

**Giving the Furies a Home:
Vengeance, Civic Justice, and Institutional
Transformation in Aeschylus's *Oresteia***

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Abstract The *Oresteia* is often described as a drama of juridical progress in which civic law supersedes an older regime of blood vengeance. That account identifies a real movement in the trilogy, but it mistakes transformation for replacement. From the sacrifice of Iphigenia to the pursuit of Orestes, Aeschylus presents vengeance as an internally coherent yet self-reproducing economy: every act that discharges one obligation generates another claim. The court founded by Athena interrupts this sequence by transferring judgment from the injured household to a durable public institution. The trial, however, does not itself secure reconciliation. Orestes's acquittal rests upon a tied vote and is explicitly supported by Apollo's denial of maternal parenthood and Athena's allegiance to the male, exposing the gendered cost of the new order. The decisive settlement occurs only afterward, when Athena persuades the Erinyes to accept a cultic and civic home in Athens. Their punitive force is neither refuted nor eliminated; it is reassigned to the protection of public order, fertility, and restraint. Yet this incorporation remains asymmetrical, backed by divine power and accomplished within a political structure that subordinates the maternal claim. The trilogy's achievement is thus neither the triumph of reason over violence nor the uncomplicated birth of democratic justice. It is the institutional conversion of retaliatory force into civic authority—an ethically productive, politically durable, and permanently compromised settlement.

Keywords: Aeschylus; *Oresteia*; Erinyes; Eumenides; vengeance; Areopagus; civic justice; persuasion; gender; Greek tragedy

1. Introduction: From Retaliation to Institution

The *Oresteia* lends itself almost irresistibly to a narrative of progress. In *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*, the house of Atreus answers blood with blood: Agamemnon sacrifices Iphigenia, Clytemnestra kills Agamemnon, and Orestes kills Clytemnestra. In *Eumenides*, Athena establishes a homicide court, the jurors acquit Orestes, and the Erinyes—agents of intrafamilial vengeance—assume a new place within the civic order. Summarized in this way, the trilogy appears to lead from kinship to citizenship, passion to deliberation, and archaic retribution to rational law. The sequence is not imaginary. Yet the familiar formulation becomes misleading when it turns a difficult accommodation into a clean supersession. Aeschylus does not dramatize the disappearance of the old moral order. He dramatizes the conditions under which its indispensable force can be preserved without allowing it to perpetuate private bloodshed.

The structure of *Eumenides* makes this distinction unavoidable. Orestes is acquitted at line 752, but the play continues for nearly three hundred lines. The verdict restores him to Argos and produces a political alliance between Argos and Athens; it does not reconcile the defeated prosecutors to the city that has judged against them. On the contrary, the Erinyes immediately threaten Attica with sterility and civil devastation (*Eum.* 778–87, 808–17). If the trilogy's purpose were exhausted by the creation of a court or the exoneration of its defendant, this prolonged aftermath would be dramatically superfluous. It is instead the culmination of Aeschylus's political thought. The court can suspend retaliation, but only the subsequent negotiation can convert those who embody retaliation from external enemies into internal guardians.

E. R. Dodds's insistence that the moral and political dimensions of the trilogy cannot be separated remains essential here. The final settlement does not append a civic allegory to a completed family tragedy; it answers, at the level of the polis, the moral contradiction generated within the house (Dodds 1960, 19–20). C. W. Macleod similarly argues that the foundation of the homicide court and the cult of the august goddesses properly resolve the sufferings of the Atreidae because the city's institutions assume responsibility for conflicts the family cannot settle (Macleod 1982, 124–25). Yet “resolution” cannot mean that every prior claim has been vindicated or that the new order is

morally transparent. Simon Goldhill's attention to the trilogy's unstable language of justice, sexuality, and authority helps explain why no single speaker can monopolize *dike*: the word changes its practical force as it passes from chorus to ruler, victim to avenger, and household to court (Goldhill 1984). The ending creates a binding order from this semantic and ethical contest; it does not discover an uncontested definition that had been present all along.

The historical setting sharpens the problem without reducing the play to topical allegory. The trilogy was produced in 458 BCE, only a few years after the measures traditionally associated with Ephialtes in 462/1. Later sources represent those measures as curtailing the Areopagus Council's broader political functions while leaving its homicide jurisdiction intact; the historicity and extent of both the earlier powers and their alleged transfer remain contested (Harris 2019, 392–406). Harris has therefore rightly cautioned against treating the Areopagus as the deposed seat of an undifferentiated aristocratic sovereignty. In later Athenian discourse, its special prestige derives above all from its reputation as a scrupulous homicide court and symbol of lawful judgment (Harris 2019, 389–91, 415–17). Aeschylus, moreover, does not offer constitutional history. Athena's foundation is an aetiological fiction, set in heroic time and designed for a democratic audience. The fiction matters because it imagines civic authority as a response to a problem that neither divine command nor familial duty can resolve from within.

Nor is the institution presented as secular reason cleansing politics of religion, affect, or fear. Athena establishes sworn judges under divine sanction; Apollo testifies as both oracle and advocate; the Erinyes defend fear as a necessary guardian of justice; and the final civic settlement takes cultic form. The new order is public and procedural, but it remains theological and affective. Its novelty lies less in the exclusion of older powers than in the redistribution of their authority. Judgment becomes collective, repeatable, and located outside the injured household. Punitive fear is retained, but it is attached to an institution rather than left to the self-authorizing avenger.

This paper therefore argues that the *Oresteia* does not represent the simple replacement of primitive vengeance by rational law. Rather, Aeschylus imagines civic justice as an act of institutional transformation: Athena preserves the moral force represented by the Erinyes while redirecting it from private blood retaliation toward the maintenance of public order. The trilogy's resolution depends upon persuasion and incorporation rather than abolition, although its new civic settlement remains complicated by the gendered logic of Orestes's acquittal. The first two plays expose the reproductive structure of blood justice; the trial converts an inherited quarrel into a public case but cannot by itself produce moral closure; the final negotiation then gives the Erinyes a place from which their power can sustain, rather than destroy, the community. Froma Zeitlin's influential account of the trilogy's gender politics makes it impossible, however, to celebrate that achievement without asking whose claims the institution privileges and what forms of female authority it contains (Zeitlin 1978, 149–84). The result is an order at once more capacious and more unequal than a simple progress narrative permits.

References to Aeschylus use conventional line numbers and the abbreviations Ag., Lib., and Eum. English renderings are the author's adaptations, informed by the translations of Lattimore (2013) and Fagles (1977).

2. The Inherited Economy of Blood

The violence of the *Oresteia* begins before its first dramatic action. The watchman who opens *Agamemnon* waits for the beacon announcing Troy's fall, but his guarded language already reveals a household in which speech is constrained and fear has become habitual (Ag. 1–39). The victorious king returns not to an intact home but to a structure burdened by crimes that exceed the temporal

limits of the play: the feast of Thyestes, the curse upon the Pelopid line, the sacrifice of Iphigenia, and the destruction of Troy. Aeschylus does not invoke this genealogy merely to supply mythological background. It establishes the temporal form of retaliatory justice. A past injury does not remain past. Because it has not received an acknowledged and authoritative settlement, it persists as an obligation imposed upon the living.

The language of debt, payment, and balance that pervades the trilogy gives this order an austere intelligibility. Blood calls for blood; suffering incurred must be suffering returned; an avenger understands violence as the restoration of an account left open by another. The system is therefore not “primitive” in the sense of being thoughtless. Its actors reason, remember, distinguish relations, invoke gods, and offer arguments about precedence. Its defect lies elsewhere. The victim’s kin are at once plaintiff, judge, and executioner, so the act intended to close an account is necessarily experienced by another party as a new offense. Retaliation can discharge an obligation locally while reproducing the structure globally. Every payment creates another creditor.

The sacrifice at Aulis renders this contradiction with exceptional precision. Agamemnon is not portrayed as choosing gratuitous cruelty. The expedition is immobilized; Calchas identifies the price Artemis requires; and the king finds both available courses polluted. “Which of these is free from evil?” he asks in substance: to abandon the fleet or to kill his child (Ag. 205–17). Yet necessity does not dissolve agency. Once he places himself beneath what the chorus calls the “yoke of necessity,” his mental movement is described not as innocent submission but as a hardening: he comes to desire what must be done and participates in the ritual that silences Iphigenia’s voice (Ag. 218–47). Political and military necessity may explain the act, but it cannot cancel the violated obligation of the father to the daughter or of the household to one of its members.

This is why the chorus’s celebrated account of *pathei mathos*, learning through suffering, should not be converted into an automatic philosophy of progress. Zeus may establish a path by which wisdom comes through pain (Ag. 160–83), but pain does not teach uniformly. It can produce recognition; it can also consolidate grievance. Agamemnon interprets the crisis at Aulis as a demand to continue the expedition. Clytemnestra interprets the sacrifice as a debt only Agamemnon’s blood can pay. The chorus interprets the sequence as evidence of a divine order whose operations it can perceive only incompletely. Suffering becomes knowledge only through an act of interpretation, and the house of Atreus supplies no shared tribunal capable of deciding among rival interpretations. What passes from one generation to the next is thus not guilt as a biological substance but an archive of unresolved claims.

The victory at Troy enlarges rather than cancels this archive. The beacon announces military success, but the chorus’s imagination repeatedly returns to the cost of the expedition: emptied houses, urns containing the ashes of men, resentment against the leaders who spent Greek lives for another man’s wife, and anxiety that excessive glory attracts divine retribution (Ag. 427–74). Troy itself has been made to pay for Paris’s violation of hospitality, yet the Greek punishment exceeds its stated cause. Agamemnon returns as the agent of Zeus’s justice against Troy and as a father who has violated justice within his own household. The same action can bear public honor and private pollution. No abstract distribution of innocence and guilt can separate the two.

Aeschylus makes that instability audible in the competing uses of *dike*. For the chorus, Justice eventually reaches the transgressor; for Clytemnestra, Justice stands beside the avenging mother; for Orestes and Electra, Justice requires the killers of Agamemnon to be killed; for the Erinyes, Justice is inseparable from the blood bond between mother and child; for Apollo, it supports the father, the royal husband, and the command of Zeus. The term is not emptied of meaning by these conflicts.

Rather, each use isolates a genuine relation—guest and host, parent and child, wife and husband, ruler and subject—while subordinating the others. The trilogy’s violence arises because a partial justice presents itself as exhaustive.

The image of blood absorbed by the earth gives material form to the resulting irreversibility. In *The Libation Bearers*, the chorus insists that once blood has fallen to the ground it cannot simply be called back or washed away; the balance of Justice waits for the answering stroke (*Lib.* 55–65). The maxim is both morally compelling and structurally catastrophic. Murder cannot be treated as nothing, but if the only adequate recognition of the dead is another death, remembrance becomes an engine of repetition. The older system possesses memory and sanction but no mechanism of closure. Its strength and its failure are the same: it refuses to forget.

The eventual civic settlement will not ask the community to forget. Athena’s institution succeeds because it preserves the two functions the Erinyes already perform—remembering the violated claim and attaching consequences to transgression—while changing who may authorize those consequences. Before that transfer can occur, however, the first two plays must show that the household’s competing claimants cannot produce a final judgment. Their arguments are not too weak. They are too implicated.

3. Competing Claims of Justice in *Agamemnon* and *The Libation Bearers*

Clytemnestra’s murder of Agamemnon is the first play’s most explicit attempt to present vengeance as completed justice. She does not conceal the deed or seek refuge in a fiction of accident. After trapping Agamemnon in the woven garment and striking him three times, she describes the killing as an achieved work and stands over the bodies as its responsible agent (*Ag.* 1372–98). Her public avowal matters. It converts the palace from the concealed site of murder into a rudimentary court in which she prosecutes the dead man before the Argive elders. When they condemn her, she reopens the case of Iphigenia: these same men, she charges, did not expel Agamemnon when he sacrificed his daughter, yet they now treat the death of the father as uniquely intolerable (*Ag.* 1401–25). Her accusation exposes a hierarchy in the chorus’s moral attention.

Clytemnestra’s position is not exhausted by maternal grief. She has taken Aegisthus as a lover, plotted sovereign power, and killed Cassandra as well as Agamemnon. Yet these facts do not invalidate the claim she raises. Aeschylus refuses the economy by which her guilt would retroactively make Iphigenia’s death just, just as Agamemnon’s guilt cannot make his murder innocent. Clytemnestra invokes Justice, the ruinous power of *Atē*, and the avenging spirit of her child as the divine allies of her act (*Ag.* 1431–47). The language is not parody. It belongs to the same moral universe in which the expedition to Troy has been authorized as retribution for an earlier wrong. Her revenge is horrifying precisely because it is recognizable as justice under the terms the house has inherited.

The murder’s theatrical form nevertheless reveals the corruption of those terms. Clytemnestra’s textile is at once a weapon, a material reminder of the luxurious cloth on which she persuaded Agamemnon to tread, and a counter-image to the ceremonial fabric associated with Iphigenia’s sacrifice. The avenger reproduces the sacrificial structure she condemns: a victim is immobilized, enclosed, and killed in the name of a prior demand. Even the third blow, offered in fulfillment to an underworld power, ritualizes murder rather than transcending it. Clytemnestra can identify the debt and still become the next debtor.

Cassandra’s scene clarifies why the household cannot adjudicate its own history. Her prophetic vision brings the house’s dispersed crimes into a single field of knowledge: the slaughtered children

of Thyestes, the impending murder of Agamemnon, her own death, and the avenger who will follow (Ag. 1072–1330). Yet her knowledge has no institutional address. The chorus hears but cannot assimilate the form of her speech until the event has overtaken interpretation. Cassandra is therefore more than a figure of unheeded truth. She demonstrates the difference between revelation and judgment. To know that violence is recurring is not yet to possess a procedure capable of interrupting it. Her entrance into the palace confirms that perfect insight, when deprived of recognized authority and collective action, remains politically powerless.

The opening ritual of *The Libation Bearers* initially appears to provide another medium for the past. Electra and the chorus bring offerings to Agamemnon's tomb, and Orestes returns to recover his paternal house. Yet lament almost immediately becomes prospective violence. When Electra asks what kind of person she should invoke, the chorus answers with the revealing alternative *dikastēn ē dikēphoron*—a judge, or a bearer of justice in the sense of an avenger (*Lib.* 84–123). The phrase compresses the trilogy's institutional problem into a grammatical choice. In the world of the tomb, the distinction between judging and avenging has not yet stabilized. The person who recognizes the claim of the dead is expected to execute it.

Orestes's situation makes the inadequacy of that expectation visible because he is bound by incompatible relations. Apollo has commanded him to avenge Agamemnon and threatens physical and psychic torments if he refuses; dynastic restoration, filial duty, Electra's appeal, and hostility to the usurpers converge upon the same act (*Lib.* 269–305). Yet the target is the mother who bore and nursed him. At the decisive confrontation, Clytemnestra exposes her breast, converting maternity from an abstract legal category into an embodied relation. Orestes falters and turns to Pylades: should he spare his mother? Pylades replies by recalling Apollo's oracle and the danger of betraying divine command (*Lib.* 896–930). The killing follows, but the pause prevents it from becoming the uncomplicated execution of a verdict. The avenger recognizes the sacred bond at the moment he violates it.

The alternatives are not a pure right and an obvious wrong. If Orestes abstains, Agamemnon's murder remains unavenged, Apollo's command is disobeyed, and the usurping regime endures. If he acts, he commits matricide and activates the oldest sanctions of kinship. Apollo's oracle intensifies rather than removes the contradiction because divine authority has aligned itself with only one of Orestes's obligations. The command can explain why he acts; it cannot make the maternal blood cease to be maternal. This distinction will become central at the trial, where Apollo attempts to solve the conflict not by weighing both kinship claims but by denying one of them.

Orestes's conduct after the murder confirms that vengeance has failed to deliver the closure it promised. He displays the garment in which Agamemnon died and argues that Clytemnestra's killing was just, but his language breaks between vindication and contamination. He acknowledges that the victory is unenviable and that pollution is overtaking him; he prepares to seek purification at Delphi even as he insists upon the justice of what he has done (*Lib.* 973–1043). The two judgments coexist. He is not simply remorseful in a modern psychological sense, nor is he merely deluded. He has fulfilled one authoritative demand and become liable under another.

The Erinyes who appear to him at the end of the play are therefore not an arbitrary supernatural complication (*Lib.* 1048–62). They are the personified consequence of the maternal claim that Apollo's command did not annul. Their pursuit gives that claim continuity after Clytemnestra's death, just as Orestes gave Agamemnon's claim continuity after his. The sequence has now reached a point of perfect reciprocity: if Orestes's act is sufficient because it avenges a murdered parent, the

Erinyes' pursuit is sufficient for exactly the same reason. No further act of private vengeance can resolve the contradiction, because each side can cite the other's logic as its warrant.

The first two plays thus establish more than a cycle of violence. They construct a field of competing jurisdictions. Kingship, marriage, maternity, paternity, divine command, ritual purity, and the dead each make claims upon the living. The household cannot rank them impartially because every potential judge occupies one of the contested relations. What *Eumenides* introduces is not a new moral substance called "law," but a new location and procedure for judgment. The critical question is whether that procedural innovation can recognize the plurality of claims without reproducing the hierarchy that generated them.

4. The Trial and the Limits of Acquittal

The movement to Athens is preceded by a significant distinction between purification and adjudication. At Delphi and during his wanderings, Orestes undergoes rites that remove or diminish his ritual pollution; when he reaches Athena's image, he insists that the blood on his hands is no longer fresh (*Eum.* 235–43, 276–86). Purification, however, cannot decide whether the matricide was just. The Erinyes continue to prosecute because their grievance is juridical as well as miasmatic. Aeschylus thereby prevents the court from appearing as a merely secular replacement for ritual. Ritual has done one kind of work; public judgment must do another.

Athena's first achievement is not certainty but an acknowledgment of difficulty. After hearing both sides, she declares the matter too great for a mortal to judge and too fraught even for her to decide alone. Orestes has arrived purified and cannot be rejected without cause; the Erinyes possess an office that cannot be lightly dismissed, and their dishonor would endanger the land. Either simply retaining or simply expelling them threatens disaster (*Eum.* 470–89). This statement supplies the intellectual premise of the institution she creates. The court is necessary not because the case is easy enough for rules to settle, but because it exceeds the legitimate authority of any single interested judge. Athena chooses citizens bound by oath, calls for witnesses and proofs, and establishes the tribunal "for all time." The private imperative to answer immediately is replaced by a public interval in which claims can be heard.

The Areopagus is therefore best understood here as a dramatic institution and civic symbol, not as a transcript of fifth-century legal practice. Athena's court combines heroic aetiology, divine authorization, and recognizable features of Athenian adjudication. Its appearance in a play of 458 BCE inevitably resonated with contemporary disputes about the council, including the measures attributed to Ephialtes. Yet the ideological force of the scene does not depend upon identifying Aeschylus as a partisan for or against a precise constitutional program. Harris's account is salutary because it locates the Areopagus's authority in its distinctive homicide jurisdiction and its reputation for rigorous legality rather than in a generalized antidemocratic power (Harris 2019, 389–91, 415–17). Macleod's broader political reading remains compatible with that caution: the court resolves the house's crisis by making judgment a responsibility of the community (Macleod 1982, 124–25). The civic advance lies in institutional continuity, sworn procedure, and third-party judgment, not in the literal invention of law at a single mythical moment.

Within that institution, the trial exhibits real procedural achievements. The accusers speak first; Orestes admits the act; the Erinyes cross-examine him; Apollo accepts responsibility for the command and appears as witness and advocate; sworn jurors cast individual ballots (*Eum.* 566–680). The case is public, adversarial, and separated from automatic execution. The Erinyes are not barred as irrational relics. Athena recognizes their standing, and their questions expose the central issue with

considerable force: if Clytemnestra's blood relation to Orestes is real, on what ground can the killer return to his father's house and participate in civic and religious life (*Eum.* 590–613, 640–56)?

Procedural inclusion, however, is not equivalent to substantive fairness. Apollo is not a neutral expert. He ordered the murder, purified its agent, and now invokes Zeus as the source of an oracle whose authority he declares superior to the jurors' oath (*Eum.* 614–21). His defense moves through three related hierarchies. First, Agamemnon's death receives greater weight because he was a scepter-bearing commander killed by a woman. Second, the marital relation is elevated over the blood relation acknowledged by the Erinyes. Finally, Apollo denies that the mother is properly a parent at all: she is only the nurse of the seed sown by the father, while Athena's birth from Zeus supplies the supposed proof that fatherhood can exist without motherhood (*Eum.* 625–66). The biological argument does not reconcile two genuine obligations. It erases the status on which one obligation depends.

The violence of this argument is intellectual before it is juridical. Clytemnestra's embodied appeal to the breast in *The Libation Bearers* is answered in *Eumenides* by a theory that reduces the maternal body to a container for paternal generation. The trial thereby repeats at the level of discourse what Orestes performed with the sword: the mother's claim is made subordinate to the father's. Zeitlin's analysis of the trilogy's "dynamics of misogyny" remains decisive because it shows that gender is not a detachable blemish upon an otherwise neutral constitutional myth. The oppositions between female and male, household and polis, maternal blood and paternal legitimacy organize the passage to civic order itself (Zeitlin 1978, 149–84). Apollo's speech makes that organization explicit.

Athena's vote confirms rather than corrects the asymmetry. She announces that no mother bore her, that she is "entirely for the male" apart from marriage, and that she will not give precedence to the death of a woman who killed the male master of the house. She therefore votes for Orestes and establishes that equality of ballots will acquit (*Eum.* 734–41). The subsequent count is tied. The result is legally valid under the rule Athena has articulated, but the reasons she gives prevent it from standing as a demonstration of extraordinary or disinterested fairness. The jurors divide; the decisive convention is announced by a goddess who has already declared her filial and gendered allegiance.

Indeed, the tie is one of the most important facts in the trilogy's account of judgment. It registers the case's irreducibility. The collective body does not discover a moral consensus; it reaches equipoise. Athena's casting vote produces a rule for decision when argument has failed to yield unanimity. That is an institutional achievement: a community can act without pretending that disagreement has vanished. It is also a limit. Acquittal determines Orestes's civic status, but it does not establish his innocence in every moral register. The Erinyes have not been refuted, and the maternal blood has not been explained away merely because a procedure can now declare the prosecution unsuccessful.

The Furies' choral warning before the trial makes their continuing relevance even clearer. They fear that Orestes's success will teach children that attacks upon parents go unpunished; they defend fear as a necessary "guardian of the heart" and reject both lawlessness and tyranny (*Eum.* 490–565). Athena's later foundation speech absorbs much of this language. Her court will preserve reverence and its kindred fear; citizens should support neither anarchy nor tyranny; the tribunal will remain awake as a guardian of the land (*Eum.* 681–710). The new institution thus speaks with the conceptual resources of the power it is supposedly replacing. The court does not make the Erinyes obsolete. It generalizes their insistence that wrongdoing must be remembered and feared.

Orestes's departure underscores the verdict's political efficacy and ethical incompleteness. He regains his Argive inheritance and swears an enduring alliance with Athens (*Eum.* 753–77). The trial has converted a suppliant into an ally and a dynastic crisis into interstate advantage. But Apollo disappears, Orestes leaves, and the injured prosecutors remain. Their anger is now directed not only at the matricide but at the city that has institutionalized his acquittal. The court has ended the case; it has not yet secured the order.

5. From Erinyes to Eumenides: Incorporation Rather Than Erasure

The final movement of the trilogy begins where a conventional courtroom drama would end. The ballots have been counted and the defendant released, yet the Erinyes threaten to discharge their dishonor into Attic soil as barrenness, crop failure, and the destruction of children (*Eum.* 778–87). Their response exposes a problem that procedure alone cannot solve. A judgment binds the parties juridically, but a political order cannot remain stable if a power capable of devastating the community experiences the judgment as annihilation. Athena must do more than enforce the verdict. She must transform the defeated party's relation to the institution.

Her first rhetorical maneuver is therefore striking: “You have not been defeated,” she tells them, because the votes were equal and the result brought them no disgrace (*Eum.* 794–807). Literally, they have lost the case. Politically, however, Athena attempts to distinguish defeat in a particular adjudication from dispossession of office. The court has rejected the Erinyes' demand for Orestes's punishment; it need not reject the moral function they embody. She offers them a cavernous sanctuary in Attica, thrones, sacrificial honors, first fruits, and a permanent share in the land. Their power over fertility, marriage, offspring, and prosperity will be publicly recognized rather than left outside the city as a hostile curse (*Eum.* 804–36, 854–69).

This is not toleration in the weak sense of permitting an obsolete belief to survive privately. Athena assigns the Erinyes a civic function. They are to suppress internecine bloodshed, bless lawful households, foster the land's fertility, and attach terrible consequences to impiety. When they ask what power will accompany the proposed residence, Athena answers that no house will prosper without them (*Eum.* 895–900). The assertion is crucial. The household is not abolished by the polis, and the ancient guardians of kinship do not become decorative emblems. Their authority remains causally effective, but it is relocated within a cultic order supervised and honored by the community.

The protracted repetition of offer, lament, and renewed offer gives the exchange the form of negotiation rather than conversion by fiat. Twice the Erinyes rehearse the grievance that younger gods have trampled ancient laws; Athena responds without denying their age or wisdom and refuses to weary of persuasion (*Eum.* 808–91). The drama slows because consent matters. The goddesses ask where they will live, what honors they will receive, and whether Athena's promise will endure. Only after the terms are specified do they release their anger and agree to bless the land (*Eum.* 892–915). Their change is neither amnesia nor moral surrender. It is acceptance of a new relation between power, place, and public recognition.

Nancy Rabinowitz's account of the movement from force to persuasion properly emphasizes *peithō* as a structuring principle of the trilogy's conclusion (Rabinowitz 1981, 159–91). Athena herself gives “holy reverence” to Persuasion and later credits Persuasion with watching over her tongue (*Eum.* 880–86, 968–75). Yet the scene does not oppose speech and coercion absolutely. In the midst of negotiation Athena reminds the Erinyes that she possesses the keys to the chamber where Zeus's thunderbolt is kept, though she immediately adds that there is no need to use it (*Eum.* 824–

29). The offer of honor is genuine; so is the asymmetry of power. Persuasion succeeds under the shadow of force.

That shadow does not make the agreement meaningless, but it prevents sentimentalizing it. Political incorporation often operates through a mixture of recognition, inducement, and constraint. Athena does not grant the Erinyes authority to continue private pursuit on their own terms. She offers them a better status on the condition that they renounce the curse against Athens and redirect their force toward civic flourishing. The negotiation is therefore transformative precisely because neither side remains unchanged. The Erinyes abandon the immediate prosecution and accept civic limits; Athena's city accepts that its new order requires chthonic sanction, fear, ritual, and female divine power. The polis contains the Erinyes, but it also becomes constitutionally dependent upon what they contribute.

Their new function is best described as a transposition of jurisdiction. Earlier, the Erinyes pursue a particular offender on behalf of a particular blood relation. After the settlement, their field becomes the city's collective well-being. They pray that the soil and herds will be fertile, that young people will enter flourishing marriages, that untimely death will be restrained, and—most importantly—that insatiable civil strife will never drink the black blood of citizens from the dust (*Eum.* 916–1002). The image of earth drinking blood, which previously marked the irreversibility of murder, now appears in a prohibition against civic self-destruction. Their memory of blood has become a public warning.

At the same time, the transformation does not bleach their terror into benevolence. Athena calls them “great and hard to appease” even while installing them, and declares that the person who has never felt their weight does not understand the blows of life (*Eum.* 928–48). They continue to punish inherited wrongdoing and to distinguish the reverent from the impious. The city's peace depends not on eliminating punitive force but on binding it to a stable distribution of honors and obligations. Fear becomes civic restraint rather than the private avenger's license.

Even the names involved resist a simple metamorphosis. Within the action the goddesses remain Erinyes, daughters of Night, and are associated with the *Semnai Theai*, the Revered or August Goddesses whose cult was located near the Areopagus. The transmitted title *Eumenides*, “Kindly Ones,” reads the ending retrospectively, but the play does not stage an instantaneous lexical baptism that erases their former identity. The new designation is euphemistic and performative: by addressing terrible powers as kindly, the city articulates the relation it seeks to sustain. Naming is part of the institution. It neither falsifies their capacity for harm nor allows that capacity to define the whole of their public role.

The torchlit procession completes the incorporation spatially and ritually. Athena, citizens, children, matrons, and older women escort the goddesses to dwellings beneath the earth, clothing them in honor and prohibiting inauspicious speech (*Eum.* 1003–47). The descent can be read as containment: dangerous female divinities are placed below the visible civic order. It is also enthronement. Their underground position corresponds to their chthonic identity and locates them permanently beneath the city whose prosperity they now protect. “Giving the Furies a home” is therefore not a metaphor for making them harmless. It is the creation of a recognized office, cult, and jurisdiction through which their dangerous power becomes a condition of civic stability.

6. The Achievement—and Cost—of Civic Justice

What, then, has changed by the trilogy's end? Most obviously, the authorization of punishment has been displaced from the injured kin group to a public body. The homicide court introduces third-party judgment, sworn responsibility, adversarial speech, evidence, a recorded rule for resolving a tie,

and institutional duration beyond the immediate dispute. These features do not guarantee a just verdict in every case. They do, however, break the equivalence between experiencing injury and possessing the right to retaliate. The plaintiff may demand judgment; the plaintiff no longer executes it.

The change is temporal as well as political. Vengeance converts memory into an urgent command: because blood has fallen, blood must answer. Procedure creates delay. Athena listens to each party, recruits judges, convenes a public hearing, counts ballots, and then negotiates the consequences. That interval permits a distinction between acknowledgment and repetition. The dead can be remembered, the act named, and responsibility debated without requiring another corpse as the only adequate sign that the community has taken the injury seriously. Civic justice does not end violence simply by condemning it. It develops forms through which violence can be recognized without being reenacted by every claimant.

The institution also preserves elements that a modern rationalist account might prefer to discard. Athena insists that reverence and fear must remain within the city; a population that fears nothing will not reliably act justly (*Eum.* 681–710). This claim echoes the Erinyes' earlier song and locates the court within, rather than beyond, an affective economy of sanction. Aeschylus's civic order is not liberal, secular, or pacifist. It celebrates military victory against external enemies even as it forbids civil bloodshed; it rests on oaths, divine genealogy, cult, and the threat of punishment. Its achievement is not purification from force but the politically discriminating use of force.

For precisely this reason, the trilogy should not be described as the transparent "birth of democracy." Athena chooses the judges and defines the court's ordinance; a goddess casts the decisive vote; Apollo invokes Zeus; the defendant's acquittal secures an alliance favorable to Athens. The mythical scene authorizes a civic institution, but it does not dramatize popular sovereignty in a modern sense. Nor does the play accurately narrate the historical creation of the Areopagus. What it offers is an idealized account of the rule of law: even a divinely entangled case must pass through a standing tribunal, and even a victorious city requires limits on internal retaliation.

That achievement carries a gendered cost. Apollo's denial of motherhood and Athena's explicit preference for the male make the verdict depend upon more than a neutral transfer of jurisdiction. As Zeitlin argues, the trilogy's civic synthesis is organized through a hierarchy in which male, Olympian, and public authority defines itself by containing the female, chthonic, and domestic other (Zeitlin 1978, 149–84). The point is not that every woman in the trilogy represents the household or that every male speaker represents the polis. Clytemnestra wields public power and extraordinary rhetoric; Athena is a female deity who founds the civic order; the Erinyes become public divinities. Rather, the play can mobilize powerful female figures while directing their power toward the confirmation of a male civic genealogy. Athena's exceptional status—a daughter without a mother—does not overturn that hierarchy. It makes her its most effective mediator.

The fate of Clytemnestra's claim is especially revealing. Her ghost opens *Eumenides* by reminding the Erinyes that she has been dishonored among the dead and that no god is angry on her behalf (*Eum.* 94–116). At the trial, however, she is absent. The prosecution speaks for maternal blood in general, while Apollo redescribes her chiefly as the female killer of a noble husband. Iphigenia, the injury around which Clytemnestra constructed her own claim to justice, receives no equivalent adjudication. Orestes is restored to his paternal inheritance; no institution retrospectively judges Agamemnon's sacrifice of the daughter. The court stops the chain at a point favorable to the surviving son and the continuity of the male house. That may be politically effective, but it is not symmetrical redress.

The final incorporation of the Erinyes can therefore be interpreted as neutralization rather than recognition. They lose their case, surrender their pursuit, accept residence beneath the city, and redirect their blessings toward marriage, fertility, and civic concord. The spatial and functional pattern is compatible with a patriarchal settlement: unruly maternal vengeance is placed underground and made to support the structures that have subordinated it. Goldhill's analysis of sexuality and narrative reinforces the need to read the ending's harmonies alongside the exclusions that make them possible (Goldhill 1984).

Yet "neutralization" alone is also insufficient. The Erinyes are not destroyed, silenced, or represented as having been logically disproved. The dramatic action waits for their assent. They negotiate the terms of residence, retain the capacity to harm and bless, participate in the final exchange of speech, and become indispensable to the city's future. Athena does not say that households will prosper despite them; she says no household will prosper without them. Their presence modifies the polis by forcing it to acknowledge that law requires memory, fear, embodied kinship, and powers that exceed procedural reason. Incorporation is real even when it occurs on unequal terms.

The resulting settlement is best understood as a compromise whose durability depends upon its incompleteness. It is not a compromise in which each proposition is half true. Orestes has killed his mother; Apollo did command him; Clytemnestra killed Agamemnon; Agamemnon sacrificed Iphigenia; the Erinyes possess an ancient office; Athens cannot permit private blood pursuit to continue indefinitely. The institution does not dissolve these facts into a higher synthesis. It decides what must happen next. Its legitimacy derives from converting incompatible claims into a future order, while the tragedy preserves enough of the excluded claims to prevent the order from appearing innocent.

This is where the moral and political arguments identified by Dodds finally meet. The sufferings of the Atreidae become politically meaningful not because a constitutional reform justifies them, but because their unresolved contradictions disclose what an institution must do. It must take judgment away from interested avengers; preserve the seriousness of violated bonds; permit a decision without manufacturing unanimity; and create a place for defeated powers whose exclusion would make the settlement unstable. Aeschylus's answer is formidable because it recognizes that justice is not secured by correctness of verdict alone. It also requires the construction of a community capable of surviving judgment.

The cost should neither cancel the achievement nor be hidden by it. The *Oresteia* imagines a genuine reduction in retaliatory violence and a durable public responsibility for homicide. It also imagines that achievement through a verdict that privileges paternal continuity, devalues maternity, and turns powerful female divinities toward the support of a male-centered civic order. The ending is therefore neither a liberal foundation myth to be celebrated without qualification nor a simple ideological fraud whose harmonies conceal nothing but domination. It is tragic politics: a binding order created under conditions in which no available settlement can vindicate every claim.

7. Conclusion

The *Oresteia* does not lead from darkness into a world purified of darkness. Its movement is more exacting. The first two plays show why blood vengeance possesses moral force and why that force becomes catastrophic when the injured household alone authorizes punishment. Clytemnestra and Orestes each act under claims that the trilogy permits the audience to recognize; each transforms

a prior wrong into a new one. The Erinyes bring this economy to its logical impasse because their pursuit of the matricide is no less coherent, on its own terms, than his vengeance for Agamemnon.

Athena's court interrupts the sequence by creating an external and enduring site of judgment. Its procedure marks a decisive political achievement, but the tied vote and the gendered arguments of Apollo and Athena prevent acquittal from becoming synonymous with moral innocence. The trial decides Orestes's status; it does not answer every claim carried into the court. Aeschylus signals that insufficiency formally by reserving the final movement of the trilogy for the anger of the defeated prosecutors.

The resolution lies in transforming their office. Through persuasion, honors, cult, spatial incorporation, and an acknowledged background of coercive power, Athena directs the Erinyes away from private pursuit and toward civic restraint, fertility, and protection from internal bloodshed. Their terror is retained because the city needs the memory and sanction they embody. Their autonomy is limited because the city cannot survive if every injury licenses unilateral revenge. They become Eumenides not by ceasing to be Erinyes, but by acquiring a public relation in which their power can be both honored and governed.

That settlement remains ethically compromised. It confirms the priority of the father, contains maternal vengeance, and leaves Iphigenia's sacrifice without a corresponding trial. Its institutional wisdom cannot be detached from its gendered hierarchy. Yet the trilogy's refusal to conceal this cost is part of its continuing intellectual force. Civic justice emerges neither as immaculate reason nor as vengeance under a new name, but as the difficult organization of memory, fear, judgment, and power.

The true climax of the *Oresteia* is therefore not the ballot that frees Orestes. It is the moment at which an order threatened by irreconcilable claims creates a durable place for the force it cannot simply abolish. Athena does not refute the darkness represented by the Furies. She gives it a home—and Aeschylus leaves us to see that the home is at once an honor, a boundary, and the compromised foundation of civic peace.

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