation of blood feuds.\footnote{see Alexiou, \textit{The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition}.p. 14-15, and Holst-Warhaft, \textit{Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature}. p. 118.} When Solon legislated the restrictions on funerals he was legislating in a context of strife and conflict, directly out of the Cylonian Conspiracy. As Alexiou argues, Solon’s laws were conceivably, “designed to end internecine strife between clans by removing the responsibility for punishment in cases of homicide from clan to state, as Plutarch implies...
himself by connecting them with the Kylon affair and with Drakon’s homicide laws.”\(^{48}\) It was the voices of mourning women, and not the killing hands of men, that were seen as responsible for the continuation of the bloody cycle of agonism and blood feud.

The content of Solon’s laws directly targeted female practices of mourning and greatly reduced the role that women could play in funeral rites. As Plutarch writes, Solon “taught the Athenians to be more frugal in their religious worship, and more moderate in their mourning, by intermixing certain sacrifices with the funeral solemnities, and abolishing the cruel and barbarous customs that had generally prevailed among the women before.”\(^{49}\) Before Alexiou’s treatment of this topic, the question of why women in particular was not addressed as a gendered question or issue for feminist concern. Instead, the laws were seen primarily either from an economic angle or from the position of eliminating superstition.\(^{50}\) However, the economic argument falls short because money spent on funerals at the time was private not public money, and because during the same period we know of no attempts to limit or reduce spending on religious festivals.\(^{51}\) The argument from superstition also fails to persuade because Athens officially introduced one of its most significant elements of religious life, the hero cult, at the same time that Solon was issuing restrictive laws against mourning.\(^{52}\)

Solon’s laws on lament do not permit women to be viewed as weak and subservient creatures confined narrowly within the oikos. Instead, his laws see women as

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\(^{48}\) Alexiou, *The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition*. p. 22.

\(^{49}\) Plutarch, "Life of Solon." p. 257.


\(^{52}\) Ibid.
being the possessors of tremendously powerful voices that could stir men to violent action and shake the very foundations of the *polis*. 6th century lament legislation in Greece “hardly supports a notion of lament as the expression of the helpless and downtrodden. Rather, it would suggest a belief in women’s laments or lamenting women as a force to be reckoned with.” As such, Solon’s laws on mourning severely restrict and limit the role that women could play in burial rites and mourning. Solon’s laws, regulated, moreover, the journeys of women, their mournings, and sacrifices, and endeavored to keep them free from all disorder and excess. They were not to go out of town with more than three habits: the provisions, which they carried with them, were not to exceed the value of an obolus: their basket was not to be above a cubit high; and in the night they were not to travel except in a carriage, with a torch before them. At funerals they were forbidden to tear themselves, and no hired mourner was to utter lamentable notes, or to act any thing else which tended to excite sorrow. They were not permitted to sacrifice upon those occasions, or to bury more than three garments with the body, or to visit any tombs, except at the time of internment, beside those of their own family.

In addition to all this, Solon also restricted public mourning to a mere handful of kinswomen, disallowed bull sacrifices, forbade any person from walking unaccompanied through the graves, and prohibited women from singing set dirges composed specifically for the deceased or one’s ancestors. These laws “were particularly strict on women mourners, a fact which suggests that women must have played a leading part in the funeral ceremony.” Furthermore, the laws were actively enforced and openly stated “that such offenders shall be punished by the board of censors for women, because they

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indulge in unmanly and effeminate extravagances of sorrow when they mourn.”57 Plutarch specifically uses the Greek word ἀνάνδροις, (anandrois) which means literally unmanly, things unworthy of a man, or unmanly behavior. In other words, women who disobeyed Solon’s laws were punished precisely for failing to adhere to strict male standards of behavior and conduct. Women were punished for not behaving like men; women were punished for behaving like women.

Solon’s mourning legislation is also motivated by fear. There is a “fear based on the association of laments not only with the dead, but with possession, madness and violence,”58 as well as a fear of the potential power of female voices to sway male bodies. Solon’s restrictions on mourning and lamentation in the late 5th and 6th centuries coincided with multiple reforms to Athenian governance which resulted in strengthening the democratic institutions of the polis.59 The timing and targeted nature of Solon’s funerary laws suggests not only that women’s prominent roles in burial rites and lamentation were seen previously as desirable and appropriate, but also that these same functions came to be seen as a threat to the success of the democratizing reforms of the polis. For Solon, it appears that the previous blurring of oikos and polis in which women served as privileged intermediaries between the living and the dead was seen as disruptive, undesirable, and threatening to the democratic city.60 In other words, “by

58 Holst-Warhaft, Dangerous Voices: Women's Laments and Greek Literature. p. 27.
60 Alexiou, The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition. p. 18.
drawing sharp lines between the public and private spheres of life, and assigning women’s role strictly to the latter, the new democratic institutions effectively negated women’s participation even in the traditional rituals they once controlled."\textsuperscript{61} Because female lament as embodied in \textit{thrēnos}, (θρῆνος, funeral-song) encourages male relatives to value their ties of kinship to the \textit{oikos} more highly than their ties to the civic \textit{polis}, to secure the safety of the \textit{polis} women’s voices needed to be controlled and removed. Mourning and the violent agonistic strife that it could demand and realize became perceived as a potential “focus of resistance to the new political order.”\textsuperscript{62} Athens’ strengthened democratic order required that female voices be removed from the \textit{polis} and confined to the \textit{oikos}. If the \textit{agon} was to be controlled and the violent justice as vendetta that characterized the Cylonian conspiracy rendered a thing of the past, the voices and bodies of women had to be strictly regulated and controlled. Female mourning contained the potential to sing for the death of the \textit{polis}.

\textbf{The Lamentation Scene}

The \textit{Choephori} takes place approximately seven years after the murder of Agamemnon and the start of Clytemnestra’s and Aegisthus’ reign in Argos.\textsuperscript{63} The play begins with the arrival of Orestes and his silent companion Pylades at the tomb of Agamemnon. As Garvie argues, the opening tone of the play is one of “unrelieved gloom and anger.”\textsuperscript{64} Orestes’ first words are an invocation to Hermes, the lord of the dead to “be

\textsuperscript{61} Holst-Warhaft, \textit{Dangerous Voices: Women’s Laments and Greek Literature}. p. 103.
\textsuperscript{62} Blundell, \textit{Women in Ancient Greece}. p. 162.
\textsuperscript{63} Alan H. Sommerstein, \textit{Aeschylean Tragedy} (London: Duckworth, 2010). p. 125.
\textsuperscript{64} Garvie, \textit{Aeschylus: Choephor}. p. 55.
my savior and stand by my claim,” and a request for his father’s support in the vengeance he seeks. He wastes no time in clearly stating why he has traveled to Argos, the place of his birth: “here is my own soil that I walk. I have come home; and by this mounded gravebank I invoke my sire to hear, to listen.” These first lines are not only a call for the god’s support and his father’s protection, but also a clear statement that ties Orestes’ birthright to the ignoble fate of his murdered father. Orestes’ claim to the throne is dependent on his relationship to the dead and the duty that he owes to avenge his father. These lines immediately make clear that the conflict of the Agamemnon did not end with the murder of the king as Clytemnestra optimistically hoped; instead the Chorus’ threats are born out – Orestes has returned – and the blood feud is about to spawn another violent agonistic conflict inside the family.

The ties of obligation between the living and the dead are strengthened by Orestes’ next action. He carefully cuts a lock of his own hair and leaves it upon his father’s tomb with these words: “Here is a lock of hair for Inachus, who made me grow to manhood. Here a strand to mark my grief. I was not by, my father, to mourn for your death nor stretched my hand out when they took your corpse away.” These words and the physical lock of hair stress not only Orestes’ ties of blood and kinship to his father,

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65 Aeschylus, Choephoroi. l. 1-2. It should be noted that the opening of the Choephoroi is fragmentary and that these are the first preserved words of the play. According to Garvie, it is impossible to say how many lines are missing, but the number is likely under ten. Garvie, Aeschylus: Choephoroi. p. 47.
66 Aeschylus, Choephoroi. l. 3-5.
67 “I will take some small measure of our riches, and be content that I swept from these halls the murder, the sin, and the fury,” and “we two shall bring good order to our house at least.” Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 1573-6 and 1673.
68 Aeschylus, Choephoroi. l. 6-9.
but also the necessity for Orestes to honor his duty and obligation to avenge his father’s death before he can seize his own future and claim his birthright as ruler of Argos. The lock of hair is a way for Orestes to establish a physical link with his murdered father and thus claim his birthright.\(^\text{69}\) The dedication of a lock of hair while conducting prayers was a common graveside ritual.\(^\text{70}\) In this way, Orestes’ actions show him to be completing as much as possible the funeral rites for his father that he could not perform as a young child and exile. Orestes’ gift of a small lock of hair, while meager in value, is potent in symbolism, blood, duty, and honor. The lock of hair and the words spoken at Agamemnon’s graveside also draw attention to Orestes’ regret that he could not mourn his father at the time of his death, as well as the fact that Orestes was too young to avenge his father sooner.

Orestes’ belated lament for Agamemnon is interrupted by the arrival of Electra and the chorus of foreign female slaves bearing offerings for Agamemnon’s tomb. Electra and the chorus are described as “women veiled in dignities of black,”\(^\text{71}\) characteristic of mourning attire. Orestes immediately recognizes his sister, but he is ignorant as to her purpose. He is initially concerned that she could be acting against his interests and wonders if her arrival speaks to “some new wound struck into our house.”\(^\text{72}\) Until he can be sure that Electra is not aligned with Clytemnestra and intent on

\(^{69}\) Garvie, Aeschylus: Choephori. p 51.

\(^{70}\) Alexiou, The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition. p. 7.

\(^{71}\) Aeschylus, Choephori. l. 11.

\(^{72}\) Ibid. l. 12-13. Orestes could be assuming that Electra’s mourning is for a recent death in the family, and unconnected to Agamemnon’s death.
continuing the disgrace of Agamemnon, he and Pylades choose to hide and observe the women to learn “what their prayer would ask.”

Electra is described as being dressed in all the outward signs of mourning. When she arrives, she initially expresses confusion and concern. She and the women who attend her are bearing gifts sent by Clytemnestra to the tomb of the man she killed without regret. Electra doesn’t know how to perform the task asked of her to speak prayers and deliver Clytemnestra’s offerings without offending the gods. She feels deeply that she cannot do as Clytemnestra has bid her and asks the chorus, “shall I say I bring it to the man beloved, from a loving wife, and mean my mother? I have not the daring to say this, nor know what else to say, as I pour this liquid on my father’s tomb.” Electra asks the female slaves who attend her for counsel and guidance. She knows that she cannot be as bold as her mother, and yet she also does not want to do her father’s grave dishonor by a dishonorable offering ignominiously poured out and the vessel carelessly tossed away. Whereas Clytemnestra did not shrink away from committing the daring murder of her husband, her daughter clearly lacks the same daring to endorse her mother’s actions and share in her father’s murder symbolically in her own heart.

But why is Clytemnestra, the bold murderess, sending grave offerings to the man she murdered seemingly without remorse? The answer is simple: she is afraid. Clytemnestra has had a terrifying dream. The chorus reports that the previous night, “terror, the dream diviner of this house, belled clear, shuddered the skin, blew wrath from

73 l. 19-20.
74 Aeschylus, Choephoroi. l. 17 “πένθει λυγρῷ”
75 Ibid. l. 89-92.
76 Ibid. l. 97-99.
sleep, a cry in night’s obscure watches, a voice of fear deep in the house, dropping deadweight in women’s inner chambers.”

Clytemnestra dreamed that she gave birth to a snake, “a little monster,” that she swaddled and nursed at her breast. Every time she nursed the snake, “the creature drew in blood along with the milk.” The queen woke screaming from her sleep and ordered that all the torches in the palace be kindled. Just as the beacon fires signaled both the coming and the demise of the king in the *Agamemnon*, the torches in the *Choephori* herald the arrival of Orestes and the rapidly approaching death of Clytemnestra. As such, the dream symbolizes the terrible agonistic contest within the family, where kin kills kin and matricide becomes the ultimate civil war. The snake nursing at the breast represents the inversion of the relationship between mother and child, from nurturing love to violent strife-filled hatred. The dream speaks to the impending total destruction of the family through a hateful and savage *agon* that will see a son kill the mother who killed his father. Furthermore, the dream draws attention to the hold of the dead upon the living in inciting agonistic violence. Those “who read the dream meanings and spoke under guarantee of God told how under earth dead men held a grudge still and smoldered at their murderers.” Clytemnestra is afraid of the power of the dead Agamemnon to act against her. This is why she now desperately orders that the funeral offerings be sent to his tomb in an attempt to appease and stave off his wrath. This fear of the harm that the dead could inflict upon the living, especially their enemies,

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77 Ibid. l. 32-36.
78 Ibid. l. 530.
79 Ibid. l. 533.
80 Ibid. l. 535-6.
82 Aeschylus, *Choephori*. l. 37-41.
was a part of accepted Greek religion which saw tending a tomb to be the same as appeasing the angry inhabitant of the tomb.\footnote{Alexiou, \textit{The Ritual Lament in Greek Tradition}. p. 9.} Sending the funeral offerings is the only way that Clytemnestra can potentially stave off the threat posed to her by Agamemnon’s angry spirit. Even though Clytemnestra previously dismissed dreams as being weak and foolish,\footnote{When the chorus asks Clytemnestra how she knows that Agamemnon’s return is imminent, they ask her if she has had “dream visions, easy to believe, you credit?” To which she replies, “I accept nothing from a brain that is dull with sleep.” Aeschylus, \textit{Agamemnon}. l. 274-5.} she chooses to see this dream as heralding an imminent threat that requires her to act to save herself. As Garvie notes, “there is dramatic irony in the fact that the very steps taken by Clytemnestra to appease the anger of the dead set in train the events that lead to the fulfillment of that anger; for they bring about the meeting of Orestes and Electra.”\footnote{Garvie, \textit{Aeschylus: Choephori}. p. 54.} Clytemnestra’s terrified offerings facilitate the meeting of her murderers.

Before delving deeper into the lamentation scene, a few words need to be said about the composition and role of the chorus. The women of the chorus in the \textit{Choephori}, I argue, are a deadly force for stoking the violent passions that give life and hate-filled momentum to Electra and Orestes’ mourning song. When Electra first arrives at her father’s tomb carrying the offerings sent by her mother, she is conflicted in thought and spirit as to how she should act. For advice, she turns to the chorus of women who attend her and asks, “what should I say while I pour these offerings of sorrow?”\footnote{Aeschylus, \textit{Choephori}. l. 97-99, my translation.} The chorus responds, “in reverence for your father’s tomb as if it were an altar, I will speak my
heart’s thoughts, as you ask.”

Because the women who accompany Electra show open respect for the tomb, they are seen as being loyal to Agamemnon and therefore to Electra’s cause. This perception of loyalty is the main reason why Electra both solicits and heeds their advice. But how loyal are these women to Agamemnon and his defenders? Who are they, and why would they support Electra and Orestes’ desire for revenge?

Early in the play it is revealed that the women of the chorus are foreign slaves, having suffered great misfortune. It is strongly implied that the women are Trojan captives brought to Argos by Agamemnon on his return. All of the women share a common past in which the contestation of warfare destroyed their homes, families, and cities, leaving the women to suffer their many losses as best they can. The women of the chorus state that the “gods have forced on my city resisted fate. From our father’s houses they led us here, to take the lot of slaves. And mine it is to wrench my will, and consent to their commands, right or wrong, to beat down my edged hate. And yet under veils I

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87 Ibid. l. 106-7.
88 There is a great deal of debate over if we can positively identify the chorus as foreign slaves brought back by Agamemnon from Troy, or if rather, they ought to be seen as a generic representation of foreign slave women whose presence predates Agamemnon’s return. T.G. Tucker, The Choephoroi of Aeschylus (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901).p. 4-5, and Lattimore in Aeschylus, Choephoroi. (in list of characters, p. 92), hold that the chorus are generic female slaves. Arthur Sidgwick, Aeschylus Choephoroi (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900).p. xvii-xviii and Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Aeschylus, the Libation Bearers (Englewood Heights, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1970). p. 11 are for Trojan captives. Garvie, Aeschylus: Choephoroi. p. 53-4, argues that the text does not allow for one identification over the other to be determined definitively. For the sake of argument, I have chosen to identify the chorus as Trojan captives.
weep the vanities that have killed my lord; and freeze with sorrow in the secret heart.”

When Electra hears these words, she assumes that the lord they speak of is Agamemnon, and that in addition to speaking of their own sorrows, they are also weeping over the murder of Agamemnon as she is. Electra assumes that as a result of this shared allegiance to Agamemnon as lord and master, that she and the chorus “hold a common hatred in this house.” And yet, when the chorus laments the death of their unnamed lord, they could just as easily be speaking of the husbands, fathers, and sons who once ruled over and protected them before the destruction of their homes. The context of their words would suggest that the women are not speaking of Agamemnon, who as leader of the army that murdered their families and enslaved them they would rightly despise, but those now dead who they saw as ruling justly over them.

In my reading, the chorus is deliberately speaking with a double meaning designed to convince Electra that they hold the same allegiances as she, and that it is a deliberate omission to hide their remaining loyalty to their previous masters. When they lament for Agamemnon, they are behaving as other examples of captured slave women in Greek epic do. In the Iliad the Trojan captive Briseis is called upon to lament for Patroclus, whose death is the source of Achilles’ terrible wrath upon Troy. Briseis begins the lament not by singing of the charms and accomplishments of Patroclus, but by drawing attention to her own sorrows and the misfortune of the captured slaves.

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89 Aeschylus, Choephori. l. 76-84. It is possible to translate this passage differently and to preserve the plural of “lords.” More literally, the Greek can be translated as “useless fates of our lords.” This disagrees with Garvie’s claim that it is a generalizing plural referring only to Agamemnon.
90 Ibid. l. 101.
surrounding her. She even lists her many family members killed in the war and chronicles the destruction of Troy. Singing openly of the woes of Troy, Homer writes that “so she spoke, lamenting, and the women sorrowed around her grieving openly for Patroclus, but for her own sorrows each.”

The lament sung by Briseis is only on its surface sung for Patroclus. The soul of her lament is for each and every single person suffering under the events of the Trojan war. As Holst-Warhaft argues, “Briseis is expected to lament and she, like the other women captives, finds reason enough in her own condition.” In sharing in Electra’s lament for her father, the chorus in the Choephori is able to sing of their own misfortunes and give voice to the desires for revenge that they harbor in their “secret heart.” The chorus and Electra do indeed seek the same end, the destruction of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, but they have different reasons for desiring vengeance. Electra seeks justice for her father, while the chorus seeks the downfall of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus because they rule over them as tyrants.

For the chorus of slave women, there can be no righting of the wrongs done to them, but there can be vengeance. As Holst-Warhaft argues, “There is, it seems, no akos (remedy) for past wrong in the chorus’ vocabulary. As captured women they have, themselves, been wronged. They remain slaves of masters who have destroyed their city and killed their menfolk. Behind their veils, though, they have secretly wept for Electra, nursing their fury. Now the time has come to turn their tears to some purpose.” Perhaps because Electra herself is disgraced and outcast from her home by Clytemnestra, the

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93 Aeschylus, *Choephori*. 1. 84.
chorus is able to see in her a parallel to their own exiles, struggles and sorrows. In my reading, the women of the chorus identify their own misfortune with Electra’s, and by aiding Electra in her revenge they are able to vicariously and paradoxically participate in their own revenge against Agamemnon and his household for the crimes done to them. By facilitating the murder of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus the chorus is able to strike out against those who rule unjustly over them. When the chorus gives advice to Electra and Orestes they are able to indulge in their own hopes for vengeance. They see Electra’s longing for revenge and justice as their own. Their words are ominous: “we gather into murderous revolt. Hear us, hear. Come back into the light. Be with us against those we hate.”95 Throughout the lamentation scene, they speak powerfully and persuasively to Electra and Orestes to spurn their hatred onwards and towards murder and revenge.

The chorus is also among the most active and forceful in all of extant tragedy. Throughout the play, the chorus is the only character who do not need to be persuaded over the necessity of the murders. Rather, the chorus is fixated on seeing the murders of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra completed, and it is the chorus who acts to persuade both Orestes and Electra that the deed need be done, and best done quickly. The chorus not only whip up Orestes’ and Electra’s sense of dishonor to a murderous frenzy, but also directly influence the events leading up to the murder. It is the chorus who directly intervenes with Cilissa the nurse, and convinces her to deceive Aegisthus and instruct him to go unarmed into the room where his murderer awaits.96 As slaves, the chorus is

95 Aeschylus, *Choephori*. l. 458-60.
96 Ibid. l. 766-73.
far from subservient. Instead, they are seen as offering invaluable counsel and wisdom, and play a pivotal role in seeing the murders through. The lament and prayer that Electra gives after receiving the guidance and lessons in revenge provided by the chorus is of a much more ruthless and vengeful content than the prayer she would have given on her own. It is the chorus, and not Electra or Orestes, who set the narrative tone of a grim and dogged quest for bloody revenge. As the chorus’ lament demonstrates, even when women lack political power, their mourning voices can still be raised powerfully towards violent revenge and to sing of ties of duty and obligation that the living dare not ignore.

Without knowing that her brother is secretly observing her, Electra asks the women who attend her what she should say in her prayer and still be right in the eyes of the gods. The chorus advise her that she should begin her prayer by saying words of grace for herself and her friends who they define as all those who hate Aegisthus. Electra then realizes that the prayers spoken to her father will be as much for her and the chorus as they are for the dead. She is then reminded by the chorus to include Orestes in her prayer as a friend who hates Aegisthus. Only when the chorus prompts her to speak against “the murderers,” does Electra indirectly include her mother amongst her hated enemies. Significantly, never once during her actual prayer does she name her enemies; instead, she indirectly refers to the wrongs that they did to her father, herself, and her family. Electra, with the chorus’ help, realizes that her prayer must focus not only

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97 Ibid. l. 84-91.
98 For examples of these types of lessons in vengeance see Ibid. l. 115-16 and l. 122-3.
99 Ibid. l. 111.
100 Ibid. l. 112.
101 Ibid. l. 115.
102 Ibid. l. 117.
on rectifying the dishonor done to her father, but also in tying her and Orestes’ dishonor to their father’s fate. As Electra notes, her prayers are not only for her father, but also “for you, [the chorus] and myself,” as well as Orestes. In this way, Electra draws attention to how Agamemnon’s ignoble death has stained the timē (honor) of his surviving children. This mirrors common practices in historical Greek lament in which the fate of the deceased is closely tied to lamenting one’s own fate. Because Agamemnon is dishonored, his children also go without honor. As such, the only recourse left open to his children is to once again embrace the violence of agonism, and seek revenge to not only gain vengeance for their father but to regain their birthrights. The agon of the grave threatens to destroy the living because of the wrongs done to the dead.

The chorus also urges Electra that she should pray for “the coming of some man, or more than man,” to slay Agamemnon’s murderers. Crucially, Electra does not pray specifically for Orestes’ return, but rather for someone to avenge her father. What the chorus asks Electra to do is to pray for “two distinct blessings: first, the return of Orestes; secondly, the coming of an avenger. And that is what she does.” Electra’s prayer does not require that Orestes be the one to wield the knife to kill Aegisthus and their own mother. In addition, “we the audience, know – and the original audience knew too –

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103 Ibid. l. 112.
105 Aeschylus, Choephoroi. l. 119.
107 The murderer of Clytemnestra is also not entirely consistent in the mythic tradition. In the Odyssey Homer actually does not explicitly say how Clytemnestra died or who killed her. He writes of her funeral and explicitly mentions that Orestes killed Aegisthus, but he does not say who killed Clytemnestra. This suggests two possibilities. Firstly, that Homer
that Electra’s two prayers, though distinct in intention, were in effect one and the same. But Electra doesn’t know this." Electra does not realize that it will be Orestes who will fulfill both aspects of her prayer until Orestes himself reveals much later that Apollo directly ordered him to commit matricide. Whether revenge killings could be seen as an act of justice is further muddied when Electra draws attention to an important ambiguity in dikē. She asks if she should pray for someone, “to come to judge them, (δικαστήν, dikastēn) or to give them punishment, (δικηφόρον, dikēphoron)?” The chorus, however, is unconcerned about the issue of justice, and instead urges Electra to “say simply: ‘one to kill them, for the life they took.’” The phrase “to kill them,” uses the Greek word ἀνταποκτεῖ (antapoktei) which means, to kill in return. The concern here is therefore with vengeance, and not with what is just. Orestes, of course, does punish his mother, and he is later, in the Eumenides, judged for his actions. Electra is initially confused about if she can ask for judgment or punishment and still be seen as living according to the gods. Interestingly, she does not ask if such prayers would be just, but only if she could pray for these things and still be seen as living according to the

108 Ibid.
109 see Ibid.p. 190-1. It is only in lines 270-4, over 100 lines later, where Orestes reveals that Apollo has ordered him to kill Clytemnestra.
110 “πότερα δικαστήν ἢ δικηφόρον λέγεις;” Aeschylus, Choephoroi. l. 120.
111 ἀπλῶς τι φράζουσ’, ὡς τις ἀνταποκτεῖει.” Ibid. l. 121.
112 Electra asks: “καὶ ταῦτα μοῦστ᾽ εύσεβὴ θεῶν πάρα;” Ibid. l. 122.
gods. The chorus, in advising her, sees the issue as being unconcerned with justice. For them, it is a simple case of being entitled to strike back at your enemy if your enemy strikes you first.\(^{113}\)

Only now does Electra truly begin to speak her prayer. What she does not know, is that her prayer has succeeded before she speaks it. Orestes has come, though he has not yet revealed himself. Like her brother before her, she too begins by invoking Hermes’ aid.\(^{114}\) She directs attention to how the terrible nature of the murder is compounded by the fact that no one was present to mourn her father. Electra was locked away in the palace while Orestes was forced abroad to live the life of an exile. However, instead of focusing on the dishonor that has been done exclusively to Agamemnon, Electra brings her father’s fate to bear upon the ignominious existence that has befallen his children. Her prayer is more about bemoaning the fate of herself and Orestes than it is a lament for her father. She invokes her father’s spirit to “pity me; pity your own Orestes,”\(^{115}\) and thus shifts the focus of her prayer away from the dead and onto the living. The word for pity that Electra chooses, *εποικτείρω* (ἐποικτείρω), beseeches her father to have compassion for the pitiable wretches that his noble children have become as a direct effect of his absence. As Goldhill argues, “certainly here the lack of the father separates Electra from her social role and Orestes from his economic rights.”\(^{116}\) Her prayer is no mere lament; it is a direct invocation to the ghost of Agamemnon to aid his children in seeking revenge and acquiring their birthright through vengeance.

\(^{113}\) “πῶς δ᾽ οὐ τὸν ἐχθρὸν ἀνταμείβεσθαι κακοῖς;” Ibid. l. 123.
\(^{114}\) Ibid. l. 124.
\(^{115}\) Ibid. l. 130-1.
Once Electra has roused her father’s spirit towards the pitiable existence of his children, she then proceeds to illustrate the many ways in which the children have been removed from the culture of honor because they share in their father’s ignoble misfortune. His wife and cousin stole what Agamemnon worked his entire life to win, and enjoy their riches in the most unjust of fashions. Adding insult to injury, Electra declares: “Now I am what a slave is, and Orestes lives outcast from his great properties, while they go proud in the high style and luxury of what you worked to win.” The children suffer as much as the dead king for the actions of their mother and her lover. Electra draws attention to the treachery of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, her kin, and cites their murderous actions as the cause of the shame that has befallen the entire house of Atreus. She asks, “how shall we be lords in our house,” and fears that she will die “quiet and dishonored, as my father died.” She directly links her father’s lack of honor to her and Orestes’ own miserable state; because he died dishonored, they must now live without the honor that is their birthright.

As soon as Electra concludes her prayer for revenge, she says to her father “I pray that your avenger come, that they who killed you shall be killed in turn, as they deserve.” Electra, however, exhibits some discomfort once more with issuing a kakēn aran, (κακὴν ἀράν) a prayer for evil. These words come immediately after her cry for

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118 Ibid. l. 132-4.
119 Ibid. l. 131-2.
120 Ibid. l. 96.
121 Ibid. l. 143-4.
122 Ibid. l. 145-6 “ταύτ’ ἐν μέσῳ τίθημι τῆς καλῆς ἀρᾶς, κεῖνοις λέγουσα τίνεδε τὴν κακὴν ἀράν”
justice for her father. She explicitly states it would be just, *(dikē)* for those who killed Agamemnon to be killed in return.\(^{123}\) She recognizes the ill intent of her revenge prayer as a potential source of pollution. Once again, Electra wrestles with a dilemma of justice: can she be considered just if she is actively wishing evil upon others? Is the vendetta justice so characteristic of the *agon* of the grave truly justice if it perpetuates rather than stops violence? To attempt to balance out the evil of praying for violent revenge, Electra places her revenge prayer between two prayers for good.\(^{124}\) But this does not ameliorate the underlying dilemma: can a prayer calling for revenge which has some “rightness” to it, be just, despite its evil or wicked intent? Can *dikē* be itself a source of evil? These are questions which the *Oresteia* and Electra’s prayer require us to ponder without the certainty of an answer.

In the *Oresteia* shame and honor intersect and motivate agonistic action. Clytemnestra in the *Eumenides* is upset that she goes dishonored among the dead. She laments that she lacks *timē* (honor) and that she is *aischrōs* (ashamed) in her wanderings.\(^{125}\) Furthermore, Clytemnestra blames this on the failure of the Furies to exact vengeance for her murder at the hands of her son.\(^{126}\) In the *Choephori* Agamemnon’s dishonorable death is a key motivation for his children to side with their father against their mother thereby choosing to perceive his shame as if it were their own. Without this sensation of dishonor, injustice, and shame, would they seek revenge? If the dishonor and

\(^{123}\) Ibid. l. 142-4 "τοῖς δ᾽ ἐναντίοις ἐλέγῳ φανηναί σου, πάτερ, τιμὰρον, καὶ τοὺς κτανόντας ἀντικατθανεῖν δίκῃ."

\(^{124}\) Ibid. l. 145-6.


\(^{126}\) Ibid. l. 95.
shame of Agamemnon’s death did not extend to his children, would the cycle of agonistic contestation end with the murder? It is not just revenge and shame that motivate violent agonism, but also a deep sense of loss when deprived of timē. The agon of the grave and the violence that it demands is motivated heavily by a yearning not just for revenge, but more importantly for the restoration of honor. It is this demand for timē which enables the dead to grasp the living and pull them into the violent agonistic contests of the past.

It is only after Electra and the chorus have raised their voices together to beseech Agamemnon’s spirit, that Electra notices the footprints and lock of hair at the graveside. She reacts with wonder that both the lock of hair and footprints around the tomb are exactly like hers, and she concludes that only Orestes could have made such offerings.127 However, when Orestes does come out of hiding, Electra does not immediately recognize the man before her as her brother, to which Orestes says, “you see my actual self and are slow to learn. And yet you saw this strand of hair I cut in sign of grief and shuddered with excitement, for you thought you saw me, and again when you were measuring my tracks.”128 This is perhaps the most famous recognition scene in all of drama, and one which both Sophocles and Euripides referenced in their own tellings of the myth. And while Euripides mocked the recognition scene in the Choephoroi for its simplicity and implausibility, the scene is a significant moment in the revenge cycle of agonism that characterizes the trilogy. What the recognition scene accomplishes is to establish a physical link between the two siblings that unites both of their struggles against their mother and Aegisthus. What happens in the recognition scene is that “the tie between

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127 Aeschylus, Choephoroi. l. 172 and 205-6.
128 Ibid. l. 225-8.
Electra and Orestes is asserted both as a physical link – same hair, same feet – and as a shared project of revenge. This recognition is also a way of rejecting – refusing to recognize – Clytemnestra. Both daughter and son have to undo the tie to the mother.”

Just as they share the same hair and footprints, they share the same agonistic spirit which requires them to avenge their father and unite against their own mother renouncing their relationship to her. The recognition scene makes real the threat of Clytemnestra’s dream of the snake at the breast, and realizes the deadly reality of an agonism that will destroy familial bonds in the name of fidelity to the father.

Immediately after Electra has recognized Orestes, she places all of her hopes for revenge firmly on his shoulders. Her blood calls to his, and her cries of love are equally cries for more blood to be spilled. Hailing her brother she says, “O dearest, treasured darling of my father’s house, hope of the seed of our salvation, wept for, trust your strength of hand, and win your father’s house again.” However, there is a strange remark in Electra’s speech when she seems to implicitly criticize her father for the sacrifice of Iphigenia, her sister. She says “my love for a pitilessly slaughtered sister turns to you.” This line immediately follows Electra’s statement that she loathes her mother “as she deserves,” and that she transfers all the love she should feel for her mother to her brother. Electra seems to acknowledge that her father did wrong by killing Iphigenia, but she refuses to see her mother as being justified in killing him for vengeance. And yet,

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130 Aeschylus, Choephorai. l. 235-7.
131 Ibid. l. 241-2.
132 Ibid. l. 241.
by praying to Zeus to ensure Orestes’ success in matricide,\textsuperscript{133} she fails to see the parallel between mother and son. Why is Clytemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon worthy of condemnation and Orestes’ matricide praiseworthy?

The answer to this question seems to rest with the patriarchal structure that overlays much of the \textit{Oresteia}. As Goldhill argues:

\begin{quote}
the recognition constructs a horizontal bond between brother and sister, which, in rejecting the mother, is part of the trilogy’s move away from family blood to the ties of citizenship in the city. But the city is still patriarchal (and made up also of households), and the daughter must be returned to the house, her proper place. Electra can be like her brother, but by virtue of her gender must also remain quite different. In the way that brother and sister do and do not make a pair, this strange recognition of Electra and Orestes is formed within the tensions of this trilogy’s dynamic movement between the power of the household and the power of the State.\textsuperscript{134}
\end{quote}

At stake in the trilogy is not just an end to the cycle of agonistic violence, but also a return to order for the patriarchal city. A wife cannot kill her husband and retain masculine political power, but a son can kill his mother to restore the male to the top of the social and political order of the city. As a partisan to her father, Electra fails to see the similarities between the murderous actions of mother and son when she advocates for the return to patriarchal authority in Argos.

Now that brother and sister have been reunited in body and in purpose, the tomb of Agamemnon is able to “receive the homage that the chorus of \textit{Agamemnon} regretted being unable to offer.”\textsuperscript{135} The two siblings turn to the joint task of lamenting their father in very polemic terms. Their lament serves as an attempt to rouse their father’s spirit and

\textsuperscript{133} Ibid. l. 245
\textsuperscript{134} Goldhill, "Antigone and the Politics of Sisterhood." p. 150.
to steel their own courage for the matricide to come. As Seaford argues, “in this restoration of due ritual process, this making good of what the dead Agamemnon has been denied (the hair, the lament), his children enlist his support in their struggle.”

They use the graveside and ritual lament as a way to fix their courage upon violence and revenge. The children conceive of their father as being “still within his tomb, angry with his murderers, and demanding vengeance.” The grave is where they focus their agonistic energies and prepare their wills to rise to the challenge of contestation and vengeance. Mourning becomes the children and enflames their violent passions. Their lament becomes “the means to kindle Electra’s and Orestes’ violence; the rituals of death, we begin to understand, beget the rituals of death.”

The lament sung at Agamemnon’s grave calls out for blood, and Orestes and Electra respond with murderous intent.

The lament that the children lead returns to drawing attention to the violent deeds done to their father and the dishonor that these actions have brought to themselves and their household. Together now, Orestes and Electra alternate their pleas between drawing attention to the dishonor done to their father and themselves and asking their father to aid them. Orestes declares that “we both are driven from the house that should be ours,” and so demands his father’s aid in recovering his and his sister’s birthrights. They also speak to Agamemnon’s sense of honor and anger by drawing attention to his disgraceful

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139 Aeschylus, *Choephoroi*. l. 253-4.
burial and how his murderers “hid you in shrouds that were thought out in shame”\textsuperscript{140} As if this were not shameful enough for both the living and the dead, the chorus deliberately recount the hobbling of Agamemnon’s corpse conceived of by his murderers as a way to prevent his spirit from seeking direct retribution upon them. As much to remind the children as Agamemnon, the chorus viciously sing out, “know then, they hobbled him beneath the armpits, with his own hands. She wrought so, in his burial to make his death a burden beyond your strength to carry. The mutilation of your father. Hear it.”\textsuperscript{141} This speaks once again to the obligation of the children to act on behalf of their disabled and mutilated father, as well as serves to stoke Agamemnon’s anger at his attackers.\textsuperscript{142}

Orestes and Electra’s speech recalls the imagery from the \textit{Agamemnon} of the eagles of Zeus when they liken themselves to orphaned chicks. Orestes says, “Behold the orphaned children of the eagle-father, now that he has died entangled in the binding coils of the deadly viper, and the young he left behind are worn with hunger of starvation, not full grown to bring their shelter slain food, as their father did.”\textsuperscript{143} These lines are hugely symbolic. In them Orestes calls upon Zeus to remember that Agamemnon was a loyal

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid. l. 494.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid. l. 439-44.
\textsuperscript{142} The question of whether or not the children are successful in rousing their father’s spirit to their cause is highly debatable. Following Seaford, I am of the opinion that their prayer succeeds in enlisting their father’s aid and support because the children are ultimately successful steeling their emotions and committing the murders. Seaford, \textit{Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State}. p. 92. Sommerstein, however, disagrees and argues that the prayer fails because Agamemnon’s ghost is not seen to physically rise from the grave, and instead argues that the hobbling of Agamemnon was successful in disabling and preventing him from giving his blessing to the children’s actions. Sommerstein, \textit{The Tangled Ways of Zeus and Other Studies in and around Greek Tragedy} p. 147
\textsuperscript{143} Aeschylus, \textit{Choephorii}. l. 246-51.
\end{flushright}
servant to him as his eagle in destroying Troy, and reminds the god of a duty and obligation to Agamemnon’s now dishonored noble children. Agamemnon, in turn, is reminded of his duty as a father to aid his own children and nurture them. Furthermore, Orestes casts Clytemnestra as a deadly and treacherous viper. This move is hugely symbolic as it sees Clytemnestra not only as a venomous snake, but also as a treacherous serpent that murders its mate during copulation. According to Herodotus, the female viper does not go unpunished for daring to kill the father of her children, as “the female suffers in return for the male the following punishment: avenging their father, the young while they are still within the womb gnaw at their mother and eating through her bowels thus make their way out.” In this way, Orestes depicts himself and Electra not only as young orphaned eagles, but also as vengeful vipers willing and able to fatally strike out at their mother for the crime of murdering their father.

In the heat of the joint lament with her brother, Electra prays, “there has been wrong done. I ask for right.” Yet what constitutes right, and justice, is unclear within the confines of the drama. Both Electra and Orestes have certainly concluded that right lies with their father’s side. And yet, they both appear aware that matricide is itself a great and terrible crime. She prays for right, but can doing wrong bring about right? The chorus have a very telling reply. They declare that “it is but law that when the red drops

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144 “So too if the vipers and the winged serpents of Arabia were born in the natural manner of serpents life would be impossible for men; but as it is, when they copulate, while the male is in the act of procreation and as soon as he has ejaculated his seed, the female seizes him by the neck, and does not let go until she has bitten through.” Herodotus, *The Histories*. 3.109, p. 218.
145 Ibid. 3.109.1.
have been spilled upon the ground they cry aloud for fresh blood. For the death act calls out on Fury to bring out of those who were slain before new ruin on ruin accomplished.’" Once again, the *Oresteia* returns to the uncertainty of justice and right. The chorus reassert the frequent tendency of the *agon* to beget new and more violent *agones*. Their idea of the law of agonism as encompassing uncompromising demands for blood to pay for blood paints a picture of the *agon* as ever-spiraling violence and despair. The acts of mourning become cries for fresh blood to be spilled on top of old blood. The *agon* leads from bloody contest to new blood letting and further ruin. And yet, somewhere in the revenge and retribution that the *agon* of the grave demands lies a type of justice as necessity which requires its participants to act despite the bloody consequences and sorrow that their actions will reap. It is Orestes who seems to fully grasp these consequences when he intones, “warstrength shall collide with warstrength: right with right, *(Dikē with Dikē).*” Justice collides with justice in an uncertain contest where the only certainty is the destruction of the bonds between mother and child.

The long lament that makes up the majority of the *Choephori* cannot be seen as attempting to assuage the loss and grief brought on by the murder of a father and a king. The lament sung by Electra, Orestes, and the chorus is not a moment of cathartic grief meant to purge anger and regret over the loss of Agamemnon. What they sing is not a song of healing; it is a song of bitter death, and destruction still to come. It is a song of obligation and duty which “rouses in the living the emotions required to undertake the

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147 Ibid. l. 400-4.  
148 Ἀρης Ἀρεί ξυμβαλεῖ, Δίκα Δίκα. Ibid. l. 461.
horrific revenge, so that the lament itself seems to be hunting down the murderers.”

Their mourning song becomes the means through which they can realize their murderous intentions. When they sing Agamemnon’s mourning song, they are also singing the inevitability of their mother’s murder. They sing of an anger that can only be satisfied with blood.

Electra’s constant and insatiable mourning in the Choephori raises significant problems for how female lament is understood within the context of political contestation. In Euripides’ Electra the chorus reproaches Electra for her excessive and unyielding displays of a mourning expressed in terms of always and forever, (aei). As Loraux argues, Electra’s constant mourning, “suggests the strength of the potential threat that Electra’s behavior, characterized by her pointed rejection of amnesty, poses to the values of the city-state.” In the Choephori the uncompromising and totalizing character of Electra’s mourning, goaded along by the chorus, rules out any and all chance of forgiveness, and reconciliation. Her mourning song can only become a song of healing after its destructive and murderous desires for revenge have been realized and no sooner. She prays “I too, my father, ask of you such grace as this: to murder Aegisthus with strong hand, and then go free.” With these words Electra reveals herself to be willing to wield the murder weapon against Clytemnestra and Aegisthus herself. Her mourning demands vengeance, and if Orestes were not the one to commit matricide, then Electra would be.

149 Seaford, Reciprocity and Ritual: Homer and Tragedy in the Developing City-State. p. 92.
151 Aeschylus, Choephori. l. 481-2.
In character, Electra is much more like her mother than she would care to admit. In her prayer she asks, “and for myself, grant that I be more temperate of heart than my mother; that I act with purer hand.”152 The irony here is that in so fervently desiring the deaths of her mother and Aegisthus, she reveals herself to share in her mother’s warrior spirit. Perhaps, Clytemnestra sees herself all too clearly in the grief stricken angry eyes of her daughter. The queen does require that Electra stand “apart, dishonored, nothing worth, in the dark corner, as you would kennel a vicious dog”153 This language recalls Cassandra’s words labeling Clytemnestra as an “accursed bitch,”154 and suggests that mother and daughter share the same violent temperament. Electra also acknowledges her own violent and bloodthirsty nature. She declares of herself and Orestes, “for we are bloody like the wolf and savage born from the savage mother.”155 Over the course of the play we witness Electra’s transformation through lament from a reluctant girl uncertain of how to mourn her father, into a savage wolf cub who thirsts after her mother’s blood. Perhaps it is Electra’s savage growth that the parable of the lion cub in the *Agamemnon* foretold.156 She knows what she has become, and her prayer asks for divine intervention to make her less like her mother. However, it is not in Electra’s warrior-spirit, but rather in her all-consuming mourning that she is most like Clytemnestra. If anyone in the play could understand how Clytemnestra’s love for her husband could be turned to bitter hatred and murder by grief, it is Electra. It is Electra’s incessant mourning for her father

152 Ibid. l. 140-1.
153 Ibid. l. 445-7.
which compels her to put aside all love she once held for her mother. While she is a girl mourning the death of her father, Electra prevents herself from experiencing other aspects of women’s lives such as motherhood. As such, she is excluded from participating in one of the most important civic functions open to women: marriage and the rearing of the next generation of male citizens. Both Clytemnestra and Electra reject motherhood in favor of mourning. In the *Agamemnon* Clytemnestra is so consumed by grief for her sacrificed daughter Iphigenia that she turns her back on her surviving children and actively pursues the death of her husband. Clytemnestra’s mourning births her revenge. Electra, in her relentless mourning for her father, rejects all other aspects of life, and recreates a simulacrum of Clytemnestra’s mourning. And like her mother’s mourning, “Electra’s mourning can only be transformed into revenge.”¹⁵⁷ For both Clytemnestra and Electra, the demands of their mourning song can only be satisfied through death and murder. Their mourning can only end after the blood they demand lies spilled at their feet.

While Electra’s grief reveals her to be willing to play the man’s part and commit the murders, it is Orestes who ultimately wields the knife. What Orestes does is to reassert the androcentric political structure in which men rule and women are ruled. By killing Clytemnestra, Orestes enables the rightful male heir to assume political power. When he says just prior to committing the murders, “my sister here must go inside,”¹⁵⁸ his words have the effect of returning Electra to the household, and enabling her to pursue the actions deemed proper for a woman which her mourning prevented her from

¹⁵⁸ Aeschylus, *Choephoroi*. l. 554.
seeking. In other words, Orestes’ actions prevent Electra from fully realizing the violent promise of her mourning song. He stops her from following in her mother’s footsteps and becoming a grief-stricken vengeful murderess. He frees Electra from the enticing violence promised by her song of lament, and restores male dominance to the *polis*.

During the joint prayer, Orestes and Electra prayed to Hermes for success in the murders. As Hermes is the god of deception, it should come as no surprise then that Orestes will realize his vengeance through a trick.\(^{159}\) To commit the murder, Orestes uses deceit and guile to gain entrance to the palace and his victims. As Goldhill argues, “as the language exchange of the carpet scene (and Clytemnestra’s other lies and deceit) brought Agamemnon down, so his revengers are marked as using a similar strategy of deceit and tricky language.”\(^{160}\) He poses as a foreign messenger bearing news of Orestes’ death and even adopts a phony accent to throw off suspicion. Orestes even claims the rights of *xenia* (hospitality), which he transgresses by killing his hosts.\(^ {161}\) The chorus is quick to label Orestes’ tactics as “guile that is no guile,”\(^ {162}\) likely because dying through deception elsewhere in the *Oresteia* has been seen to be *aischrōs* (shameful) for both the murdered and the murderer.\(^ {163}\) The chorus even predicts that Orestes will hesitate to kill his mother. They urge him to “be not fear struck when your turn comes in the action but with a great


\(^{160}\) Ibid. p. 175.

\(^{161}\) need text reference here.

\(^{162}\) Aeschylus, *Choephoroi*. l. 955.

\(^{163}\) For example, Electra states that Agamemnon died shamefully, and that dying through deceit brings *aischōs* upon the victim whereas dying in battle would not. She also states that the deceit of the murderers brings shame upon them. This leaves open the question of why Orestes’ deceit is not seen by the chorus to bring shame upon him especially because Orestes himself seems to believe it would be shameful to kill his own mother. Ibid. l. 494, 345-54, 479, 890.
cry *Father* when she cries *Child* to you go on through with the innocent murder.”\(^{164}\) It is as if they are as much attempting to reassure themselves of the “innocence” of the murder they so ardently desire as they are Orestes.

Once inside the palace, Orestes quickly and without hesitation dispatches the unarmed Aegisthus. Staring in the face her own death at the hands of her son, seemingly returned from the dead, Clytemnestra finally grasps the full significance of her dream: “you are the snake I gave birth to, and gave the breast.”\(^ {165}\) Orestes does not argue. He has come to direct Clytemnestra’s “trial by the sword’s fierce edge,”\(^ {166}\) and he intends for his sword’s justice to be swift. But Clytemnestra will not go meekly to her death. She calls out in desperation, “bring me quick, somebody, an ax to kill a man,”\(^ {167}\) and reasserts that she will compete and fight with her last breath. The weapon does not arrive in time and Clytemnestra resorts to supplicating herself before Orestes, baring her breast, and urging him to take pity on her as his mother. Orestes hesitates.\(^ {168}\) It is only when he is confronted by his bare-breasted mother holding the sword he intends to murder her with that the gravity of his intended action dawns upon him. He realizes that while his mother’s actions were terrible, murdering his own mother would be to commit as great a crime. Orestes turns for advice to his steadfast companion,\(^ {169}\) Pylades, who has been an absent presence at his side since the first scene and uttered not a single word. Pylades,

\(^{164}\) Ibid. l. 826-30.
\(^{165}\) Ibid. l. 928.
\(^{166}\) Ibid. l. 729.
\(^{167}\) Ibid. l. 889.
\(^{168}\) “Hold, my son. Oh take pity, child, before this breast where many a time, a drowsing baby, you would feed and with soft gums sucked in milk that made you strong.” Ibid. l. 896-8
\(^{169}\) “what shall I do, Pylades? Be shamed to kill my mother?” Ibid. l. 899.
whose name means literally “gates of hell” leads Orestes towards murder by warning him not to make an enemy of Apollo, the god who commanded Orestes to commit matricide to avenge his father. Pylades, ever-shadowing Orestes, only makes his presence known at the crucial moment and speaks the words that will push Orestes through the gates of hell. Orestes declares with the certainty of a judge, “you killed, and it was wrong. Now suffer wrong.” Like his father before him, Orestes chooses to ignore the bonds of *philia* (φιλία, love) and kill one he ought to preserve.

Orestes emerges from the palace much like Clytemnestra did in the *Agamemnon*: crowing over two corpses and proclaiming the justice of his act. The chorus triumphantly declares that “the big bit that held our house is taken away,” and celebrates being free from tyranny. However, almost immediately after Orestes has committed the murders, he is beset by the furies who “come like gorgons,” and are “the bloodhounds of my mother’s hate.” Interestingly, the Furies do not appear onstage and we are left to wonder if the horror of matricide has driven Orestes insane. Orestes does not take up his birthright as ruler, but instead is forced to flee the land, hounded by furies that only he can see. The chorus responds to Orestes’ flight by asking, “where is the end? Where shall

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170 Pylades, (Πυλάδης) from *pulē* (πύλη) for gate, and *Hadēs* (AILABLE) for hell. See also Hélène Cixous who writes: “Pylades, the absent-present, the double with the disturbing name: Pylades, Gate-of-Hell. Stranger-exile-messenger-ghost, set free by the irresistible desire of the dead.” Hélène Cixous, "Sorties," in *The Newly Born Woman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). p. 104.


172 Ibid. l. 930.

173 Ibid. l. 962.

174 Ibid. l. 1048.

175 Ibid. l. 1054.
the fury of fate be stilled to sleep, be done with?”

Even the chorus now doubts if the cycle of violence and blood has come to an end.

In the first two plays of the Oresteia Aeschylus presents justice and agonistic contestation in a context of lex talionis, an eye for an eye. In the Agamemnon and the Choephori cries for dikē usher in actions of violence which then in turn solicit demands for revenge and further violence in a vicious and brutal cycle seemingly without end. As Garvie argues, “what matters is the sense of continuity between the successive tragic situations, the recurring combination of divine will, family curse, and the responsibility and guilt of the human agents, and the idea that each crime will call forth vengeance in the form of another crime, so that, whenever someone expresses the hope that his act may be the last in the chain, that hope is doomed to failure.”

Agonistic conflict and strife in the first two plays are not what justice tries to alleviate, but are rather the causes and results of justice as vendetta.

The picture of agonism that we get from the Choephori is one of grief and ruin where “through too much glut of blood drunk by our fostering ground the vengeful gore is caked and hard, will not drain through. The deep-run ruin carries away the man of guilt. Swarming infection boils within.” The types of agonistic contestation seen in the Choephori result in so much blood being poured upon the ground like libations of unwatered wine that the earth overflows and can drink no more. Blood, is a force to be reckoned with in the trilogy. Whether it is the blood of family, of the living, or the spilt

176 Ibid. l. 1074-6.
177 Garvie, Aeschylus: Choephori. p. xxix.
178 Aeschylus, Choephori. l. 66-70.
blood of the dead, blood calls for blood. And once blood has been spilled, “all the
world’s waters running in a single drift may try to wash blood from the hand of the
stained man; they only bring new blood guilt on.”\textsuperscript{179} The \textit{agon} of the grave gives birth to
violent demands for justice that are not satisfied with slaking a thirst for blood with
vengeance, and that only succeed in bringing ever more blood guilt upon the living. In
the \textit{Iliad}, Achilles is likened to a grief-stricken lion whose cubs have been stolen by a
hunter. The loss fills him with a bitter wrath that no amount of blood can satisfy.\textsuperscript{180} His
wrathful mourning becomes a source of pleasure in itself.\textsuperscript{181} When the loss felt is
irreplaceable, and that no one else could ever take the place of the deceased in a wounded
heart, the transition from grief to anger can be quick and deadly. Loyalty to the tomb can
lead to an agonism steeped in blood and tears. The chorus ask, “what can wash off the
blood once spilled upon the ground?”\textsuperscript{182} But they know, perhaps better than anyone else
in the play, that there can be no \textit{akos}, (remedy or relief)\textsuperscript{183} when one pours one’s soul into
the moaning glory of a lament\textsuperscript{184} seeking blood retribution.

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid. l. 72-5.
\textsuperscript{180} Homer, \textit{Iliad}. 18. 318-23.
\textsuperscript{181} Ibid. 18. 107-110.
\textsuperscript{182} Aeschylus, \textit{Choephori}. l. 48.
\textsuperscript{183} “Our house has a cure to heal these woes, a cure not from outside, from the
hands of others, but from itself, by fierce, bloody strife.” (\textit{δῶμαιοιν ἔμισθοπτωνδ᾿ ἁκος,
οὐδ᾿ ἀπ᾿ ἀλλωνέκτοθεν, ἀλλ᾿ ἀπ᾿ αὐτῶν,δι᾿ ὑμᾶν ἔριν ἀματηρᾶν.) Ibid. l. 71-2, see also l. 471, 510.
\textsuperscript{184} Ibid. l. 321 I have chosen to use Loraux’s non-literal but expressive translation of
Chapter 4:
From Fury to Kindness? The Fragility of Victory

“Thunderbolt steers all things.”
Heraclitus, Fragment 64

"... safety will be the sturdy child of terror, and survival the twin brother of annihilation"
Winston Churchill, March 1, 1955. last speech in the House of Commons

At its core, the Eumenides is an origins story. The play serves as a charter myth for the founding of the Areopagus, the Athenian court charged with hearing crimes of intentional homicide. The Oresteia was first performed in 458 BCE, shortly after Ephialtes’ controversial reforms of the Areopagus in 462 BCE which removed unspecified constitutional powers from the court, and left it with the exclusive right to try crimes of murder.¹ These reforms were broadly seen as efforts to democratize the court and reduce the influence of the aristocrats. However, Ephialtes’ reforms were deeply controversial and revealed significant tensions between demics and aristocrats. Less

¹There is a tremendous amount of debate and mystery surrounding the exact nature of these reforms. What is known is that Ephialtes was an unrelenting critic of the Areopagus which he saw as exercising undemocratic powers. His reforms, supported by Pericles, were intended to strip the Areopagus of its constitutional powers, and transfer them from the aristocrats to the demos. His reforms left the Areopagus with the much reduced role of trying crimes of intentional murder. Four years after Ephialtes’ assassination, the Areopagus saw further democratic reforms which broadened its membership to include a third property owning class. In 404 BCE, Ephialtes’ reforms of the Areopagus were repealed by the Thirty Tyrants. Aristotle, "The Constitution of Athens." 23-26, p. 228-230. See also: Robert W. Wallace, The Areopagos Council to 307 B.C. (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985). p. 83-93 and John R. Cole, "The Oresteia and Cimon," Harvard Studies in Classical Philology 81 (1977). p. 107.
than one year later, the democratic reformer “was murdered for his trouble.”

The Oresteia was written and produced during this tumultuous period of civil strife. Dodds argues that when it comes to Athena’s founding of the Areopagus in the Eumenides, “no audience in 458 could fail to be reminded of contemporary goings-on.”

Aeschylus creates an aition, a myth of origins, for the newly reformed Areopagus by having Orestes’ trial be the first intentional murder case heard by the court. As Zeitlin argues, “by taking as his subject a dynastic myth known to us from the beginning of Greek literature and transforming it into a wide-ranging myth of origins, Aeschylus draws upon his mythopoetic powers in the service of world building.”

The trial agon of the Eumenides has far-reaching implications that extend beyond the play. As Komar argues, “the trial of Orestes for his mother’s murder precipitated the founding of the law court of Athens and the beginnings of Western democracy.”

However, the Eumenides is much more than simply an exercise in aetiology, giving the reason for the Areopagus’ power to decide cases of homicide. The play is also an exercise in world building that simultaneously justifies the powers left to the Areopagus after the reforms of Ephialtes and the androcentric organization of politics.

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6 I have tried in my analysis to avoid the term “patriarchy” as I agree with Zeitlin that “it bears both too much and too little weight. Overuse has made it reductive, and in any case it is not particularly accurate as an anthropological tool of analysis.” Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*. p. 7-8.
around the rule of men. After the first two plays of the trilogy, the blood feud has been revealed to be a dangerous, ever-enlarging cycle of violence that threatens to extinguish both the *oikos* and the *polis*. This is the point at which Athena intervenes and establishes the Areopagus “into the rest of time.” In fact, Athena stresses on four separate occasions that she is establishing the murder court as a permanent civic institution. Athena attempts to break the cycle of blood, murder, and blood by establishing a new form of justice enshrined in the deliberative rule of law. In so doing, Aeschylus traces “the evolution of civilization by placing the *polis* at the center of its vision and endowing it with the creative power to coordinate human, natural, and divine forces.” Aeschylus shifts judgment away from the gods, and onto human shoulders; he shifts away from the feminine *oikos*, and towards the masculine *polis*. For the *Oresteia* to realize a resolution to the strife that consumes it, the strength of women like Clytemnestra and the Furies must be replaced and controlled by the rule of men. As Zeitlin argues, “if Aeschylus is concerned with world building, the cornerstone of his architecture is the control of woman, the social and cultural prerequisite for the construction of civilization.” It is not just the rule of law that Athena institutes with the founding of the Areopagus, but also a

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8 Ibid. l. 484, 572, 683-4, 707-8. However, it is only made clear at 685-90 that the court that Athena is founding is specifically the Areopagus. see also Alan H. Sommerstein, "Orestes' Trial and Athenian Homicide Procedure," in *Law and Drama in Ancient Greece*, ed. Delfim F. Leão, P.J. Rhodes, and Edward M. Harris (London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 2010). p. 26.
9 Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*. p. 87.
10 As Sommerstein notes, in earlier versions of the myth, Orestes would have been judged by the gods and not by men. Sommerstein, "Orestes' Trial and Athenian Homicide Procedure." p. 26.
hierarchy of values which equates politics, power, and supremacy with the rule of men. However, despite the androcentrism of the play’s conclusion, Aeschylus still finds it necessary to stage the debate, implying that the masculine hierarchy of values in the *Eumenides* is not necessarily hegemonic and monolithic.

The ending of the *Eumenides* where Orestes is acquitted and the Furies become patron deities of Athens has been interpreted in wildly different ways. My reading wishes to avoid the pitfalls of both the reconciliationist and feminist approaches to the trilogy. The *Eumenides* is neither an uncomplicated story of resolution, nor simply an apologia for patriarchy. Many classical scholars see in the closing of the *Eumenides* the peaceful restoration of harmony and order, and the replacement of vendetta-style justice with civic order and the rule of law. As Podlecki argues, “the family blood-feud has been made obsolete, to be replaced by the new and higher morality of the *polis*.”12 Other scholars such as Llyod-Jones see the play as realizing the healing powers of the justice of Zeus through which the Furies are transformed from sinister and hideous beings into the kindly ones, (Eumenides) worthy of permanent honor and respect from Athena and Athens.13 Even Goldhill, who is acutely aware of the gender dynamics of the trilogy, argues that “for the first time, the dramatized conflict of words does not involve a conflict of the sexes or a victory in the form of the destruction of one party.”14 The most common

interpretation of the *Eumenides* is to see it as “a tour de force of reconciliation,”\(^{15}\) where the conflict between competing conceptions of justice and the sexes is finally resolved and a harmonious and natural order is restored. It is from these interpretations of the play that this reading most departs. The *Eumenides* is not a play with a happy ending.

On the other side of the interpretational wall are feminist inspired analyses of the play. For Goetsch, a scholar of theatre studies, “Aeschylus, unmeddled with, cannot possibly have anything true or empowering to say about women.”\(^{16}\) This sentiment is closely seconded by Case who argues that “the feminist reader of the *Oresteia* must read against the text.”\(^{17}\) Much of the feminist work on the *Oresteia* finds inspiration in Bachofen’s *Myth Religion and Mother Right* which makes the case that the *Oresteia* tells the story of the replacement of matriarchy with patriarchy. First published in 1926, well before the feminist awakening in classical scholarship, Bachofen argued that Athena was the representative agent of a fledgling system of patriarchy which replaced matriarchy, the worshiping of the feminine, with the worshiping of the masculine.\(^{18}\) Thus, the worship of the Furies understood here as the older goddesses of fertility and mother-right, is replaced with the newer worship of the masculine Olympian gods. Following Bachofen, Millett argues that the Furies “appear as the deposed powers of a matriarchate,


\(^{16}\) Goetsch, "Playing against the Text: 'Les Atrides' and the History of Reading Aeschylus." p. 76.


reduced already to the level of harridans,” and that the play constitutes “matriarchy’s last stand in the ancient world.”

My reading of the *Eumenides* resists interpreting the play as the restoration of the natural and correct order between the sexes, and as a clear resolution of the vendettas of the trilogy. This may very well have been how the (almost assuredly) male audience of Athens would have regarded the closing of the trilogy, but it is neither the only plausible interpretation nor the only possible interpretation open to us moderns. However, while the interpretation forwarded here is aligned with feminist concerns of gender, inequality, and power, it critically distances itself from feminist interpretations of the text which see the trilogy essentially and simplistically as an apologia and defense for patriarchy. The reality of the closing of the *Eumenides* is far more complex than the positions of either the reconciliationists or feminist critiques of patriarchy realize. Instead, this reading will try to occupy a space in between these two interpretational extremes. By being attentive to the way in which agonistic competition is engaged in by both the Furies and Athena in the trial scene this reading will demonstrate how the faith placed in the willingness for agonistic actors to embrace and affirm their differences by agonistic theorists is overly optimistic. An attention to the gender dynamics that compound and question the relations between the sexes also demonstrates how the *agon* can facilitate oppression instead of emancipation at the same time as it manages to realize and nourish a particular conception of political community. However, even though the *Eumenides* does view the subordination of the feminine to the masculine as the result of an unequal and mutual

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struggle, it by no means provides sufficient reason to view this as an unambiguous affirmation of patriarchy. Instead, the trial scene problematizes and questions the subjugation of the feminine to the masculine and provides reasons to anticipate that the *agon* between the sexes defies closure and maintains the potential to violently burst forth once more. The establishment of an androcentric order is not indicative of a “natural” reordering nor an apology for it, but rather is indicative of a fragile and contingent harmony established through coercion and fraught with tension and contradiction.

**The Trial of Orestes and the Defeat of the Furies**

In Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* we hear about the horror of the Furies long before we actually see them. At the close of the *Choephori* Orestes has succumbed to madness and terror, and is relentlessly driven from his home by the, as yet unseen, monstrous Furies. However, the audience does not know if the Furies are figments of Orestes’ tormented mind, fractured by the horror of matricide, or real until the moment they take their place on the stage in the *Eumenides*. The first person to confirm the physical existence of the Furies is the Pythia. The oracle enters Apollo’s temple, and is so stricken with terror at the vision of the Furies seen in prophecy that she flees the temple, scrambling in fear upon all fours.\(^{20}\) Clearly shaken, she describes the Furies as loosely female creatures similar to gorgons or wingless harpies.\(^ {21}\) They are “black and utterly repulsive,”\(^ {22}\) with a

\(^{20}\) Aeschylus, *Eumenides*. l. 36-37.
\(^{21}\) Ibid.l. 48-52.
\(^{22}\) Ibid.l. 52-3
case of halitosis so severe that it “drives one back.”

Their eyes are rheumy and dripping with a “foul ooze.” Never has she seen creatures as fearsome as these hounding Orestes.

With the audience’s senses and expectations enhanced by the Pythia’s terrible prophetic vision, the Furies at last take the stage. If anything, the Pythia’s words do not do justice to their gruesome grandeur. Apollo describes them as “lewd creatures,” “repulsive maidens,” and “gray and aged children;” parodies and mockeries of feminine sexuality. The Greek μάργους, in addition to meaning mad, means lewd in the sense of being sexually repulsive. Apollo is quite literally saying here that the Furies are so repulsive that they are not fit to have sex with. Furthermore, Apollo simultaneously acknowledges their dangerous feminine sexuality while emphasizing their status as virgin beings who have no truck with male sexuality. The Furies characterize themselves through vivid animal imagery as hunting hounds and show no hesitation in admitting their desire to transform Orestes, their quarry, into a “wraith, a shell,” and to suck the marrow from his bones. They are the hunting hounds of vengeance. They follow Orestes by scent “like hounds after a bleeding fawn, we trail our quarry by the splash and drip of blood.” They drink the blood not only of the fallen, but also suck

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23 Ibid. l. 53.
24 Ibid. l. 54.
25 Ibid. l. 67.
26 Ibid. l. 68.
27 Ibid. l. 68-9.
28 Ibid. l. 67.
29 Ibid. l. 302.
30 Ibid. l. 247-8.
31 Ibid. l. 1188-90
the clots from men’s veins \textsuperscript{32} and threaten to drink Orestes’ blood like vampires.\textsuperscript{33} They are without a master, and flit about the stage like a “flock of goats without a herdsman.”\textsuperscript{34} The Furies are virgin daughters of night, sterile and bringing barrenness to all that they touch.\textsuperscript{35} They are the feminine made repulsive. In their physicality, they transform the metaphors of “serpentine female monstrosity that have been associated with Clytemnestra from the beginning of the trilogy,”\textsuperscript{36} into misshapen flesh and blood. Their forms of a horrifyingly organic and dripping violent femininity are representative of masculine fears. The Furies are hell-bent on avenging mother-right; they care only that Orestes committed matricide and must therefore be punished. They do not concern themselves with his motivations.\textsuperscript{37} Consistently, the Furies are described in “a profusion of horrific language.”\textsuperscript{38} And when the Furies name themselves, they proclaim loudly: “we are the Angry Ones.”\textsuperscript{39} They are gorgons, hounds of the hunt, vampires, sinister maidens of the night, pursuers of vengeance, defenders of mother-right, and dangerous expressions of a fearsome feminine sexuality. These are the horrifying creatures that Aeschylus sets up as the merciless defenders of justice and vendetta. Is it any wonder that female audience

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid. l. 184.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid. l. 265-7.
\item \textsuperscript{34} Ibid. l. 196.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Zeitlin, \textit{Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature}. p. 97.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Ibid. p. 103.
\item \textsuperscript{37} Aeschylus, \textit{Eumenides}. l. 316-20.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Aeschylus, \textit{Eumenides}. l. 499.
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members were said to have suffered the specifically feminine ailments of spontaneous miscarriages and premature labor at the mere sight of these creatures?\(^{40}\)

By 458 BCE the Furies had a reputation in myth as being agents of vengeance to punish those who committed grave wrongs such as murder or oathbreaking.\(^{41}\) They were regarded as the champions of dikē whose ferocity was so unappeasable that no one could stand against them without divine intervention.\(^{42}\) Religious cults to the Furies did not exist, as it was considered “a waste of effort and resources to offer prayer and sacrifice to beings who are by their nature implacable.”\(^{43}\) And yet, not only Aeschylus, but also Homer and Hesiod argue that without such vengeful figures of promised violence, a stable and harmonious society could not possibly exist.\(^{44}\) Peace and stability come at the price of violence.

The *Eumenides* opens with the Pythia, priestess of Apollo, offering a prayer to the gods outside the sanctuary of Pythian Apollo. Almost immediately after she enters the temple, she exits it, shrieking in fear and terror, unable to stand, and running only “with

\(^{40}\) Anonymous, *Vita Aeschyli* 9. This anecdote is often used as evidence that women did attend plays. However, as Goldhill notes such anecdotes, “are of most dubious value since there is no doubt that women did attend the theatre in these much later periods, and these stories are often invented from the cultural perspective of the late writers in response to particular passages in the plays themselves.” There is no solid evidence from Aeschylus’ own time that women were present. Simon Goldhill, "The Audience of Athenian Tragedy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*, ed. P.E. Easterling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). p. 63.


\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) Ibid. p. 10.

\(^{44}\) see Hesiod’s *Theogony* 217, 220-2, and Homer, *Iliad*. 15.204, 21. 412.
hands help,” her legs having “no speed.” She speaks of “things terrible to tell and for the eyes to see” which drove her out of the temple. These things, shown to her in prophecy, are not only the murder of Clytemnestra at the hands of her own son Orestes, but also the Furies who have vowed vengeance and relentlessly pursue the murderer.

Inside the temple, we find Orestes surrounded by the slumbering Furies. He is joined by Apollo who vows that he “will not give you up,” and by Hermes who will escort him to Athens where he will “find those who will judge this case.” Only in Athens, the city of the wise goddess Athena, can Orestes’ case be judged. Only in Athens can Orestes “be rid of [his] afflictions, once for all.” It is of no small significance that Hermes will escort Orestes on this journey. Either Orestes will find freedom from his mother’s Furies and be cleansed once and for all from the crime of matricide, or he will be guided by Hermes, the patron god of boundaries and travelers, to the underworld after he is destroyed by the Furies.

The scene changes to Athens, where Orestes appears before Athena’s statue as a suppliant. Outcast and besieged by the Furies he clings to her statue and calls upon the goddess to rescue him. The final play of the trilogy thus presents the dilemma that the killing of a criminal, even as a rightful punishment, is itself a further crime equally demanding of retribution and punishment. Right once more clashes with right, and the

46 Ibid. l. 34.
47 Ibid. l. 81.
48 Ibid. l. 83-84.
49 Goldhill notes the significance of πομπαίος in Apollo’s speech, as the word typically refers to the passage from life to death, and therefore its significance here as signaling a rite de passage. Goldhill, *Language, Sexuality, Narrative: The Oresteia*. p. 213.
path of justice is unclear. The Furies encircle Orestes and sing their binding song to destroy his mind and sanity.\textsuperscript{51} In their song the Furies sing not only of their ancient rights to bring murderers to justice, but also of their estrangement from the Olympian order.\textsuperscript{52} They both accept and revel in their otherness, the distinctiveness and authority of their primeval form of justice so different from the justice and dispensation of Olympian Zeus.\textsuperscript{53} The Furies’ song is like an inescapably cast net; their hunt will only end when Orestes is dead. Reconciliation seems impossible.

It is only when all seems lost for Orestes that Athena makes her entrance. She arrives resplendent in full armor having heard Orestes’ pleas for aid. She arrives by chariot,\textsuperscript{54} with the speed of the Aegis hurrying her progress.\textsuperscript{55} From Athena’s entrance, it is also clear that the goddess is equated with “the city and its institutions as much as she is the founder of the Areopagus court.”\textsuperscript{56} Athena arrives as the protective deity of not

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid. I. 332.
\textsuperscript{52} Ibid. I. 365-6.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid. I. 381-388.
\textsuperscript{54} Athena’s entrance at 405 where she claims to have arrived from Troy by chariot is often excised from the text. Taplin argues for the line’s removal on the grounds that it is inconsistent, contradictory, and likely a later addition to the text. Oliver Taplin, \textit{The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977). p. 388-90. However, Himmelhoch has argued, I think convincingly, for the legitimacy and significance of the chariot entrance. For Himmelhoch the line’s inclusion is warranted by its parallelism with other chariot entrances and horse imagery throughout the \textit{Oresteia}, most notably Agamemnon’s entrance in \textit{Agamemnon}. As Himmelhoch argues, “the manuscript tradition gives us no reason to question the Aeschylean authenticity of these verses, nor is there evidence to suggest that ancient commentators considered these lines to be a problem.” Leah Himmelhoch, "Athena's Entrance at Eumenides 405 and Hippotrophic Imagery in Aeschylus’s Oresteia," \textit{Arethusa} 38, no. 3 (2005). p. 263-4
\textsuperscript{55} Aeschylus, \textit{Eumenides}. I. 404.
only suppliants, but also of the city of Athens, her institutions and her people. She is the all-wise and powerful warrior goddess, capable of absolving sins and resolving the most difficult of disputes. She shares her reputation for wise justice with the city of Athens. As such, Athens, protected and guided by the goddess, becomes the only place where the blood feud that has consumed the House of Atreus could possibly be resolved.

Aeschylus, however, presents us with many reasons to doubt the impartiality of Athena as a wise-arbiter. The appearance of the Furies differs dramatically from that of Athena in ways which speak to their relative power. Aeschylus needs to make Athena even more commanding than Clytemnestra and her hunting hounds the Furies. As Goetsch argues, “Klytaimnestra has only to set the Erinyes [Furies] in motion, to urge them on to their appointed task, whereas Athena has to stop that flock of raging daimons from drinking Orestes’ blood.” Comparative, Clytemnestra has the easier task of calling for justice according to the current rules, whereas Athena must propose and implement innovative new rules. When Athena enters, she is resplendent in full war gear and youthful vigor, a stark contrast to the filthy black robes worn by the grey, aged, and child-like Furies. Indeed, the goddess has come with great haste directly from Troy, fresh from claiming her and Athens’ share of the spoils from the sacking of Troy. She

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59 Aeschylus, Eumenides. l. 370 for the clothing of the Furies, l. 68-9 for the Furies as children, and l. 397 for the entrance of Athena.
60 l. 397-402. In this way, Aeschylus transforms the sack of Troy into “the cause of an honorable reward: the Athenians have conquered, but conquest for them is not ruined by their leader’s guilt,” unlike the Argives who were implicated in Agamemnon’s
arrives as a victorious and well-rewarded warrior, fully armed and well prepared for her next conflict. That Athena arrives with spear in hand, ready and able to defend Athens by force if need be, does not escape the Furies’ notice. Her spear speaks to the disparity in power between Athena and Furies from the very moment that the goddess enters. When Orestes greets Athena he is at great pains to claim her as an ally of his family. He recounts that it was with his father, Agamemnon, that Athena “made the Trojan city of Ilium no city anymore.” From Athena’s very entrance the audience is left to ponder the question of whether the motherless virgin daughter of Zeus is even capable of lending a sympathetic ear to the fatherless virgin daughters of Night. Despite Athena’s reputation for courage and wisdom, she is shown to be far less than an impartial judge and demonstrates herself to be complicit with a masculine order long before her infamous justification for her vote to acquit Orestes.

Despite their misgivings, the Furies agree to turn over their jurisdiction to Athena to decide Orestes’ fate. Athena feels that the decision is too much for any one mortal or immortal alone to decide. She realizes that the decision in this contest between competing conceptions of justice has stakes beyond the constituencies immediately concerned. The whole setting for the trial is based on this clash between opposing views of justice. Realizing that the contest between Orestes and the Furies represents two sacrilegious destruction of altars and temples. MacLeod, "Politics and the Oresteia." p. 268. When Athena arrives in Athens she casts a fearsome and powerful shadow.

62. Ibid. l. 433.
63. “the matter is too big for any mortal man who thinks he can judge it. Even I have not the right to analyze cases of murder where wrath’s edge is sharp, and all the more since you have come, and clung a clean innocent supplicant, against my doors.” Ibid. l. 470-474.
irreconcilable positions, Athena acknowledges that she can no more offer her protection to Orestes who clings to her statue as a suppliant, than she can drive the Furies out of her lands who do speak with just cause for vengeance against a matricide. Instead, Athena institutes a new *agon* and convenes a court of twelve of the elders of Athens to judge where the truth in this contest lies.\(^{64}\) However, even at this point, when the Furies decide to turn the matter over to Athena, they express deep misgivings as to whether the trial will be conducted in a fair manner that will truly take their rights as ancient goddesses of vengeance into account. They state that they will turn the matter over out of respect for Athena and her father Zeus. Yet, they also feel obliged to voice the threat to all of Athens that if Orestes goes free “vengeance will be upon you.”\(^{65}\)

Orestes’ guilt or innocence is debated before a jury of twelve of the elders of Athens, (*dikastai*) in the newly created law court, the Areopagus. The defendant is represented by Apollo, none other than the god who commanded the murder of Clytemnestra. The prosecution is comprised of the Furies representing mother-right and the deceased Clytemnestra. Athena presides as arbiter and by extension represents the justice of her father Zeus. She reserves a final ballot for herself to cast. The theatre audience is also invited to participate in “the vital, but silent, role of the jurors.”\(^{66}\) As such, the audience finds themselves drawn directly into assessing the arguments being made by both prosecution and defense. It is not merely the appointed jury on the stage

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\(^{64}\) In summoning the twelve *dikastai* Athena also answers Electra’s prayer from the *Choephori* by sending one to judge, instead of merely to punish which is what Orestes did to Clytemnestra. Ibid. l. 120

\(^{65}\) Ibid. l. 543.

\(^{66}\) Griffith, "Brilliant Dynasts: Power and Politics in the *Oresteia*." p. 77-8.
who decides Orestes’ fate; the theatre audience also participates in the judging of Orestes and the Furies.

The trial proceeds in the ritualized format of the *agon* of the court, which, with its set speeches, question and answer, and back and forth between accused, prosecution and defense, would have been familiar to the audience. Sommerstein argues that in all of extant tragedy, the trial scene in the *Eumenides* most closely resembles the practices of a civic institution easily recognizable to the audience.\(^{67}\) The trial scene contains most of the basic elements that the Athenians would have expected to see in a judicial proceeding: a presiding officer (Athena), an agonistic prosecution (the Furies), and defense (Apollo), set speeches and witnesses, a sworn panel of judges who would listen to the case and decide, and votes cast in a secret ballot.\(^{68}\) Even the questions that Athena asks the Furies and Orestes before the trial would have been familiar procedures to the audience. These questions closely mirror the common court procedure of *anakrisis* in which the magistrate would use a meeting between the accused and accuser to determine what the alleged crime is and the appropriate court to hold the trial.\(^{69}\) Furthermore, both sides appear to be well prepared and familiar with court expectations and procedures. As Goetsch argues, there is nothing in the text that “suggests that the Erinyes [Furies] do not

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\(^{67}\) Sommerstein, "Orestes' Trial and Athenian Homicide Procedure." p. 25.

\(^{68}\) Ibid.

know how to behave in a court of law; indeed they are supreme debaters and have the advantage of Orestes.”

However, there are also significant differences between the conduct of Orestes’ trial and familiar Athenian courtroom procedures. These differences could lead the audience to question the validity and fairness of the trial which they are witnessing upon the stage. Firstly, Orestes’ refusal to swear an oath is a significant departure from accepted court practices. It was customary at the start of a trial for the accused to swear an oath of innocence and for the prosecution to swear that the defendant is guilty. At the end of the trial, the winning side would swear that they were truthful and the decision of the court was just. The Furies loudly complain that Orestes refuses to follow this procedure when they say, “he is unwilling to give or to accept an oath.” By refusing to swear the compulsory oath of innocence, Orestes is implicitly acknowledging his guilt. Orestes does not dispute that he did indeed kill Clytemnestra. Furthermore, when Orestes claims to have been cleansed of blood guilt and to no longer be suffering pollution, it is the same as claiming that he is innocent. Why then, does Orestes refuse to swear a compulsory oath of innocence if he has truly been cleansed of the crime of matricide by Apollo?

72 Ibid.
74 Leão, "The Legal Horizons of the Oresteia." p. 50.
75 Harris, "Introduction." p. 6.
The issue of Orestes’ pollution raises concerns for the trial. Orestes claims to be guiltless and cleansed of the act of matricide by Apollo,\textsuperscript{76} while the Furies stand firm that the bloody stain of matricide cannot be washed away or covered up. If Orestes were truly clean of the crime, the Furies would not pursue him. However, the Furies see Orestes as still being covered in his mother’s wet blood, leaving a scent trail for these hounds of vengeance to follow.\textsuperscript{77} Indeed, the Furies are relentless in their pursuit of Orestes, and claim that “nothing will ever make me let that man go free.”\textsuperscript{78} This questions Apollo’s powers of purification and undermines Orestes’ assertions of purity, as the Furies would not hunt down one who was truly cleansed of blood guilt. As Taplin asks, “how can he be pure when he still trails his mother’s blood?”\textsuperscript{79} Furthermore, while Athena and Apollo accept that Orestes has been cleansed,\textsuperscript{80} not everyone agrees with this assessment. In addition to the Furies, the Pythia also sees Orestes as still being covered in his mother’s blood.\textsuperscript{81} Orestes’ blood-guilt hangs over the entirety of the \textit{Oresteia}: where is justice if one as clearly guilty of matricide as Orestes is allowed to go free?

The Furies have even more reason to be suspicious of the newly convened court. Their suspicions, stem largely from the fact that the court is being founded by a representative of the Olympian order. Many times throughout the play, the Furies draw attention to their fear of the Olympians, and with good reason. The Furies fear

\textsuperscript{77} Ibid. l. 359, 245-8.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid. l. 225.
\textsuperscript{79} Taplin, \textit{The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy}. p. 382.
\textsuperscript{80} Aeschylus, \textit{Eumenides}. l. 473-5.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid. l. 41.
displacement, and loss of respect. On numerous occasions they accusingly lament that the younger gods, “have ridden down powers great with age.” During the course of the trial, Apollo openly expresses his hatred and disdain for the Furies. He angrily lashes out that the Furies are detested by the gods, and that none among the gods holds any love for them. The Furies also have ample reason to be suspicious of Athena’s touted impartiality. After all, it was Athena’s father, Zeus, who shamelessly “shackled elder Cronus, his own father,” while establishing the present Olympian order. Indeed, the Olympian order only came to be through violence directed against the elder gods. The Furies rightfully fear that they could be made to suffer a fate similar to Cronus’ at the hands of Zeus. The Furies draw our full attention to the fact that the Olympian order is founded on coercion, force, and violence.

Finally, both the physical location and name of the new court should give the Furies cause to worry about the trial’s fairness. In the accounts common at the time of the Oresteia’s production, the Areopagus was said to have taken its name from the Trial of Ares. Aeschylus, however, invents a new naming story grounded in the well known story of Theseus’ defeat of the Amazons. The Amazon War begins with a rape. As the story goes, Theseus accompanied Herakles to the land of the Amazons, Themiscyra, in an effort to help Herakles to win the girdle of Ares as one of his labors. Theseus is either given the Amazon princess Antiope as a prize by Herakles, or abducts her himself and brings her back with him to Athens. The Amazons, attempting to rescue their princess

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82 Ibid. l. 150. see also l. 162-3, 641, 731, 778-9, 808, 838, 879-80.
83 Ibid. l. 192, 197, 644.
84 Ibid. l. 641.
and sister, invade Attica and lay siege to the Acropolis. It is upon the very site that the Amazons were defeated that the Areopagus is located. Aeschylus’ aetiology for the Areopagus is thus grounded in the physical location of the Amazon’s camp, siege, and defeat, and the belief that the Amazons sacrificed to Ares on that location.\textsuperscript{86}

Aeschylus’ use of the Amazon War in the naming of the Areopagus is much more significant than merely giving a reason for the name of the court. As Sommerstein argues, it is crucially significant that the trial of Orestes for killing his mother should occur in “the same place where the man-shunning, man-killing Amazons tried to establish a polis of their own.”\textsuperscript{87} Once again the trilogy returns to the theme of deviant female sexuality, and the need for this challenge to be defeated by the maculine polis. The Furies, Clytemnestra, and the Amazons are all linked symbolically, as each represents an abhorrent female sexuality that disrupts fertility through man-killing, and poses a distinct threat to the survival of the polis. Recalling Theseus’ victory over the Amazons demonstrates both the danger of the rule of women, and the need for the masculine to triumph if the polis is to be preserved. This not only celebrates Theseus’ defeat of the Amazons,\textsuperscript{88} but also suggests that Athena, as a champion of male interests, must assume Theseus’ mantle and decisively defeat the threat posed by Clytemnestra and the Furies. Furthermore, “the prior victory over the Amazons not only foreshadows the outcome of the trial but also, by association, invests the new defeat with the same symbolic

\textsuperscript{86} Aeschylus, \textit{Eumenides}. l. 687-9. see also Sommerstein, ed., \textit{Aeschylus: Eumenides}. p. 213.

\textsuperscript{87} Sommerstein, ed., \textit{Aeschylus: Eumenides}. p. 214.

\textsuperscript{88} Zeitlin, \textit{Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature}. p. 93.
significance and prestige as the earlier one.” There will be, however, one significant shift away from the bloodshed that characterized these earlier struggles against the rule of women. Unlike Clytemnestra and the Amazons, the Furies will be given a choice. The Areopagus holds out the hope that “defeated forces can be reintegrated into ordered existence.” In other words, the Furies can choose to redefine their relationship to masculine conceptions of justice and the *polis*, and avoid suffering the same fate as the Amazons and Clytemnestra. If, however, the Furies do not choose submission, then the location of the trial holds out the threat that the Furies will suffer the Amazons’ fate of extermination and utter defeat.

Despite all of these compelling reasons to doubt the fairness of the trial, the Furies agree to turn over authority to Athena and submit to the court. The question is why? Firstly, the Furies respect both Athena’s and Zeus’ reputations for wisdom and justice. Secondly, the Furies are confident *that they will win*. As Gagarin argues, “the Furies have faith that the Areopagus will convict Orestes, for if it does not, men may commit all sorts

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89 Ibid. p. 93-4.
91 Gagarin chooses to see the link between the Areopagus and the defeat of the Amazons in a much more optimistic light. Instead, Gagarin argues that the location of the court actually makes possible sexual compromise. He argues that “this odd bit of local history is perhaps included in Athena’s account of the court in order to indicate the sexually neutral nature of the hill and thus to establish that it is the proper place for a trial that will assist in achieving a sexual compromise.” Michael Gagarin, *Aeschylean Drama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). p. 104. I choose to side with scholars such as Zeitlin who see in the location of the court an implicit threat of violent defeat that equates the challenge of the Furies with the Amazon invasion of Attica. Given the attention to sexuality throughout the trilogy, I can by no means see the site of the Amazon defeat as supplying neutral ground.
92 Aeschylus, *Eumenides*. 1. 435
of wrongs without fear of punishment.” At the start of the trial just before the first witness is called, the Furies clearly argue that the Areopagus cannot possibly survive as a just institution if one so clearly guilty as Orestes is allowed to go free. They proclaim that “here is overthrow of all the young laws, if the claim of this matricide shall stand good, his crime sustained.” For the Furies, it is not just Orestes who is on trial or even the crime of matricide; the justice of the new Olympian order is also being put to the test.

The trial proceeds not in terms of determining whether or not Orestes committed matricide. By his own admission to the first question the Furies ask him, Orestes confesses, “yes, I killed her. There shall be no denial of that.” Orestes’ guilt is never questioned, and Apollo takes responsibility for ordering the murder when he says “it was I who made you strike her down.” Rather, the trial agon focuses on Orestes’ motivations and by extension on the validity of the respective claims to justice made by Orestes and the Furies. In Goldhill’s words, “with the Erinyes [Furies] are drawn up the claims of the mother, the devaluing of the ties of civic authority in favour of the ties of blood-kinship.” With Orestes, are the claims of a masculine legal order which would replace the vendetta-style justice championed by the Furies.

In short order, the trial becomes more about Clytemnestra’ guilt in the murder of Agamemnon than about Orestes’ guilt as a son who willingly killed his own mother. The trial moves quickly away from the Furies’ claim that Orestes deserves punishment for the

93 Gagarin, Aeschylean Drama. p. 73.
94 Aeschylus, Eumenides. l. 490-3.
95 Ibid. l. 588.
96 Ibid. l. 84.
97 Goldhill, Reading Greek Tragedy. p. 28.
murder of Clytemnestra, and instead centres around who committed the worse crime: vengeful mother or vengeful son? Athena effectively ignores the charges of matricide and intentional homicide brought by the Furies, and instead allows the trial to focus on whether Orestes’ crime was not a crime under the law.\footnote{Vellacott, "Has Good Prevailed? A Further Study of the Oresteia." p. 121.} Athena allows the trial to pivot. The central issue is no longer whether Orestes committed matricide, but whether that matricide was a crime at all. Orestes even goes so far as to accuse the Furies of hypocrisy in failing to punish Clytemnestra for the murder of Agamemnon.\footnote{Aeschylus, \textit{Eumenides}. l. 604.} Orestes manages to twist the trial away from the charge of matricide, and instead argues that even though he committed matricide, it was not a crime for him to kill Clytemnestra in an act of vengeance for his father.\footnote{“I plead guilty. My father was dear, and this was vengeance for his blood.” Ibid. l. 463-4.} Essentially, Orestes admits his guilt as a killer, but argues that his actions were permitted under the law.\footnote{This raises a problem of jurisdiction. For the original Athenian audience, Athena’s choice to have Orestes’ trial held by the Areoagus would have been unusual, as it does not conform to the standard legal practices of the day. The Areopagus strictly heard cases on issues of intentional homicide or wounding. As Orestes’ trial hinges not on determining his guilt or innocence of the murder, but rather on if his act was justified under the law it should have been heard by the Delphinium. As a court, the Delphinium heard cases in which the killer admits guilt, but claims that the act was actually legal. See, Leão, "The Legal Horizons of the \textit{Oresteia}." p. 51 and Kennedy, \textit{Athena’s Justice: Athenia, Athens and the Concept of Justice in Greek Tragedy}. p. 26-7.} For Orestes, the murder is not just a case of matricide; it is also an act of liberation that frees Argos from the tyranny of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus, while also restoring the rightful line of succession.\footnote{Interestingly, the trial never questions the rightness of Aegisthus’ murder. Orestes’ justification from the \textit{Choephori} still stands that Aegisthus rightly suffered the punishment of an adulterer and that it was Orestes’ right as a son to kill the man who seduced and brought shame to his mother. Aeschylus, \textit{Choephori}. l. 989-90. For more on}
Orestes’ defense consists of indicting and vilifying Clytemnestra for the murder of Agamemnon. It’s enough to make one wonder: who’s really on trial here, Orestes or Clytemnestra?

To defend Orestes, Apollo arrives as a witness. Apollo emphatically states that he bears “responsibility for his mother’s murder,” and that he has cleansed Orestes of the stain of matricide. Ironically, it is the Furies’ claim that they only pursue those guilty of shedding kindred blood which sets up Apollo’s infamous pseudo-biological defense of Orestes. Apollo claims that “the mother is no parent of that which is called her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed that grows.” The truth of Apollo’s words that “there can be a father without any mother,” is personified by Athena, the motherless daughter of Zeus presiding over the trial. By Apollo’s argument, Orestes didn’t kill his

seeing the murders of Clytemnestra and Aegisthus as acts of liberation see Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 1355, 1365, and Aeschylus, Choephoroi. l. 973, 1046.
102 Aeschylus, Eumenides. l. 604.
103 Aeschylus, Eumenides. l. 631-5.
104 Ibid. l. 578-9.
105 The Furies state that it is their duty to hunt and punish matricides, but that a woman murdering her husband is outside of their sphere of concern as this would not be an instance of shedding kindred blood. Ibid. l. 210, 212.
106 Ibid. l. 658-60. The argument that the woman is simply an incubator or carrier for the male seed may have been supported by popular belief and the science of the day. Support for this interpretation is usually drawn from Aristotle’s On the Generation of Animals 1.17-23. However, many feminist scholars have argued that Aristotle’s biological argument here is simply a cover for an argument to support the political rule of men over women. Apollo’s argument here crucially differs from Aristotle’s later account of reproduction and female biology in that Aristotle argues that women do provide something to generation, namely the passive element of matter and the space for the embryo to develop. The active elements that provide movement and life are provided by the male. Apollo, however, argues that the female contributes nothing. see also Blundell, Women in Ancient Greece. p. 106. and Jean Bethke Elshtain, Public Man, Private Woman (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981). p. 44.
107 Aeschylus, Eumenides. l. 661-2.
mother; he merely slew an empty vessel to avenge the death of his one true parent, his father Agamemnon. While Orestes does not deny that he killed his mother, Apollo, through his argument that the mother is no true parent, does deny that Orestes committed matricide.\textsuperscript{108} Whereas the Furies only care that Orestes committed matricide and show no regard for why he killed, Apollo cares only about who he killed and not that he committed murder. Agamemnon was a powerful king and commander of the fleets, who was shamelessly murdered by Clytemnestra, a mere woman who attempted to seize a man’s place in the world. By Apollo’s reasoning, how could her death be seen as being equal to Agamemnon’s? For Apollo, the two deaths are impossible to compare. Apollo’s argument creates a hierarchy of value where father rules over mother, husband over wife, and \textit{polis} over \textit{oikos}. All of this begs the question: is this conception of justice truly representative of “the just moral order of Zeus, or justice as the right of the stronger?”\textsuperscript{109}

Indeed, much of the trial proceeds along the basis of powerful threats made and received. The trial begins because of the threat posed by the Furies to the land of Athens. Athena cannot drive them off without risking the Furies’ venomous attacks upon all of Athens for being denied their prey.\textsuperscript{110} The Furies attempt to intimidate Orestes with their threats of violent harm to his body. Orestes, however, returns their threats by invoking his father’s furies when he replies, “I have no fear. My father will aid me from the grave.”\textsuperscript{111} When Apollo arrives to defend Orestes he begins by threatening the jury. Apollo claims

\textsuperscript{110} Aeschylus, \textit{Eumenides}. l. 476-81.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid. l. 598.
that his prophecies always speak the commands of Zeus, and that he represents Zeus’
justice. As such he instructs the jurors to acknowledge that “this is justice. Recognize
then how great its strength. I tell you, follow our father’s will. For not even the oath that
binds you is more strong than Zeus is strong.” Every year six thousand Athenian
citizens swore a judicial oath that they would vote only in accordance with the letter of
the law. Apollo’s words have the effect of a coolly spoken threat. He is instructing the
jury to ignore their sworn oath to uphold the written law of Athens, and to instead decide
the case according to Zeus’ justice. If the jury fails to agree with him, he threatens
them with the anger of Zeus the Father. For Apollo, divine law takes precedence over
human law. To Athena’s credit, she rejects Apollo’s claim that the authority of Zeus’
justice overrules the human justice found in the Areopagus’ decision when she reaffirms
the sanctity of the judicial oath in the court’s charter.

During the course of his defense Orestes does not himself make threats; he does,
however, attempt to unfairly influence the verdict by offering a bribe to the city of
Athens. When Orestes calls upon Athena’s aid, he offers something in return: an alliance
with himself, all of his land, and the Argive host for the rest of time. Orestes offers the
goddess and her city a valuable alliance that can be won by words and persuasion, and
that does not require force to secure. In other words, Orestes offers Athena a victory,

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112 Ibid. l. 616-18.
113 Ibid. l. 619-21.
115 Sommerstein, "Orestes' Trial and Athenian Homicide Procedure," p. 29.
“without work of her spear.”

Orestes also reminds Athena that they are tied together by bonds of loyalty and obligation through the goddess’ relationship with Agamemnon. Orestes draws attention to Agamemnon as Athena’s ally and agent in the destruction of Troy. These words serve a double purpose. Firstly, they establish Athena as a friend of the family through her relationship as a spear-friend to Agamemnon and through him to Orestes. This reminds Athena of her duties and obligations towards the House of Atreus and should help to ensure that the goddess will pledge both her support and protection for Orestes. Secondly, Orestes’ words gently reproach Athena for failing to protect Agamemnon upon his return home. In this way, it is as if Orestes is saying that because Athena did not protect Agamemnon from Clytemnestra, it became Orestes’ duty to avenge his father. Thus it is clear that, “Orestes is in the right city for a sympathetic hearing.”

At the conclusion of the play Orestes makes good on his promises and returns to Argos after swearing an oath to be the steadfast friend of Athens for all time. Crucially, both the alliance and the Areopagus are intended to be permanent protections for all time. As Macleod argues, “the alliance is to save Athens in war: the court is to save her from bloodshed and its consequences for the community.” As such, both the alliance and the court are attempts to promote the harmony, stability, and prosperity of Athens. At the end of the play, Orestes returns to Argos as a summachos (ally, σύμμαχος) of Athens in stark contrast to the Furies who remain in Athens as metics,

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118 Ibid. l. 289.
119 Ibid. l. 457-8.
120 Griffith, "Brilliant Dynasts: Power and Politics in the Oresteia." p. 100.
121 Aeschylus, Eumenides. l. 762-74.
122 MacLeod, "Politics and the Oresteia." p. 274.
(resident foreigners, μετοίκοι). Just as Agamemnon and Athena were fellow fighters, Orestes returns as a summachos to Athens and Athena.

When the time for decision comes, the jurors do not cast their votes impartially – they have received threats and promises from the two sides. The Furies remind them that they hold the power to crush their lands;\textsuperscript{123} the first time during the trial where the Furies actively threaten the prosperity of Athens. Apollo once more threatens the jurors with divine anger if they void the results of his and Zeus’ oracles.\textsuperscript{124} When the votes from the twelve dikastai are counted, they are found to be equal, and Athena casts the final ballot.\textsuperscript{125} Athena votes in favor of Orestes, prefacing her remarks by saying “there is no mother anywhere who gave me birth, and, but for marriage, I am always for the male with all my heart, and strongly on my father’s side.”\textsuperscript{126} Her support for Orestes is unequivocal. As Cohen argues, “she too regards the male as supreme and the death of

\textsuperscript{123} Aeschylus, Eumenides. l. 712
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid. l. 713-14.
\textsuperscript{125} The text explicitly states that the vote is a tie, (753, 796) but there has been much scholarly debate as to whether Athena’s vote in favor of acquittal makes the tie or breaks the tie. It is my opinion that Athena casts the deciding vote and therefore breaks the tie; her vote does not create the tie by adding to the votes for acquittal. I disagree with Vernant who claims that Athena’s vote made the two human sides equal as this would effectively eliminate a human majority to convict and result in the supremacy of divine law over human law. Jean-Pierre and Videl-Naquet Vernant, Pierre, Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece, trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: Zone Books, 1988). p. 418. I agree with Seaford that “a human majority…would not have required a divine vote, and the reversal of a human majority by a divine vote… would destroy both the intrahuman and the divine-human balance.” Richard Seaford, "Historicizing Tragic Ambivalence: The Vote of Athena," in History, Tragedy, Theory: Dialogues on Athenian Drama, ed. Barbara Goff (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995). However, it must be stated that the text is on this point ambiguous. For more on the vote of Athena see: Michael Gagarin, "The Vote of Athena," The American Journal of Philology 96, no. 2 (1975).
\textsuperscript{126} Aeschylus, Eumenides. l. 736-38.
Agamemnon as the worse crime.”

Orestes lives, and the Furies lament the result of the trial which they see as destroying their high duties, disinheriting them, and leaving them “heavy with anger.” And rightly so, for from the very beginning they have been involved in an unequal agonistic contest with the wise goddess Athena who has claimed to be fair but has shown and declared herself in all ways to be biased and in favor of the masculine over the feminine. Furthermore, in claiming that she is firmly on her father’s side she ultimately aligns herself with Apollo and the justice of Zeus. The Furies’ reaction is heartfelt and sincere, but they ought not to have been surprised. Athena sides with Agamemnon, Orestes, Apollo, and Zeus, against the Amazons, Iphigenia, Clytemnestra, and the Furies.

At the start of the trial, Athena convinces the Furies to submit to the court by saying that “wrong must not win by technicalities.” And yet, Orestes’ freedom is won by a technicality: the provision that a tied vote counts for acquittal.

This speaks to an important ambiguity in the plays. The split decision as seen in the closeness of the vote strongly implies that “a ‘perfectly honest opinion’ might go either way and there could be no such thing as a verdict that was unequivocally right.”

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128 Aeschylus, Eumenides. l. 780.
129 Ibid. l. 432.
130 This once more raises the issue of Athena’s vote. If the goddess’ vote breaks the tie, as I hold, then her vote here is ceremonial as even without her ballot, Orestes would go free on the technicality that all of the human votes are equal. However, if Athena’s vote actually creates a tie by making the two human sides equal, then her vote has effectively canceled out a human majority to convict Orestes on a technicality. Effectively, Athena’s vote would then have decided the case, reversing the decision of a majority of human jurors to convict.
131 Sommerstein, "Orestes' Trial and Athenian Homicide Procedure." p. 32.
shows that both the prosecution and defense were thought to have had justice firmly on their side. As the trial has pitted male against female from the start, it is significant that the victory for the male cause is won by the narrowest of margins. With Athena’s vote, the goddess clearly sees the death of Agamemnon as being a greater crime. However, she does not explain in her rationale for her vote how Orestes’ crime, being a lesser crime than Clytemnestra’s, somehow absolves Orestes of guilt in the murder that by his own admission he did commit. Effectively, Athena’s presence and authority serves as a stand-in for the justice and authority of her father Zeus. As Vellacott argues, Athena’s “decision recognizes neither justice nor mercy; it divides the human race into two halves, and pronounces justice inapplicable to the weaker half.” The closeness of the vote draws our attention back to the crises of gender and sexuality that are at the heart of conflicts throughout the trilogy. Athena’s vote may effectively reaffirm an androcentric conception of society, politics, and justice founded in the power of the stronger, but it cannot erase the fact that not all regard that very order and structure as just. In other words, it reveals the justice achieved by the Areopagus to be procrustean.

There is another story from Greek myth that closely parallels the voting in Orestes’ trial and illuminates the gendered struggles and ambivalences of the decision. The tale of the naming of Athens contains a vote which resembles the voting in the trial, and which also serves to explain Athena’s position as patron deity of the city. In the

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133 Griffith, "Brilliant Dynasts: Power and Politics in the Oresteia." p. 82. The view that Athena’s justice is merely an extension of the authority and justice of Zeus is further explored in Lloyd-Jones, The Justice of Zeus.
134 Vellacott, "Has Good Prevailed? A Further Study of the Oresteia." p. 120.
Divine *Eris*, there was a contest between Poseidon and Athena for the right of privileges and honors in the soon to be named city. To determine a winner to the contest, all residents of the city, both male and female, gathered to vote. The men unanimously voted for Poseidon, and the women, who outnumbered the men by one, all voted for Athena. Poseidon reacted with anger. To assuage the god, King Cecrops and the men of Athens declared, “a threefold punishment for their womenfolk: they were to lose the right of suffrage; they were not to give their own names to their children; they were never to be known as Athenians.”

This decision revoked women’s status and rights as political citizens, saw the start of relations of patrilineal kinship, heterosexual marriage instead of sexual promiscuity, and the rule of husbands over wives. All that remained of the women’s victory was a name: Athens. As a result, “Athena therefore won the victory, but the women, it seems, did not.” Indeed, the women’s victory proved to be the grounds for their defeat. The myth serves to both inform and warn us of the women’s power “only to take it away from them again forever, on the very day of their victory.”

At the very same moment that the political action of women creates the identity of Athenian citizen, women forever lose the right to call themselves either Athenian, or citizens; they are merely women.

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136 Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*. p. 115


138 Ibid. p. 142.
This casts Athena’s vote and her justification for siding with Orestes in a different light. The circumstances of the vote in the Naming of Athens closely parallels the verdict in Orestes’ trial in which the decision hinges upon a single vote. Furthermore, both votes emphasize gender and instances of highly partisan decision making; both votes share the same gendered power narrative. As Seaford argues, in both votes we see the same sequence: female power, (Clytemnestra, the Furies, the women of Attica) a very close vote which provokes divine anger in need of appeasement, (Poseidon, the Furies) and a fragile settlement brokered by Athena which sees the female principle gain and lose in the new order.\textsuperscript{139} In the Naming of Athens we find “the assumption that males and females pursue their own separate interests, each group bound to maintain solidarity by siding automatically with their own kind.”\textsuperscript{140} This essentially mirrors Athena’s justification for her vote in the trial when she expresses clearly that she is in all things always for the male. When seen from the perspective of ensuring the smooth running of court proceedings, Athena’s provision for breaking a tie vote seems reasonable; however, when seen in the context of the Naming of Athens, “the provision itself and Athena’s reasons for putting it into practice take on a different cast.”\textsuperscript{141} Despite the fact that Athena greatly profited from the women who voted to name their city after her, the goddess shows no loyalty towards her supporters. Instead of intervening on the women’s behalf to secure their political powers and citizenship, Athena sides with the reforms of Cecrops that vanquish women in the moment of their victory. In the \textit{Eumenides} Athena not only

\textsuperscript{139} Seaford, "Historicizing Tragic Ambivalence: The Vote of Athena." p. 216.
\textsuperscript{140} Zeitlin, \textit{Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature}. p. 117.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
validates but also extends Cecrops’ reforms; her vote validates the supremacy of male authority, affirms androcentric procreation, and confirms “the primacy of the paternal bond.” In other words, Athena uses her vote not only to ensure Orestes’ acquittal, but also to support and extend the legitimacy of the male-dominated city at the expense of the feminine.

The rendering of the verdict, however, “is far from the end of the conflicts of the play.” The _agon_ between Athena and the Furies only intensifies after the decision. Before the verdict the Furies were willing to trust that Athena’s wise counsel would decide the case fairly. However, with Athena’s blunt admission that she is always for the male the Furies realize that they have misjudged the situation. Athena’s claim that the vote was fair and equal, creating no dishonor, only serves to pour salt in the Furies’ wounds, especially if it was Athena’s vote that ensured acquittal. They become angered and pledge “to let loose on the land the vindictive poison dripping deadly out of my heart upon the ground,” destroying Athens and intensifying the conflict between the old and the new gods. Clearly, the Furies are both willing and capable of unleashing violent destruction upon those who have refused to recognize their rights and honors. However, Athena does not allow for the _agon_ to descend into the kind of violence which characterized it in both the _Agamemnon_ and the _Choephori_. Significantly, Athena uses

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142 Ibid.  
143 Goldhill, _Reading Greek Tragedy_. p. 29.  
144 Aeschylus, _Eumenides_. l. 795-6.  
145 This would certainly be the case if Athena’s vote served to create a tie by adding to the human votes for acquittal, and thus overruling a human majority to convict Orestes. If this were the case, Athena’s vote would have erased a victory for the Furies.  
146 Aeschylus, _Eumenides_. l. 781-82.
persuasion not to deceive the Furies and lead them to their destruction, but to convince them to ally themselves with Athens. The goddess attempts to persuade the Furies to “share my pride in worship,” by offering the Furies new powers and a permanent place of worship in Athens. Athena sweetens her bribe by flattering the Furies, and going so far as to say that the ancient goddesses are wiser than she. But all of Athena’s efforts to pacify the Furies through her beguiling persuasive speech fail. The Furies do not trust Athena’s offer, (and why at this point should they?) and continue to spit bile and threaten the land. Even though persuading the Furies to submit to the court has effectively spared Orestes from a gruesome fate, persuasion alone is insufficient to soothe the Furies’ wrath over their defeat. This failure of persuasion threatens to lead all to destruction instead of salvation.

It is only when Athena combines persuasion with coercion, abandoning the respectful eristics of her courtroom demeanor, that violence is averted. Athena uses both persuasion and coercion as inextricable tools of state power. Athena blatantly threatens the Furies with a power greater than their own. She bullies them into accepting her offer by stating that “I am the only god who knows the keys to where [Zeus’] thunderbolts are locked.” When bribery with a seat of worship fails, Athena avails herself of coercion. As Cohen argues, “Athena makes all too clear, fear and force underlie the transformation of the social order.” Crucially, however, the thunderbolts remain hidden away.

\[147\] Ibid. l. 832-833.
\[148\] Ibid. l. 847-8.
\[149\] Ibid.885-6
\[150\] Ibid. l. 827-828.
\[151\] Cohen, "The Theodicy of Aeschylus: Justice and Tyranny in the Oresteia." p. 139.
Unlike in the two previous plays where violent coercion is used in the service of bloody revenge, Athena uses the thunderbolts as a threat in the service of persuasion. Many scholars, such as Podlecki, choose to ignore Athena’s threat of the thunderbolts and do not acknowledge the role that coercion plays in the ending of the Eumenides. Podlecki argues without a hint of sarcasm that, “what we are given… is a re-education of the Furies and their consequent conversion into resident deities of Athens; the Dread Goddesses become ‘Well-Wishers’ for Athena’s people for all time to come.”\(^{153}\) Other scholars, such as Winnington-Ingram\(^{154}\) and Llyod-Jones,\(^{155}\) downplay the threat and choose to emphasize the reasoned persuasion of Athena as playing the decisive role in negotiating a settlement. All of these interpretations result in denying and repressing the violence which makes the closure of the Eumenides possible. Through Athena’s threat of using Zeus’ thunderbolts against them, the Furies are subdued, subjugated, and pacified. Their ultimate submission to Athena’s coercive persuasion has resulted in a similar effect to Agamemnon’s choice to trample the purple: it has sealed their fate and confirmed their status as weaker.

Despite the fact that the Furies ultimately submit to Athena, crucially they are not stripped of their powers. In fact, the Furies actually gain significant and complex powers by submitting to Athena’s coercive persuasion. While the Furies do submit to Athena’s coercive and violent threat of the thunderbolts, the bribes that they are offered help to assuage the bitterness of their submission. Athena offers the Furies the chance to share

\(^{153}\) Podlecki, The Political Background of Aeschylean Tragedy. p. 77.  
\(^{154}\) Winnington-Ingram, Studies in Aeschylus. p. 155, 171-172.  
her “pride of worship,”\textsuperscript{156} and promises to create a religious cult for worship of the Furies.\textsuperscript{157} This is a significant promise as the Furies presently do not enjoy a place of worship or receive gifts of devotion. The cult of the Furies would also see a return to the correct making of sacrifices instead of the corrupted sacrifices, (Iphigenia, Agamemnon, the tomb offerings to Agamemnon’s shade) which have characterized the trilogy. The Furies are also granted power over marriage and fertility.\textsuperscript{158} Their new powers over fertility encompass both the fecundity of human beings and of the land itself. These powers are so expansive that “no household shall be prosperous without [the Furies’] will.”\textsuperscript{159} The Furies agree to use their power to promote the fertility of Athens; however, they still retain the power to destroy and make the land and people barren. That said, the Furies also agree that they will only use their destructive powers when it is correct to do so; they promise that Athens will be free of arbitrary terror.\textsuperscript{160} Significantly, the Furies maintain their power and right to pursue the guilty, and this power extends into future generations.\textsuperscript{161} The justice of the Areopagus civilizes \textit{lex talonis}, but still maintains the rights to punish violently and to visit “the sins of the father on the children,”\textsuperscript{162} The Furies remain in the city to enforce these in the new order. In other words, the Furies’ power to pursue those who have inherited their guilt is not abolished but preserved in their transformation. This continues the idea that, “the doer suffers,” (\textit{drasanti pathein

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{156} Aeschylus, \textit{Eumenides}. l. 833.
\item \textsuperscript{157} Ibid. l. 804-7.
\item \textsuperscript{158} Ibid. l. 834-6.
\item \textsuperscript{159} Ibid. l. 895.
\item \textsuperscript{160} Ibid. l. 976-87.
\item \textsuperscript{161} Ibid. l. 934-5, l. 950-5. see also Dodds, "Morals and Politics in the \textit{Oresteia}." p. 252.
\item \textsuperscript{162} MacLeod, "Politics and the \textit{Oresteia}." p. 284-5.
\end{itemize}
δράσαντι παθεῖν)\textsuperscript{163} and maintains that an entire family can be punished for the actions of a single relative or ancestor. Athena’s attempt to reconcile the Furies to Athens is also an attempt to achieve a type of justice. Here, justice is not understood as equality, but as granting the Furies their appropriate rights and share in the order of Athens. Athena is therefore attempting to correct the sense of dishonor acutely felt by the Furies by giving them the rewards, power, and honors that are their due. The bribes offered by Athena are essential for the Furies to be able to reconcile themselves to their new place, yoked to Zeus’ power and incorporated into the religious, judicial, and political system of Athens.\textsuperscript{164}

While the Furies do gain significant powers by agreeing to be incorporated into Athens, they also suffer significant losses. Even though the Furies gain immense power in all areas of fertility and reproduction, this influence comes at a cost. By agreeing to play the role of arbiters of fertility, the Furies become an essential part of establishing “marriage as the institution that controls sexuality and ensures fertility even as it serves to assert the inherent subordination of female to male.”\textsuperscript{165} The Furies also change both their role and conception of justice. Their role as protectors of the right for wronged women to act, and their conception of justice as vendetta is judged to be “blind, archaic, barbaric, and regressive.”\textsuperscript{166} Furthermore, the Furies completely abandon their role as agents of violent mourning. Even though the Furies are agents directly spawned by Clytemnestra’s death, the issue of mourning, so prominent in the \textit{Choephoroi}, is completely erased from

\textsuperscript{163} Aeschylus, \textit{Choephoroi}. l. 313.
\textsuperscript{164} Cohen, "The Theodicy of Aeschylus: Justice and Tyranny in the \textit{Oresteia}.” p. 139.
\textsuperscript{165} Zeitlin, \textit{Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature}. p. 98.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid. p. 101.
the *Eumenides*. The justice embodied in the Areopagus and the court system supersedes the justice of the Furies. In their new role as agents of the court and the city, the Furies lose their independence. Instead of being free to pursue those who earn their wrath, the Furies are now leashed to the procedures and decisions of the court. As agents of the court, the Furies “will in the future play a supporting rather than a starring role.” The Furies also lose their freedom of movement. Instead of being free to leave Athens, they must remain in the city at the site of their cult. This reverses the usual pattern in suppliant plays where the suppliant earns the right to remain and the pursuer is driven away. Instead, “the Erinyes [Furies] have taken over from Orestes the role of the disinherited, homeless wanderer.” Lastly, and most importantly, the Furies lose their partisan character as agents of female anger and revenge. As Foley notes, in the two previous plays women played a significant role as agents of justice, (Clytemnestra and Elektra) but in the *Eumenides*, women are removed from the processes of justice and are replaced by the procedures of the all-male court. As tools of the court and the city, the Furies are subsumed into the male-order of the *polis* and bound to the decisions of the all-male jury. The role of the Furies becomes more symbolic and religious, segregating them

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167 the closest that the *Eumenides* comes to engaging with the violent politics of mourning is l. 792 in which occurs the word ἀτιμοπενθεῖς, *atimopentheis* (“sorrowing for dishonor,” and sometimes translated as “in revenge for grief”). This and the status of the Furies as Clytemnestra’s hounds of vengeance are the only passages in the *Eumenides* which draw attention to the close relationship between the Furies and the violence of lamentation and mourning.

168 Zeitlin, *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature.*


170 Foley, *Female Acts in Greek Tragedy.* p. 34.
from the *polis* and the judicial system. Like Zeus’ thunderbolts, the Furies become a tool of coercion to be kept locked away as a powerful threat until absolutely needed.

In convening the trial *agon* with the Furies, Athena notes that “whether I let them stay or drive them off, it is a hard course and will hurt.” In this way, she is caught in a tragic bind, where by necessity she must act knowing full well that there will be negative consequences regardless of the path she chooses. The Furies’ cries for justice cannot be ignored, lest they realize their threats to destroy the prosperity of Athens. But, neither can Athena give in to their demands for blood and violence, as to do so would be to support the continuation of the cycle of murder and vengeance which would completely destroy the House of Atreus. However, the reasoned persuasion that Athena attempts in the trial scene is a failure from the start. She is unable to convince the Furies through words alone to give up their quarry, nor can she convince them of the justice in deciding in favor of Orestes. She must resort to both bribery and threats to accomplish these goals. While the Furies are made part of the order of Athens, it is an uneasy and fraught alliance, and represents neither peace nor resolution. It cannot be forgotten that just as the trial *agon* is initiated to divert and address aggression and violence, it is only concluded by making recourse to bribes and threats of violence. Indeed, the fragility of the order is reflected in the awareness on the parts of both Athena and the Furies that justice as a response to violence prevailed because it too made recourse to fear and force. Furthermore, the closure of the trial *agon* does not speak to a stable resolution. Rather, it demonstrates the tenuous grounds on which Athena and the masculine can claim victory, and the ever-

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171 Ibid.
172 Aeschylus, *Eumenides*. l. 480-481.
present possibility that the feminine could once more challenge that victory and demand a reordering.

The *Eumenides* reveals that force and fear lurk at the heart of political contestation. Cohen argues, “Aeschylus portrays a cosmic and political order which is neither moral nor just, but rather tyrannical, in the sense that its ultimate foundations are force and fear.”173 One way to interpret the relationship between the Areopagus, and the Furies’ new role as agents of the court, is to emphasize the uncomfortably close linkage of justice, fear, and violence. Indeed, the positions of Athena and the Furies regarding the correctness of using violence to resolve the violence of agonistic contestation are surprisingly close. The Furies hold that “there are times when fear is good,”174 and argue that it is their role to instill in people a well-grounded fear of violent punishment. The threat of violence then, is not always a negative as it is the fear of harmful retribution which gives the law its power.175 If the city creates a citizen whose heart holds no fear, then “how shall such a one any more respect the right?”176 Athena echoes this claim when in her dedication speech for the Areopagus she asks, “what man who fears nothing at all is ever righteous?”177 These words imply that it is not always an internalized moral sense of justice or fairness which prevents wrong-doing, but rather the fear of punishment or violent reprisal that maintains law and order. Both Athena and the Furies hold that without violence and the threat of punishment, justice has no force; reasoned persuasion

173 Cohen, "The Theodicy of Aeschylus: Justice and Tyranny in the *Oresteia.*"p. 129.
175 Ibid. l. 499-516.
176 Ibid. l. 522-5
177 Ibid. l. 698-9.

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alone is insufficient to maintain a harmonious order. Respect for the laws comes not from the persuasive power of reasoned arguments, but from fear of the consequences of disobedience and non-compliance. The Areopagus is not merely a bulwark against injustice; it is, more importantly, an institution to instill fear and reverence in the interest of creating a stable order. The ending of the *Eumenides* shows that attempts to enshrine justice at the centre of political order are contaminated by force and fear. As Zak argues, “if the worship of the Furies relieves us in that it represents a domestication of terror, it nevertheless burdens us with the care and nurture of dread.”\(^{178}\) The treatment of the Furies suggests that while unbridled terror cannot be, without terror and the threat of force to back it up, justice cannot survive. Without a sharp sword at the ready, justice as embodied in the rule of law has no strength. Justice is the *archê*, (empire) of force.

It is through a reverent fear of punishment that the rule of law can prevent wrongdoing and stave off the evils of despotism and anarchy.\(^{179}\) As the Furies sing, fear “must keep its watchful place at the heart’s control. There is advantage in the wisdom won from pain.”\(^{180}\) This returns us to the *Oresteia*’s theme of *pathei mathos*, that wisdom comes through suffering. It is the experience or fear of punishment through the laws which teaches individuals to respect and revere the justice of the city and the courts. This wisdom gained through the fear of suffering the consequences of one’s actions appears to apply equally to the human and the divine. As Zak argues, “even the gods in Aeschylus


\(^{179}\) MacLeod, "Politics and the Oresteia." p. 285.

must learn through suffering.” The Furies agree to give up their particular conception of bloody vengeance and relinquish their angry threats to destroy Athens only after Athena has threatened them with Zeus’ thunderbolts. Confronted by the clear superiority of Athena’s power, the Furies are educated by fear; through fear of suffering violence themselves, the Furies learn to accept their place as watchdogs leashed to the new order.

To symbolize their transition from angry and vengeful goddesses to benefactors and defenders of Athens, the Furies change their outward appearance by donning new robes. Their change in attitude towards Athens is reflected in a physical change in appearance. The Furies accept from Athena and her city the new robes as a gesture of “civic good will,” that is meant to convey a hopeful tone. The Furies place their new crimson robes over their black. Crucially, the Furies do not remove their black robes or change their masks; they keep their fearsome faces and mask their original black robes. The Furies may cover their robes, but they do not change their grim masks. Even though the Furies allow their hateful anger to slip away, they are not themselves transformed.

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182 The trilogy therefore comes full circle. The *Agamemnon* opens with the image of the watchman, chained to his post awaiting the beacon fires to signal the end of Troy. He is released from his position by Agamemnon’s imminent return and Clytemnestra’s murderous justice. The *Eumenides* concludes then with the Furies’ assumption of the role of watchdogs, guarding the city against injustice and those who, like Clytemnestra, would dare to take justice into their own hands.
185 Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy*. 

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They retain their capacity for fury, violence, and vengeance. Athena makes good on her promise to give the Furies a place of honor, “deep hidden under ground… where you shall sit on shining chairs beside the hearth to accept devotions offered by your citizens.” The Furies are accompanied by a large escort, potentially including armed guards, and led in a torchlight procession to the caves at the foot of the Acropolis. As Komar notes, “the older female order is literally driven underground as the Eumenides closes.”

The new robes of the Furies prove to be an ambiguous symbol that simultaneously celebrates the avoidance of violence and visually reminds the audience of past violent crimes that threaten to repeat in the future. The Furies accept new robes the color of *porphyreos*, a deep dark crimson-purple reminiscent of dried blood. This is not the first time in the trilogy that the color *porphyreos* has been of crucial importance: it is

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187 “you, children of Cranaus, you who keep the citadel, guide these guests of the state.” Ibid. l. 1010-11. There is considerable debate over exactly who is included in the Furies’ escort. Potentially, the escort includes: Athena, the jurors, the guardians of the citadel, sacrificial animals, and a second chorus potentially composed of female torchbearers who sing the final song of the trilogy. Taplin, argues that the final song is sung by the jurors themselves as representatives of the citizenry of Athens and that the female chorus is implied but not seen onstage. Taplin, *The Stagecraft of Aeschylus: The Dramatic Use of Exits and Entrances in Greek Tragedy*. p. 410-11. Sommerstein, however, argues that the women in their roles as servants of Athena do join the procession on stage as a second chorus, and that the entire procession likely numbered approximately thirty-five persons. Sommerstein, ed., *Aeschylus: Eumenides*. p. 276-8. Regardless of the debate, the visual effect of this multitude of people on the stage would have done much to cement Aeschylus’ reputation for the spectacular.
188 The Furies themselves view their descent into the cave as a dishonor and disgrace: “I, the mind of the past, to be driven under the ground out cast, like dirt!” A sentiment that they repeat twice. Aeschylus, *Eumenides*. l. 838-9, 871-2.
the same color as the tapestries used by Clytemnestra to entrap Agamemnon, and the same color that stains the garments that netted and ensnared the murdered king. Clytemnestra used garments of porphyreos to subdue Agamemnon, and Athena uses garments of the same stale blood-like hue to subdue the wrath of the Furies. This serves to symbolically link the death of Agamemnon with the defeat of the Furies, by mimicking the funerary ritual whereby the deceased is clothed in new garments before being covered in earth. Immediately after the Furies put on their new robes, they are driven beneath the earth, having lost their original role and adopting a new status in relation to Athens and the Areopagus.

Initially, the closing scene of the Eumenides suggests a reconciliation of the Furies to the Athenian polis, as well as a resolution to the violent conflicts between men and women that have characterized the trilogy. Athena herself characterizes the agon between her and the Furies to have been a form of beneficial strife that has accomplished good for the city. She states, “but Zeus of the Agora has won the day. Our strife of good things conquers for all time.” If a second chorus of women enters during the final scene, this joint celebration of religious cult and human justice by the female servants of Athena and the male jurors of the Areopagus could be seen as suggestive of an end to the strife between male and female. Furthermore, as Peradotto argues, the torches could be seen as a powerful image of light chasing away darkness to promote harmony and

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192 Ibid. p. 553.
193 Aeschylus, Eumenides. l. 973-5, my translation.
overcome the corruption of religious ritual of the previous two plays.\textsuperscript{195} While Peradotto is correct in arguing that the torches of the \textit{Eumenides} link back to the beacon fires of the \textit{Agamemnon}, his reading overemphasizes the firm establishment of harmony and resolution. Instead, I argue that the final image of the Furies being led off stage in a torch light procession is one that is meant to deliberately invoke the beacon fires to serve as a cautionary warning that the peaceful resolution of the \textit{Eumenides} might only be a temporary cease to violent contestation and strife. While many scholars choose to see the final image as celebrating “the torches of our triumph,”\textsuperscript{196} which reverse the light to dark imagery and returns the light to symbolize peace, harmony and stability, I argue that the torch light is meant to remind us of Clytemnestra’s beacon fires and the murder of Agamemnon in a way which disturbs the stability of the conclusion of the \textit{Eumenides}. In this way, the torch light of the final scene becomes an ambiguous symbol that celebrates the avoidance of violent contestation, but that simultaneously retains its potential to usher in danger, violence, murderous strife, and grief. The Furies have been subdued, but their threat to destroy the \textit{polis} in an eruption of agonism remains. The light of the final scene, therefore, indicates a temporary and fragile reprieve from the violence of the trilogy. The ending serves as a cautionary warning that destabilizes and undercuts the celebration of harmony and peace in the final scene. It indicates that the perceived safety of the light chasing away the darkness can be deceptive. Violent agonism and strife do not occur only in the dark, when the light has gone out.


For many scholars, the torch-bright procession and joyous celebratory song make good on the promise of the play’s title; Eumenides literally translates as “kindly ones.” Gagarin clearly sees the final message of the play as being one of peace and harmony in which both the Furies and the “bitter internal feuds of the past,” are transformed “into the fertile harmony of the future.”

However, the title of the play misleads many scholars into assuming that the Furies are transformed and renamed as the Eumenides. That the Furies undergo a metamorphosis from anger to kindness is simply not the case; nowhere in the play do we see the Furies referred to as Eumenides. In fact, the play that we know as the Eumenides was not named so by its playwright. The Furies are not transformed, and do not lose their capacities for anger and wrath; they merely decide to put aside their immediate anger with Athens over their defeat when faced with a coercively persuasive force more powerful than themselves. Aeschylus uses the conclusion of the Eumenides not to celebrate a definitive victory that will stand for all time, but rather to give voice to a fragile hope that the violence of agonistic strife can be controlled and contained by the institutions of the polis. The conclusion of the play does not remove violence from the polis, but rather attempts to yoke fear to justice and

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199 *Eumenides* as the title of Aeschylus’ play only appears in the supporting materials of the MSS, in the introductory synopsis, the list of dramatis personae, and one scholium. Sommerstein and Brown both conclude that the annotator in each case has erred in the title of the play. One possible explanation is that the Furies were referred to as Eumenides as a euphemism intended to assuage the anger of the wrathful goddesses. Sommerstein, however, argues that if the Furies were renamed at the end of the Eumenides their new name would have been Semnai and not Eumenides. see A. L. Brown, "Eumenides in Greek Tragedy," *The Classical Quarterly* 34, no. 2 (1984). p. 267-76, and Sommerstein, ed., *Aeschylus: Eumenides*. p.12
therefore minimize the circumstances in which violence is required. At the same time, Aeschylus presents a narrative of struggle and contestation that questions ideas of civilization, progress, victory, and defeat. By the end of the trilogy, confronted by the torch-lit fearsome faces of the Furies newly enrobed in garments reminiscent of dried blood, one wonders if it is even possible to fully escape the agonistic cycle of contestation and violent reprisal. In Fagles words, “its final synthesis is a spur to further struggle.” This is no bold paean to victory, but rather a warning filled with anxiety against the unexpected costs and dangers of victory.

The contentious resolution that Aeschylus attempts to the agonistic contests posed by Clytemnestra and the Furies requires that women be removed from the *agon*. The result is that the democratic *polis* shuts down one sphere of agonistic action, or more accurately dominates one actor so fully that they are denied the capacity to act agonistically; the *polis* subordinates women and closes all roads leading to agonistic action. Crucially, this allows for agonistic relations between male citizens to continue unhindered in a manner that does not threaten the political order of Athens. As such, the *polis* can be seen as limiting the *agon* precisely in order to preserve the *agon* of citizen males which it prefers. Agonisitic action between included participants, such as the male citizens of Athens, is generally peaceful. However, when agonistic contests become battles for inclusion or power by the excluded, they demonstrate a much greater propensity to spiral into violence. This is clearly the case in the *Oresteia* when it is women who seek to enjoy the benefits of masculine inclusion such as citizenship, rights,

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200 Fagles, "A Reading of 'the Oresteia': The Serpent and the Eagle." p. 92.
political speech, honor, and glory. The Furies, furthermore, attempt to defend the rights, powers, and honors that they have, chief among them mother-rights, mourning, and blood vengeance, and it takes the strong threat of overwhelming violence to strip them of these enjoyments. Thus, at the end of the *Oresteia* “justice as the stronger” prevails, and the *agon* in which men and women contest their identities continues to be democratic in the worst possible way, where one group by superior strength dominates and towers over all the rest.

Contemporary agonistic theory assumes that agonistic contestation aims to include rather than exclude. But agonistic action is as much if not more about the ability to command and dominate as a reading of the *Oresteia* demonstrates. Persuasion itself is directly implicated in acts of coercion which strive to command and exclude particular constituencies. As the agonistic contests between Clytemnestra and Agamemnon, and the Furies and Athena show, agonistic action is premised on the ability to dominate and command one’s opponent. Peaceful and respectful persuasion plays a significant role, but only in bringing about subordination. What contemporary agonistic theory forgets is that in contests there are both winners and losers. The *agon* has the potential to compel these losers by force, or by the threat of force, to accept the terms of their defeat as dictated by the victor of the contest. The challenge of agonistic theory is not in embracing the disruption of politics that agonistic action necessitates, but rather in how politics ought to deal with incommensurable identities, and the threat of aggression and violence which underlies agonism. It is not necessarily the case that agonistic politics will promote respect, freedom, plurality, and community, as contemporary agonistic theory holds. The
agon can also displace politics and justify exclusion instead of inclusion by allowing only certain kinds of contests, and in insisting through the threat of coercion or the realization of violence that the losers of agonistic contests must accept the terms of their defeat.
Conclusion:

The Gorgon’s Gaze: Athena’s Aegis, the Furies, and Harmony

When Athena first takes the stage in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides*, she is the picture of terrifying divinity. Clothed in full war-gear, carrying a spear and bearing the aegis,¹ Athena’s appearance alone is enough to inspire awe and terror in all who gaze upon her. This is exactly the point. The most fearsome element of Athena’s dress is neither the armor that covers her, nor the spear she carries; it is the aegis that she wears about her shoulders. Aeschylus does not describe in any depth the artistic details of Athena’s costume, but the aegis worn about her shoulders would have been immediately recognized as a symbol of fear, strength, and power, as easily as the spear she holds in her hands. In Greek art, Athena’s aegis is typically represented as a scaly garment of differing lengths worn either around the shoulders or hung over the left arm, and fringed with tassels or snakes.² Two elements of Athena’s aegis are fairly standard in artistic representations: the fringe of snakes and the gorgoneion, the severed head of Medusa. By

¹ Aeschylus, *Eumenides*. 1. 403-4. All translations of the *Eumenides* and the *Iliad* are by Richmond Lattimore unless otherwise noted.
² It is also likely that the aegis Athena wears in the *Eumenides* is of longer length as the phrase, κόλπον αἰγίδος (Eu. l. 404) suggests that the garment is loose and hanging down to conceal the belt at her waist. Sommerstein, ed., *Aeschylus: Eumenides*. p. 154. That said, in other works it is very unclear exactly what the aegis looks like as there is no firm tradition. Frequently, the aegis is described as being a small shield, goatskin shield, or a cloak. In Homer, for example, it is not always clear if the aegis is intended as a garment or a shield. "Aegis," in *Brill’s New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World*, ed. Christine F Salazar, Hubert Cancik, Helmut Schneider, David E. Orton, (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2002-[2010]).
costuming Athena in this way Aeschylus not only clothes Athena in the traditional garments of the warrior goddess, but also draws connections to the gorgon imagery that occurs throughout the trilogy. In this way, Aeschylus uses Athena’s aegis to transform the gorgon imagery of the trilogy from fear-inducing terror and destruction, to one of protection and harmony. Athena’s aegis is much more than an overt symbol of her authority and power; its presence also foreshadows Athena’s victory over the Furies and speaks powerfully for the potential to reclaim a conditional and fragile harmony out of the jaws of ever-present contestation, strife, and violence. The aegis is much more than a mere article of clothing or piece of war-gear. The aegis symbolizes Athena’s potential to temporarily resolve the conflicts of the Oresteia by restoring a form of harmony that seeks not to remove fear and strife, but that is rather formed in and by the fear and strife of active contestation and dissent. This vision of harmony is much more in line with the thought of Heraclitus than it is with contemporary agonistic political theory. Contemporary theorists of agonism see harmony as a homogenizing desire to violently erase difference and manufacture consent. As such, these theorists argue that harmony is incompatible with a commitment to agonistic politics. However, understanding the ending of the Oresteia in terms of a re-imagined Heraclitean harmony shows that harmony is not only compatible with agonism, but also that harmony can only exist in and through an agonistic war of differences.
In Greek epic and poetry Athena is frequently described as the “aegis-bearing child of Zeus.” When Athena wears the aegis, it utterly protects her, making the goddess invulnerable to physical harm. The protective powers of the aegis are so strong that they even protect Athena from Ares’ fearsome spear and formidable anger. The aegis “knows neither age nor death.” But the aegis is much more than the ultimate protective armor. The appearance of the aegis in the battles of the Iliad mark it as the most devastating, fearful, and powerful weapon. No spear, arrow, or chariot is as mighty. Not even the shield of Achilles can match its capacity to induce fear and turn the tide of war.

Book 5 of the Iliad contains a crucial arming scene in which Athena dons the aegis and equips herself for battle:

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4 Homer, Iliad. l. 446-454 Book 21 l. 400-1 states that the “ghastly aegis… which gives way not even before the bolt of Zeus’ lightning.” The aegis is also loaned to mortal heroes in the Iliad to utterly protect its wearer from harm. For example, the aegis is used to drape Hector’s body and protect it from harm when Achilles drags the corpse behind his chariot and subjects the body to numerous indignities. Homer, Iliad. Book 24 l. 18-21.

5 Ares “stabbed against the ghastly aegis with fluttering straps, which gives way not even before the bolt of Zeus’ lightning. There blood-dripping Ares made his stab with the long spear, but Athena giving back caught up in her heavy hand a stone that lay in the plain, black and rugged and huge, one which men of a former time had set there as boundary mark of the cornfield. With this she hit furious Ares in the neck, and unstrung him. He spread over seven acres in his fall, and his hair dragged in the dust, and his armor clashed. But Pallas Athena laughing stood above him and spoke to him in the winged words of triumph: ‘You child; you did not think even this time how much stronger I can claim I am than you, when you match your fury against me.’” Homer, Iliad.

Athena, daughter of Zeus who bears the aegis, let fall on her father’s floor her soft robe, richly embroidered, that she herself had made and her hands had fashioned, and put on the tunic of Zeus, the cloud-gatherer, and arrayed herself in armor for tearful war. Around her shoulders she flung the tasseled aegis, fraught with terror, all around which Rout is set as a crown, and on it is Strife, on it Valor, and on it Assault, that makes the blood run cold, and on it is the Gorgon head of the terrible monster, terrible and awful, a portent of Zeus who bears the aegis. And on her head she set the helmet with two ridges and with bosses four, made of gold, and fitted with the foot soldiers of a hundred cities. Then she stepped on to the fiery chariot and grasped her spear, heavy and huge and strong, with which she vanquishes the ranks of men, those with whom she is angry, she, the daughter of the mighty sire.  

This arming scene marks a decisive transformation of Athena from a feminine, domestic, and peaceful goddess who weaves her own robes, into a fearsome masculine warrior goddess ready to vanquish all who oppose her. The gesture of shedding her robe as it sensuously slips to the floor is one seemingly more appropriate for Aphrodite than for the virgin warrior Athena, and marks the female form that Athena wears under her war-gear. This is not Athena the teacher of the domestic art of weaving, this is Athena the fearsome warrior without parallel. Athena’s physical appearance here is likely identical to her appearance in the Eumenides. In each scene the goddess arrives armed to the teeth, wearing the aegis, gripping a great spear, riding in a chariot, and ready to punish all who evoke her displeasure. In this way, Athena’s armed entrance with aegis and chariot not only harkens back to Agamemnon’s chariot entrance in the first play, but also to Athena’s arming scene and decisive intervention in the Iliad. Athena not only participates

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7 Ibid. Book 5 l. 733-47. (Murray)
8 I have discussed in greater detail the probability that in the Eumenides Athena arrives in a chariot in Chapter 4. For more information on this debate see: Himmelhoch, "Athena's Entrance at Eumenides 405 and Hippotrophic Imagery in Aeschylus's Oresteia."
9 Aeschylus, Agamemnon. l. 783.
in the *agon* of battle; her interventions often prove to be the decisive moments of contestation. This is exactly the role that Athena as convener and presiding official of Orestes’ trial, and protector of Athens fulfils in the *Eumenides* when she secures a position for the Furies within Athens’ civic and judicial order.

In the arming scene the aegis is clearly described as having the gorgoneion, the severed head of Medusa, at its centre. As Belfiore argues, “in Greek thought, the Gorgon is associated with fear and strife.”\(^{10}\) Three times the components that comprise the aegis are described as *deinos*, (δεινός) terrifying and causing awe, in their effect. The aegis itself is “fraught with terror,” and twice the head of the gorgon is described as terrifying to behold. *Deinos*, however, means much more than an awe-inspiring terror. It is not just the capacity for the mere sight of the gorgon-adorned aegis to cause fear and terror that *deinos* describes. In addition to meaning terrible, fearful, and awful, *deinos* also carries the senses of wondrous, awesome, and marvelous. Furthermore, *deinos* implies force, might, and power, whether for good or ill. As Feldman argues, “from this passage we grasp the quintessential nature, if not the specific features, of this bodiless head: fearful and aggressive, its immediate peers Terror, Hatred, Battle-Strength, Onslaught, and the rest. By his choice of adjectives Homer thrusts at his readers the nature of that Terror.”\(^{11}\) The gorgon of the aegis is both a force of terrible fear, and powerful protection. From the awe-inspiring fear of the gorgon’s stony gaze, comes the power to ultimately protect its wearer from harm, and strike crippling fear into one’s enemies. The combination of

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protection and terror induced by the gorgon’s gaze is what makes the aegis a wondrous marvel of violence to behold.

The aegis is worn by Athena upon the battlefield of Troy to devastating and awe-inspiring effect:

“With it she sped dazzling through the army of the Achaeans, urging them on; and in the heart of each man she roused strength to war and to fight without ceasing. And to them at once war became sweeter than to return in their hollow ships to their dear native land.”

On the battlefield the aegis’ presence has both protective and inspirational effects. In addition to utterly protecting Athena from harm, the aegis inspires morale and protects the army from harm by its enemies. From its presence, the Achaean army draws both strength and inspiration, enabling them to fight with ceaseless energy and vigor when before they had been exhausted and near defeat. When deployed on the battlefield, the aegis has a double effect. In addition to protection and inspiration, it also strikes fear into the opposing army who witness its devastating splendor. After the death of Patroclus, Athena clothes Achilles in the aegis and crowns him with a cloud of fire. The figure that the semi-divine Achilles cuts wearing the aegis, cloaked in grief, fire, and anger, is truly terrifying. Dressed in the aegis, Achilles lets forth three mighty war cries. When the Trojans see Achilles wearing the aegis ringed with fire and hear his cries, “the heart was shaken in all, and the very floating-maned horses turned their chariots about, since their

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13 In addition to its use by Athena, the aegis is also loaned to Apollo by Zeus to use on the battlefield. In Book 15 Apollo uses the fear-inducing effects of the aegis to wreak havoc and panic amongst the Achaeans. By shaking the aegis, Apollo secures a victory for Hector and the Trojans, and reduces their enemies to fleeing like terrified sheep without a shepherd. Homer, *Iliad*. book 15 l. 318-27.
hearts saw the coming afflictions.”\textsuperscript{15} Fear spreads through the Trojan forces like a storm of contagion. It is the terror induced by the aegis which enables the recovery of Patroclus’ corpse from the battlefield as the entire Trojan army flees in fear and terror from the wrath of Achilles amplified by the aegis.\textsuperscript{16} When the aegis is used against its foes, it inspires utter fear and terror in all who see it, man and beast alike. Under the protection of the gorgon its wearer is invincible; under the gaze of the gorgon, panic and fear hold sway.

The gaze of the gorgon is the very image of horror in the Greek imagination. A mere glance into the gorgon’s eyes petrifies.\textsuperscript{17} In addition to Athena’s aegis, the paralyzing stare of the gorgon was incorporated into numerous shield designs in art and epic poetry.\textsuperscript{18} For example, Agamemnon’s shield in the \textit{Iliad} incorporates both the “blank-eyed face of the Gorgon,” and a coiled “cobalt snake.”\textsuperscript{19} Hesiod places upon the shield of Herakles the arresting image of Perseus fleeing from the sisters of Medusa where “close at his heels the unspeakable Gorgons charged, glutlusty, straining to snatch him.”\textsuperscript{20} As Howe argues, “when used on such defensive armor the gorgoneion was

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid. Book 18 l. 222-4.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid. Book 18 l. 231-8.
\textsuperscript{17} In the \textit{Iliad} Hector is described as “wearing the stark eyes of a Gorgon,” to convey the terrible quality of his petrifying gaze upon his enemies on the battlefield. Ibid. Book 8 l. 348.
\textsuperscript{19} Homer, \textit{Iliad}. Book 11 l. 36, 39.
\textsuperscript{20} Hesiod, \textit{Shield} l. 228-230.
plainly meant as apotropaism, a horror to avert horror.”\textsuperscript{21} In this way, the image of the gorgon on protective shields transforms the fear of the gorgon’s stare into a protective force for the bearer.

Of all of these shields, Athena’s aegis remains the most powerful and terrifying of all. Only Athena’s aegis can claim to have incorporated the head of Medusa herself. According to myth, Athena as patroness aided Perseus in his quest to free his mother from Polydectes, the King of Seriphos. With Athena’s aid, Perseus “slew the Gorgon, and, bearing her head adorned with locks of serpents, came to the islanders, bringing them stony death.”\textsuperscript{22} After Perseus had won Andromeda and freed his mother, he put down the gorgon’s head as a weapon, and gave it to Athena as a gift.\textsuperscript{23} However, there is much more to this story than Perseus’ triumph. In \textit{Pythian 12} Pindar tells the tale not only of Perseus’ victory over Medusa, but also of the grief inducing effects of Perseus’ actions for Medusa’s surviving gorgon sisters. Perseus’ name literally means the slayer or destroyer from the Greek \textit{perthein} (\textit{πέρθειν}). He is the destroyer of cities when he brings the head of Medusa to the island of Seriphos and destroys the city. He is the slayer when he kills Medusa and brings grief to her surviving immortal sisters, Euryale and Sthenno.

\textsuperscript{23} There are two other versions of this myth. In one, it is said that Athena’s father was not Zeus but a goatish giant named Pallas. Pallas offended Athena who she then killed, adding his name to her own and flaying his flesh into the aegis. In the second version it is said that the aegis is actually constructed by Athena herself out of the flayed flesh of the slain Medusa. Robert Graves, \textit{The Greek Myths} 2vols., vol. 1 (London: The Folio Society, 1960, 1996). p. 51, 126. However, the story of Athena fastening the head of the gorgon to her aegis after receiving it from Perseus is much more common in Greek art.
It is the grief brought by Perseus’ actions that *Pythian 12* dwells upon. Furthermore, it is not only the aegis which is created out of the death of Medusa, but also the art of the aulos, the double flute, which Athena invents from the strife of victory and defeat.

*Pythian 12* is the only received ode by Pindar to commemorate a musical victory. Composed in 490 BCE and early in Pindar’s career, the ode praises Midas of Akragas for his victory in the *auletikē*, or aulos competition. Pindar tells us that the art of the aulos was invented by Athena:

> by weaving into music the fierce Gorgons’ deathly dirge that she heard pouring forth from under the unapproachable snaky heads of the maidens in their grievous toil, when Perseus cried out in triumph as he carried the third of the sisters, bringing doom to wave-washed Seriphos and its people.  

Despite being monstrous females, the bereaved gorgons come across as sympathetic. Their grief for their sister’s sudden and violent death is depicted in a humanizing fashion that lends their pain both sympathy and dignity. Furthermore, the poem sees both the wailing of the gorgons’ dirge and Perseus’ cry of triumph as occurring at the same time and contributing to the otherworldly sounds of the moment. As Clay argues, “Athena does not simply weave a threnos, but she interweaves (διαπλέξαις) two very different sounds: the Gorgons' mournful song of loss and Perseus' triumphal shout of victory.”

The moment of victory depicted here contains both the joy of the victor and the sorrow of the defeated as a single unity.

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Through the aulos, Athena attempts to craft a harmony between victory and defeat. From this vocal atmosphere of joy and despair, triumph and defeat, Athena:

“composed a melody with every sound for pipes, so that she might imitate with instruments the echoing wail that was forced from the gnashing jaws of Euryale. The goddess invented it, but invented it for mortals to have, and she called it the tune of the many heads, famous reminder of contests where people flock.”

There could be no more perfect instrument to capture this many-headed tune than the aulos. The essence of the aulos is the double nature of its sound. The aulos consists of two pipes and two reed mouthpieces that are played simultaneously. The instrument could be played in an antiphonal manner, with one pipe supplying a melody and the other an accompaniment such as a drone. As an instrument it was known in antiquity for its vast emotive range and versatility. During the 5th century, “the aulos became the preferred musical instrument, and in Attic drama almost the only instrument.”

Athena rescues Perseus and secures his victory at the same time that the gorgons begin their mourning wails. As Clay argues, “the duality of the aulos arises from its double origin: victory turns out to be the complement of defeat, loss, of success.”

Athena weaves together two contradictory sounds to create the doubling music of the aulos. The aulos captures the contrast of joy and sorrow while at the same time its birth song is a movement from death to creation. In Belfiore’s words, “neither victory nor music

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changes the essential nature of painful toil, but each represents its pleasant and beneficial aspects.”\textsuperscript{29} The aulos is the instrument of the \textit{agon}, in that it perfectly captures the great risk of contestation that is always already bound up in the pleasures of both joyous triumph and bitter defeat.

From the death of Medusa, Athena fashions not only the aegis, but also the music of the aulos. Perhaps the most fearful aspect of the gorgon is the paralyzing fear one experiences when gazing upon the fearsome face. The gorgon is above all an embodiment of fear, capable of destroying the wits and agency of an individual. In \textit{Pythian 12}, “instead of weaving the gorgoneion into her garment, Athena weaves the wail of the Gorgon into \textit{aulos} music.”\textsuperscript{30} Both the aegis and the aulos are closely tied together by their joint emphasis on the transformation of the destructive powers of the gorgon into the apotropaic effects of fear. Athena uses both the aegis and the aulos to transform petrifying fear into a broadly social benefit that is attentive to both the pain and pleasure of contestation. Through both the aulos and the aegis, Athena transforms the gorgon into an awe-inspiring symbol of victory and protection.

The idea of a many-headed tune that combines the rapture of the victor with the despair of the vanquished returns us once more to the \textit{Oresteia}. In their \textit{desmios humnos},\textsuperscript{31} (\textit{ὕµνος δέσµιος}) binding song, the Furies collectively sing a song of many heads that they describe as being sung in “stringless melody.”\textsuperscript{32} In its most literal sense, stringless melody is a translation of \textit{aphormiktos}, (\textit{ἀφόρµικτος}) which means that the

\textsuperscript{29} Belfiore, \textit{Tragic Pleasures: Aristotle on Plot and Emotion}. p. 16.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Aeschylus, \textit{Eumenides}. l. 306.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid. l. 333, 346.
Furies sing without the musical accompaniment of a lyre. In this sense, the Furies’ binding song can be likened to the graveside funeral songs sung by women, which were also sung without musical accompaniment. Singing without a lyre also implies that the song is sorrowful, as lyre music was associated with joyful occasions. Earlier in the trilogy, the song of the Furies is explicitly compared to the threnody of funeral dirges sung by women. In the *Agamemnon* the chorus sing of the “unlyric threnody of the Fury.” In its more metaphorical sense, however, *aphormiktos* here conveys a sense of dissonance, disharmony, and a terrifying cacophony of voices. Fagles translates the same passage as “ripping across the lyre.” In this translation, the binding song of the Furies is filled with such anger, hate, and strife that it literally rips apart the strings of the lyre and destroys the joyful and harmonious sound of the instrument and its song. The choir of Furies truly sings a stringless melody, a tuneless song, that “breaks harsh with menace.”

Indeed, the binding song of the Furies is one that intentionally drips with menacing promise. The Furies themselves say that their song is *stugeros*, (στυγερός); an abominted, horrifying song brimming with hatred and bearing malice towards their intended victim, Orestes. The purpose of their song is to bind Orestes with their power to

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33 the Greek word here is ἀφόρµικτος which means literally “without the lyre”
38 Ibid. l. 308.
terrify. It is a song intended to drive Orestes mad,\(^39\) and utterly destroy him.\(^40\) In their wailing song of terror, the Furies are very much like gorgons. Twice in the trilogy the Furies are explicitly described as gorgons. When Orestes first sees the Furies he frantically cries, “they come like gorgons.. and they are wreathed in a tangle of snakes.”\(^41\)

At the start of the *Eumenides*, the Pythia, the first person to confirm that the Furies are real and not merely the imagined tormentors of Orestes’ troubled mind, calls the Furies gorgon-like.\(^42\) The Furies also share the gorgon’s most fearsome feature: terrifying eyes that one dare not look upon.\(^43\) Even though the Furies cannot literally petrify with a glance, their foul appearance and their hateful binding song are capable of paralyzing and rendering their victims immobile with fear and horror. So closely do the Furies resemble gorgons in their physical appearance and capacity to terrify, that Belfiore argues that “the evidence indicates that the Erinyes [Furies] looked much like Gorgons, had the emotional effects that Gorgons did, and might well have been represented as such on stage.”\(^44\)

When Athena arrives on stage wearing the aegis she is responding directly to Orestes’ peril and plea for aide against the Furies. This serves to deepen the gorgon imagery even further. In the *Choephoroi* Orestes is compared by the Chorus to Perseus. The chorus urge Orestes to, “raise high within your body the heart of Perseus,”\(^45\) and go

\(^{39}\) Ibid. l. 329-32.
\(^{40}\) Ibid. l. 358-9.
\(^{41}\) Aeschylus, *Choephoroi*. l. 1048-50.
\(^{42}\) Aeschylus, *Eumenides*. l. 48.
\(^{43}\) “From their eyes drip foul ooze.” Ibid. l. 54.
\(^{45}\) Aeschylus, *Choephoroi*. l. 831-2.
through with the murder of Clytemnestra, the gorgon-like monstrous female. These words also foreshadow Athena’s role as Orestes’ patron and protector, much as she was to Perseus. When Athena takes the stage displaying the gorgoneion of her aegis, “the audience would hereby see the opposition between Athena and the Furies as one between Gorgon and Gorgon-slayer or tamer, between Snake and Snake-tamer, with the victory of Athena foreshadowed by her control over the creatures of her aegis.”46 Orestes slew the gorgon Clytemnestra, and now Athena as his patron will save him from the gorgon-like agents of female-mourning the Furies. “If Orestes is a Perseus figure in the Libation Bearers, Athena in the Eumenides plays a role similar to the one she has in the Perseus myth: she helps a mortal hero and uses for constructive purposes a power that can also be destructive.”47

The gorgoneion of the aegis also foreshadows the type of victory that Athena will secure over the Furies. As she did by fastening the head of Medusa to her aegis, Athena will transform the fearsome faces of the Furies into apotropaic forces. With Athena’s intervention the Furies will become honored goddesses incorporated into the civic order of Athens as beneficent forces. Athena will also transform the menacing promises of the Furies’ dirge-like binding song into protective hymns of praise and prosperity for Athens, much like she did in transforming the mourning wails of the gorgons into the music of the aulos. Like the severed head of the gorgon and the music of the aulos, the Furies retain their ability to create fear but channel this power towards averting harm and protecting a

particular community from harm. The Furies’ binding song, under the influence of Athena’s intervention, is transformed from a song of pain, mourning, and fear, into a hymn of praise for Athens. The Furies are incorporated into the social fabric of Athens as “guarantors of civic harmony.” As with the severed head of the gorgon, the Furies’ powers become redirected towards the end of taming rather than promoting fear.

The picture of harmony presented at the close of the Oresteia is very different from contemporary understandings of harmony. Contemporary agonistic theory with its emphasis on pervasive conflict and strife, “is anxious about too much emphasis on ‘harmony’ within political theory and society.” For these theorists the drive towards harmony indicates a dangerous tendency to impose unity and closure while disavowing the violence done to diversity when communal harmony is taken as a society’s goal. In this sense, harmony is understood by contemporary agonistic theorists as incommensurable with the conflict of opinions and identities that is prized by their commitment to diversity and difference; harmony is not consonant with a commitment to ambiguity and contestation. For Connolly, “the standards of unity and harmony they presuppose seem closer to death than to life.” For contemporary agonistic theory, harmony marks a stultifying project of homogenization that is hostile to the spirit of energetic contestation and the play of identities.

However, the vision of a harmonious society established at the conclusion of the Oresteia is not incompatible with agonism. The multiplicity of dissonant voices that the

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49 Johnson, Theology, Political Theory, and Pluralism. p. 84.
50 Connolly, Identity\Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradoxes. p. 90.
51 Ibid. p. 172.
Furies sing with in their stringless melody does not become a single one-note harmony after they are incorporated into the Athenian order. The Furies retain both their powers for fear and terror and their capacity to harm those who displease them. For the Greeks, harmony means neither all voices singing the same note in perfect unison, nor the establishment of perfect agreement and concord. The Greek word for harmony, *harmonia* (ἁρμονία) has as its first meaning to fit together, join or fasten. In this way, harmony is understood as a fastening together of disparate elements to make a whole.

For Heraclitus, this joining together does not erase strife between the component elements; harmony itself is a product of the tension of continual strife and opposition. In Fragment 51 Heraclitus writes:

Fr. 51. They do not apprehend how being at variance it agrees with itself [lit. how being brought apart it is brought together with itself]: there is a back-stretched connexion, as in the bow and the lyre.

Both the bow and the lyre function according to the same principle of a string held in a position of tension. Harmony is created out of the strife of actions and reactions that stand in opposition, here being the act of tuning the lyre or drawing back a bow string. The harmony of the bow and the lyre comes about through a straining tension that threatens to snap the strings and destroy the unity of both weapon and instrument. Harmony is the exact point of tension between opposing elements that threaten to snap the strings of the

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bow and lyre. In other words, harmony not only depends upon a state of strife, but also utterly depends upon the maintenance of opposition. Without tension, harmony cannot be achieved.

Harmony, for Heraclitus, can only be understood in terms of strife. Fragments 80 and 46 claim that even the violence of war has a part to play in maintaining the harmonious order of the cosmos.

Fr. 80. It is necessary to know that war is common and right is strife and that all things happen by strife and necessity.  

Fr. 46. Opposites are brought together, and out of extreme differences comes the most beautiful harmony, and all things happen by strife. 

The unity of opposites embodied in Heraclitus’ harmony sees war and peace, conflict and justice, as being all part of the same harmonious order. Indeed, justice is conflict for Heraclitus. It is not merely that all things are in flux, (panta rei πάντα ἰδεῖ or panta chorei, πάντα χωρεῖ) but also that everything is in a permanent state of opposition that results in a war of opposites. Harmony is not a static moment of stability, but rather an instance of ongoing contestation. Indeed, Heraclitus, much like contemporary agonistic theory, would abhor any conception of harmony which saw it as a homogenizing and stable end point where all stood in agreement. In Heraclitus’ thought, “if strife…were to cease, then the victor in every contest of extremes would establish a permanent domination, and the world as such would be destroyed.” Harmony does not seek to end

disagreement, strife, or war. An end to strife would end the very order that the cosmos depends upon. Without strife, even harmony could not exist. War is everywhere. It is only in and through the war of opposites that the most beautiful of all harmonies can exist.

When seen as a state of tension between opposing forces, harmony becomes a way of managing and restraining violence rather than an attempt to eradicate or erase it. This is the vision of harmony promoted by both Athena’s aegis and the incorporation of the Furies into the civic order of Athens. Neither the powers of the gorgon nor the Furies are destroyed. Within the unity of the aegis the gorgon retains its powers of fear and terror just as the Furies retain their capacity to cause harm and bring evil to those who earn their anger. After the Furies have accepted a place within the order of Athens, Athena says, “in the terror upon the faces of these I see great good for our citizens.”

What does shift, however, is how these destructive and fearsome powers are deployed. By adhering to a vision of harmony in line with Heraclitus, the *Oresteia* transforms the opposition of the Furies into a tenuous and fraught unity. This fragile harmony is itself the product of tension between irreconcilable opposites: male v. female, young gods v. elder gods, human v. divine, and justice v. revenge to name only a few of the constitutive struggles of the trilogy. The powers of the Furies are then directed towards the positive end of protecting the prosperity of Athens.

Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* can be seen as engaged in building a “stringless melody” rather than a one-note homogenous harmony. The harmony of the *Oresteia* is not a

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resolution of conflict, but rather an imperfect attempt to channel strife and contestation by making a permanent place for conflict within the civic order of Athens. Violence has not been eradicated, but it has been imperfectly channeled and regulated. Justice, force, and conflict have been shown to be dependent upon one another, in that justice becomes a way of trying to regulate the strife of contestation. Violence and war also pointedly remain. The justice of the law courts retains the right to violently punish offenders. The harmonious city is not the same as the peaceful city; while Athens is spared civil war, the city directs its violence outwards to war with external enemies. In this way, the conclusion of the *Oresteia* does not eliminate conflict, but rather seeks to regulate contestation in a way which is constantly open to renegotiation. Contemporary agonistic theory cannot afford to forget that life in the *polis* is necessarily a condition of violent strife. Violence always underlies the *agon* of politics, threatening to undermine attempts to channel and regulate it. In embracing the full capacity of the *agon* for joy and suffering, victory and defeat, violence and harmony, we can only act as the chorus in the *Agamemnon*, singing “sorrow, sorrow: but good win out in the end.”

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58 During the persuasion of the Furies, Athena says, “only in this place that I haunt do not inflict your bloody stimulus to twist the inward hearts of young men, raging in a fury not of wine, nor, as if plucking the heart from fighting cocks, engraft among my citizens that spirit of war that turns their battle fury inward on themselves. No, let our wars range outward hard against the man who has fallen horribly in love with high renown. No true fighter I call the bird that fights at home.” Ibid. l. 858-866. see also l. 976-8.

59 Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*. l. 121.
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