

EUMENIDES AND THE INVENTION

ABSTRACT

Aeschylus's Oresteia is widely seen as describing and as itself representing the historically momentous transition from archaic to classical culture. In this context, Eumenides is thought to be especially important in providing arguably the first systematic account of the idea of the polis, hence of the notion of a social order whose primary virtue is justice. Without denying this, I propose to show that the model of politics we find in the Eumenides in fact raises as many issues as it resolves. Far from presenting a coherent and satisfying idea of the polis – “a utopia of civic harmony” – Aeschylus offers something quite different, namely, a complex and interrelated set of questions and concerns, perplexities and conundrums, puzzles and challenges that constitute, together, the agenda both for the polis itself and for anyone, ancient and modern, who would think systematically about what it means to live in a state.

EUMENIDES AND THE INVENTION OF POLITICS

Political philosophers in the West have long traced the origins of their enterprise to the historically momentous transition from the world of early archaic Greece – the age of Homer, reflecting, as it did, the reemergence of Greek civilization after three or more centuries of social, cultural and economic collapse – to the very different world of the fully-established polis. According to the traditional account, this transition was not only enormously consequential but also quite radical. The underlying assumptions and values of the eighth century, itself embracing the ideology of a long-defunct warrior culture, were replaced wholesale by something utterly and entirely different, a brand new ideology. That ideology was rooted in a range of interrelated economic, technological and military developments and was implicated variously in the achievements of pre-Socratic philosophy, rational historiography and constitutional law. The result was the unfolding of a unique and distinctive universe of discourse that served sharply to separate the mindset of fifth and fourth century Greek culture from that of the earlier era and that produced, not only in Athens but in Greece more broadly, forms of political organization and varieties of political thought the likes of which had never before been imagined (See, variously, Finley (1978, 120); Murray (1980, 44, 63, 97-98, 129-31); Snodgrass (1980, 31-35, 102-103); Vernant (1982, 37, 45, 49-54, 63, 87); Ehrenberg (1989, 20-27); Tandy (1997, 113-17); Gill, Postlethwaite and Seaford (1998, 5); Sansone (2004, 29-31, 39); and Hall (2007, 127).

Within this general framework, Aeschylus is thought to have played an important and distinctive role. Generations of scholars have seen the Oresteia as describing and as itself representing, perhaps more than any other product of human imagination, the change from archaic to classical culture. The Eumenides in particular seems to portray with unrivaled clarity the stark and profound difference between the palace-based world of early Greece, as envisioned or reappropriated by Homer and presumably other poets singing or writing in the immediate aftermath of the Dark Age, and the justice-based world of the polis. It is here that we encounter, arguably for the first time, a recognizable picture of a rational state.

I think this account, though undeniably correct in certain respects, is also deeply misleading. Indeed, it has been repudiated by recent scholarship, and for good reasons. On the one hand, locating the foundations of Western political thought in the world of Aeschylus – and, more broadly, the world of Herodotus and Thucydides, Protagoras and Gorgias, Sophocles and Euripides – is no less true for being a cliché; and to discover in the Oresteia, especially in the Eumenides, the notion of a political order whose primary virtue is justice is only to discover the obvious. That Aeschylus is a singular and massively important figure in the emergence of the very idea of politics – understood as a form of authoritative collective endeavor aiming at some conception of the common good – is thus beyond doubt. And yet, the notion of a massive rupture between old and new – between the beginnings of the archaic and the flowering of the classical – misses the sense in which cultural and intellectual developments of the fifth century might best be understood as bringing to light themes and theses already present, if only implicitly, in an earlier age. It may be that the invention, so to speak, of politics would not have been

possible without the large social and material changes that gave rise to the city-state. But the presumption that the relevant ideas as articulated by Aeschylus among others were spun more or less out of whole cloth and that the theoretical underpinnings of the state were therefore essentially without substantive precedent can no longer be taken seriously. Perhaps equally important, scholars have shown beyond much doubt that the finished model – the model of politics that we find in the Eumenides – raises as many issues as it resolves. Indeed, far from presenting a coherent and satisfying idea of the polis – “a utopia of civic harmony” (Scodel 2010, 105) – Aeschylus seems to offer something quite different, namely, a complex and interrelated set of questions and concerns, perplexities and conundrums, puzzles and challenges that constitute, together, the agenda both for the polis itself and for anyone, ancient or modern, who would think systematically about what it means to live in political society.

It is from very much within this latter perspective that I propose to look once again at the Eumenides. However, I believe that many of the most influential contemporary readings are broadly unsatisfying in at least two important respects. On the one hand, they have failed to provide a systematic and compelling account of exactly how the dramatic practice of Aeschylus at once embodies and expresses the complex, perplexing and even vexing character of fifth century politics. At the same time, they have also failed to offer a convincing and theoretically penetrating account of just what that complex, perplexing and vexing character entails. I am to explore both of these questions. Specifically, I will argue that the Eumenides can be fruitfully read as a sustained exercise in the subversion of expectations. As such, it unsettles and disturbs its audience and opens up, thereby, a space for the development of a powerful and

distinctive political problematic. But further, that problematic involves, I will suggest, a complex and challenging series of meditations on what today would be called political ethics. Those meditations compose, in effect, a syllabus for the pursuit of political theory, not only for the fifth century itself but virtually all subsequent efforts to explore the moral foundations of the state.

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There can be little doubt that Aeschylus, in the Eumenides, not only depicts an enormous cultural change of some kind but does so with extraordinary literary skill. That skill is in evidence at virtually every level of dramatic practice. Indeed, even as they reject traditional interpretations, recent scholars continue to acknowledge what might be called the “progressive” arc of the Eumenides. One critic, for example, emphasizes “the movement of action from an ancient, distant... Argos to the new democratic Athens,” and notes that at the end of the play the audience – presumably ancient and modern alike – must feel itself “to have been liberated... from the tribulations of the old, monarchical-aristocratic world by [its] initiation into a Brave New World of Athenian democracy” (Griffith 1995, 76, 81-82). According to another commentator, Aeschylus’s goal is nothing less than “to distinguish Athens as a whole from... the characters who appeared or were spoken of earlier in the trilogy” (Chiasson 1999, 152). Indeed, even the purely spatial dimensions of the Eumenides – the scene shifts from the temple at Delphi to the court of the Areopagus to the setting of the final procession – is thought to mirror the trilogy’s “movement from a fixed mythic past toward the open-ended contemporary world of the audience” (Rehm 2002, 89).

Consider, in this context, the overall architecture of the play. It is not hard to discern in its narrative structure a seemingly inexorable development from the primitive, barbaric and strange to the civilized, orderly and familiar. Thus, the first third of the play is largely given over to a spectacle of blood, gore and ghoulishness – a forerunner, one might say, of the modern horror film. Apollo famously tells the Furies to “go where heads are cut off [karanistêres], eyes gouged out [ophthalmôrukhoi], where young men’s glories are butchered, they are castrated, their seed wasted, extremities mutilated, huge stones are hurled at their chests, and the victims wail for pity, spikes thrust up the spine, torsos impaled on stakes” (182-86).¹ In passages such as this, and there are many, Aeschylus conjures a horrific world indeed, a realm of unrestrained violence and unspeakable torture. The language is graphic and unrelenting, and it describes what a fifth century audience must have viewed as a deeply alien universe – a kind of pre-political state of nature, disturbing, forbidding and ghastly (see, for example, Lebeck 1971, 146 and Conacher 1987, 142).

As we know, this is presumably the world of Mycenae, or rather one aspect of it, as imagined from a roughly Homeric perspective, hence from five hundred years or more

¹ Here and throughout, otherwise unidentified parenthetical references are to the Eumenides. For the original, I have relied on the edition edited by Anthony J. Podlecki (Warminster, England: Aris & Phillips, 1989). Also, I forbear any and all references to the Agamemnon and the Libation Bearers. Such references could be numerous to the say the least, but to include them in a responsible manner would require an essay roughly three times as long as the present one, and the theoretical payoff with respect to my specific aims would be uncertain at best.

after the fact – a world, apparently, of military elites and warrior heroes, of which Agamemnon himself is one kind of prototype.² Of course, from the viewpoint of Aeschylus’s own historical circumstance – hence, perhaps an additional three centuries removed from the Mycenaean period – such a world is long gone and must have seemed culturally, socially and intellectually distant indeed.³ But it is also important to note that within the space of only a handful of modern pages, the narrative of the Eumenides transforms itself into something utterly and entirely different, something far less bizarre. The horror show of the early scenes suddenly gives way to a kind of courtroom drama replete with judge and jury, prosecuting and defense attorneys, witnesses giving testimony and, ultimately, a verdict. Here the strange, irrational world of personal vengeance and blood-lust is displaced by a culture of reasoned discourse in which opposing sides seek to persuade impartial decision-makers by adducing evidence and formulating arguments. It is impossible to doubt that Aeschylus’s audience, well accustomed to what Aristotle later called forensic rhetoric, would have suddenly found itself in familiar territory. Indeed, the very same Court of the Areopagus that judges Orestes, even or perhaps especially in its post-Ephialtic existence as an institution

² Some have argued that Homeric epic describes neither Mycenaean Greece nor Dark Age Greece but, rather, the Greece of the eight century. See, for example, Morris (1986, 18-138). Others claim that what we find in the Iliad and the Odyssey is more an amalgam of different cultures and periods. See, for example, Finkelberg (2005) and also Ehrenberg (1989, 10-11).

³ It is perhaps worth remembering that, in terms of sheer time, the author of the Oresteia is to the age of Mycenae roughly as we are to the age of, say, Guelphs and Ghibellines.

devoted solely to the adjudication of capital cases, could well have been in operation more or less on the very day of the premier of the Eumenides in 458, and just a short walk from the Theater of Dionysus itself.

Of course, the play's lengthy denouement describes a world that is, if anything, even more familiar and comforting (Griffith 1995, 81-82). The tense agon of criminal adjudication having been resolved, we witness at the end a kind of civic pageant celebrating above all the triumph of reason and the emergence of the polis as a structure of public justice. Indeed, the pageant is rather like the popular Festival of Dionysus itself – the very celebration that would have provided the occasion for writing and performing the Eumenides.⁴ Here, events internal to the play directly echo both the spirit and the fact of events happening immediately outside of the theater, and in more or less real time. The transition from the barbarism of the old order to the civilized order of what we now call classical Greece seems to be complete.

This same transition appears to resonate at what we might think of as the opposite end of the aesthetic spectrum, namely, the micro-level of poetic motif. Consider the image of the flame – a representation that recurs throughout the play. Early on, fire is regularly associated with violence, vengeance and pain. Thus, Clytemnestra's ghost

⁴ Many and perhaps most scholars seem to believe that the end of the Eumenides harks not to the Festival of Dionysus but to the Panatheneia. See for example, Chiasson (1999, 156-59). But see also Goldhill (2000, 43), who emphasizes the social-functional similarities between the Great Dionysia on the one hand and the tragedies produced under its auspices on the other.

urges the Furies to attack Orestes with “the flame in your bowels [nêduos puri]” and, thereby, to “set him ablaze” (137) and to exult over their victim’s “burning brain” (344); and the Furies embrace such an image on more than one occasion. But by the end of the play the role of fire has been utterly transformed. With establishment of reason and public justice, torches now produce “sacred light” (1012). They bear the flames that illuminate the path with which the Furies – presumably rechristened Eumenides – are to attain a hallowed home beneath the city of Athens (1031).

Consider, similarly, the repeated motif of song and dance. Aeschylus takes us from a world in which the Furies chant a disturbing, frenzied hymn of “insanity and delerium” (345), and in which they dance uncontrollably, “their feet pounding with furious rage [orkhêsmois t’ epiphthonois]” (374), to a very different world in which happy citizens “sing aloud their joyful, blessed songs [ololuxate]” (1045) and dance the joyous dance of civic peace and prosperity (1053; see Brown, 1983, 26). This general pattern can be traced with respect to any number of motifs, involving (inter alia) snakes, the human heart, the activity of the chase or hunt, urns, fertility, sacrifice and marriage (see especially Lebeck 1971, 132-33, but also Peradotto 1964, 378-93; Conacher 1987, 173; Vernant and Vidal-Naquet 1988, 141-59; and Porter 2005a). Time and again, the transition from the barbaric to the civilized is underwritten by a recurrent, even relentless repertoire of poetic image.

Indeed, in the hands of Aeschylus the very structure of the world – as expressed, for example, in the metaphysics of a natural philosopher such as Empedocles – is radically transformed. We have already witnessed the reimagining of fire as it reflects and underwrites the play’s narrative arc. But consider as well the treatment of earth itself. At

the outset, the Furies's home in "the bowels of the earth" is forbidding and sinister. It is a "dark pit," a "hellish world of death [Tartaron]" and of "evil darkness" (75). But by the end of the play earth has become, quite to the contrary, something "rich and fertile [ploutokhthôn]" the source of, among other things, the large deposits of silver that have allowed Athens to become prosperous and powerful and that produce "the abundance of good things" that make life both possible and pleasurable (935, 957). More broadly, the peace and justice of Athens is a blessing that "rises up from the earth and the waters of the sea, and from the sky above and the blowing winds that carry sunlight streaming across the land..." (905-915). Here, earth, water, air and fire – the very foundations of reality – have become implicated in and transformed by the glory that is the modern polis (see Peradotto 1964, 387). Indeed, "as the image becomes symbol it is woven into the very fabric of the drama, and it is this interweaving of plot and symbol which often reveals the pattern of thought" (Zeitlin 1965, 453).

The upshot, according to the traditional interpretation, is an entirely new vision of social order. Indeed, the thought is that Aeschylus achieves nothing less than the first comprehensive account of political life itself, properly so conceived. With the trial of Orestes, the Athens of Aeschylus seems to emerge as a structure of recognition, respect and reconciliation. Deep and fundamental oppositions characteristic of human society are uncovered, encountered and resolved (Euben 1982; Goldhill 1984, 267; Rocco 1997, 140; Scodel 2010, 105). For example, the antagonism between old and young – between the ancient attachments of the Furies and the emergent ambitions of younger gods such as Apollo and Athena – appears to disappear under the influence of a political process driven by considerations of justice and by the explicit goal of balancing the "two sides

that are present [duoin parontoin]” (427) (Euben 1982, 27-28; see Markovits 2009, 432). Or again, tensions associated with gender difference – e.g., the maternal claims of Clytemnestra’s ghost as embraced by the Furies over and against traditional masculine virtues as embodied in Agamemnon and Orestes – are engaged and apparently resolved, in part through the good offices of a motherless, hence ambiguously gendered, goddess (Gagarin 1976, 87-105; Euben 1982, 25-27; Goldhill 1984, 259, 280; Conacher 1987, 206-212; but see Section 2 below). More broadly, the seeming contradiction between ever-present and often righteous impulses of passion and equally compelling habits of rational analysis is, to borrow language from another time and place, annulled yet preserved in a higher unity that embraces and perfects both principles. Ultimately, the Aeschylean state is thought to reflect a fundamental overcoming of the tension between private and public. Oikos and polis, perversely intercalated in a pre-political world where decisions of public consequence, including and especially decisions about war and peace, were made for the most private of reasons – jealousy, pride, friendship, greed – now find their proper places in a world where each institution performs only those functions for which it is naturally suited (Maitland 1992, 30; Rocco 1997, 142).

In all such cases, self and other are said to engage in a process of mutual recognition. In all such cases, recognition engenders mutual respect. And in all such cases, respect seems to produce, in turn, reconciliation (Euben 1982, 28). The upshot is nothing other than the very idea of the state. Without doubting the importance of either Hesiodic or Solonic contributions, it is Aeschylus who arguably provides the first serious account of the concept of a body politic. As seen from the perspective of contemporary historical and political theory, the Aeschylean polis qua state is an entity based on

deliberation, judgment and public reason. Thus, it is in such a polis that we witness, allegedly for the first time, “the extraordinary preeminence of speech over all other instruments of power” (Vernant 1982, 49; see also Murray 1980, 97-98; Euben 1982, 31; and Stockton 1990, 118-19). The art of politics is a matter of “open debate, discussion, argument,” involving, as it does, the “management of language” and the close connection between politics and reason (Vernant 1982, 50.) Of course, deliberation of this kind presupposes the establishment of a public space, understood both as “an area of common interest” and as a set of “open practices openly arrived at” (Vernant 1982, 51). As such, the state is, perhaps preeminently, a system of measure, balance and moderation (Dover 1957, 230-37; Valakas 2009, 202). Opposing interests are evaluated against one another, and differences are adjudicated with a view toward reflecting and reinforcing habits of mutual recognition, respect and reconciliation. The result is nothing less than the idea of the state as a kind of organism. The polis described or envisioned by Aeschylus is a structure of diversity in unity and of unity in diversity. The part – the individual citizen – derives its well-being, indeed its very identity, from its healthy participation in the whole, while the whole – the polis itself – is well-ordered only insofar as its citizens can thrive precisely in virtue of being citizens. Indeed, here is perhaps the very first intimation, however inchoate, of the idea of functional causation.

According to the traditional interpretation, then, the Eumenides not only depicts a sharp transition from one cultural system to another but describes that transition more or less explicitly as a change of master narratives. One particular and discrete set of metaphysical and moral commitments is replaced by a new set of commitments having very different kinds of implications. The governing categories of Mycenaean/Homeric

civilization, revolving around canonical notions of timê, kleos and xenia, compose the core of a universe of discourse on the basis of which an entire gamut of social practices and relationships is rendered meaningful. Moral obligations, class differences, social duties, kinship ties, political arrangements, even cosmological investigations – all are underwritten by, are interpreted through the lens of, an economy of honor and competition connected, above all, with military prowess.⁵ The logic of ancient, pre-hoplite warfare colonizes, in effect, all sectors of social life. With the rise of the polis, on the other hand, this universe of discourse is said to be replaced wholesale by a new system of thought. We presumably encounter now an entirely different conceptual apparatus, one that privileges notions of dikê, logos and phronêsis. Whereas honor was, in the earlier period, the analytic category through which conflict could be made intelligible, in the latter period conflict comes to be understood in terms of justice (see, for example, Conacher 1987, 197). The heroic quest for fame or celebrity has been replaced by the prudent pursuit of coherence and common sense. The celebration of larger-than-life passion – e.g., the anger of Achilles – gives way to a focus on moderation and judgment.

⁵ On the centrality of honor, see Finley (1978, 28, 118, 120); Murray (1980, 63); Snodgrass (1980, 88); Thomas and Conant (1999, 50-55); and Sansone (2004, 39, 44). On the specific question of competition, see Finley (1978, 118-19); Vernant (1982, 29); Gill, Postlethwaite and Seaford (1998, 5); Sansone (2004, 39, 44); and Hall (2007, 120-27). On the peculiar role of gift-giving, see Finley (1978, 120); Murray (1980, 22); Tandy (1997, 98-100, 141); Gill, Postlethwaite and Seaford (1998, 305-307); and Hall (2007, 122-23).

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This general account has now been substantially revised and/or rejected by recent scholarship, and for very good reasons. Perhaps above all, it ignores the sense in which emergent modes of thought, however influential, rarely obliterate altogether older habits of mind, hence ignores or at least underplays the dynamic tension that persists beneath the surface of any social formation. Thus, the traditional account presupposes a deeply misleading view of the world according to Homer. Far from being a simple, one-sided, top-down aristocracy of warrior kings and heroes, that world is, in fact, richly political in ways that strongly prefigure many features of the Aeschylean polis. Emblematic here is the Homeric assembly, characteristic of both the Iliad and the Odyssey, which turns out to be, upon inspection, a rich locus of argument, dissent, deliberation and persuasive oratory. To be sure, the idea that leaders in early Greece apparently felt themselves under some kind of compulsion – legal? cultural? tactical? – to call assemblies and to use those assemblies as opportunities for persuasion in and of itself belies the notion of a docile, powerless, purely passive citizen-body operating in blind obedience to orders from above. In the history of political practice, autocracy is rarely simply and solely that. Despots and tyrants typically depend on intermediate entities and even whole populations that, however dependent and awed, must nonetheless be convinced to provide the leader with the kinds of support – often financial or military – necessary for public undertakings and that, as such, cannot simply be taken for granted. In the instant case, textual evidence clearly shows the assembly of Homeric epic to be, above all, a scene of “agonistic speech” (Martin 1989, 65-77). It embodies a culture of contestation and dissent “in which the relationship between the leader and his people is examined, questioned, and

forged,” and thus functions as “an institution that supports the challenging of authority and accommodates differences of opinion” (Barker 2009, 37). Of course, this manifests itself in several ways; Homeric assemblies are not of a piece. But many cases, for example the celebrated episode of Thersites,⁶ suggest that relations between elites and ordinary folk are hardly thought to be one directional. The commons are neither utterly

⁶ The importance of Thersites has been recognized across the centuries. In Troilus and Cressida, for example, Shakespeare makes him out to be a fool, though one possessed of a particularly caustic tongue and, like most of Shakespeare’s fools, hardly lacking in wisdom. Hegel (1956, 3) finds in Thersites “a standing figure for all times” and, as such, an avatar of resistance to the pretensions of autocracy. Nietzsche (1962, 76) identifies Thersites with no less than Parmenides as an angry and scornful critic of the heroic ethos. For a helpful recent account that proposes a strong parallel between Thersites and Achilles himself and that insists on the weightiness of Thersites’s accusations, see Bell (2007, 101-108). For a very different kind of approach – a contemporary celebration of Thersites by an Eastern European writer of consequence – see Herbert (2010, 332-34). The scholarly literature is large and focuses on, among other things, the nature of shame in Thersites (Lowery 1991); the paradoxical fact this his speech is, at once, awkward, in appropriate, coherent and highly effective (Kirk 1985, 140; Martin 1989, 111-13; Vodoklys 1992; Kouklanakis 1999, 42, 45; Worman 2002, 66-67; and Worman 2008, 27); and the close connection between his standpoint and that of Achilles on the one hand (Postlethwaite 1988, 126-32; Rose 1988, 8, 19; Thalmann 1988, 16; Martin 1989, 109; Mackie 1996, 17; and Worman 2008, 162n), Odysseus on the other (Kouklanakis 1999, 35-36, 47; Worman 2002, 94).

compliant nor inert nor silenced. They listen to debates, and they express their approval or dissent (Hammer 2002, 150). As such, they play an important role in the decision-making process. Indeed, at least one scholar goes so far as to suggest that “the evidence of Homer is overwhelming that in the long run the dêmos has the final say” (Donlan 1998, 69). In this context, one very plausible formulation argues that Homeric epic depicts something like a Weberian plebiscitary democracy wherein “decisions are enacted in public space and subject to community acclaim and sanction” (Hammer 2002, 160; see also Taplin 1992, 6-7 and Rose 1997). Understood in this way, archaic politics seems strongly to anticipate the politics of Aeschylean Athens, where “[i]n the assembly, though the herald would invite ‘any who wish’ to speak, debate would be initiated by elected officials, and was normally dominated by the educated and influential,” and where “lower class opinion might be expressed by intermittent murmurs or shouts of approval or disapproval, and eventually by a show of hands” (Griffith 1995, 67).

The more traditional approach thus oversimplified what is in fact a complex and tangled historical and cultural relationship between the archaic and the classical. To be sure, that approach has its roots in none other than the age of Aeschylus. It should go without saying that many of the most important cultural artifacts of the mid-fifth century (architectural, historiographic, oratorical, and the like) testify in particular to an Athens that conceived itself as the culmination of a great historical transformation and as the ideal manifestation of an enlightened politics that is, at once, distinctively modern and distinctively Greek. But to the degree that this picture tells only part of the story – to the degree that the world in which Aeschylus lived and worked was a world that reflected, like any other, both the stubborn persistence of seemingly old ideas and the distant

provenance of seemingly new ones and that encompassed, as such, any number of unresolved contradictions – a deep and substantial work such as the Eumenides would almost certainly have spoken to the dislocations as well as the triumphs, the perplexities as well as the achievements, of the polis.

In this context, the notion that Aeschylus presents a coherent and relatively tidy picture of the healthy polity is problematic. If much recent scholarship on the archaic period emphasizes the complexity and richness of Homeric culture, so too for recent scholarship on democratic Athens as reflected generally in tragedy and specifically in the Oresteia. Critics have noted, for example, the wide range of voices that we hear in Greek drama, from gods and heroes to wives and seers to sentries and the chorus of citizens. They have also emphasized the diverse nature of the Athenian audience, comprising, as it did, a variety of social categories and presumably embracing, thereby, a multiplicity of viewpoints (Griffith 1995, 74-76). In one way or another, “diversity is inscribed” in tragic literature (Goldhill 2000, 43). Thus, a play such as the Eumenides represents an “intricate and layered” structure of thought. It is a “polysemous” text that offers an “interweaving of various discourses” (Goldhill 2000, 54-56).⁷ With this in mind, moreover, certain high-profile controversies in Aeschylus scholarship seem somehow inapt, perhaps even a little silly. For example, the influential claim that Greek tragedy, like the Great Dionysia under which it was produced, was a fundamentally democratic endeavor that pursued an essentially democratic ideology (e.g., Goldhill 1987; Seaford 2000, 39-40) has been juxtaposed to the equally influential claim that Aeschylean

⁷ See also Mark Griffith (2009, 38-49). As these essays indicate, the positions of Goldhill and Griffith seem to have drifted closer to one another.

democracy has an “enduring need for elite leadership and traditional dynastic ties” (Griffith 1995, 110), and that the Eumenes celebrates “discreet victories of aristocratic friendship deals and patronage,” reflecting thereby a kind of international support-system for traditional elites involving such institutions as xenia and hetaera and functioning collectively as the true savior of democratic Athens (Griffith 1995, 71-72).⁸ But if the world of Aeschylus is indeed like the world of Homer in embracing a kind of plebiscitary democracy, then we should not be in the least surprised to find latent aristocratic commitments and values embedded in an explicitly democratic universe of discourse; and to the degree that the Eumenides is a work of unusual literary substance reflecting the spirit of its own age, it would be natural to find therein important elements of both aristocratic and democratic ideology. Indeed, to the question of whether the Eumenides is a statement of democratic or aristocratic thought, it seems that the answer is not simply both; rather, the form of the question does not do justice to the character of the work. Thus, many readers continue to find in the end of the Eumenides a fundamental resolution of the most basic social tensions (see Gagarin 1976, 83-84, 104-105; Rose 1992; Patterson 1998, 140-148, 156-57; Heath 1999, 17-47; and Seaford 2000, 41), while others insist that any such resolution is partial and temporary at best, utterly illusory at worse.⁹ But the intellectual system of the Eumenides, as a product of its time, could not

⁸ See also Griffith (1995, 90-95) on the importance of an “old boy and old girl network” and the sense in which Athenian democracy needs a ruling family. Of course, all of this brings to mind Thucydides’ famous claim about Pericles and one-man rule.

⁹ See, for example, Porter (2005b, 315), who argues that “Aeschylus shapes the trilogy to move toward resolutions on many fronts” and that “in these resolutions many dissonances

but encompass both the explicit structure of metaphysical coherence that kept society more or less whole and the sort of frequently implicit elements of discord and disagreement will be characteristic of any complex discursive universe and that give rise to precisely the kinds of hard cases that form the typical subject matter of tragedy (Goldhill 2000, 43). All universes of discourse seek to resolve internal contradictions; they all achieve such resolutions, for if they didn't they couldn't function as universes of discourse; but the resolutions they achieve will always be incomplete, as a result of which the quest for resolution never ends. A work such as the Eumenides could not but embody and, in its own way, exemplify these basic features of intelligent society per se.

In light of this, I would suggest that the Eumenides is perhaps best read not simply as a positive statement having some kind of normative or prescriptive force but also as an extended exercise in the subversion of expectations, including and especially expectations that the play itself engenders. Even as Aeschylus provides an account of an organic, well-ordered state, he systematically provokes his audience to confront at least some of the perplexities and challenges inherent in any such entity. He does so, I believe, by employing a literary practice that serves to disrupt and challenge all manner of intellectual and aesthetic convention.

remain.” Also, Vernant and Vidal-Niquet (1988, 33), who indicate that “questions are posed but the tragic consciousness can find no fully satisfactory answers to them and so they remain open”; Simon Goldhill (1992, 53), who says that “the threat of competing obligations and the tensions in the language of dikê haunt even the final torchlit procession”; Goff (1995, 22); and Markell (2003, 191-93).

Consider, to begin with, the basic theme of fear. The very first montage of the play offers nothing other than a stunning, even devastating depiction of sheer, paralyzing terror. It is, of course, the priestess at Delphi who is petrified upon seeing the hideous Furies themselves, and one can hardly imagine a more striking account of what it means to be mortally afraid: “(t)he strength drains, I cannot stand upright, crawling on all fours, no speed in the legs... an old woman gripped by fear [deisasa gar graus] is nothing, no better than a helpless child” (33-37) (see de Romilly 1958, 86-87, 92-93; also Goldhill 2000, 41). Terror is plainly an awful thing; and one’s expectation at the end of the play is that the establishment of a just and well-ordered polis means that there will no longer be anything to fear. But Aeschylus, in the proto-Machiavellian voice of Athena herself, directly subverts that expectation: “Embrace neither despotism nor anarchy, I urge you, but revere the middle way, and never banish terror [deinon] from the city, not completely. Where is the just man [endikos] who fears nothing at all. The stronger you fear the power of the state, the more secure will be your city and its walls....” (695-705). The realpolitik of such a passage may be perfectly sensible, but it also establishes a kind of aesthetic and thematic tension in a work of dramatic art that allegedly describes a civic utopia (Scodel 2010, 105). Perhaps fear is not one thing, but many. Perhaps there are good fears and bad. Perhaps the utility of fear is entirely context dependent. These are difficult questions; but I’d suggest that they are questions that Aeschylus explicitly fails to answer, even as he raises them. Our simple expectation upon discovering the state – i.e., terror is a problem of an older epoch that the invention of politics will solve – turns out to be something far more complex, far less tractable. The fact that the perplexities of

politics are, as we have seen, age-old – archaic as well as classical – is thus deeply embedded in Aeschylus’s poetics of fear.

Consider also the poetics of blood. The text of the Eumendies refers to blood on virtually every page; in one form or another [aima or phonos] Greek words for blood appear no less than fifty times. But again, the function of the motif is far from straightforward. Throughout the play, the shedding of blood is vividly emblematic of precisely the kind of brutality and barbarism that the political state is presumably designed to abolish. The Furies warn Apollo that his “throne is reeking with blood, blood around the foot, blood around the head....” (163-65); and the ultimate horror of the Furies is that they themselves act like vampires, as when their leader assures Orestes that “I will suck my red libation out of your veins, from your flesh I will take my sickening drink” (262-64; see de Romilly 1958, 89 and Brown 1983, 14, 26). And yet, blood is also, at the same time, the most substantial, even sacred foundation of human connectedness. Apollo and Hermes, to pick just one early example, are explicitly identified as blood brothers (92), a fact that creates between them an ineradicable bond and that establishes at the outset the centrality of blood ties. Indeed, the fundamental question of the play – the question of human guilt and innocence – is deeply bound up with the issue of who is and is not related by blood. The Furies defend Clytemnestra precisely because “she was not a blood relative of the man she killed [ouk ên homaimos phôtos hon katektanen]” (606), while the fate of Orestes himself will be decided largely by determining the nature of the blood relationship. The imagery of the Eumenides seems to propose not the progressive and hopeful transition from bad blood to good that one might expect but, rather, a

recurrent, even obsessive series of poetic provocations that convey the timeless complexity – perhaps the intractability – of the very meaning of blood.

And so too for the important image of fabric. Throughout the Oresteia, the woven net is a famously sinister contrivance. It is a powerful symbol of doom (25), of capture and punishment (115, 147), and it is all the more menacing precisely because it is often, ironically, lovely to look at (475). And yet, at the same time, what are the clothes we wear – products of human artifice – but emblems of civilization itself, part and parcel of that which separates us from the animals; and indeed, what is the organic state but a weaving together of various elements to create the very fabric of society? The elusive, precarious and contrary nature of fabric – established in early Greek culture by the nightly labors of Penelope herself – is thematized throughout the Eumenides, and with large implications for our understanding of the nature of civic ties. Those ties can imprison even as they civilize, but they can also unravel no matter how strong they appear. This is true of human society per se, regardless of time period; and it's worth nothing here that the complex and contradictory ideas of blood and cloth are themselves woven together in the “blood-red robes” [phoinikobaptois endutous esthêmasi] (1037)¹⁰ that the Furies wear as they proceed to their final, fitting destination.

The unsettling, ambiguous universe of Aeschylean imagery is itself underwritten by a powerful set of narrative provocations. Of course, the Oresteia as a whole seems famously to violate the Aristotelian principle of unity precisely for its blurring of genres (see Snell 1928, 139-140). The expectations set out at the beginning of the trilogy and again at the beginning of the Eumenides itself are plainly tragic and would have been

¹⁰ Here I follow Fagles's helpful rendering.

understood as such by an audience already well-attuned to the emerging conventions of Greek drama. But those expectations are turned entirely upside down by an outcome that is anything but tragic. And if the Eumenides is not entirely unique in this respect – one might mention Oedipus at Colonus, Alcestis¹¹ and Orestes – the flouting of aesthetic convention would perhaps be especially striking in a play that completes what has been, up to that point, a quintessentially tragic trilogy. The relatively simple if also deeply moving world of ancient tragedy, with its awesome and austere inevitability, is pointedly and systematically undermined by a narrative structure that transforms a tale of seemingly ineluctable death and disaster into a benign, even giddy kind of comedy.

It is true that the comedic turn, however unsettling, would appear to serve a progressivist, utopian agenda. But the dramatic force of this transformation is itself problematized by an especially troubling feature of the narrative arc, namely, the extraordinary conversion of the Furies. For all their hideous appearance and baleful presentation, the Furies are nothing if not principled. Indeed, for the better part of the play they are virtual paragons of moral rectitude. If their devotion to a certain kind of justice is severe and even alarming, it is also absolutely unwavering, and it is clearly underwritten by very powerful intuitions about right and wrong (143-170, 215, 227, 270). A son has murdered his mother, and there is nothing complicated or confusing about that. It is a moral violation, indeed an atrocity; and in seeking to punish Orestes the Furies declare what seems to them obvious: “we are the just and upright” (310-312). Indeed, virtually every statement that the Furies make, up to and immediately after the trial itself, reflects and embodies a fierce, adamant, unyielding devotion to ethical doctrine. It

¹¹ It should be noted, however, that Euripides may have written Alcestis as a satyr play.

cannot but be astonishing, then, that Aeschylus contrives utterly to reverse all of this, and to do so in very short order. Within a matter of little more than two modern pages (840-900), scarcely more than a few moments on stage, the Furies' deep and unwavering commitment to right and justice utterly collapses. It does so, of course, in the face of Athena's rhetorical skill (892). But the alacrity with which the Furies embrace what the goddess has to say, surprising in itself, is matched only by the remarkable fact that the turnabout is driven by a kind of vanity that is, at once, unlikely and disappointing. It is surely the very opposite of principled. Nothing has changed the fact that Orestes killed his mother, and not one word has been said to convince the Furies that their moral position is wrong. Indeed, their continuing rejection of the arguments in support of Orestes could hardly be clearer. The susceptibility of the Furies to flattery and, worse, bribery seems fundamentally out of character with everything that Aeschylus has told us about them. Of course, scholars have long argued about this narrational choice, but the notion that the poet gradually prepares the way for the flip-flop of the Furies (see, for example, Lebeck 1971, 145 and Conacher 1987, 142; but see also Brown 1983, 13-34 and Conacher 1987, 171) is difficult to reconcile with, in particular, their reaction to the final verdict of the trial at 792-804, a passage that is famously repeated verbatim at 820-832 and that is as adamant, violent and fearsome as anything we've seen before.

If, moreover, the malleability, inconstancy and irresolution – one might well say corruptibility – of the Furies cannot but confound expectations, so too for the final verdict itself. On the one hand, it is notable that we never learn exactly why the jurors found themselves deadlocked. It's true that the circumstances of the case are intrinsically difficult, even paradoxical (see, for example, Scodel 2010, 101). The situation of Orestes

is paradigmatically tragic insofar as either of the two options available to him – to permit the crime against his father to go unpunished or to profane the filial bond by killing his mother – will likely lead to disaster. In view of this, the inability of a small group of citizens to square the circle, even if they are the finest men of Athens (503), can hardly be surprising. Still, the absence of any explicit explanation from the court establishes a gap, a silence, an empty discursive space that cannot but unsettle and perplex.

On the other hand, the rationale that Athena does offer as she breaks the tie is, if anything, even more disturbing, and famously so; for in accepting Apollo's argument that the mother is, in effect, not truly the parent of the child, she embraces a doctrine that must have been, as it continues to be, inflammatory in the extreme. Commentators have long struggled with this. Some have argued, for example, that "Greeks were accustomed to seeing a parallel between human reproduction and agriculture, so the idea would have seemed less bizarre to them: the male plants the seed and the woman is like the earth that nurtures it" (Scodel 2010, 102); and of course, some such view would come to be codified in the fourth century by Aristotle. In effect, Athena presents "a strange doctrine, though not as strange for the Athenian audience as for modern readers" (Conacher 1987, 161). Of course, other readers famously emphasize the sense in which Aeschylus's play reflects the deep misogyny of his own age, noting that the reconciliation of oppositions characteristic of play's resolution results in, at best, a twisted sense of gender relations (Porter 2005 and Goldhill 1986, 51-53; see also, Gagarin 1976, 87-105; Zeitlin 1978; Goldhill 1984; Conacher 1987, 206-212; and Rocco 1997, 145-56). The tradition of seeing the *Oresteia* as an ur-text of Western patriarchy is venerable indeed, embracing writers from Bachofen (1948, 177-82) to Millett (1971, 112-15) and beyond.

As de Beauvoir (1948, 99n) insists: “The Eumenides represents the triumph of the patriarchy over the matriarchy. The tribunal of the gods” [sic] “declared Orestes to be the son of Agamemnon before he is the son of Clytemnestra – the ancient maternal authority and rights were dead, killed by the audacious revolt of the male!” But still other critics have suggested that the trial scene in general and the arguments of Apollo in particular are in fact not intended to be taken seriously. To the contrary, they are comic. Aeschylus provides little more than a parody of Greek judicial procedure, a ridiculous tableau full of wit and humor, a satirical caricature of Athenian justice (Lebeck 1971, 134-37 and Scodel 2010, 101; but see Goldhill 1986, 54-56 and Conacher 1987, 161-62).

However this may be, one cannot but believe that an Athenian audience would have regarded the underlying rationale for the verdict much as we do, i.e., as startling and deeply troubling at best. If we can see that the arguments in court are terrible arguments that “do not match the grandeur of the institution” (Scodel 2010, 102), that the claims of Apollo are trivial and quibbling and that the process itself is “a let-down, a sell-out, an awful disappointment” (Lebeck 1971, 135, 137), then it’s hard to know why substantial intimations of this wouldn’t have been more or less equally available in the middle of the fifth century. As a historical/cultural matter, the centrality of the mother-child relationship is a recurrent and ever-present theme in Greek literature, archaic and classical alike. One thinks immediately of Thetis and Achilles, Hecuba and Hektor, Penelope and Telemachus, and countless others. The tragedy of Oedipus is, of course, virtually unintelligible absent the blood relationship of mother and child; and so too for the story of the Oresteia itself, if, that is, we are to regard the connection between Clytemnestra and Iphigenia as merely superficial. It can hardly have escaped

Aeschylus's audience that the mother is a necessary if insufficient condition for procreation, that childbirth itself as an arduous affair (e.g., Iliad XI, 270 and, more generally, the cult of Eileithyia), that mothers typically nurse and nurture their offspring and protect them with fierce devotion, that children frequently resemble their mothers (e.g., Works and Days, 273), and so on. Indeed, to offer such observations is to risk sarcasm; and to invoke against all of this the putative claims of Greek science is, at once, to go well beyond the available evidence and, perhaps worse, to adopt the improbable assumption that the more abstruse arguments of ancient inquiry into the nature of things would have been widely understood and embraced by the larger society.

It is especially important to note in this context the very extreme nature of the argument that Aeschylus attributes to Apollo. It's not simply that the paternal relationship takes precedence nor even that the mother is not the parent at all. For Apollo insists that she is "like an unrelated stranger serving a stranger" (658-665). The relationship between mother and child is thus denied virtually any significance whatsoever, and for reasons that are self-evidently outrageous. Snell's famous discussion (1928, 141), in which he calls Apollo's argument intellectually embarrassing (peinlich) and a matter of sheer sophistry (Spitzfindigkeit), only understates the case; and if it stretches credibility to think that this would have been entirely lost on an Athenian audience, it is, I would suggest, even less plausible to imagine that Aeschylus himself – a master of dramatic craft who was clearly in control of his material – would have been

unaware of the unconvincing nature of the claims upon which the final verdict is ostensibly based.¹²

3

But if the Eumenides is, in fact, an elaborate structure of ambiguities, perplexities and imponderables that unsettle and undermine our expectations, perhaps the most astonishing of these is offered immediately before the beginning of the trial. It is there that Athena admits that she herself does not know how Orestes should be judged. That a goddess preeminently associated with wisdom and insight should find the case too difficult to decide – “I cannot manage it” (487) – is surprising enough; and it is perhaps telling that Athena’s divine ignorance is matched by the self-confessed and all-too-human ignorance of Orestes (615). But what seems to me especially important is the context, namely, the clear-headed realization on the part of Athena (and Orestes) that at issue here is nothing less than the question of justice (505). If Athena does not know what justice is – at least not well enough to apply it to the case at hand – then who does?

The traditional interpretation holds that Aeschylus provides a foundational statement of the now commonplace claim that “justice is the first virtue of social institutions” (Rawls 1971, 3). Again, I myself am not at all convinced such a notion is in

¹² Snell goes on to excuse Aeschylus, suggesting that the court scene is best viewed not as a structure of rational argument but as a dramatic device for setting up the ending of the play and that Aeschylus himself was not a logical thinker insofar as rationality, properly understood, only begins with Socrates and Plato. But one hardly needs to be a systematic philosopher to know that Apollo’s claims are unserious.

fact the invention of post-archaic Greece. The problem of the Eumenides is, as I have suggested, an old one, and its persistence over time is something of which a fifth century audience would have been well aware. But if Aeschylus himself is reminding us that politics is and has long been about justice, he is also failing to tell us exactly how that should be understood. Indeed, to the contrary: it seems to me that the Eumenides is, in some substantial measure, a meditation precisely on the enormous and age-old complexity of the very idea of what it means to be just. The specific form of this meditation, moreover, is a series of controversial and contradictory claims about the nature of right and wrong. Aeschylus provides, in effect, a survey of ethical argumentation, a kind of laundry list of competing perspectives. To encounter such a list is to be brought into contact with one's own uncertainty about justice, and thereby to confront, if only subliminally, the urgent need to engage in serious moral discourse.

We know, to begin with, that the Furies invoke divine law in seeking to condemn Orestes. Matricide is explicitly described as a violation of “the law of the gods [nomon theôn]” (170), a profaning of the will, on the one hand, of Zeus himself and, on the other, of Hades – “a powerful deity who balances all men's accounts and engraves his reckoning on the record books of his mind” (270-272). It can hardly be surprising, of course, that a deeply religious society would look to the realm of the divine for moral guidance. But the character of the Greek gods themselves – their foibles and prejudices, their internal squabbles, the various and changing viewpoints that they bring to the affairs of mere mortals – makes it difficult to attribute to them any kind of coherent teaching of a sort that we commonly associate with the very idea of divine law; and if Zeus is often portrayed as transcending the pettiness and irrationality of the others in the pantheon,

even he is hardly a model of unerring wisdom. The problem is famously raised by Socrates in his inquiry into the concept of piety (Euthyphro 7-9); and it's in the context of this general issue that the Furies, even as they invoke the deities, immediately subvert any such invocation when they declare that "no god can be our judge" (361).

It's a striking declaration, and it surely implies that justice is to be found in something different from and external to the will of the immortals (cf. Reinhardt 1949; Winnington-Ingram 1983, 154-72). Exactly what that might be, however, is not at all clear. On the one hand, the Furies seem to connect right and wrong with tradition itself. They refer to the historical bases of the institution of marriage (214), to their own "ancient privilege" (394), to the long-standing authority that has been invested in them by the Fates (335), to the sharp contrast between tried and true traditions and the new-fangled arguments of the younger gods (152, 162). The Furies seem to be saying that matricide has always been understood as a heinous crime, and that neither the sophistry of Apollo nor the persuasive arts of Athena should be allowed to trump moral insights that have stood the test of time. Indeed, in the very first lines of the play the Delphic priestess – Apollo's own acolyte – explicitly invokes Themis, the pre-Olympian Titaness who stands for tradition, custom, and the established order (though also for divine will and proper procedure),¹³ and whom the Pythia ranks second only to motherhood itself as someone or something to be honored as authoritative (1-5). Interestingly, this same theme is invoked by none other than Athena, who advises the citizenry "never to pollute the law with innovations" (693). Elsewhere, however, the authority of tradition is problematized. Early on, for example, it is Orestes who notes that "the blood is fading

¹³ On the difficulty of translating Themis, see Finley (1978, 78n).

from my hands” and that time is a source of change (278-285); but even more, it is hard to see how conventions alone, even venerable ones, could possibly adjudicate between acts – matricide on the one hand, avenging the murder of one’s father on the other – each of which is defended precisely on the basis of what tradition would seem to demand.

If neither divine nor historical law provides sufficient guidance, perhaps we should seek answers in something like natural law. Indeed, the Eumenides is, I would suggest, filled with moral claims that advert more or less directly to the nature of things. Sometimes this manifests itself as a kind of intuitionism. Thus as we have seen, the Furies often insist that the actions of Orestes and Apollo alike are simply self-evidently wrong: “both are guilty, and who can call them just?” (155). One doesn’t need an elaborate argument to know that Orestes has done something radically at variance with the natural order; killing your mother is an unnatural act par excellence (220). But the appeal to intuition also resides in some tension with a kind of rational/legal language that recurs throughout the text. For example, Orestes seeks to discover the “rules of right and wrong” (88) and he acknowledges “the law that condemns the man of the bloody hand to silence” (447), while the Furies invoke “the law promulgated by Fate [moirokranton]” (392-394) and admonish Athenians to “bow before the altar of right [dikas]” (537). The polis is and must be preeminently a structure of law, and the text often conveys the sense that positive law, the law that humans promulgate, should reflect a kind of higher law that is embedded in the very structure of the universe.

Exactly how this comports with the ultimate resolution of the play is, however, unclear. For in establishing the Court of the Areopagus, Athena seems to have opted not for natural law, nor for divine or traditional sources of right and wrong, but for something

like equitable process. The Furies themselves invoke the criterion of “fairness” (432), and Athena seems to interpret this in procedural terms. As we have seen, she selects the “best men” to serve on the jury, presumably because they will be unbiased in assessing witnesses and proofs (500-505). The trial itself unfolds according known “rules” of due process (587); the jurors have taken a formal oath to seek impartial justice (692, 724); the votes themselves will be counted with an explicit view toward proper procedure (763); the verdict is reached by a “fair ballot” (797). Now it’s certainly true that the exigencies of formal judicial procedure could be invoked precisely with a view toward uncovering the relevant principles of higher law, whether natural or divine. Due process, in other words, might be the best way of discovering the truth. But it is notable that the Furies explicitly reject such a notion: “Here, now, is revolution causing the overthrow of binding law – once his appeal is sustained, his matricide” (491-497; see also 361). On their account, the recourse to procedure is precisely a turning away from truth, an embrace of licentious, willful relativism.

Of course, the ultimate decision is made neither by the Furies nor by the jury nor by Zeus himself, but by Athena. And if the goddess does indeed advert to the arguments of Apollo, however dubious they may be, one might also wonder if she does so with much conviction. Athena’s decision is, in some important sense, puzzling, its rationale underdetermined. But I would suggest that the narrative structure of the play invites us at least to consider the possibility that her reasons are, in the end, largely practical, even utilitarian. The evidence of divine law and natural law is unclear. The testimony of tradition and history appears to be contradictory, the outcome of fair process plainly inconclusive. In the face of this, has Athena perhaps chosen a path designed to maximize

happiness, a strategy that defines right as the achievement of the good, an approach that conceives of morality as a largely pragmatic enterprise?

The Eumenides, appearing barely twenty years after Salamis and Plataea, was written for a city at or near the height of its glory, a city whose self-confidence would be reflected politically in the Delian league, materially in the Parthenon, and personally in the figure of Pericles. Given its implicit but unmistakable (if largely non-committal) references to very recent events such as the treaty with Argos and the Ephialtic reforms,¹⁴ one can well imagine Aeschylus's audience to have understood the final scenes of the Eumenides as composing a highly contemporary encomium to the miracle of the polis (see, e.g., Griffith 1995, 64 and Markovits 2009, 437-39). And so it is. We do indeed witness here the creation of the organic state. But the play also problematizes allegedly sharp differences between past and present. The Argive treaty recalls Greek alliances of Homeric epic with their horrendously bellicose implications, while any allusion to Ephialtes, assassinated just three years before Aeschylus produced his trilogy, could only serve as a further grim reminder that the brutal shedding of blood is hardly the peculiar possession of an earlier age. Again, Aeschylus's art in effect reflects the long-standing, perhaps eternal problematics of political life, problematics that are evident in the kultur-kritik of Thersites much as they are in the major works of the fifth and fourth centuries. Here, then, I agree with Euben (1982, 32), who says that "however powerful the final hymns of benediction, they cannot wholly seal off the memory of death, perversion, violence and disease which dominated the earlier portions of the drama" (see also Goldhill 2000, 55-56). But in this context, I would suggest that the on-going and

¹⁴ On the "nationalistic" implications of the Aeschylus's court, see Kennedy (2006).

systematic practice of self-subversion that we find in the Eumenides – its surprising turns and internal contradictions and defied expectations, piled one upon the other and operating at virtually every level of poetic and theatrical art – cannot but unsettle the audience, undermining any sense of complacency and establishing a powerful undercurrent of perplexity and doubt. It is within such a dramatic framework that Aeschylus is able to offer an account of the well-ordered polis that poses, by design, deep questions about the structure and content of moral and political argument; and I believe that those questions would provide at least part of the agenda for, say, an itinerant philosopher who might choose to spend his life engaging others in serious conversation about the nature of the virtues.

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